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Cover Feature

Patrick Joseph & Associates

Carolina Coastal

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REMODELING.REORGANIZING ISSUE

Planning Ahead Eases Aging Process

It's a fact of life that we're all getting older. But if we can plan for that eventuality on the front end as we're designing or renovating our residences, the chances are that the long-term quality of our lives will be much better for it. That's the message that several Charlotte firms are striving to get out.

Brian and Debbie Carney, owners of SILVER CROSS® Charlotte, work with architects, custom builders, remodelers and individuals to cater homes to clients' current and future needs by using universal design principles and a variety of products that range from elevators and chair lifts to simple, portable thresholds designed to ease travel over uneven floors. "We've talked with an architect about one mountain home that's currently in the planning stages for a couple in their 70s who want to remain in their residence. So they're including two master suites with a small adjoining room for a future nurse," Debbie says.

One of the firms they work alongside is Fresh Start Transitions, LLC. Founded by Certified Aging in Place Specialist Adele Mahan, the company offers a variety of support services for senior adults and their families. Coordinating their Aging in Place division is Tom Kirchner, director of building service. "There are about 70 million boomers, and the AARP has found that more than 84 percent of them want to stay at home as they age. Given this economic climate of tight credit and fear, still others are faced with the inability to move. So we offer life-changing services that allow clients to transition in their own homes," he says.

Fresh Start works with occupational therapists to provide a sincere approach to serving clients' needs that is focused on budget and meeting their particular needs. "We want to add value to the home, not only for the homeowner, but for visitors as well. We want to make things more safe, secure, comfortable and accessible without making it look institutional," Kirchner says.

Many of the elements that will make a real difference in your home's accessibility aren't nearly as dramatic as adding a suite for a future nurse. "There are simple things you can do, like making halls and doorways wide enough – at least 32" – to accommodate a wheel chair if they had to," Debbie says. "Then consider your doorknobs – round doorknobs are much more difficult to turn than lever styles, particularly for people with arthritis. Think about choices like your flooring. Area

rugs can be tripped on, and you may have difficulty rolling a wheelchair over thick shag carpeting. If you like the look of hardwood, there are wonderful flooring products out now that look like it but also have some give so they cushion falls better."

It's amazing to think that these types of minor changes can make the difference between being able to access every area of your home – or even remaining there or one day being forced to leave it. Yet even if you're not planning on making your current residence your forever home, it pays to think ahead as an aging population makes universally designed features more attractive to a growing number of home buyers. Even if your family is young and healthy, universal design makes sense: if you've ever had a leg in a cast, had to use a crutch temporarily, or had an elderly relative come for a visit, you probably already can appreciate the value of making your home accessible. "It's really just smart home building. You can plan for things that may happen or you can react to them after the fact, and it's always better to plan," Debbie emphasizes.

One thing Debbie sees many buyers planning now is elevators. Costs have come down and styles range from basic to luxe. Yet even if you don't plan on installing one right now, making sure that your floor plan can accommodate one in the future – by perhaps aligning closets on the first and second floors – is a minor consideration that can ease the retrofit process. If your home can't accommodate an elevator, options like stair lifts are a viable alternative. Ultimately, the cost of planning it right on the front end will be less than the price of retrofitting, yet either still makes sense when you consider your choices. "Some of these options are more costly, but it really depends on your alternative. You could easily pay \$3,000 to \$5,000 a month for an assisted living center. Alternately, you can install a straight stair lift for as low as \$2,500 and, by perhaps bringing in some extra help, remain in the home you love. That means you've already saved money in the first month and stayed where you're most comfortable," Debbie advocates. And Tom agrees: "Using the equity in your home to make these types of changes is much more efficient than the alternative. All it takes is one slip and fall and then you're suddenly forced to make a move. But if you take charge of your life now, you'll be able to make the decision of whether you want to stay." ■

For more information on SILVER CROSS Charlotte, call (704) 521-1115 or for Fresh Start Transitions, call Tom Kirchner at (704) 577-8758. Visit www.TodaysCustomHome.com for more of these experts' tips on Aging in Place.