

As seen in the  
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**Bethesda**  
MAGAZINE

# Bethesda Magazine

# HOME

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2014



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HOME COVER PHOTO BY ROBERT C. LAUTMAN

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TRISHA LANDWEHR/SWANK-DESIGNS.NET

# Designing INDEPENDENCE

A North Potomac home remodeler draws on his own experience to ease the way for others with special needs.

By Archana Pyati

**IT WAS CLEAR TO** Russell Glickman from the beginning that his son, Michael, 26, was going to be the master of his own fate—despite facing tremendous odds.

Deprived of oxygen before his birth, Michael was delivered at 25½ weeks and weighed just over 2 pounds. His brain was damaged and his lungs were underdeveloped. Three days after his son was born, Glickman and his wife, Anne, rushed to the neonatal intensive care unit at what is now MedStar Georgetown University Hospital. There, doctors told them that Michael's oxygen levels were dropping precipitously and that he would likely die—the Glickmans needed to say goodbye.

What happened next was as life-changing as it was inexplicable. Michael's eyes—"blue as the Caribbean," Anne Glickman remembers them—opened. "It was as if he said, 'I'm not going anywhere,'" says Russell Glickman, 58. "I wasn't sure what qual-

ity of life he was going to have, but apparently he wanted to give it a shot."

Diagnosed with cerebral palsy—a spectrum of conditions affecting cognition, movement, balance and posture caused by a brain injury or malformation—Michael has struggled his entire life with walking, talking and other tasks of daily living. Nonetheless, his family's efforts to provide him with the medical care, therapy and education he needed and his own persistence have enabled him to achieve a level of independence.

In 2012, Michael moved from the family's house in North Potomac to a group home in Frederick, where he attends an educational and therapeutic day program, goes to church every week and has his own circle of friends, including two roommates.

Bearing witness to his son's journey shaped Glickman's identity as a father and

husband, and more recently his professional life as well. Five years ago he began seeking out clients with mobility challenges for his home-remodeling business, Glickman Design/Build. He has leveraged his experiences caring for Michael and additional training in accessible design to create customized solutions for clients with special needs: seniors, people with degenerative diseases or debilitating injuries, and families like his own.

It took some time for Glickman to connect the two halves of his life—as a businessman and a parent dealing with a special needs child—but he says he came to realize that “I can help people. I have empathy for their situation.”

**ALTHOUGH GLICKMAN** calls Michael a “blessing,” he is the first to admit that having a disabled child meant letting go of certain long-held aspirations. The father of two girls, Glickman had dreamed of having a son to take on fishing trips and to toss a football with. After the cerebral palsy diagnosis, Glickman worried about paying for Michael’s medical care and therapy for the rest of his life. Adjusting to the reality of Michael’s disability was difficult because he saw his son as an “extension of himself,” he says. “Maybe that’s what fathers do.”

After coming to terms with Michael’s limitations, his family pitched in to ensure that he lived the best possible life. For Glickman, that meant renovating their home to foster Michael’s independence and facilitate his care.

When Michael grew too heavy to be carried upstairs, Glickman renovated the basement so Michael could have his own living space on a single floor. Glickman built ramps to the front door, and a smooth stone path from the driveway to the basement entrance so Michael could exit the home in his wheelchair. He installed a series of ceiling tracks between Michael’s bedroom and bathroom so that a family member or caregiver could simply place Michael in a sling and move him with the flip of a switch.

Around this time, Glickman occasion-



Glickman retrofitted this upstairs bathroom for Michael, who later grew too heavy to be carried upstairs and moved into the basement, which his father renovated to provide living space on one level.



Landscaping disguises the ramp to the front door of the Glickman home (above) and a smooth stone path (right) leads from the driveway to the basement entrance.



“I can help people.  
I have empathy for their situation.”

