

A HOME for the Ages

BY HEATHER E. TOWE

Photography by Jennifer Finazzo

Laurene and Bob Nelson in West Leigh have completely transformed their house at 1400 Wendover Drive. With the design and build services of Artisan Construction, Inc., they have taken the idea of the single-family home to the next level by emphasizing family and adding aging-in-place features. The home, which comfortably held their immediate family for years, now accommodates multiple generations of their family.



The Nelsons moved into the house, which Bob describes as "standard, with a two-car garage and closed-in sun porch, which was not very functional," in 1998. When his father moved in with them in 2010 to spend the last 16 months of his life in their care, they realized that their house was poorly suited for the elderly. After seeing the effects of limited access on the first floor and no access to the other stories of the house, they learned what it would take to improve the accessibility and functionality of the entire house.

Artisan Construction, which modified a whopping 80 percent of the house, completed the renovation in two phases. Phase One, which began in June 2013, added a detached three-car insulated garage with a living space above it. The insulated garage doors are steel-clad with cedar, which are sturdy and beautiful at the same time. The living area upstairs has a bedroom that is closed off for privacy, and an open kitchen and living space that is perfect for entertaining. The kitchen has solid maple cabinetry and contains a stovetop, convection oven, microwave and dishwasher.

Whereas Phase One of the renovation added a separate structure to the house, Phase Two redesigned the main house to add functional living space and aging-in-place features that are designed to keep the Nelsons comfortable in their home for many years to come. The second phase, which began in December 2013 and ended in September 2014, removed the original garage that was attached to the house and expanded the interior living space where the garage had been. Inside the house, with the extra space they created, they relocated the kitchen, added a two-story library, expanded the sewing and craft room, modified the bathrooms, added a downstairs theater and installed an elevator to give access to all floors. Outside, they added landscaping and hardscaping, expanding the driveway and building two brick circular retaining walls that house beautiful foliage, provide bench seating and are lined with LED lights.

With the completion of Phase Two, all areas of the house, including the new kitchen, hallways, bathrooms and elevator, are designed for wheelchair accessibility. The doors are wide, there are ample turn-around areas at corners and in hallways,

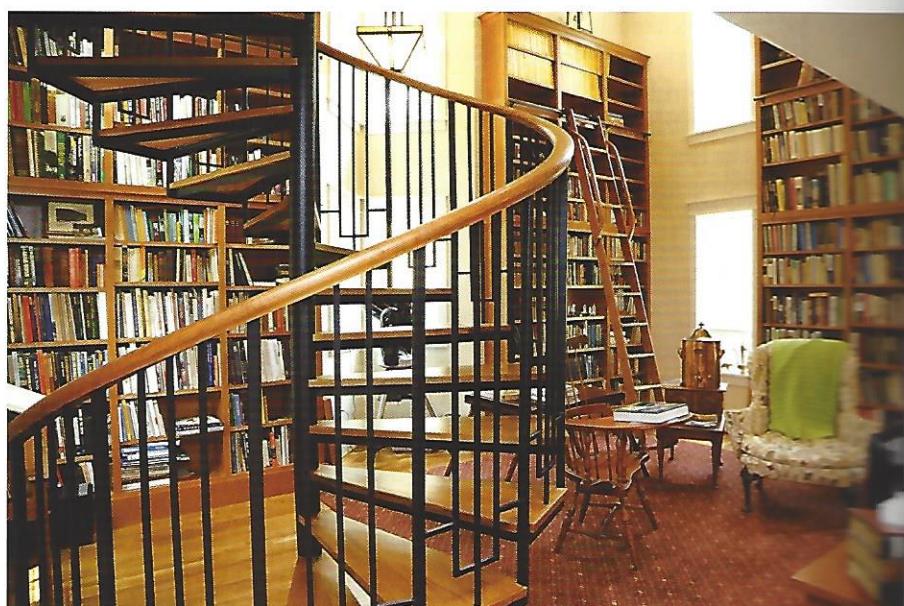
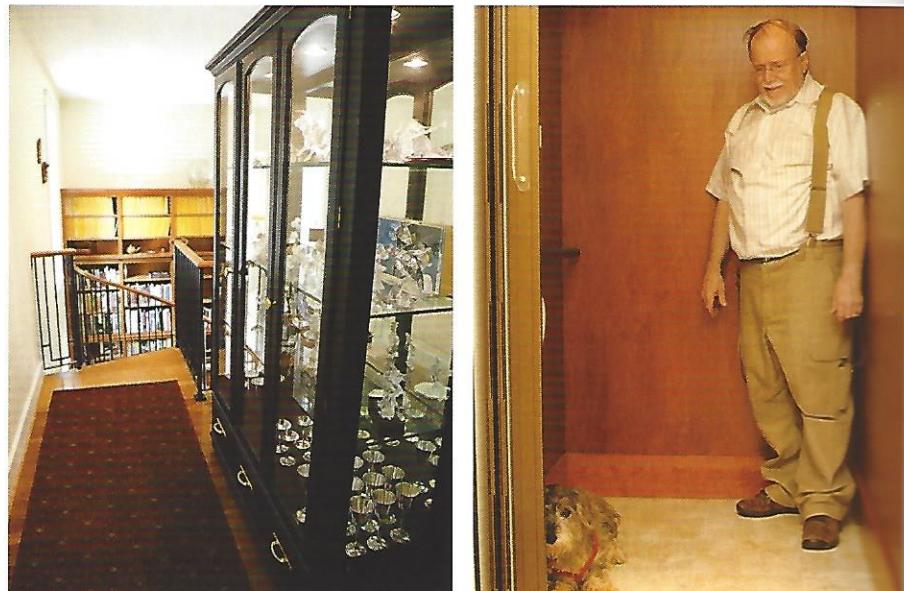
and the elevator, which can bear up to 950 pounds, is designed to hold a wheelchair with two additional people. Upstairs, wheelchair-accessible showers were installed in the bathrooms. In the showers, portable and comfortable teak seats were added, as well as dual showerheads, so both the wall-mount and hand-held heads can be used as necessary. The closets also allow wheelchair access and are large enough to ensure maneuverability within. In the lower level of the house, the new media room and entertainment area, as well as the bathroom and closets, are also easily accessible.

