

# Remodeling Stories

## **Kathy – a Kitchen Re-do**, By Bill Powers

***Author's Note: My career has spanned some 32 years and I have been the driving force behind nearly 2,000 projects. I have accumulated a wealth of stories that are classic examples of what can happen under a variety of circumstances. I have assisted people that got into trouble during their building project for one reason or another. These stories are based on real life situations, the names and exact circumstances have been slightly changed for good storytelling. Learn from the experiences and mistakes of others. It is free of charge and will likely save you lots of money.***

Kathy had planned and saved for her kitchen remodeling for over 10 years. She was a single woman with no children, a fact that made it easier for her to build up her 'kitchen nest egg'. She lived in a modest home in east Tulsa and it had the original 'builder's' grade kitchen. 'Builder's grade' is a term used in the industry to describe what the builders are doing at a certain point in time as their standard offering and it is generally understood that term infers a **modest grade of product**. Now, 35 years later the cabinets were falling apart, the original stain painted over several times showed gouged doors and drooping drawers that did not work properly and were generally beyond any repair. Additionally, her old layout was not very functional by current standards since kitchen planning had evolved greatly. The appliances were completely outdated. The oven either got way too hot or not hot enough. The counters were worn through and the floor was stained beyond cleaning, etc. She was so happy to have reached her savings goal and to be really able to make firm plans for her new kitchen.

Kathy read numerous articles to help her understand what needed to be done and how it needed to be done. She went to a local building center and started working with a kitchen designer that helped her lay out the kitchen from the dimensions she provided based on their instruction sheet. They tried several different layouts and finally she really liked one that gave her more counter space and more cabinets than were currently in the kitchen. The designer pointed out that if she removed the wall between her kitchen and dining room she could have more room for the best kitchen design and integrate the eating and living spaces directly into her kitchen space. The kitchen designer could not offer any information about what was involved with the wall removal but told her that she could find a contractor who would know how to remove her wall and install the kitchen for her. So, Kathy finally approved the plan and then selected her cabinets from the Building Center's offering. They had lightly stained wood with nice drawers and interiors, a nice trash bin, recycling bin, and one set of nice pot and pan drawers. She shopped extensively for appliances and found the best buys she could on the appliances she wanted and could afford. She opted for Formica countertops with matching backsplashes because granite was just too expensive. She really wanted a tile backsplash but it was over her budget. She picked out wood flooring at a discount flooring center and gave them a copy of her

floor plan to bid the flooring materials and installation. She found a list of contractor's from the services directory in the newspaper and started making calls to interview those she liked on the phone.

After meeting the contractor's and getting their bids, she picked 'The Hammer' remodeling firm. John Hammer gave her a bid for labor and specified materials. His price was not the lowest but she liked him the best. He told her he would handle the plumber and the electrician that would be necessary, as well as the other subcontractors needed for this project and that he would make sure they worked within her budget as much as possible. She checked his references and they were good. At that point they agreed he would start a week before the cabinetry arrived so they would be ready to start installing cabinets shortly after their delivery. She asked about a contract and he said 'we'll use my budget as the contract' and she agreed so they both signed it. She began emptying her kitchen and preparing for the remodeling to start, her heart full of anticipation.

John's crew arrived on time the morning they had agreed to start and they began taking the cabinet and counters out of the kitchen. Kathy was concerned about dust getting through the house and also about her wood floors in the entry foyer where the workers were carrying things out. John agreed to mask off the work area and cover the floors but that was not part of his bid.

It just took a day to get the old kitchen cleared out and some new developments arose. There was a toe-kick vent in the kitchen that discharged out of a short peninsula from the old kitchen. Kathy didn't understand this nor did she know what to look for. John was only thinking about the installation for his bid and did not take the duct into consideration. The duct was a round hole in the floor set into concrete. John pointed this out to Kathy and she did not know what to do because the new plan eliminated the peninsula and the duct would be in the middle of the floor. John suggested she just cover it up because it wasn't really needed and it would cost a lot of money to move that pipe somewhere else. Kathy thought about it, 'what will I do for air conditioning?' John pointed out that she still had the duct under the window where the table used to sit and that would be under the new cabinetry and they could just run it out to the front of the toe-kick like the one on the peninsula and it would be fine. That won't cost much extra and 'you'll still have good air flow'. Kathy wanted to know why John had not considered this when he gave her a bid to which John explained, "We didn't talk about air conditioning changes, just the remodeling you wanted done. I would have charged you for this if we had considered it so it doesn't make any difference at this point." Kathy was not happy about this development but had no choice but to continue. Of course she wondered if there would be anything else.

