

MEET KAREN TRANSCRIPT

00:00:00:22 - 00:00:31:58

Karen Brown

Welcome to Real Life Renos : The Podcast. I'm your host, Karen Brown, and I'm also happy to welcome you to 2025 and our first podcast of that new year. Can't believe we're here already. You know, I noticed that we have acquired a lot of new listeners and readers over the past year. So to answer some of the questions that they have been asking, I wanted to do a podcast essentially introducing myself and talking about what I do and more importantly, why I do it.

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Karen Brown

So that is the topic today. I started my business about 28 years ago, so we're encroaching the 30 year mark at this point in time. At first, it was a catalog of aids to daily living. So that would be things like, long handled forks, knives, things to help you wash your hair and bathe with longer handles and better development in terms of how they fit your hand swivel seats, low vision, playing cards, grab bars, that sort of thing.

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Karen Brown

We still sell a number of those items and a couple of years after I started that catalog, I was asked to become, and I accepted the exclusive Canadian distributor for HipSaver Hip Protectors. Shortly thereafter, DermaSaver Skin protectors and HeadSaver Head Protectors entered our realm, and we deal with all of that under the headline Brown HealthCare.

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Karen Brown

So you can find all of that at BrownHealthCare.com. I maintain oversight on that division, but I do have staff that have for many years done the order taking, picking, packing and shipping. The new manager of that division is my older daughter. So I'm thrilled to have her involved in the business as well. She's been doing our social media for seven years, but after she came back, following

her most recent, mat leave, she took over management of the entire division.

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Karen Brown

My other employees had retired, so I needed somebody new, and she wanted to do it, so that's just fantastic. Fall and injury prevention has been and remains an essential focus of successful aging. Most people. I would wish it was fewer, but most people tend to think that falling just happens because we're getting older. And of course you're going to fall down.

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Karen Brown

No, falls are not a normal part of aging. You need to understand that there are things that can be done to mitigate falls, and we should all be doing those that if we do them, then falling is not something that you will experience as part of aging unless you're out on the ice a lot without good skates or tread, I suppose.

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Karen Brown

But you know, we do need to look at falls as a part of life. Toddlers fall. People fall when they're doing sports. It doesn't just happen because we're older. And contrary to popular belief as well. 50% of falls happen within the home. So it's not always something that just happens outside or just happens in winter. When I was, still answering the phones and putting orders together myself for Brown Health Care, I would have a lot of conversations with my customers that went beyond hip protection.

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Karen Brown

You know, they were calling to give me a credit card number, but the conversations often became so much more. Their loved one had just entered long term or nursing care, and the facility had given them a list of things that they needed and a lot of these things were unfamiliar. So there was a lot of anxiety and concern and grief and a lot of questions around those conversations.

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Karen Brown

What were these things and what comes next and how hard it was to see their their mother, for instance, in this sort of environment? Let's just say there was a lot of education to be done. And so eventually I started a blog. It was called My Parents Are Old. It doesn't exist anymore. It has transitioned into The Oldish.

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Karen Brown

But that original blog started because of all of these questions, and there was no one central place where people could get good information and good answers. So I would invite health care professionals to participate in the blog. Our readers, as it built up, answered questions for each other. Some of them, the readers, that is, were a little bit further down the line in terms of having parents who were elderly and aging and had needed some of these products.

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Karen Brown

And, they were able to advise each other. And it was a really great community. But soon the need, the need became even greater. And so the old ish was what it became. The Oldish dot com is where you can find it and there are now over 3000 articles. The articles are based on current studies that we sort of translate for you.

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Karen Brown

Trending conversations and specific topics that I hear our customers talk about. Yes, I still do talk to our customers. Or I see these kinds of conversations bubbling up on other social media platforms. So that is what is there. Initially, we had a really terrific writer named Heather who was producing content. Now I do all of the articles.

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Karen Brown

I try to publish three a week. So bear with me. But that's what I do have as a target. As the years went by, I was hearing more and more concern from our customers and our readers about their own lives the last third of their lives. Remember, they have watched their parents. They've watched them move into long term care and age.

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Karen Brown

Some of them maybe not in long term care. They didn't necessarily want that for themselves. That became exponentially louder in terms of a conversation during and after the pandemic. People did not want to live in long term care following the pandemic,

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Karen Brown

As the years went by, I was hearing our customers sort of thinking about their own lives out loud and how they were going to live the last third of their lives. They'd watched their parents in long term care and nursing facilities. They'd watched some of their neighbors go through some of these challenges, sometimes moving away. They were beginning to realize that the homes that they had raised their children in were becoming a bit too much to manage.

