



Kadence (at left) with mom Shanna and sister Addison react to the unveiling of their new home

STORY BY ALEX FRAZER-HARRISON | PHOTOS BY KRISTY REIMER

The HOME that LOVE built

“MOVE THAT BUS!”

As friends, volunteers and supporters shouted those words on a blisteringly hot August afternoon on an Airdrie cul-de-sac, a large passenger bus pulled away and changed forever the lives of Addison and Kadence Foley and their mom, Shanna Leavitt.

The two young girls – Addison, 9, Kadence, 12 – looked on in amazement as their new home was revealed. Once inside, they raced to their bedrooms: Kadence’s with its unicorn artwork, Addison’s done in an equine theme.

“This is amazing – overwhelming,” said Leavitt. “The girls are just beyond excited.”

It had been only 111 days since renovations began on the 1,870-square-foot, three-bedroom bungalow in Woodside that had been purchased as a home that would meet the changing needs of the two girls who are fighting Friedrich’s ataxia (FA), a rare progressive disease that attacks

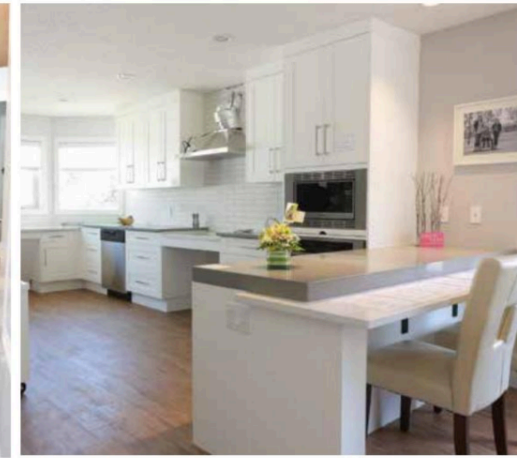
mobility and damages the nervous system. Their previous two-storey home in Fairways had become too difficult for the girls to navigate as their mobility changed; Leavitt, a single mom who works as a dental hygienist, even found herself having to carry the girls up and down the stairs to get to their bedrooms.

Shauna Wilkinson and Laurena Pollock, longtime friends of Leavitt’s, saw the impact the FA diagnosis had on their friend and her girls.

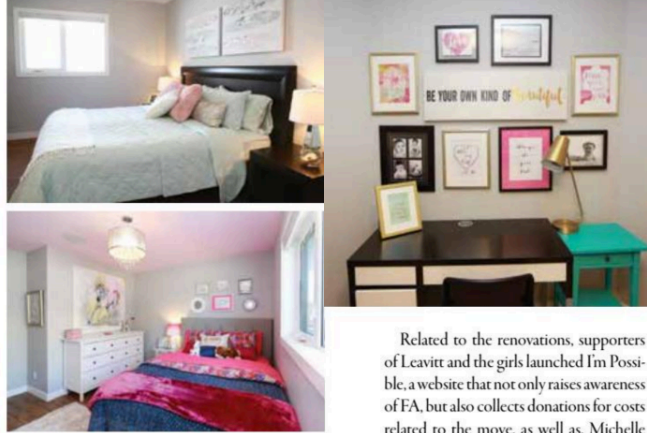
“We did not really understand the magnitude of what she was dealing with until the diagnosis came down,” said Pollock.

Added Wilkinson: “There was no alternative but to help. I actually joke with Shanna that it was sheer stupidity and complete love; we had no idea what we were doing, but we just started.”

Initially, the family’s story was communicated as a potential nominee for the Airdrie Angel program, an initiative that helps Airdrians going through difficult times, but the program’s Michelle Carre recalled that



Our final chapter in the renovations of the Leavitt family home reveals dramatic transformations and a caring community.



“Over 300 volunteers have crossed the threshold, 73 different companies were involved ... there were more than 8,640 volunteer hours [put] into the project”

the scope of Leavitt's needs – basically a future-proofed home where the girls could maintain as much independence as possible – was beyond what Airdrie Angel could provide.

