

Richard Beardsley

33 Walnut Lane

Perkiomenville, Pa 18074

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My name is Richard Beardsley and I am here today to speak about my experience making it possible to remain in my house after becoming paralyzed due to a fall. It has taken 16 years to finally be able to access all parts of my home.

In April 2005 I moved from my apartment in Glenside, Pa to a fixer upper house I bought in Perkiomenville, Pa. It had a beautiful view from the porch which overlooked the Perkiomen Creek.

I was a forty six year old single man at the height of my career. It was my ninth year working as a carpenter supervisor for McCoubrey/Overholser Inc. of Mt. Airy, Pa.

In September I decided to take a week off, starting on Labor Day, to begin work on my new property.

With a friend, I determined to cut down a dead tree in the front yard. My first move was to climb up a thirty foot extension ladder to cut off a branch. I started cutting with my chainsaw. The branch broke before I expected it to. I'm not sure exactly what happened but I ended up falling and sustaining severe damage to my spinal cord.

I had extensive surgery at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital to stabilize my back. But I recovered no function from my lower ribs to my toes.

After 4 months in various hospitals and a nursing home I moved in with my eighty two year old mother in her house in Berwyn, Pa. It was a big adjustment for her and for me.

I sold my work truck and got a Ford Focus with hand controls. The Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation paid for the hand controls. They also supported me financially through Montgomery County Community College. After a couple of years, I got my Associate of Applied Science degree in Architectural Drafting and Design in 2008.

During my early years in a wheelchair we considered what would be required to live in the house I had bought. The path from the parking area went down numerous steps to the house. Some doorways needed to be widened. Getting into the bathroom was blocked by cabinets. The small shower stall would be unusable. The kitchen would need to be modified with sink and stovetop with space underneath so I could roll close enough. I used my new CAD skills and experience renovating buildings to plan improvements that would make living in the house a viable option. Now, with limited income, we had to prioritize what could be done.

The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation sent a Designer to investigate how I could access my house in Perkiomenville. Their solution would be a long series of ramps down the steep front yard to the porch of the house. I thought it would be better to excavate a new driveway to bring my car to the front of the house. But, OVR considered this too expensive. I hired a young man and rented a Bobcat to make a less steep path down to the house. The new path was still difficult to traverse. I had a local plumber repair

the pipes that had frozen while the house lay vacant. He suggested that his father, an expert backhoe operator, could come look at improving access to my house. He came and offered to dig out a driveway and add crushed stone so I could drive right to the house.

I still needed a ramp to get down onto the porch floor. The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation eventually paid to pave the area where I parked and build a ramp onto the porch.

Through Magee Rehabilitation Hospital where I had been an inpatient, I met someone who was starting an organization to modify houses for former patients. He sent a designer who inspected the house and came up with plans estimated to cost about \$58,000. Then, the recession of 2008 obliterated the organization's source of funding.

I scheduled a big work day on the house for friends to come to improvise some improvements so I could move back in.

Around the summer of 2007, I moved back into the house with the beautiful view, on the Perkiomen Creek.

I put ads in Craigslist to find local young people who would do physical work on my place with me directing.

By the end of 2007, I had connected with Self Determination Housing Project. They sent Pat Nunan, of Lifestyle Designs to plan a remodeled bathroom. The existing bathroom was totally inappropriate for a wheelchair user. Ron Riker, a remodeling contractor completed the work. A grant from SDHP made it possible.

The next project to tackle was the kitchen. I drew plans on my computer and configured a layout of cabinets manufactured to be wheelchair friendly. But, paying for the kitchen was going to be challenging.

I had income from a long-term disability policy through the construction company I had worked for. But, all my income, including that from Social Security Disability, went to living expenses and mortgage payments.

Then, I was able to get a low interest loan from the Pennsylvania Assistive Technology Foundation to remodel the kitchen.

Again, I hired young people to do demo work to open up the kitchen area. Some former coworkers reframed the walls and installed new drywall. I was able to do the trim work myself.

In 2011, using my training at Montgomery County Community College, I began working for DJM CAD Co. in Schwenksville, Pa doing detailing on mechanical plans.

I continued to fix up my house doing as much of it as I could myself. I painted the front of my house, getting to the higher areas using a ramp and platform and an old tank-like power wheelchair I bought.

I also challenged myself with woodworking projects for others. With friends to help me, I built cubbies for the preschool kids at Mom's Place in Phoenixville, Pa. And I built a large chest to hold donated clothes for the church in Pottstown that I'm a member of.

In 2015, I learned that additional funds were available for housing modifications through Self Determination Housing Project. After contacting them, Pat Nunan and a contractor John O'Boyle of Pottstown, Pa came to assess my needs.

We discussed how I might have access to the basement level. I wanted to be able to independently maintain utilities like the furnace filter, the well filter and the dehumidifier. I wanted the ability to manage what was stored in the basement.

Access to the basement was by outside steps going down from the porch. One option was to install an outside stair lift to the steps.

But, they discovered that the 10' high piers that support the porch that runs along the steep bank of the creek, were ominously leaning out toward the creek. They needed to be replaced. And part of the porch and steps needed to be rebuilt. It was determined at Self Determination Housing Project that the scope of the work was beyond their ability to fund.

In 2019, my brother Chris helped me pay to have the leaning porch piers replaced. I also rebuilt the porch to make it ready for a future stair lift installation.

Early in 2021, I contacted Self Determination Housing Project, now part of Inglis House, to again consider giving me the ability to get to my basement. Their designer, Pat Nunan came with Ron Riker, the contractor who had installed my accessible bathroom back in 2007.

After all the planning and paperwork hurdles were crossed, Ron was able to quickly rebuild the steps and landing to make way for a stair lift. Bob Pretopapa's company, Power Stair Lifts Co., of Easton, Pa installed the track and the chair that rides on it.

It's been sixteen years since my accident. Finally, six years after my initial consultation with Self Determination Housing Project, I again have access to my basement. It's a success story achieved through my own professional experience and help from friends and family. But, there was a missing piece in the process of getting my adaptive needs met. I was on my own when it came to addressing the structural issues of my house.

Since the stair lift installation, I've been in the basement cleaning, organizing and getting rid of stuff. I was able to relight the hot water heater after workers had done a repair and left it unlit. And I took care of an overdue replacement of the furnace filter.

Working at improving my house and property and trying to make it into an investment for the future has kept me fit and busy and grown my character. I've had other challenges including infections due to the urinary catheters I must use. And I've had serious digestive issues which included the removal of a section of my small intestine. But it's a great relief to finally live in a house that is maintained and functional for my unique needs.

It's been a long haul and I have new appreciation for all the organizing and legislation that works to enhance the lives of people who are affected by aging and disability.

Thank you.