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Karen Brown

These conversations all became so much more pronounced during the pandemic, and even after. Surely there was a way for them to live out their lives in homes that they loved and were paid for, in neighborhoods that were familiar without having to go into a facility living. Well, guess what? There is. When I began having those conversations with customers and hearing all of this bubble up here, there and everywhere, I began to look at home.

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Karen Brown

Accessibility, what would be needed in order to make a home more friendly to those of us who were aging. Now I am the same age as many of you, I think. I just turned 70 in November. I'm not

interested in retiring. I'm still interested in working. I am still very engaged with this work. So I wanted to learn more for myself.

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Karen Brown

But for you as well. I took ultimately a two day course on aging in place. It was pretty interesting. A friend of mine who had taken that course said to me, if you like that you are going to love this. And it was a longer course months long, that was offered by the University of Southern California's Leonard Davis School of Gerontology.

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Karen Brown

And he was right. I did take that course, and I got an Executive Certificate in Home Modification. So that course had several different professors teaching it, each with their own area of expertise. I absolutely loved that course that taught me about reading plans and the different types of ways you could organize a house, build a house, renovate a house.

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Karen Brown

It was wonderful. I enjoyed that so much. Next came the Rick Hansen Foundation's accessibility certification training. I actually had fallen in love with what properly built accessible spaces could look like. It was amazing. Now, the Rick Hansen course focuses more on public spaces, municipalities, corporations and what their buildings look like and how they could be renovated to a different standard.

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Karen Brown

However, I was able to apply a lot of what I learned there to home modification. So, you know, I'm now able to deal with homes, businesses, municipal spaces, outdoor spaces, you name it. I have some area of learning and education in all of those spaces. I've also completed the Canadian Homebuilders Association's Qualified Adaptive Homes Specialist course. I have to look at my notes sometimes to get all of these courses correct.

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Karen Brown

I recently took also a couple of courses at Humber College. These were micro learning courses on AI artificial intelligence. It's a very interesting field, but I was thinking about how people would experience the written word and websites. So I took a couple of micro credential courses in those areas. Really interesting stuff. So my interest in accessibility was growing exponentially.

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Karen Brown

Super interesting stuff. But here's the thing that I really learned about accessibility. It applies to everybody. Everybody needs accessible spaces. Here's a really good, for instance, that everybody can relate to. Stairs. Nobody likes stairs. Was that a secret? Nobody likes stairs. Not people with mobility devices, not toddlers. Not people who move furniture or appliances in and out of houses.

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Karen Brown

Not those of us who carry arms full of groceries in and out of houses. Nobody likes stairs. Now, they were built for a reason, especially those of us who live in four seasons climates. But we know how to do that differently now. We don't have to build houses with stairs now. We know how to do it differently. Most builders simply choose not to.

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Karen Brown

Now, do they know how? Some of them do? Some of them do. You know, we really haven't changed the way we build houses in over 50 years. Architects are not taught about accessibility in their professional schools. Contractors, tradespeople. They're not taught about accessibility either. If they want to learn about it, they have to take courses after the fact.

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Karen Brown

And some of them have not nearly enough, but some of them have. In my work, I do spend a fairly significant amount of time educating tradespeople on how to do something differently so that it is an accessible feature of a home. Instead of yeah, we've always done it this way. You know, I can tell you that I have followed my own advice and downsized.

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Karen Brown

I sold the house that I raised my children in. I've had a couple of places that I've lived in since then, but I a year ago moved into a brand new house. I've never had a brand new house before, but now I do. And as I say, I've been here for a year. But while I was going through the process of watching that house be built, I had to go to their design center and choose finishes.

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Karen Brown

So paint and drawer pulls and things like that. While I was there, I did talk with them about accessibility. I had actually talked with the sales office about accessibility while I was in the purchase process, and they told me they knew all about accessibility. They had people on staff so that if home buyers needed something done accessibly, they could do that.

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Karen Brown

So I raised the conversation again while I was at the design center. One of the things that I asked for was for the electrical outlets to be installed higher than they would normally be installed.

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Karen Brown

Well, they looked at me like I kind of had rocks in my head. Now, understand that electrical outlets being installed differently is not something that is going to cost the builder any more money. This is not a money thing. This is just take what you were going to do and do it higher.

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Karen Brown

That wasn't something that they really understood. The design center person did say that, that she would send it on to head office, and if they could do it, they would ultimately, word came back that they were not able to do such a thing. So much for the builder understanding accessibility, because that is accessibility 101. And if they couldn't do that, then there was a lot of other stuff that they weren't going to be able to do.