But Carré's husband, Matt, a local realtor, found himself working with Leavitt to find a home that could be upgraded. A friend actually purchased the house, which allowed renovations to begin while the girls were still living in their previous abode, the idea being that, after Leavitt took possession of the new property, the old one would be sold and Leavitt would take over the payments.

But that still left an extensive renovation that required gutting the home to its studs (many of which, Michelle said, were also removed), and some substantial structural work.

Standing in the spacious kitchen, Wilkinson noted: “The kitchen in the original floor plan was originally a sunken living room – they had to raise the joists up on the house to bring everything level.” The estimated cost of the renovations on the early 1990s-vintage home, she said, was pegged at approximately \$300,000.

And that's where the community spirit of Airdrie began to shine as volunteers from the construction and trades in both Airdrie and Calgary offered their time and donated materials to make the renos happen. Michelle did the math: “Over 300 volunteers have crossed the threshold, 73 different companies were involved to the renovation ... there were more than 8,640 volunteer hours [put] into the project.”

But, as she told friends and supporters at the unveiling ceremony as she choked back tears, “the most important number is two. That is how many girls will get to grow up in this wheelchair-accessible home and be able to maintain their independence and dignity as they grow.”

Brent Fraser, owner of RockCreek Builders, managed the project. After the unveiling (as Leavitt and her girls were given some private time to explore the home), Fraser – who, along with other volunteers received signed artwork from the girls as a thank-you – said he was happy to see it finally come together.

“It is nice to see the whole project finished,” he said. “Hopefully they can enjoy it for years to come.”

“It was a challenge for sure ... organizing volunteers, but it worked out well, and a great group of people volunteered to put this together,” added Fraser. “Where we needed people, there was always someone to step up and fill in the gaps.”

Work on the home continued almost to the last minute, with Wilkinson noting that some of the kitchen work was finished only a couple of hours before the unveiling.

Some of the features in the new home include a roll-in shower, wider doorways and a lift providing access to a lower level which includes space for exercise and therapy.

Matt said the previous owners of the home, a couple in their 90s, were aware of the plans for it, though sadly the husband passed away only a couple of weeks before the unveiling. “They were extremely accommodating to let us through when we needed to,” he said. “They worked with us ... it was the community coming together.”

“And you look at the group that put this all together – it started with five of Shanna's longtime friends and now look at all the trades that came in,” said Matt. “We [Airdrie Angel program] ended up with a small part of it, which is fine by us – at the end of the day it was what was the right thing for the girls.”

Related to the renovations, supporters of Leavitt and the girls launched I'm Possible, a website that not only raises awareness of FA, but also collects donations for costs related to the move, as well as, Michelle noted, funds to provide Leavitt with “a cushion” to help cover additional costs as Kadence and Addison grow and their needs change.

“I'm Possible comes from, ‘Nothing is impossible,’” said Wilkinson. “We wanted to open the world for Addison and Kadence so they can dream and hope and live ... and (have) a home where they can be independent in and safe in, and Mom's not worried about breaking her back carrying them up and down the stairs. Things we take for granted in our own homes.”

Contacted a month after the unveiling, Leavitt said she and the girls are still excited and humbled by the community's support.

“It has been beyond amazing,” Leavitt said. “I had a moment after I was able to put the girls to bed [the first night] and I sat there and took it all in. This house is so full of love – we can feel it completely.”

Leavitt has already noticed a difference in her girls. “The girls are doing so much more on their own and it is so cool for them to be able to have friends over and get around and not be stuck in one room. And the bedrooms ... one is Kadence and the other is exactly Addison. They got it right; they did it perfectly.”

“Their disease is progressing and they are in and out of hospital doing testing. Things are changing, but they're still smiling and so happy and that is the only thing that is important,” added Leavitt. [lifc](#)

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| Airdrie Glass | Convoy | Plygem |
| Airdrie Home Furnishings | Core Brands | Prairie Woodlands Tree Care |
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