While functionality was the main reason for the renovations, aesthetics played a large role in the design. The library addition is stunning, with 13-foot shelves of solid cherry. Jeff Barratt of Jeff Barratt Woodworking in Charlottesville designed the shelves as well as the custom rolling ladder that extends to the top. Andrès Martinez, another Artisan team member at the time who worked closely with Bob and Laurene while creating the final plans for the house, designed the spiral staircase and outsourced the custom hand railing. Bob and Laurene describe the kitchen, with cabinets installed by Better Living Custom Cabinets in Charlottesville, as their "dream kitchen." Downstairs, Crutchfield installed the sound system in the home theater and entertainment area.

Bob raves about Artisan Construction, Inc., describing the care and attention they placed on every detail of the renovation. For example, Artisan created areas where handrails could be installed in the future, and also provided Bob with a photographic archive of every wall within house, so that the Nelsons have the ability to know where everything is located when they want to access or modify anything.

Artisan's Jon Norton, who oversaw the project as superintendent, explains some of the challenges with a project of this scope. "The most challenging part was actually when we started. We had to shore up the existing second floor of the house, because we removed close to half of the exterior walls in the first floor to expand... We had to fix a lot of deficiencies that existed in the original house framing," he says. Because the Nelsons were still living in the house for the first two months of the project, Artisan took special care to ensure the house remained watertight during that phase while working as efficiently as possible.

Norton says that even though there are always hurdles with large projects, collaboration on the work site led to a smooth renovation. "Everything fell into place as we were going through the process," he says. Norton's favorite part of this renovation was "finishing the job and seeing the homeowner as grateful and as thankful as he was. He was a very nice gentleman to work for...one of the best clients we have ever had. Basically, it was like we were family in the end."





A Place for Everyone

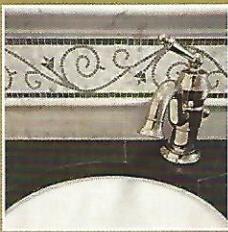
Currently, three generations of the Nelson family call Wendover Drive "home": Laurene and Bob, who have lived in the house since 1998, Sadie, Laurene's mother, and Chad, one of their two grown sons. The house has a space for everyone. Sadie inhabits the "mother-in-law suite," which consists of a bedroom and a parlor on the second floor. According to Bob, most of the furniture in her rooms moved to the house with her, so she has a familiar place to stay. Bob and Laurene, whose bedroom is on the second floor, have their own unique areas on the main level of the house. As part of the renovation, they built Bob's library, which accesses the kitchen via a large opening. On the other side of the kitchen, another large opening leads to Laurene's expanded craft room, which has two zones—one for sewing, with a state-of-the-art sewing machine and spools of thread along the wall, and another for crafts. Chad, one of their two adult sons, inhabits the living area above the garage. The space characterizes youth, with lava lamps and comfortable, casual seating.