The next day the electrician John recommended arrived and when he had checked things out he told Kathy that she was going to have to have new electrical service because the old service was too small to handle bringing the new kitchen up to current codes or that she'd risk burning the house down. "How much will that cost," was the first question she asked? The electrician quoted her an additional \$1,150.00. Kathy was not happy. She had no idea something like this would come up. It wasn't mentioned in any article she read and the contractor had not said anything about it. Is this the way it goes? "I'm not going to be able to afford to finish my kitchen at the rate the extras are piling up. What

else could possibly happen? It's discouraging to get this type of news early in the project. How can this be avoided? Can it be avoided?"

Yes it can.

The plumber didn't have any surprises and preparation for the cabinetry went pretty well after the initial issues.

Finally they were ready for cabinetry and John's crew went to work to install it. Kathy got home and was surprised to find they had only set a couple of pieces and stopped.

"What's wrong now John?"

"The measurements for the cabinets are off by 4 inches and we cannot center the sink on the kitchen window; plus the sink wall is too long," he answered.

After talking to the designer and going back and forth it was decided that they would have to eliminate the trash can by the sink and put the trash can in the sink cabinet. John's carpenter would use the trash cabinet and make an open shelf unit of some kind for cookbooks or whatever. They would have to cut down wall cabinets on each side of the sink and order new cabinet doors so the upper cabinets would match with the lower cabinets. She was upset but it was her fault. She made a mistake in her measurements and didn't pay the supplier their \$75.00 charge to do a 'job-check' for which she could then hold them responsible for the fit!

Kathy was upset. She immediately called her friends, her dad, her brother, and they all did their best to calm her down. She really thought she knew everything she needed to know after years of study but had to realize she was not a skilled remodeling professional and to save money had taken on the responsibility of the general contractor herself. John's crew was doing a good job and he kept his word though she worried that they really didn't have a good contract. Fortunately the wall they had removed was not load-bearing wall and there was not an extra expense there. She pressed forward with the job and managed to get everything done with a little help from the credit cards she had hoped not to use. She painted the new rooms herself as she had time and the job was completed 6 months after she started; just in time for the holidays. She enjoyed her new kitchen and soon the memories of the unbudgeted costs and other difficulties went away.

The next summer during a real hot day she noticed how hot it actually was in the kitchen compared to other rooms in the house. It was unbearably hot. She had purchased a gas range with gas oven and gas cooktop and it really put the heat out when she was baking. Even without it being on, that same kitchen seemed to be too warm to use. It wasn't long afterwards that she noticed the wood flooring was beginning to buckle in places and turn up on the edges. As she stood and stared at the floor in disbelief her heart sank. "Who is responsible for this?"

The Conclusion: Kathy did a good job using the best information available to remodel her home and save money. The air conditioning problem required that her furnace be 'lifted' to allow the addition of an overhead vent to bring sufficient air flow into her kitchen. All the other ductwork was embedded in

the slab and tied to the furnace under the concrete. As for the new wood floor, the installers were not instructed to do a moisture test and in that area of the home moisture was actually migrating through the slab from the soil underneath due to poor drainage around the rear of her home. In less than a year the moisture undermined the adhesive holding the wood floor to the slab and it buckled. The wood floor in her entry was different as it had been installed over older linoleum that was very well secured to the floor using modern adhesives. There the linoleum acted as a 'vapor barrier' to prevent moisture from affecting the wood flooring system. Unfortunately there is no warranty under this situation since Kathy purchased the flooring direct from the building center and then paid an installer to simply install the flooring.

In the final analysis Kathy would have spent less money overall had she hired a really experienced design/builder to help her navigate through the remodeling process; an individual with experience to know the pitfalls of this type of remodeling and how to avoid them and move through a project on budget, on time, and with confidence. Specifically, the cabinetry would have been ordered correctly in the first place. The ductwork needing to be moved and upgraded initially would have been accounted for in the first place. With a true design/builder it would've been much less expensive to move the vent in the floor properly. The concrete slab would have been tested for moisture issues and then properly installed thereby eliminating the issue of having to re-do the floor at the owner's expense.

Homeowner's have a strong tendency to be idealistic when approaching costs. The problem is in calculating what one will spend when there is so much that they do not know about or understand. No book, no magazine, no TV program can prepare individuals for the perils and pitfalls of home renovation. Everyone wants their project to be successful and to really make that happen one should bank on having a truly qualified company with a verifiable track record in the tried and true way to 'get it done right the first time.'

Next Issue of *Remodeling Stories* features Jordan and Milley's family who by now had grown to 3 children. With the family maturing, they all need more space. So what did they do? They hired the contractor with the lowest bid in order to "save money." So they thought.....