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Monday, May 2, 2005

SENIOR SCOOP

Couple helps seniors with tub conversions

Monday, May 2, 2005

By THOMAS A. BERGBAUER
For the Courier-Post

A bathroom can be one of the most dangerous places for a senior citizen.

The National Safety Council reports that in 2002, falls were the second leading cause of unintentional death and the second leading cause of injury deaths for people aged 55 to 79. The rate becomes even higher for those over the age of 80.

When all those age 65 and older are combined, falls account for 50 percent of all injury deaths, the council reported. Falls took the lives of 8,000 people in 2002, four of five over the age of 65. Falls in the bathroom were the leading cause of fractured bones.

Information like this led Lynn and Howard Kohn of Voorhees to launch a plan that would help the elderly to convert existing bathtubs into what they call walk-through showers.

"I find a great deal of self-satisfaction that I am able to do something that I know is going to keep them (senior citizens) safe and is going to be a tremendous advantage to them as well as their caregivers," says Howard.

With TubEZ, the name the Kohns use for their tub conversion, the side of the existing tub is cut out and a molded insert or saddle is put in place converting the tub into a shower.

"All we do is go in and it takes about two to three hours to cut it out, put in the saddle and seal it all up," explains Howard, who is 62. "It is a perfect fit because we profile (the tub) and it is ready to use the next day."

After the conversion, the tub can only be used as a shower. The individual can get into the shower either by holding onto a grab bar and stepping over the saddle, or they can sit on the insert and swing their legs and feet around to get into the tub. The molded insert, or saddle, is 22 inches wide and sits six to eight inches off the floor.

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"It's designed to reduce slips and falls and it also reduces stress for seniors and individuals with special needs and their caregivers," says Howard.

"I was the one that came up with the idea," notes Lynn, a retired kindergarten teacher and former gift shop owner. She says that while caring for her ailing parents she developed a deep compassion for aging adults that led her to volunteer in senior citizen communities. Lynn's service as a volunteer resulted in her being hired as a retirement counselor, first at Haddonfield Homes in Haddonfield, and then at Brendenwood in Voorhees, where she worked for more than six years.

Jackie Mullen of Yardley Commons, a senior citizen independent living facility in Voorhees, says the walk-through shower she had installed about a year ago is a lifesaver. She says she had difficulty getting into the bathtub before and was afraid she would lose her balance and fall.

Mullen, 76, who suffers from early stages of Parkinson's disease, fell twice before, once breaking her wrist.

"I love it (the remodeled tub)," she says. "It is easy to get into and I don't have that fear of falling when I have to get a shower."

It was at Brendenwood, while working in marketing and sales, that Lynn Kohn discovered the conversion process.

"As part of my job, I noticed that there were far more bathtubs than showers in place for residents, causing physical challenges for the seniors and their caregivers," explains Lynn, who is 54. "I called the company (that manufactured the inserts) and I found someone in New York that I begged to come down, (to do the conversions)." Lynn says he did come down and converted a few tubs in Brendenwood but did not want to come back.

So the Kohns decided to form a distributorship that covers South Jersey, Delaware, Philadelphia and its suburbs. They employ three subcontractors who do the installation work. The Kohns get their inserts from a manufacturer in Utah.

Another conversion the Kohns provide is the Barrier-Free shower, in which the tub is taken out and a shower with floor and walls is installed. According to the Kohns, this type of shower conversion allows people who use walkers or wheelchairs to go right into the shower. In this conversion they use the exact same space in the tub area, approximately five feet by three feet of space, thus giving the disabled individual room to move around.

Richard and Hazel Maultz, also of Yardley Commons, had such a shower installed. Hazel, 72, suffers from rheumatoid arthritis and has trouble bending over as well as trying to climb into a tub. She says

she had fallen in a bathtub at one time and finds the barrier-free shower better to get into. Richard, 75, who suffers from emphysema, has to sit down in the shower.

"It is a necessary (item) and helpful," Richard says. "It is absolutely great, it's just like walking into the kitchen."

Depending on a person's budget the first and most economical conversion is the walk-through, which ranges in price from \$795 to \$895 depending on the type of existing tub. If the person has a fiberglass tub is it \$795 and if they have a cast iron tub the cost is then \$895. The Barrier-Free shower can cost from \$3,500 and up, depending on accessories, according to Lynn Kohn.

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