

Accessible Living for a TBI Survivor

Modified Homes Allow for Greater Independence

Many people don't think twice about what it takes to step through a doorway in their own home, but for many individuals who have a brain injury, it can be a daily struggle. To offset the challenges caused by physical disability, home modifications are available to help them achieve the highest levels of independence and living space accessibility.

Generally, a ranch-style floor plan is best for people with disabilities. Homes with stairs and multiple levels are often more difficult to navigate for those individuals using a wheelchair or walker to ambulate. Often, modified ranch homes will include lowered entry thresholds, such as ramped entrance ways or door thresholds that have been removed.

Rainbow Rehabilitation Center's outpatient client Jon Spencer is an example of why home modifications are often necessary for people with disabilities, and serves as an excellent model of how to successfully implement the modifications. Jon made huge strides in independence when his home in Milan, Mich. was built in May 2008. The 2,400-square-foot-ranch was built with handicap-accessible modifications to allow Jon to do many household chores for himself – something he had been unable to do at home since his injury.

Jon, who uses both a walker and a wheelchair to get around, is able to enter his home easily due to it being only one level. No steps were used so that access, even to the garage, is by a smooth entry. Wider hallways allow him to navigate the interior of the home.

"Everything is big and spacious," explained Bob Wancha, Jon's mental health therapist at Rainbow. "It has a nice, smooth entry, van access in the garage, larger doors, and a special bathtub you can lower yourself into to bathe."

Along with the tub bench in the tub, the bathroom also features a roll-in shower and grab bars in the tub and by the toilet.

Casement windows with hand cranks were installed so that Jon can open them himself. The walk-in closet in his bedroom features a roll down metal storm door and walls reinforced with sheet rock to serve as an emergency weather shelter, since there is no basement in the home.



The kitchen is also handicap-accessible. Most of the appliances line one wall with plenty of space between the counter and an island. The island also includes another sink and the stove. "The kitchen is awesome because I can get around in it," Jon stated happily.

With the back porch spanning the entire back of the house, Jon is able to enjoy the large backyard. The bedrooms and living room feature walkouts directly on to the back patio.

The home also features an exercise room including weight machines, a sitting chest press and more.

Before moving into the new ranch home, Jon lived in a two-bedroom apartment with his aunts. The apartment was about 900 square feet. "He couldn't do much because it was so small," explained Jon's aunt, Kathleen Spencer, who lives with him in the new house. "He couldn't use his walker because it didn't fit [in the apartment]. The door had to be removed from his bathroom and bedroom so that his wheelchair fit."

Aside from the lack of privacy in the apartment, Jon was also unable to maneuver easily around the apartment, leaving him dependent on others to do this for him. Now, he is able to navigate around his home and complete chores alone.

Jon said he has been much happier since moving into the new home. "I like that I can do my own laundry, since I am at my own house. Since I moved in, I have done every single bit of my laundry on my own. It's a lot better than the apartment," he said. "I'm happy here."

Accessible Living *continued*



Jon's Story

Jon Spencer was involved in a motor vehicle accident on Dec. 11, 2000. He suffered a basilar skull fracture and a right thoracic spinal process fracture. He also went into cardiac arrest at the scene of the accident, lost consciousness and spent six months in intensive hospital rehabilitation. He was admitted to Rainbow Rehabilitation Centers, Residential Program in May 2001 with a diagnosis of TBI secondary to anoxia.

In the nine years since his accident, Jon has come a long way. After starting in Rainbow's residential program he graduated to his own home, and now comes to Rainbow for outpatient treatment. Jon is out of the active rehabilitation phase and is now focusing on maintaining his therapy gains, improving his social skills and vocational programming.

Jon grew up in Milan and was happy to return to his hometown when his handicap accessible home was completed in May 2008.

The new-found independence and responsibility that comes with his modified home has vastly improved Jon's quality of life. "I used to walk with my head down, and now I don't," he said. "I'm really happy with the way things are going, and I can do a lot more now." ❖

Written by Nicole Bonomini, Staff Writer

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