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# “It Doesn’t Look Like the Place Where You Visit Your Grandfather”

BY SANDRA BIENKOWSKI



Photos by Todd Duncan

**MISSION:** To build a beautiful universally designed home from the ground up

**OWNERS:** Judy and Bill Slease, Tapestry Custom Homes

**THE IDEA:** At a National Home Builders Show held in Houston 10 years ago, Judy Slease heard of the concept of universal design. She learned that universal design is a way to make a home comfortable and accessible for every stage of life and ability. Judy’s constant quest for information and knack for research — combined with her banker-turned-home-builder husband, Bill — led to the formation of an idea to build a home from the ground up that embraced the concept of universal design. Not only did they want their house to incorporate numerous accessibility features, but they also wanted their house to be beautiful.

## A DREAM ACCOMPLISHED:

Today, Judy and Bill are the proud owners of the first universally designed home in the state of Texas to be certified as accessible by EasyLiving Home Texas. A certification program designed to work with builders to implement features that make a home more attractive, usable and convenient for anyone regardless of ability, EasyLiving Home Texas is funded by a grant from the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities.

Since Bill and Judy do not have any current disabilities, their house will serve as an educational model to introduce the concept of universal design to other people, and to accommodate any lack of ability or function that may occur as they age.

When the Sleases discussed the concept of universal design with friends, it was met with skepticism. “They thought our house would look like that last room

of the night at a motel, with the institutional-looking features that people call the ‘handicapped room.’ Every time we talk about it, people have a preconceived notion that our house would look like a hospital. They also have a huge case of denial. No family — especially as they get older — is exempt from having mobility issues that make it difficult to live in a house. Everyone has their own



reason. We are fully mobile now, but we don't know what we will need someday," says Judy.

Now, when the Sleases show their home, friends and visitors can't even tell that the house has incorporated universal design features.

"If you do universal design right, it doesn't look like the place where you visit your grandfather," says Bill.

EasyLiving Home Texas encourages builders of single-family homes to voluntarily implement features that make a home attractive, accessible, visitable and convenient for everyone. There are three main features of the program:



- 1. Easy Access** — A step-free entrance from the driveway, sidewalk or other firm route into the central living area.
- 2. Easy Passage** — An exterior door that provides a step-free entrance and every interior passage door on the main level — including bathrooms — should have at least 32" of clear passage space.
- 3. Easy Use** — With no less than one bedroom, a kitchen, some entertainment area and at least one full bathroom with sufficient maneuvering space all on the main floor.

**BACK TO THE BEGINNING, PUTTING IT TOGETHER:** Two years ago, at a National Home Builders Association show in Orlando, Fla., the Sleases' idea for their universally designed home began to take shape. As they conceptualized the idea in their minds, Judy researched accessible products to include in it.

"Our story is not that we have created this concept, it is that we have researched all of the pieces out there and put them together," Bill says.

"We wanted to show what can be done, but not create a house too far away from what we need. We could have taken the house further down the accessibility road, but we do have

at least 70 features of universal design incorporated into this house," Judy says. "We will continue to be on top of products as they evolve. We want to be the first to know about products so we can educate other people about them."

The Sleases wanted their home to have visitability — a movement toward construction practices that makes homes easier for people who have or who may develop a mobility limitation to live in or visit. Visitability is a way of stating that barriers in homes where people live or where people visit are simply unacceptable.

**MM took a room-by-room tour of the Slease home:**

## The Living Room

- Light switches are lower and plugs are elevated for wheelchair height or easier range of motion.
- Every doorway is 3' wide.
- The casement windows are low to the ground and are easier to open for people with arthritis or with limited use of their hands.
- A one-lock window system makes the windows easy to exit in case of emergency.
- The floors are stained concrete.
- In the entire downstairs, there is a 5' turning radius for people in wheelchairs.
- Most of the halls and walls in the downstairs were taken out of the initial design of the house to create an open space.
- Trim delineates the rooms.

## The Kitchen

- The water and ice dispenser on the front of the refrigerator are an example of a universal design concept that has gone mainstream.
- The dishwasher is elevated so the user doesn't have to bend down to load or unload it.
- The kitchen work space is at a lower height.
- The kitchen table is accessible for people in wheelchairs to roll under it.





- The spice rack is in a pull-out drawer at hip height.
- For people with limited mobility, a glass-stove top would be ideal for sliding pots, but the Sleases opted for a grill top and made sure to include dials up front to eliminate reaching over the stove top.
- Pull-down cabinets assist in reaching and promote safety.
- The baseboard under the sink was removed so a chair can pull up under the sink in the kitchen.
- The microwave is at a lower height for added safety, and a cutting board pulls out underneath the microwave to assist users with limited mobility when pulling items out of the microwave. The cutting board also can be used for preparing food prior to cooking — keeping everything in the same vicinity for easily accessible cooking.
- There are toe kicks throughout the kitchen, as well as a toe kick dustpan that uses air to suck up dust and crumbs after sweeping.
- There is a rolling cart that can be used for food preparation or as a working station. Locking casters can be added at a later date to keep it in place.



