

## How One Contractor Became His Customer's Hero



*Contractor Steve Francey transforms a small space in a retired couple's home into the bathroom of their dreams to accommodate their limited mobility for about the same cost as a standard bathroom.*

Statistics Canada predicts that, by 2031, the number of Canadians aged 65 and over will approach 10 million. To accommodate their desire to remain in their homes, we will see an influx in demand to renovate their homes so they can 'age in place.'

For Steve Francey of S. Francey Home Improvements, a significant proportion of his business, which is based in Ontario's Durham Region, already reflects the increase in the need for aging homeowners to alter their homes and life style to facilitate changes in health and limited mobility. Though, in the beginning, it happened more by chance than by choice, Francey is building a niche for himself and finds this aging population "wants to stay in their homes and remain close to friends and family in a familiar community with their healthcare services near by. The only way that's going to happen is if we can modify their homes to make them more functional and accessible."

Recently, Francey was asked to take a 4- by 10-ft. space at the end of a sun room to create a practical and functional bathroom for a senior couple with limited mobility and tight budget. This couple lived in a small bungalow in a residential retirement community. There was only a crawl space under their house and no access to the shallow attic. They needed a bathroom designed to accommodate the husband's limited mobility and progressive loss of balance caused by Parkinson's disease. The wife wanted her husband to retain his independence for as long as possible, so designing a bathroom with fixtures to meet their needs and budget was a tall order. But, with Francey's enthusiasm, he tackled the challenge and began his search for the needed bathroom solutions.

### **Preparing for special needs**

First, Francey visited wheelchair accessible facilities to see what kinds of devices and products institutions install for their long-term care patients. He insisted on meeting the husband's occupational therapist and discussing what kind of support devices were needed and how they were to be positioned on the bathroom walls. He collected online literature on wheelchair accessible standards for housing and building renovations. He

visited wholesalers and trade shows to see the newest technologies and products available. He collected product brochures, spent his evenings searching the Internet for additional information and options that would help him create a bathroom that his customer said, “Must not look like a hospital room.”

This is not a contractor’s typical approach to a renovation project, but “there are no precedents for this new and growing field except those you develop for yourself,” says Francey. “For me, this isn’t just a job. I get tremendous satisfaction from trying new things, learning the latest techniques, testing materials I’ve never used before, but most of all, watching my customers’ faces light up with appreciation when they see the result. Oh yeah, and getting that hug.”

Next, he examined the physical space to find out what problems he might face before installing the plumbing, ventilation and the electrical services. He needed to know whether the crawl space underneath was adequately heated and dry, or if mould had invaded somewhere.

In a room this size, most contractors wouldn’t consider installing a tub. They would either customize a shower stall four feet by 32 inches or buy a 36 by 36-inch



preformed shower. But, neither suited Francey’s homeowners. After much searching and questioning, he created a base plan incorporating products he decided would work best in the small narrow space.

**What bath tub was selected for this project and why**

For this project, a walk-in tub was the best solution, and the dimensions of Safety

Bath’s ‘Serenity’ model were perfect—30 inches high, 36 inches from front to back and 34 inches wide. Other comparisons also made the ‘Serenity’ tub ideally suited for this installation as the Serenity:

- Holds same amount of water as a regular bathtub; larger ones may need a larger water heater because of greater capacity;
- Fills faster and drains faster than larger competitors;
- Fits into small spaces like a laundry room or even a closet, if necessary;
- Has a wider door that swings outward for easier entry—many competitors’ tubs Francey considered are designed with a narrow door that opens inward, and this could prevent you from quickly removing someone in an emergency;
- Has the lowest step in the industry because the tub floor is only two inches above the house floor, while most other walk-in tubs have a seven-inch step;

- Is available as a soaker bathtub, with 4 jet hydro-therapy action or 12 jet warm air massage and an optional heated seat. Hydro-therapy has been shown as beneficial in helping people with circulatory problems, arthritis and sore muscles;
- Weighs 120 pounds and is Canadian made from durable, easy-to-care-for fibreglass versus the heavier steel used in some imports;
- Accommodates and is primarily designed for the limited mobility of people using walkers—wheelchair users require a lift device;
- Comes complete with pop-up drain valve and a removable booster seat. Optional **MOEN** pressure-balanced, scald-guard taps and **MOEN** hand-held shower are provided if desired.

For Francey, using new products like the Safety Bath allowed him to learn as he worked. “Trying something new can be intimidating, but Safety Bath’s Serenity walk-in tub came with a template, easy-to-follow instructions and a demo DVD, plus Safety Bath’s telephone support line. Safety Bath made it really easy to install.”

### **Francey’s Recommendations for a Successful Accessible Living Renovation Project**

- Consider your customer’s mobility problems, challenges and consider their safety
- Be respectful and consider your customer’s emotional state
- Check for structural problems in the existing space
- Have a base plan
- Work with your customer and their occupational therapist to create a functional design for the project
- Expect and accept change
- Use products that best fit their needs, be willing and open to learning new about new products, technologies and techniques
- Ensure modifications are functional, affordable and provide enjoyment of use
- Provide quality workmanship which contributes to the homeowners’ equity
- Avoid disrupting customer’s daily life as much as possible
- Keep their home and your work area tidy
- Make finished area blend with home’s décor
- Take pride in yourself and your workmanship

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