



Universal Appeal

A remodel proves that individuality rules, even in accessible design

BY DEBRA JUDGE SILBER

In Bill and Allison Pileggi's kitchen, it's one cool idea after another: drawers snuck into toe kicks, cabinet doors that slip out of sight, appliances that pop open on command. Then there are the attractive features: the orderly white cabinetry that offers glimpses of colorful dishware through its glass, the marble and granite countertops that weave together in a rectangular backsplash behind the cooktop. It's a kitchen with broad appeal, even though it was painstakingly designed to meet the

family's needs. This kitchen sends a strong message: Universal design is more individual than you might think.

Paralyzed from the waist down since college, Allison uses a wheelchair. While that fact certainly impacts her requirements in a kitchen, it doesn't mean that her needs are the same as those of every other homeowner with mobility issues. "I'm very functional; I bend down to pick up stuff all the time," Allison says when asked about the toe-kick drawers where she stashes everything from

towels to plasticware. "For someone else, that might not be an option. That's why universal-design needs are so specific."

Allison and Bill wanted a kitchen matched to their needs and tastes, not to generic ADA standards. The problem was that none of the kitchen designers they consulted grasped this.

A universal playbook with someone else's moves

The Pileggis bought their suburban Pittsburgh ranch home because it offered both



The lowdown on two design highlights. Toe-kick drawers that open with a tap provide a home for plasticware, tea towels, and dishes that all members of the family can reach. Backed away from the sink to minimize splash-spotting, the new window sits nearly flush with the 34½-in.-high countertop, providing a view for all.

single-floor accessibility and the potential for improvement, especially in its galley kitchen. It would be eight years, however, before they got around to the kitchen remodel they planned from the start.

In the year leading up to the project, the Pileggis gathered photos of kitchens they liked, investigated appliance options, and churned out design sketches. In these notes and drawings, they discovered a kitchen that would do more than accommodate Allison's reach; it also would provide a comfortable

environment for her husband, daughter, and others. "My mom comes on weekends, and I knew she was going to be working in this kitchen," Allison explains, "so I didn't want it specific to my needs." Aesthetics also was important for Allison and Bill. They wanted an attractive, family-friendly kitchen—not, as Bill says, "an occupational-therapy lab."

Their homework complete, the Pileggis consulted local kitchen designers. The plans that they came back with, though, were a disappointment. "We knew what we needed,

but we thought a kitchen designer would fill in all the gaps," Bill says. "Each came back without a clue to what we were asking for. Either their CAD design had no aesthetic quality and looked institutional, or it simply ignored the fact that the person using this kitchen had to do it from a wheelchair."

Allison and Bill decided to take the kitchen design into their own hands, although they still needed professionals to translate their specifications into framing and cabinetry. Those needs were met by New Hampshire-



The perfect mix. A mixer lift promised to be a big help in the kitchen, but mounting the hardware on the cabinet sides would require a space-hogging swinging door. The answer: A false wall inside the cabinet that also creates a pocket for a retractable door.

based Crown Point Cabinetry, whose designer, Mike Murphy, spent four months drawing and redrawing plans, and by Nick Cratsa, a local contractor willing to add to the family's vision. The result is a universally comfortable kitchen that blends accessible design with rich materials and fun, family-friendly features. "There's something in this kitchen for everybody," Bill says.

Issues and invention

The renovation encompassed the original 10-ft. by 22-ft. galley kitchen and adjacent spaces, which included a tight powder room, an entry from the back patio, and a laundry/

mechanical room at the end of a narrow hallway. The space totaled 440 sq. ft., with a wall dividing the kitchen from the other areas.

After moving the furnace to the attic, the Pileggis looked into moving the wall to widen the kitchen so that it could accommodate an accessible island with at least 3 ft. on all sides. The good news was that the wall, which other contractors had described as load bearing, bore only the ceiling. "Nick sat at the kitchen table with his laptop, and he said, 'You have nothing above you. Have you thought about raising the ceiling?'" Bill recalls. Allison still wanted the cabinets to connect with a flat ceiling, so they devised a