### The Bathroom

- Decorative grab bars are installed in each bathroom.
- The bathroom has a 10" perch or deck to assist users in transfers.
- The shower has a river rock bottom to prevent it from being slippery. This option is decorative and provides better traction.
- The shower was built with enough room for a caregiver if needed.
- A slope was built into the center of the shower for water drainage and to prevent a step up or step down upon entering the shower.
- A smooth transition was created from the stained concrete into the shower, creating a roll-in entrance.
- The toilet is higher — comfort level — so users don't have to bend down as far.
- The toilet paper holder was built so it can be changed with one hand.
- The master bathroom incorporates a 5' turning radius.
- The sinks are cast as one unit with a countertop for easier cleaning.

### The Bedroom

- The carpet is low pile.
- One bedroom is built downstairs for accessibility.
- Closets feature a reacher that can pull down clothing racks for chair access.



### The Garage

- The garage door opener has become a common feature of many homes when, in actuality, it's a universal design concept.
- The garage features a Gladiator system — a garage organizing system that includes wall-mounted cabinets and shelves, as well as a full complement of floor-mounted garage components: workbench, locker, shelving, even heavy-duty appliances such as a trash compactor and a refrigerator.

### Utility Room

- Features front-load washer and dryer for accessibility and ease of use.
- Dials are on the front so reaching over isn't necessary.
- The utility room was purposefully built adjacent to the master bedroom for easy access.



### Stairway

- The stairs were built with special lighting at the bottom left corner on every step and a safety rail on each side.

### Elevator

- The Sleases recommend that everyone building a house and planning to live in it into their golden years, install two clos-



ets directly above each other (stacked closets) in case they ever have a need for an elevator. In the Sease home, a Concord elevator was built off of the main living area downstairs.

### Entryway

- There is no step up to access the front door of the house.
- The sidewalk is wide and smooth to accommodate wheelchairs.

### Special Touches

- A study on the first floor was created to be easily turned into a bedroom if needed. It was also strategically placed near a bathroom.
- The upstairs is designed like an apartment for dual usage: for visitors or as a caregiver living space.
- A mechanical room has tankless water heaters.
- Easy-to-change filters are near the floor to eliminate crawling in an attic space to change filters.

**THE FUTURE:** “We have a passion about universal design and changing people’s thinking,” says Judy.

People in wheelchairs have visited the Seases’ home, and the feedback has been extremely positive.

“We are on the front end of the frontier,” Bill says. “We are facing a tsunami of baby boomers who don’t know they can ask for universal design. The public doesn’t know they have options and we want to let them know that these options do exist,” Bill says.

If more home builders incorporated

universal design into their home construction, people with mobility limitations wouldn’t be forced to move or forced to make what can be expensive modifications.

“People might decide to use a certified aging-in-place specialist to remodel and refurbish their existing homes, and some people might need grab bars in the shower or a ramp outside,” Judy says. “Or maybe those people need something as complex as a new addition to their existing home, but we decided to take a different approach and start from scratch. We were cognizant of accessibility needs from the initial design plans,” Judy says.

Bill says they had to keep a close eye on contractors who are accustomed to doing things the old, standard way — not the accessible way. “There isn’t anything we have done in this house that a designer or other builders can’t do.

Other builders might say they don’t have the time, and that’s where we can offer consultation. They just need to learn about it and know the modifications to how they normally build.

“People in chairs want to teach builders about their needs, and we can help do that with our house. We need to educate the public that everyone can have this type of house. If everyone understood it, then there wouldn’t be such a great need for education on the functionality of a house. We want people to know the accessibility and visibility of it. We are going to be living in it and it’s difficult to predict our needs for the future,” says Bill.

He explains, “We don’t say we are builders first and universal designers second; we are practitioners of universal design and builders secondly. We see all sorts of possibilities and we hope we are found by people who need us.”

## EasyLiving Home Texas:

### Checklist to Meet Certification Requirements

#### Accessible Entrance

- Is the entrance approached by a firm surface such as a sidewalk or a garage floor?
- Is the path at least 32" wide?
- Does the accessible path have a slope with less than a 1:12 ratio (12 inches of length for each inch in rise)?
- Can the entrance served by the accessible path be entered with a step no higher than a half-inch?
- Does the entrance door provide 32" of clear passage?

#### Navigable Space

- Does the floor with the step-free entrance include at least one full bathroom, one bedroom, a kitchen and an entertainment area such as a living room or den?
- Is there an accessible path of 32" in width that connects at least one full bathroom, one bedroom, a kitchen and an entertainment area?
- Do all interior doors provide 32" of clear passage?

#### Usable Main Floor Bathroom

- Does the bathroom have 30" by 48" of space available adjacent to the tub or shower?
- Does the bathroom have 30" by 48" of space available adjacent to the commode?
- Does the bathroom have 30" by 48" of space available adjacent to the sink?
- Does the bathroom have 30" by 48" of space that is clear of the door swing width to provide room for the door to be shut?

#### Web Sites:

Tapestry Custom Homes: [www.tapestrycustomhomes.com](http://www.tapestrycustomhomes.com)  
EasyLiving Home Texas: [www.easylivinghometexas.org](http://www.easylivinghometexas.org)