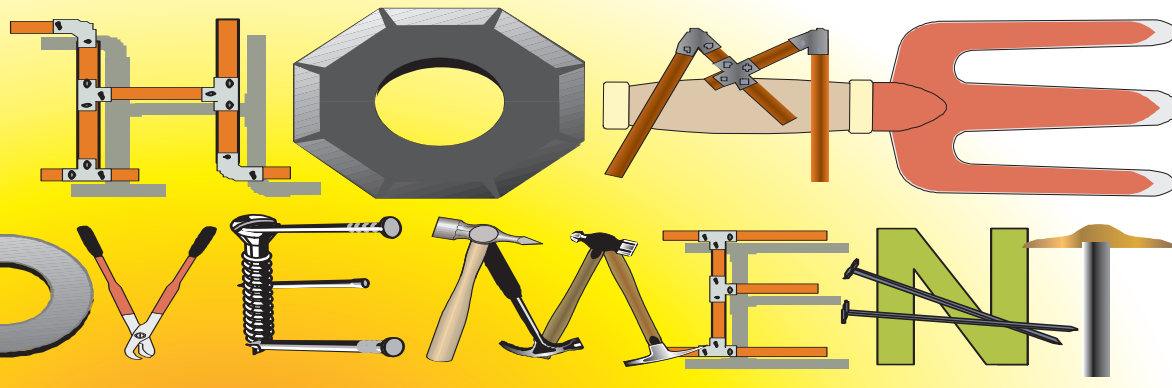


Spring



What did I get myself into?

When the home improvement DIY gene steals your summer

What did I get myself into?

That's the question that keeps going through my mind whenever I think about the all-encompassing home improvement project that I agreed to take on with my two siblings last month in Tower. As if I didn't have enough to do.

As you might imagine, there's a bit of a backstory, and on that I'll try to be brief.

As with many families, ours spread out over the years. My brother lives outside of Taos, New Mexico,

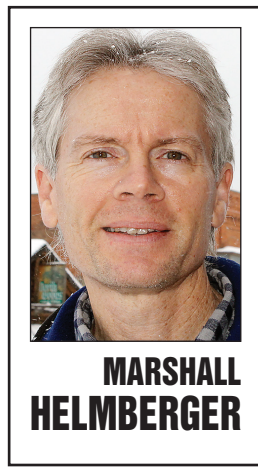
working as a handyman servicing everything from solar installations to plumbing in an off-grid community and my sister has lived as a gypsy,

wandering across the western U.S., employed mostly driving truck in the oil fields until she was laid off at the start of the COVID pandemic, when the bottom fell out in the oil patch. She's worked in oil fields in

west Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and North Dakota, but returned to Minnesota after her most recent layoff in hopes of caring for my 96-year-old father, who lived alone in his house in Plymouth up until last fall. It didn't go as planned.

My father has always been stubborn, a condition that advanced age and Alzheimer's has done little to improve. His doctor, his closest friends, and his Hennepin County social

See DIY...pg. 2C



MARSHALL HELMBERGER



Above: I point to the floor as I explain a next step in the demolition phase of the renovation of an old house in Tower that my siblings Zac and Clair have taken on. The project has become more involved than we originally imagined.

Left: Clair looks up as she pulls nails from a board. Given the price of lumber, we're reusing as much of the lumber from the demolition as we can.