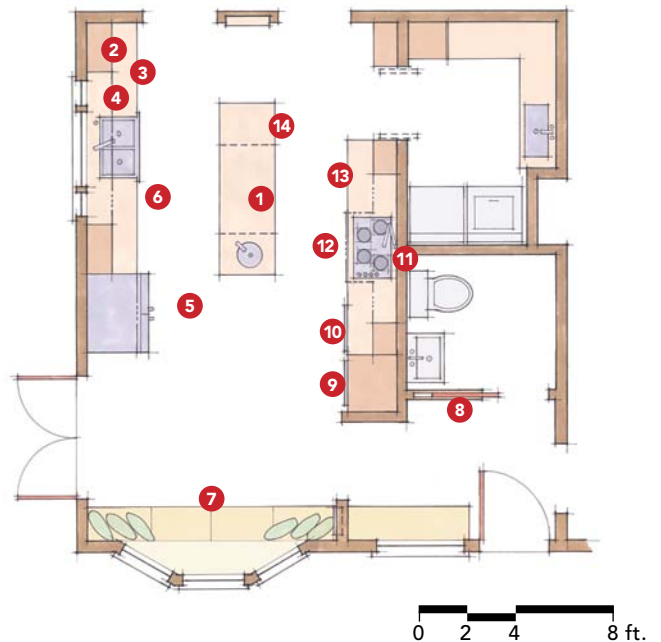
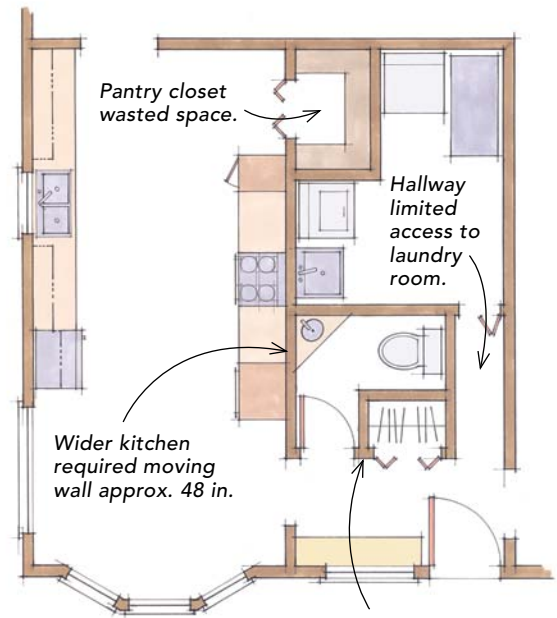


BEFORE

The original galley kitchen wasn't wide enough to accommodate an island, and the adjacent laundry/mechanical room could be accessed only by a narrow hallway. Access to the small powder room also was not ideal.

AFTER

Moving the kitchen wall, which supported the original flat ceiling, not only provided the family with room for an island, but also allowed them to open the space above with a vaulted tray ceiling and a skylight. Laundry-room access was made through the kitchen, and the dysfunctional hallway was incorporated into a larger powder room. Outfitted with new cabinetry, electrical, and plumbing, the kitchen was ready to accommodate a wealth of accessible and functional features.



hybrid tray and vaulted ceiling, with a skylight where the 5-ft.-tall attic space had been.

With the old laundry-room hallway absorbed by the new powder room, laundry-room access was moved to the kitchen. Allison and Bill didn't want to interrupt the line of cabinetry on that side with a doorway, but they also knew that any door flush with the cabinets would have to swing out, creating an impassable location. The answer lay in hardware from the cabinetmaker that enabled a pair of tall cabinet-style doors to swing open and then slide backward. With the doors retracted, the 28-in. pass-through is just wide enough for Allison's wheelchair. "It's

1. Accessible island measures 84 in. long by 27 in. wide by 30 in. high.
2. Deeper wall cabinets shorten reach to shelves; appliance garages extend storage to countertop.
3. Dishwasher drawer
4. Window counter height of 34½ in. enables views outside.
5. 45 in. of space on each side of island
6. Toe kicks 7 in. high accommodate Allison's wheelchair but maintain typical kitchen proportions.
7. Pneumatic hinges and small sections make bench storage accessible.
8. Pocket door
9. Easy-to-use ball-bearing oven racks
10. Microwave drawer opens with a touch button.
11. Reachable pot filler
12. 35½-in. cooktop height
13. Refrigerator drawer keeps essentials within reach of everyone.
14. Mixer lift with retractable doors

Blending in. Clearances needed for the Fisher & Paykel refrigerator drawer dictated the 35½-in. height of the counter on that side of the kitchen. The adjacent laundry-room pantry is accessed through retractable doors that slide forward to close, creating the appearance of an unbroken line of cabinetry.



amazing how an inch here and an inch there makes a difference,” Bill says.