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Karen Brown

In fact, I had friends who were looking at a house in the same subdivision, only they were looking at a three story house with an elevator, which is the same thing that they were living in now, but they just wanted a change. So they did talk to the sales center, and installing an elevator was not going to be an issue.

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Karen Brown

The builder could put all of the electrical pieces in place and carve out the space for the elevator. The purchaser would then have to have an elevator company come and install it themselves. So the builder was not going to install the elevator, but they would prepare the house for it. But as you might imagine, somebody who needs an elevator also needs an accessible entrance.

00:16:12:57 - 00:16:23:11

Karen Brown

So they discussed a ramp with the sales office. Oh, sure, they could do that. No problem.

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Karen Brown

When they told me about this, my friends, that is when my friends told me about it. I must have looked at them like they had rocks in their head, because the lots are about 30ft wide and their front yard was ten feet, if that. I didn't ever go and measure it, but it couldn't be much more than that.

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Karen Brown

So the builder told them they could build a ramp. I know that to access five stairs up to a porch, they would need at least 35ft for a ramp. Given that their front yard wasn't even ten feet, this was not going to be possible. There was no way that a ramp was going to be built. So, you know, the builder was just saying stuff.

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Karen Brown

They're just saying stuff because they want someone to buy one of their homes. My friends did not ultimately end up purchasing one of these homes. It just wasn't going to work for them. There are other alternatives, but they aren't things that they were willing to pursue. So anyway, understanding why people need accessibility to be done in the first place, hands down the thing that people don't understand the most, it is right at the top of the list.

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Karen Brown

You know, builders think that if they do code, they've done enough, done buttoned up code. Let me tell you. Federal or provincial, it doesn't matter which it is. Building codes are the very least that has to be done. The very least, you can't do less and still get your project approved and avoid being sued. It's the very least we can do so much better.

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Karen Brown

We know how. I mean, the technology is there. People don't always know how that education is out there, but we can do better and we should be doing better all the time. Understand that there are disabilities beyond mobility disabilities. There's range of motion to sight disabilities, hearing disabilities, sensory disability. There are so many and very often a house needs to be renovated in order to make it more comfortable for a number of these disabilities.

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Karen Brown

So you don't need to do better. They are constantly telling us. They certainly tell me that if people wanted these things, we'd be doing these things. But let me tell you, people don't know that there are options. The builders don't offer options sometimes because they don't know that there are options, but often because it disrupts the cookie cutter approach to building that allows them to build quickly.

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Karen Brown

In terms of being out there in the world. Accessibility is important. If you go to a, you know, a Tim Hortons, Tim Hortons restaurants usually have accessible bathrooms. What they don't always have sometimes, but not always, are the push buttons that let you even get into the washroom. So while they may have an accessible stall within their two stall bathroom, you can't get into it independently.

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Karen Brown

Whenever I mention it to the managers and yes, I do. I do mention it to the managers. They just say, well, they can come and get one of us and we'll open the door for them. Or maybe the person that they came in with to have coffee can help them. That is not the point of accessibility. Accessibility is to allow people to live independently, safely and with dignity.

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Karen Brown

It is not very dignified to have to go to somebody at Tim Hortons and say, can you open that door for me? They should be putting the push buttons on there. And in fact, that is code.

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Karen Brown

Unfortunately, it's often grandfathered, meaning that if your accessible bathroom was built before code required the push button, they don't bother putting them in after the fact. Now, let me say I'm not just harping on Tim Hortons. Pick a restaurant. Pick one. It doesn't matter what the brand is. They don't often do it or understand why they should do it.

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Karen Brown

Municipal buildings. Clothing stores in malls. Clothing stores in malls. Let's talk about that for a minute. You can, if you are in a wheelchair, scoot in to the business because they all have flat designs and they have elevators within the malls. Once people are in your clothing store, though, can they maneuver nicely through the racks of clothing that are jammed in there?

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Karen Brown

Is there a change room that is accessible where they can close a door and privately try on the goods that you offer? Most often, the answer to that is no. So, you know, if people can't get into your business, if they can't successfully navigate your business, if they can't try on the clothes, why would they come to your business?

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Karen Brown

Why would they do that? You are leaving money on the table, people. Because people who have use of mobility devices, people who are aging have money to spend, but they are not going to spend it with you. Okay. I'm not looking at my notes very well because I get on these tangents from the point of view of renovating houses such that people can stay in them and function in them for a long time.