— Russell Glickman

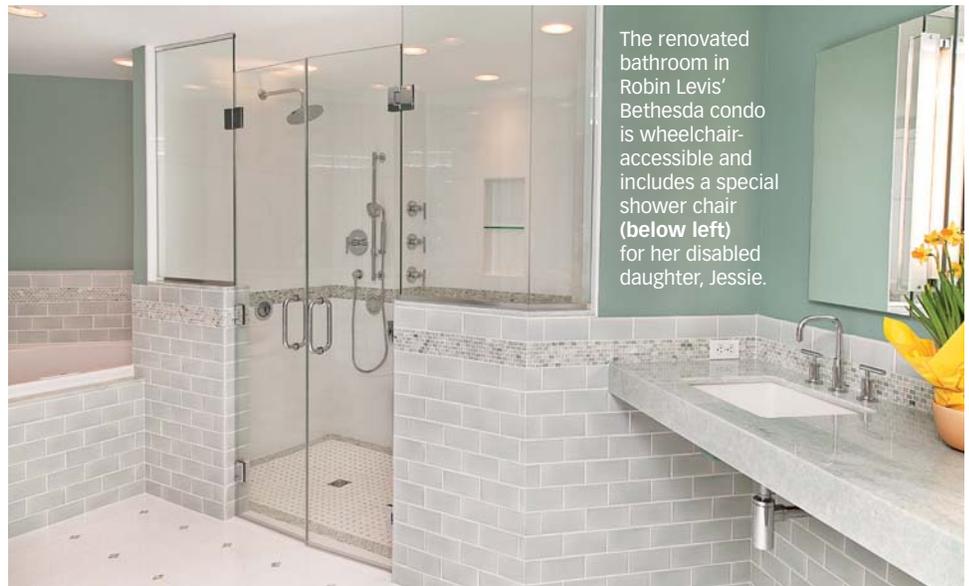
ally renovated the homes of other families with disabled children that he met through Michael's activities. But Glickman says he "never made it a point to seek out that kind of work," being "more interested in the bottom line" since opening his business in 1975.

In 1999, partly due to burnout from the remodeling industry, Glickman closed his business and focused solely on investing in the stock market for eight years, earning more than enough to support his family. After the Great Recession hit in 2007, though, Glickman says his investments lost value and he considered re-launching his business with a specific demographic—people like his family—in mind.

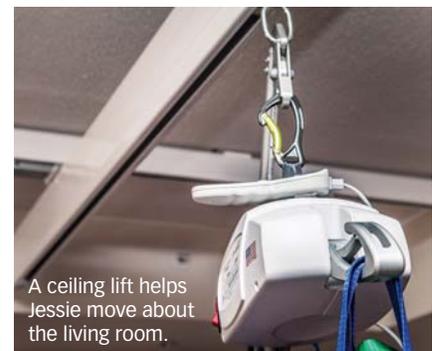
During his hiatus from business, Glickman had become interested in "universal design," a set of principles aimed at creating homes for people of all ages and abilities without sacrificing style or aesthetics. He earned certification as an "aging-in-place" specialist from the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) and reopened Glickman Design/Build in 2009. He planned to market his services to families with disabled children, disabled adults who yearned for more independence and property owners wanting to age in their own homes.

Five years later, universal design accounts for about half of Glickman Design/Build's business, says Glickman, who has become passionate about accessibility in a way that he wasn't able to be during the physically exhausting and emotionally overwhelming days of Michael's childhood. "I would wake up and go, 'Do I have enough energy to get through today?'" he says. "I lived like that every day, and 25 years went by."

**GLICKMAN AND OTHER** proponents of universal design say they're pushing back against the perception that homes for the disabled and the elderly have to be unattractive or—worse yet—advertise a person's mobility challenge. "Universal design isn't about illness or frailty," says Stephen Hage, owner of Strategies for



The renovated bathroom in Robin Levis' Bethesda condo is wheelchair-accessible and includes a special shower chair (below left) for her disabled daughter, Jessie.



A ceiling lift helps Jessie move about the living room.

Independent Living, a remodeling business in Takoma Park. "It's intelligent, realistic design that attempts to be aesthetically pleasing."

Examples of universal design include: single-floor living, stepless entries, widened doorways and hallways, pocket doors, lever handles that don't require twisting a doorknob, and curbless showers into which a disabled person can be easily wheeled. Countertops are constructed with open spaces underneath to accommodate wheelchairs, and household appliances are installed at lower

heights for greater accessibility. Outdoor ramps are typically hidden through creative landscaping,

"There's no particular reason that these things have any aesthetic limitations," says Louis Tenenbaum, a Potomac-based consultant and universal design advocate who developed the "Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist" curriculum for the NAHB in the late 1990s. Tenenbaum, who is occasionally hired by Glickman to work on remodeling projects, believes every new home should be built according to universal design—no matter how able-bodied the owners may be right now.

