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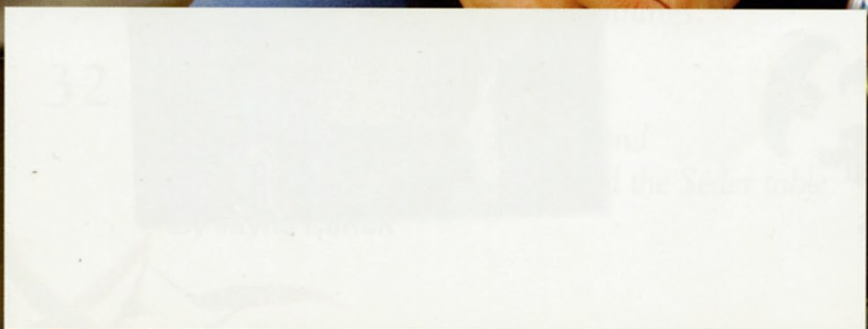
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Design often imitates life. For these entrepreneurs, a love of beautiful surroundings has translated into business success.



DESIGNING WOMEN

By Susan Josephs



LESLIE M. STERN

"The work I do for clients is supposed to express their personalities, not mine," says Leslie M. Stern, a Chicago-based interior designer who specializes in creating environments for the elderly, the disabled and others with special needs.

In addition to putting clients first, a designer also needs strong visualization skills, adds Stern. "Everyone in the field needs to be able to visualize how to transform any given space and figure out what can be done to improve it."



Stern says her contribution lies in "creating environments where people don't have to struggle. Everyone has or will have some type of issue, whether they're born with a disability or develop a disease or aging issues. All this changes the way you function in the kitchen or the bathroom or the way you sit at your desk," she says.

Stern, 61, wanted to be an artist, but her father persuaded her to be more practical, so she studied both art and art education at Drake University. She went on to receive a master's degree specializing in education for the hearing-impaired from Northwestern University. When her first husband passed away, she decided to get a third degree in interior design from Harrington College. "I wanted to specialize in design for people with special needs, so people would have beautiful, functional, barrier-free spaces," she says.

Over the years, Stern has designed stairs for those with limited vision and lighting

fixtures that help the hearing-impaired identify a ringing doorbell. She's created a wheelchair-accessible bathroom with a special shower for a client whose husband has early Alzheimer's disease and other health issues. And recently, she redesigned an apartment for a young woman who had been paralyzed in a car accident.

"She now has this accessible living room where she can get out of her wheelchair and sit on the sofa," says Stern. "She now has a special chair she can use to work at her computer. I've succeeded in fulfilling her dreams, and that's what keeps me motivated at the end of the day." **JW**

Susan Josephs is a freelance writer based in Venice, Calif.

FYI Find budget-friendly home improvement tips from the experts at jwi.org/designingwomen.