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Karen Brown

Independence, dignity and safety remain the number one issue. I'm going to put that all together as one issue, because it is it is paramount to being able to doing life successfully, being able to stay in your own home, where you are comfortable, where you have been for decades. It brings a level of comfort and well-being to people. Being in a neighborhood where you know all the neighbors, you can see them, they can see you, and you all know if something is out of whack, then you know that somebody needs some help.

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Karen Brown

Perhaps. All of these are very important to being able to do life successfully. Now, I know some people have downsized into, you know, out of their familiar neighborhood and into an apartment or a condo. We just did a podcast. I say we because, Ron Wickman, who is an accessibility architect, and I did one that touched on condos.

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Karen Brown

It was just the last one we did. And there are reasons why a condo may not work for you in terms of downsizing, if that's what you're thinking about. Go into our archives and find that one. I think it's titled House or condo, something like that. Renovate or condo or something like that. The word condo is in the title of the podcast.

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Karen Brown

Drilling down just a little bit, as I said, house design has not changed in well over 50 years. Cookie cutter is a good way to describe them because they have stairs, sharp angles, high cupboards, bathtubs with showers in them, electrical outlets down low and light switches up higher than you could comfortably reach if you were in a wheelchair.

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Karen Brown

Smaller and smaller lots with each passing year. Powder rooms on the main floor. Appliances with layered digital controls. You and I probably don't think about that a great deal. My stove is an induction stove and it has layers of digital controls, but if you have a sight impairment or if you are blind, that is the devil. Layered digital controls are the devil. Neutral colours offering little or no contrast.

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Karen Brown

A drawer pulls that arthritic hands can't grasp. I mean, the list just goes on and on and on. But guess what? We can fix that. I can fix

that. I can go into a house and I can fix all of that. If people are renovating their houses while they're in their 30s, 40s and 50s, for instance, then. This is something they should be thinking of.

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Karen Brown

They should be thinking about renovating so that this house is friendly to them in their 60s, 70s and 80s. But they don't. They tend to think about the trends, the colour trends, the appliance trends, the whatever, the renovation trends are. If you're building an island, it's easy while it's being built to build it with two different levels, one that you can sit at and one that you can stand at.

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Karen Brown

Why don't you do that? It's because people aren't thinking, or here's what they're thinking. If they're thinking at all, it's tomorrow's problem. Now, that is something that a recent podcast with a lawyer named Bill Simpson said during the podcast. And it has stuck with me. People do think about problems, but they think about problems in terms of today's problems and tomorrow's problems.

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Karen Brown

If it's tomorrow's problems, we don't need to think about it now. We don't need to deal with it now. Yes, you do. Yes you do. And I'll tell you why. Because. And this is a big reason why I do what I do. Decisions will be made. Decisions have to be made. I would rather you make them while you can, while you are thinking about these issues or this renovation or whatever the issue is.

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Karen Brown

I'd rather you make the decision while you are of sound mind and before an accident happens, which means that control goes to other people. Decisions will be made by somebody, if not you, then somebody else, and they may not make the decisions that you would have made or that you would have preferred. I often use as an example of this.

00:28:03:56 - 00:28:32:59

Karen Brown

My maternal grandmother, who passed many, many, many years ago, but she lived in a house that she and my grandfather moved into the day that they were married. Not unlike a lot of people. It was a two storey red brick house with a full basement where my grandfather had his workshop. My grandfather passed away and my grandmother continued living in it.

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Karen Brown

They were married about 50 years before he passed away and she lived in it the better part of another ten years. Eventually she did have a powder room built on the main floor, because until she had that done, the bathroom was upstairs, the bedrooms were upstairs, everything was upstairs. She did have a powder room down on the main floor.

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Karen Brown

She took a nap one afternoon on the couch on the main floor. Somebody came to the door, rang the doorbell, and she was startled awake, leapt up off the couch to go answer the door. Didn't realize that her leg had fallen asleep, just the position she was sleeping in. And down she went. She just crumpled. A lot of damage was done to her leg, and when she was in the hospital, her doctor advised her that there would be no going back to her house again.

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Karen Brown

She had to go into long term care. That was how much damage was done and how much potential there was for further damage. If she was to live independently again. She was heartbroken, of course, that she couldn't go back to her house, and she tried. You know, can I just go back there for a week? You know, gather up my stuff, whatever.

