

STRATEGIES: A COMPREHENSIVE RESOURCE FOR GROWING BUSINESSES

Keeping hold of home

Portland firm helps people stay in their homes despite changing circumstances

BY WENDY CULVERWELL
 Business Journal staff writer

Joann and Howard Nelleremo scouted dozens of homes before the couple settled on a modest rambler within shouting distance of Gladstone High School in 1985.

Two of their four children were in high school, so the location was perfect.

They didn't care for the avocado green and harvest gold color scheme, but figured that could be fixed. Unlike most of the other houses on their list of contenders, the house on Barclay Street had just one story. It wasn't a major criteria at the time, but the absence of stairs proved fortuitous.

The same year they bought the house, Howard Nelleremo, a retired high school math and physical education teacher, was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy. In the 20 years that followed, the disease has robbed him of the ability to walk and move freely.

To stay in their home, the Nelleremos turned to In Your Home, a Lake Oswego company that counsels homeowners on how to adapt their property to accommodate the disabled and which performs improvement projects as well as some routine maintenance.

For the Nelleremos, getting rid of greens and golds gave way to remaking the bathrooms, closets and kitchen so Howard could get around — first with the aid of a walker and more recently, with a mechanized wheelchair.

Joann Nelleremo, who still works as a hospital clerk, plans to call the little ranch house in Gladstone home for years to come. It's an attitude that puts them in the company of millions of older Americans determined to stay in their homes in the face of significant disabilities.

Together, older Americans and the disabled account for about 10 percent of the \$214 billion home improvement industry.

In the three years since business partners David Dickinson and Brian Bartholomew launched In Your Home to serve clients like the Nelleremos, revenue is approaching \$750,000 this year, up 650 percent in just two years.

IN YOUR HOME

PARTNERS: Brian Bartholomew and David Dickinson
WHAT WE DO: Work with people who have had a change, such as a sudden illness, to improve and change their house so that it is still livable despite the new circumstances facing the owners.
LOCATION: Lake Oswego
CONTACT: On the web at www.iyhusa.com

"It's a need that resonates with almost everyone," said Dickinson, who brings the marketing and research expertise to the undertaking. Bartholomew is the financial wizard behind In Your Home.

The team presented to the Oregon Entrepreneurs Forum's Seed Oregon last week, intent on raising capital to grow the business. By 2011, the partners hope to franchise the In Your Home concept to 175 markets nationwide.

Both Dickinson and Bartholomew built and remod-

eled their own homes before launching the business. It was Bartholomew's experience doing projects at his mother's in Salem that gave him the idea to launch a commercial business.

Dickinson readily agreed, having had a similar experience with his mother. She once took a nasty fall and lay on her floor with a broken hip for days before help arrived.

Technology and a little remodeling know-how can help seniors safely live in the homes they love is the motto that drives In Your Home.

Dickinson and Bartholomew started In Your Home with a pair of demonstration projects — they purchased two homes in a 55-and-over golf course community in Tigard and remodeled both into senior showplaces.

They put in tables that accommodate wheelchairs, bathrooms that accommodate people who use wheelchairs (and their care takers), grab bars and tall toilets, and walk- and roll-in showers.

Extra wide doorways, extra lighting, access bars in the bathroom, floors that can stand up to the demands of tires and discrete ramps at the entries are tools that let seniors and people with disabilities stay in their homes and out of hospitals and nursing homes.

Both houses sold for above-market prices, which answers an age-old question about adapting homes to suit people with disabilities: It need not hurt the home's value. Dickinson and Bartholomew said most modifications add to the value of a house. Those that don't — such as ramps — can be installed for easy removal when



CATHY CHENEY / PORTLAND BUSINESS JOURNAL

David Dickinson visits the home of Joann Nelleremo, which was remodeled to accommodate her husband's illness.

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it's time to sell the property, they said.

Since then, In Your Home has concentrated on the senior homeowner market rather than buying and renovating existing properties.

Bartholomew sees no end to the potential market. Between older homes that weren't designed for people with disabilities to multilevel modern homes built for a generation of Peter Pans — people who don't expect to grow old — will keep demand going.

Indeed, Joann Nelleremo has advice for today's house hunters. Think about what it will be like to live in the house when you're older and creakier, if not infirm. Could you get around? Could the house be easily altered to accommodate wheelchairs?

"If you're looking for a house, think of when you're older," she said.

The statistics behind the age-related home improvement boom are compelling.

Longer lifespans coupled with aging houses add up to plenty of opportunities to retrofit homes to accommodate the needs of aging occupants, the duo says.

The American Association of Retired Persons reports that nearly 90 percent of seniors want to stay in their own homes. And most would rather stay there even if they need assistance or ongoing medical care. Fewer than 10 percent want to move into a care facility and fewer, 4 percent, would prefer living with a relative.

The National Association of Home Builders says age-related remodeling is a \$25 billion industry — roughly 10 percent of the total spent on all home improvement projects.