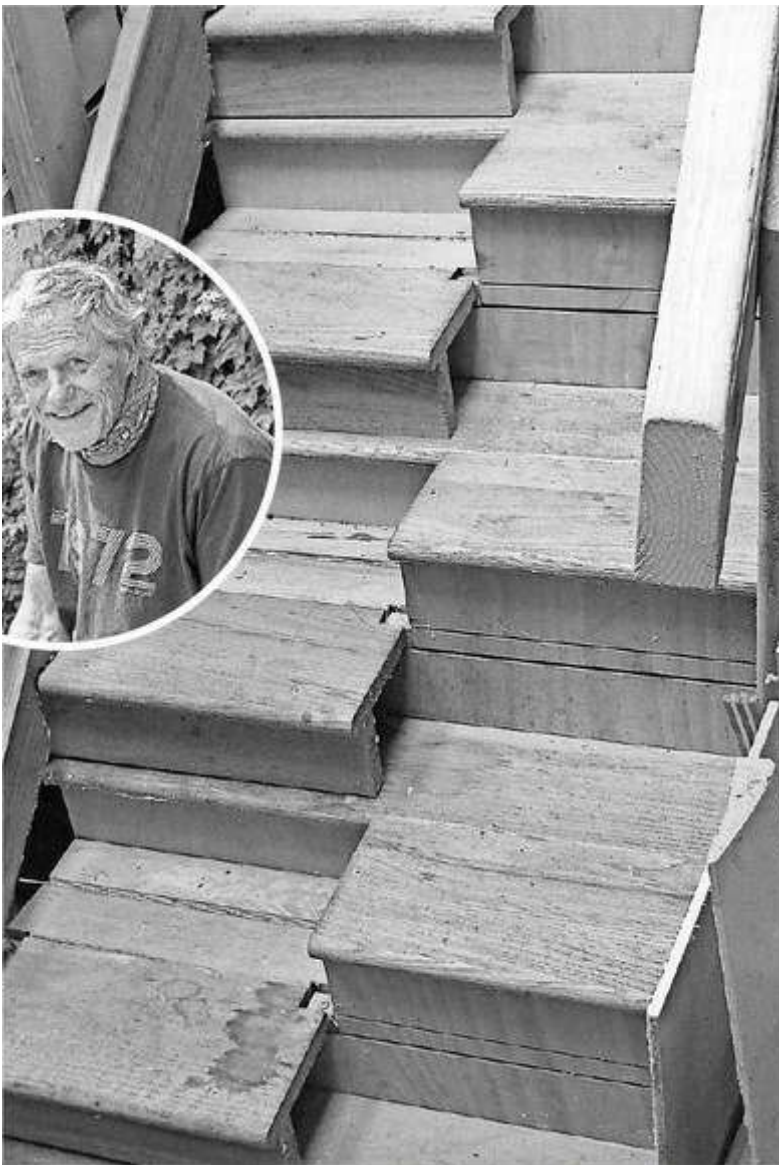


At Cape inventor's house, you have to mow the roof

Lawrence Brown

Columnist



Alex Bally built a special staircase that can adjust to a person's climbing abilities. The stairs were hand-fashioned in wood. Along the

left flank is a carved wooden handle. 'I gave it a smart pull and the left-hand half of all five treads dropped halfway. He urged me to give it a try and sure enough, left, right, left, this old reporter walked easily uphill,' columnist Lawrence Brown writes. Photos by Lawrence Brown/CAPE COD TIMES

It's funny how some stories start. This one starts with a room-full of senior citizens at the Academy for Lifelong Learning. I was teaching a class called *Telling your own Story* . If you could only tell one story about yourself that your listener, on hearing it, would have the best chance of understanding you, *what would that story be?* A number of tales we heard were harrowing. But everyone in the group trusted everyone else, so it worked.

Among the two sections, we had two industrial designers, both retired. In both cases, they told us about the first time they realized that while some people carry tunes in their heads, they were carrying designs. It was about discovering that they could conceive of complex things in their mind's eye—and then be able to make them. It was a discovery that changed the course of their lives.