Montgomery County also has recognized the need to boost the housing stock for people of varying physical abilities. New tax credits, approved by the

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Russell Glickman designed and built this ramp to the front door of his North Potomac home so his son, Michael, could have easy access.



Kathleen Tevnan with her dog, Cosmo, in front of her renovated Silver Spring home.



An expanded front porch includes a hidden lift for Tevnan's wheelchair.

county council in November, took effect in July for property owners and builders of homes with universal design features. The credits incentivize people to consider future circumstances in which they or their loved ones might face mobility challenges, says Betsy Luecking, program manager and staff liaison to the county's Commission on People with Disabilities and the Commission on Veterans Affairs. "Our target is the whole community," she says. "We're not singling out the disabled or the elderly."

**TAX CREDITS MAY** be welcome news for consumers since major home renovations can be costly. Elevators alone can cost up to \$30,000, according to John Salmen, an architect and president of Universal Designers & Consultants in Takoma Park. "Retrofitting existing properties is going to be more expensive" than incorporating accessible features into new construction, he adds.

In 2011, Kathleen and Mike Tevnan hired Glickman Design/Build to retrofit their Silver Spring home after a spinal cord injury turned Kathleen, a former educator, into a paraplegic. For \$150,000, the firm built a new master bedroom and accessible bathroom, installed an elevator, and expanded the couple's front porch with a hidden lift for Kathleen's wheelchair.

"He's a perfectionist," Kathleen, 59, says of Glickman.

In aiming for an upscale clientele and those who have ready access to cash, Glickman acknowledges that his business is "not going to be the right company for everyone." Still, his clients say they value his insight on the specific home modifications they require.

"I was starting from ground zero," says Robin Levis, a Food and Drug Administration microbiologist who hired Glickman Design/Build in 2012 to renovate the Bethesda condo she shares with her 21-year-old daughter, Jessie, who recently graduated from Walt Whitman High School. Like Michael Glickman, Jessie has limited verbal and physi-

cal abilities resulting from cerebral palsy.

"It was so clear [Glickman] knew what needed to get done from his own personal experience," Levis says.

Levis, 54, needed assistance lifting and carrying Jessie, particularly after the death of her husband, William Chin, from an aneurysm in 2011. Chin had raised Jessie with the belief she could do anything with her life, and also took on the major physical work required in her care, Levis says. Also, Jessie "needed to grow into being more independent than she was," Levis says.

Levis hired Glickman to renovate the master bathroom to accommodate Jessie, who uses a wheelchair, and to install a ceiling lift in the living room. With its marble tiles and recessed lighting, Levis' bathroom exudes a spa-like ambiance and earned Glickman Design/Build an award from *Professional Remodeler* magazine. Jessie enjoys the bathroom's luxurious curbless shower except for one feature—the body dryer. Mounted on a wall, the dryer can't access all of Jessie when she is sitting in her shower chair, Levis says.

The lift has afforded Jessie more independence since she can now move around the living room on her own once she's placed in a sling and hooked to the lift. In one corner of the room, Jessie has her own office with a computer, which she is adept at using, Levis says.

**ALTHOUGH MICHAEL** Glickman lives independently, he stays connected to his family through weekend visits and weekly Skype chats. Now that Michael is grown, Glickman says he channels his mixed emotions of the past into creative challenges posed by clients like Levis and the Tevnans.

"I understand their dilemma, their pain, their confusion" over dealing with a disability, he says. And he's there to tell them that life can get better. ■

*Archana Pyati, a frequent contributor to the magazine, lives in Silver Spring. To comment on this story, email comments@bethesdamagazine.com.*

# EXCEPTIONAL EXCERPTS

Bearing witness to his son's journey shaped Glickman's identity as a father and husband, and more

recently his professional life as well. Five years ago he began seeking out clients with mobility challenges for his home-remodeling business, Glickman Design/Build.

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