“If you can draw it, we can make it”

With space concerns addressed, it was clear the dark, outdated cabinets and appliances had to go. “I was very interested in having an off-white kitchen with inset cabinet doors,” Allison says. The desire for this style led her to Crown Point, but more than the cabinets sold her. “They were the ones who said, ‘If you can draw it, we can make it,’” she says.

That began a four-month exchange of more than 220 emails loaded with dimensions, product suggestions, and scans of pencil sketches and handwritten notes. Mike

translated all of this into a design scheme in Cabinet Vision, the software his company uses. “Mike was like the engineer,” says Bill. “It was so collaborative, it was beautiful.”

What did Mike get that other designers didn’t? His answer seems too simple. “It comes down to just listening closely to what it is they’re trying to achieve, and putting myself in their place,” he says.

For Allison, one of those things was a cabinet finish that not only would brighten the kitchen but also would hold up to occasional dings from a wheelchair. Mike sent samples of each finish for Allison to test. She opted for a painted finish that could be touched up easily. Other features important to the couple

included lots of drawers, which are easier to access for everyone, and countertop heights ranging from 30 in. on the island to 35½ in. at the cooktop. A new window behind the sink is about 5 in. lower than the original, enabling Allison—and 7-year-old daughter Lila—to look into the yard and the retired apple orchard beyond.

The stainless-steel farmhouse sink protrudes from the cabinet base by about 1½ in., offering a wide ledge that Allison can grip when reaching for the faucet. A pot filler over the stove enables her to fill pasta pots at the point of use. A mixer lift in the island was designed to accommodate retractable doors, and storage drawers fill most of the kitchen’s



Calculated move. Before cabinets were installed, contractor Nick Cratsa drew a line on the wall to mark the countertop height, then asked Allison to test her reach before he positioned the pot filler.

Oven options. While a side-opening oven might be considered more accessible, the Pileggis liked the features of this Thermador, including the ball-bearing slides that help racks to move in and out easily.

7-in. toe-kick space. This recess, 2 in. shorter than toe kicks typically recommended for accessible kitchens, is high enough to accommodate the footrests on Allison's wheelchair without throwing off the aesthetic balance of the cabinetry. "ADA standards are terrific, but you can manipulate them," says Mike, who has designed a number of universal kitchens, including one for a former football player. "Not every person is the same size; not every wheelchair is the same width."

In fact, the Pileggis have discovered that the kitchen's proportions are ideal for all its frequent cooks. "My mom is only about five-one, so the lower countertop works for her," Allison says. "Anyone who has worked in this kitchen has felt that it really works well." That includes her brother, who is 6 ft. tall.

Appliance approach

"We really scrutinized the appliances," says Bill, who made outfitting the kitchen his personal mission. Prize finds included a Thermador wall oven and steam oven. The controls are placed between them within easy reach, and the ball-bearing slides on the lower ovens' racks ease access. The paneled refrigerator has a freezer on the bottom,

but refrigerator items Allison can't reach are stocked in a refrigerated drawer. The microwave, mounted in the base cabinet to the right of the cooktop, and the dishwasher both are drawer models. The cooktop is induction. Its cool-to-the-touch surface was not a necessity, Allison says, but she admits, "I do lean over it. And having a young daughter—it's safer for her, too."

What made it work

Bill and Allison say that it was their contractor's and cabinetmaker's open-mindedness and willingness to collaborate that got them the kitchen they wanted. Nick and Mike say that it was also the enormous time and effort the Pileggis put into analyzing and then clearly communicating their needs. "What was great about working with Bill and Allison is they knew exactly what they wanted," says Nick.

Mike agrees: "They had their ducks in a row," he said. "They prepared for quite some time, and it shows." □

Debra Judge Silber is managing editor. Photos by Craig Thompson, except where noted.

DETAILS

Cabinetry: Crown Point Cabinetry; crown-point.com

Dishwasher drawer: Fisher & Paykel; fisherpaykel.com

Microwave drawer: Sharp; sharpusa.com

Mixer lift: Knape & Vogt; kv.com

Refrigerator drawer: Fisher & Paykel

Sink: Kraus; kraususa.com

Wall and steam ovens: Thermador; thermador.com

Designer: Mike Murphy, Crown Point Cabinetry, Claremont, N.H.

Location: New Kensington, Pa.

Builder: Nick Cratsa, Verona, Pa.

FineHomebuilding.com

See more photos of the Pileggis' kitchen at FineHomebuilding.com/extras.