One of these industrial designers was 88-year-old Alex Bally of Marstons Mills. I learned from Alex that some people can't climb normal stairs anymore. But they can if the height from tread to tread is reduced 50%. Alex had invented a prototype design in which, with the pull of a lever, the left half of each stair tread dropped half a level. By walking left-right-left, you had half-stair heights all the way up. He was hoping to find a market for it. He was imagining multi-generational families being able to use the same stairs, kids bounding up two stairs at a time, Gramps pulling a lever and making his patient way up.



Alex Bally has to mow his roof. He doesn't live atop a hill, he lives inside it, columnist Lawrence Brown says. All the utility rooms, bathroom, washer and dryer lined up, windowless, against the interior wall of the house. The entire front wall is a series of sliding glass doors.

I recently got an email from Alex, inviting me to see his work. When I got to his gate, the black head of his dog bounced into the air where I could see him for a second and he could see me. I could hear his husky bark, friendly, as his head bobbed into view over and over.

One look at his house and I fell in love. It was built into a long hillside. Atop its massive concrete roof, the hill —sod, grass and all — continued all the way to the front edge. Alex wasn't living atop a hill; he was living *inside* it. All the utility rooms, bathroom, washer and dryer lined up, windowless, against the interior wall of the house. The entire front wall was a series of sliding glass doors.

Despite the hot day. it was comfortable inside as we enjoyed a cold cider, looking out into his yard. Light was flooding in. The interior was filled with a lifetime of his wife's work. Tapestries adorned the walls. Sculptures, some of them massive, reared up from the floor. Doris too shared the same gifts as her husband, except it was art, not machines, that had filled her head since she was a child. Now she had Alzheimer's. The memories and pictures were fading.

All along the front of the house, a lattice-work trellis stretched like a roof above the windows. For years, climbing wisteria had woven into the trellis

for shade and beauty alike. Now, the trellis was bare. One night, like a ghost in the dark, trailing her long robe, Doris had gone out and cut all the flowers at the roots. Since in her right mind, Doris would never have done such a thing, she became convinced that goblins living in the trees had come down in the dark and done it. Alex told me the story and for a minute, his lively eyes stared off into infinity. Like the flowers in the trellis overhead, the love of his life, cut off at her roots, was fading away. For all his love, there was nothing he could do about it. Meanwhile, everywhere you looked, you saw evidence of what this fantastic woman had accomplished.

Theresa, a nurse, was there part-time to help any way she could. As a nursing student, she witnessed her first childbirth at the hospital and was enchanted. But then she sat at the bedside of a dying patient, held his hand, and kept him company till the end. It was, she felt, a privilege to be there for people during their last hours on earth. (As I write, there are nurses out on strike in Boston, and I think I know why. What would be enough for people who do what they do with such love and skill? Well... not what *they're* getting.)

We talked for quite a while and then Alex took me around the house and up a slope to the roof. The grass needed cutting, Alex apologized. At the back edge of the roof, I noticed a black line of solar panels, faces turned toward the sun, random wild flowers at their feet. Then we continued toward his workshop. At 88, Alex still works in there, if at a slower pace. And there was his prototype stairs.

Alex apologized again for the clutter, but I had found my way to the stairs. Everything was hand-fashioned in wood. Along the left flank of the stairs was a carved wooden handle. I gave it a smart pull and the left-hand half of all 5 treads dropped halfway. He urged me to give it a try and sure enough, left, right, left, this old reporter walked easily uphill. I looked up and against a back wall an old WPA painting depicted workers from the 1930s in their overalls, tools in hand. A spider web delicately draped one corner.

Especially in the modern era, old people are made to feel like fossils, ready for their own feature on the History Channel. But then I meet people like Alex... a bright conversationalist at 88, still able to think and love and create as well as ever. There is heroism in every forgotten corner of the world. And in a dusty old shed, an invention waiting to make the world a little better, a little easier for people.

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