photos by J. Summit



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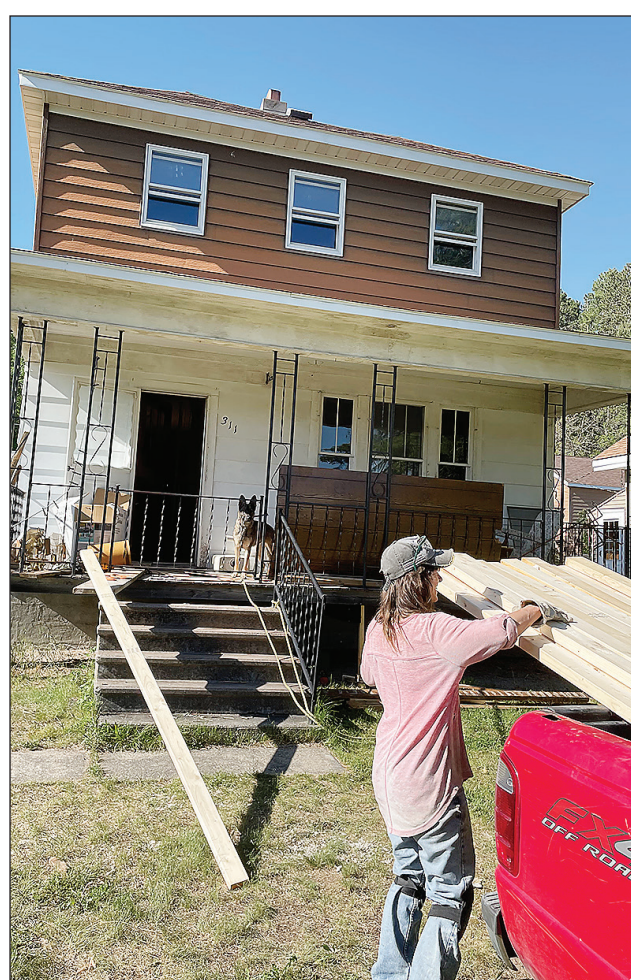
DIY...Continued from page 1C

worker were all pushing us to get him into assisted living. He, of course, refused to go. We eventually forced the issue. Last September, we told him he was coming to Tower for a visit and to see the fall colors, but he never went back. My sister drove him up north and Jodi and I and a friend moved much of his stuff up in a U-Haul we brought in just as they left the driveway in Plymouth.

He was mad as a hornet several days later when the return trip home was all of seven miles, ultimate destination the senior living facility in Tower. We went around and around with him for weeks, visiting him daily, but he never settled in. COVID didn't make things easier.

Eventually, someone suggested we buy a house for him in Tower and have my sister move in with him. It sounded workable. The main reason we moved him in the first place was because he lived too far away for any of his kids to reasonably take care of him. And none of us wanted to live in the Twin Cities, which would have been required if he had stayed in his home.

We started looking and found a pretty good house for sale on N Third St., so we bought it last December with some of the proceeds from the sale of his house in Plymouth. Exactly six months later, my father has it made, although he'd never admit it. He's in a comfortable house, and he has nearly full-time help from family. He's eating better than ever and has stopped losing weight. We play cards and watch television together. With summer here, we bought patio furniture and eat dinners outside when the



Left: The house, located on N Third Street, will see better days ahead.

photo by M. Helmberger

execution has proven to be a bit tougher than it was with the purchase of my dad's house. His house was very comfortable and move-in ready. Not so with the house across the street. The price was right, but it's a long way from the dream house my mother is expecting.

At first, as my sister and I scouted the situation, we envisioned a tweak here and an adjustment there, some new kitchen cabinets, a bathroom touch-up, and a whitewash of the dark brown 1970s-vintage paneling that "graced" the dining and living rooms. Of course, my sister ripped the orange shag carpeting out within hours of closing on the property.

Yet everything is connected, so that tweak meant pulling down the drop ceiling, and that adjustment meant 14 other things that were all tied to it. And if we were going to do that, or this, we probably should do those two other things as well. Which is how my summer was, in a matter of hours, lost to a knock down-drag out gut and total renovation of a two-story house in Tower which is, fortunately, as I write this, nearing the end of the demolition phase.

This wasn't what I was planning for 2021, but sometimes things get away from us. Life happens, as they say.

Having two siblings to help is making the job easier, and more complicated, since it means sharing in the decision-making. My wife Jodi learned early on

weather's nice. And he can drive his kids crazy on a daily basis with an endless stream of questions that we've already answered a thousand times.