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The family loves to spend time together, so the main house has several common areas where all generations can visit. In the morning, they convene in the kitchen to drink coffee, read, knit and chat. The living room has an abundance of seating. Downstairs, the media room is large enough for the family and guests, and Laurene says that everyone gathers in the entertainment area at night.

Every element of the house is geared toward functionality and making life easier, so that the family can spend less time worrying or working at the house, and more time enjoying their lives and each other. They decided to place the washing machine and dryer on the same level as their bedrooms, which Bob describes as "the best decision we made." In the kitchen, the quartz countertop is impervious and requires little maintenance other than cleaning. The surround sound in the living room and library is controlled easily by simply turning a knob. The house is outfitted with LED lights which do not need to be changed often. Additionally, the water is heated by a gas-fired instant water heater, so no time is wasted waiting for water to heat up.

The entire house is a reflection of their family and its history. On the walls and placed proudly throughout the house are various collections of art and furniture that represent those living in the house and the legacy of previous generations. Downstairs, there is a lovely back-lit shelf with glass doors that displays crystal and china pieces that once belonged to Bob's grandfather, Bob's mother and Laurene's mother, Sadie. Laurene's needlework and Bob's sketches adorn the walls, while the furniture in each room is both eclectic and historic.

In much the same way they repurposed their old house and transformed it into a new, more functional space, they often take

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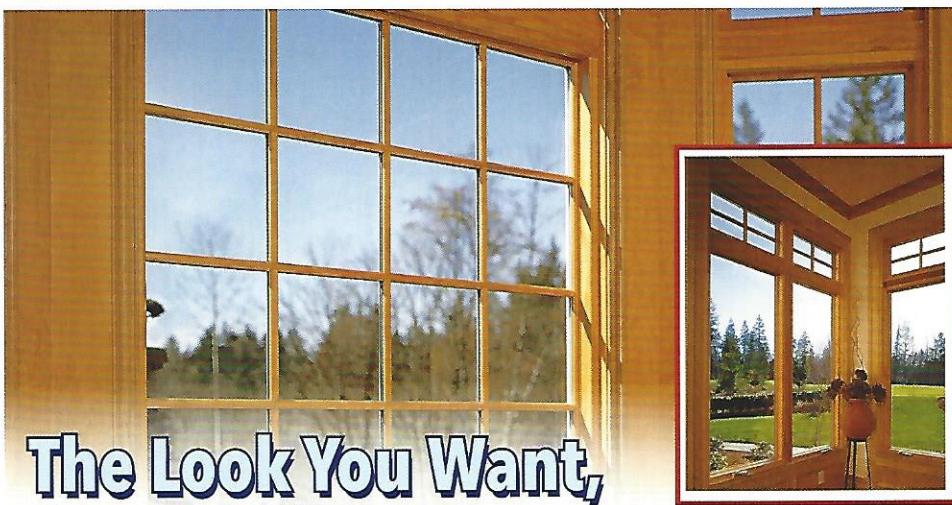
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family heirlooms and turn them into art. Just off the kitchen hangs a piece of art that, at one time, was jewelry belonging to various relatives. In the entertainment area downstairs, a piece of art hanging on the wall had a past life as a coffee table top. Even the ramps that were used for Bob's father's wheelchair have been repurposed, as the family now uses them to help their blind dog, Scooter, access the front porch of the house. Throughout the home, what was old has new life, and the evolution of the elements in the house echo the changing house itself.

The love that holds the family together is palpable. Bob beams as he describes his wife, Laurene. "We are each other's best friends," he says, noting that the couple has been married 50 years. Of his mother-in-law, he confides, "it was so nice to have Laurene's mother move here. The day we found out, I was so overjoyed I was in tears. She's as sweet as they come. She's 100 years old and in good health. We are richly blessed to have her here. Everyone should be as lucky as I am. If people had mother-in-laws like that, there would be no mother-in-law jokes." And of their sons, Chad and Kurt, who Bob and Laurene adopted from the Dominican Republic 25 years ago when they were 5 months and 19 months old respectively, Bob states, "We are richly blessed. I can't tell you how much."

What makes the Nelsons' house multigenerational is not only the space and its functionality, but also the personality that is evident within. The family celebrates their blessings by keeping their loved ones close to them. Bob jokes, "These days everyone downsizes; we upsized. Chad said he will take care of us. We hope." The house is designed so that several generations of their family will feel comfortable and right at home, now and for many years to come. ■



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