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Karen Brown

No. She never saw the the inside of that house again. I don't think she ever saw the outside of that house ever again. And it was left to my mother and her sister to clear out a house that had been lived in for almost 60 years. Let me tell you, that was a task. It was a monumental task to leave to somebody else.

00:30:15:33 - 00:30:42:38

Karen Brown

But, you know, she just hadn't made the decisions along the way. She hadn't cleared the clutter. She hadn't gotten rid of things that no longer served the life that she was living. And anyway, she never went back to that house. You could see her. I mean, she didn't plan to follow that day. She didn't plan for her leg to go to sleep.

00:30:42:40 - 00:31:17:55

Karen Brown

She did what many of us often do and have, that is, have a nap in the afternoon. That could be you. You need to make the decisions that need to be made and guide your own future. It is such a weight off your shoulders when the decisions are made and things are set up for you to live successfully, and whether that is clearing clutter, changing the drawer pulls on your kitchen cabinets, doing a bathroom renovation, or figuring out how you can get in your house.

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Karen Brown

If you use a mobility device. All of those things are questions that need to be answered. And it's better if you do it. I can help you do it. There are other people that can help you do some of it. Occupational therapists, for instance, if you've already had some sort of event happen in your life and you've worked with an occupational therapist, they can help with some of the stuff they can't help with.

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Karen Brown

Everything that someone like me does. An accessibility strategist, aging in place strategist. I call myself both things. There aren't a lot of us around. In fact, earlier this year, I worked with a married couple out in California who couldn't find a me in their state. They probably do exist, but their daughter lives in Ontario and so she was able to access me and my services, and I worked with them over zoom.

00:32:20:33 - 00:32:42:27

Karen Brown

We hand it off to an accessible, sorry, a contractor who understands accessible building, who this couple had hired before to do a ramp outside for them so they were confident that he was going to be able to do the, the bathroom renovation that they needed. And in fact, he was they sent me pictures, just I think about 3 or 4 weeks ago.

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Karen Brown

And it's beautiful. And they are very happy with it. So, you know, they don't do they need these things now? Well, one of them uses a, a walker, a mobility device. I was going to say, but a walker and she will be using a wheelchair before too long. So they were able to build the washroom that they wanted because they had the time to think about what they wanted it to look like.

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Karen Brown

It does not look like any kind of a hospital or facility, because they made the decision ahead of time and chose the finishes that they wanted that fit in with their decor. It's beautiful. You can do that too. And that is why I do what I do, because I know that it's possible for you to do this. You can listen to some of the education that I provide.

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Karen Brown

You can watch some of the videos and get ideas. If you want to hire me as a consultant. That's possible too, but a lot of people can't afford consultants. I get that. I've written a course. I'm not

being salesy here. I've written a course that you can do a walk through on your own house and pick and choose the things that can be renovated based on your needs now and in the future.

00:34:08:31 - 00:34:32:40

Karen Brown

That course exists. Use it or don't. It exists for you. You know, you need to, as we all do, as I think I said earlier in this podcast, I'm 70. I'm not going to stop working, but I do need to do preparation. I need to prepare for the time when I won't be driving my car. So do you.

00:34:32:45 - 00:34:55:10

Karen Brown

How are we going to get to the grocery store? How are we going to get to the doctor or to the hairdresser or the drugstore? How are we going to visit our friends? How are we going to have our social life renovations? And this is why it's called Real Life Renos. Real life renovations include renovating the way we think about things.

00:34:55:15 - 00:35:27:43

Karen Brown

You know, one of my favorite quotes is from Wayne Dyer. And it is this you've probably heard it before. When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at, change. I'm here to help you change the way you look at things, so that you are able to manage your aging process, your disease progression, your disability progression on your own and better so that you are able to live independently.

00:35:27:48 - 00:35:59:08

Karen Brown

Safely and with dignity for as long as you possibly can. Now, if this is the sort of content that interests you, then you can find us. As I said, you can find the products based division at Brown HealthCare dot com. You can find the blog content at The Oldish dot com. You can find the podcasts, the audio and the video for them, as well as other video content at Reno Studios dot com.

00:35:59:13 - 00:36:22:20

Karen Brown

We are Real Life Renos on Facebook and Instagram and also over on YouTube. You can find us there so we are not hiding from you. I say we, I guess it's the royal we. I'm not hiding from you. I am here to help you and I hope you will take advantage of that. We'll be doing more podcasts as the year goes on.

00:36:22:21 - 00:36:37:03

Karen Brown

We've got some really exciting content planned for you, and I hope that you do join us Until the next time we are together with the Real Life Renos podcast. I wish you well. Do take care.