While there are always complications and chaos when you're dealing with someone like my father, it's actually gone about as well as we could have hoped. Which is why when the house across the street recently came on the market after the death of its lone occupant, we decided to buy it as well. My mother lives in Grand Rapids and while she's a good ten years younger than my father, she's having physical health issues and is no longer realistically able to take care of her house there. Having her right across the street from my father seemed incredibly conve-

nient. No more driving all around the state to check in on aging parents. This way, we can check on them daily and they're all of two blocks from our office.

This concept, having them across the street from each other, probably wouldn't have worked in years past. My parents divorced a long time ago mostly over the fact that my father was always off fishing. She asked her divorce lawyer if she could list the cause as "alienation of affection to the walleye," but her lawyer didn't think the judge would go for it.

Fortunately, they seem more tolerant of each other these days. Besides, my father forgets she's going to be living across the street as long as we don't mention it.

While the plan seems a good one in theory, the

to just stay out of my way when I'm unleashed on a home improvement project. That has its advantages, but it also meant working alone for the most part. And since I work a real job during the week, it meant progress was mostly made in weekend increments. Neither of my siblings have regular gigs, so they've been free to work almost every day, which means things are going faster.

It also helps that the demo is a big part of the job. The house, with a footprint of 28 x 28 feet, is pretty small, and it was made smaller by being broken up into lots of rooms. So, we're opening it up, which means we're removing walls that won't be replaced, or will be replaced with headers, which will be turned into faux beams. We're expanding a main level bathroom to include a shower and a stacking washer and dryer so my mother won't have to go into the basement to do her laundry or clean up. We're taking out walls upstairs as well, to create one large bedroom with an attached sitting room, connected through French doors. My mother said she's largely leaving the decisions to us, except that the house must include French doors and at least one arch, somewhere. Turns out, we found an arch after removing the old paneling on the main floor, so we're already making progress.

Fortunately, my brother is pretty handy with the electrical and plumbing and I have plenty of experience on the carpentry side. My sister is used to hard physical labor, so she's been relentless on the demo side. Just give her a sledge and she'll go to town.

Of course, because it's an old house, there

are unexpected surprises. Years of sweating pipes in the house left a section of floor rotted out on the first floor, so we cut everything out back to solid wood and are rebuilding the floor using treated material. We're also going to insulate the pipes so we don't have a repeat performance. As we've stripped walls, we've found some exterior walls with no insulation and nowhere, even in the attic, have we found more than three inches of fiberglass insulation. So, we've got a local insulation installer coming to help us button things up, probably with some strategic application of spray foam and lots of cellulose in the attic. The last thing we want for my mother is a big heating bill.

I'm also mindful of the fact that while we're creating a comfortable home for my mother, we're restoring housing stock that, hopefully, someday will be home to a new family in town. It's not enough to cover up the rot or ignore the wall with no insulation. For one thing, the house is sitting on the finest basement I've seen in Tower. While parts of the house date back to around 1900, with the square nails to prove it, the basement is concrete block, which looks like it was laid yesterday. There's not a hint of any water leakage, and no musty smell whatsoever.

The demo part of the job has been like peeling an onion. Successive layers go back in time, revealing different eras in the house's century-plus lifetime. Under at least two layers of vinyl flooring, we found an old cellulose-based linoleum with the exact same pattern I still recall from my grandparents' old farmhouse near Perham. Below that, are maple floors that we plan to restore throughout much of the first floor and upstairs.

Like other old houses I've explored in the area, this one was built, rebuilt, and added onto by different people over the years. Some knew what they were doing. Others didn't, so we're trying to address problems as we uncover them.

One thing's for sure... we have a long way to go to get the place livable. I had told my mother sometime this fall, but then she put her house in Grand Rapids on the market, and it took all of three days to sell, so now we have a deadline of mid-July. In other words, we have our work cut out for us.

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