

Designer  
Leslie  
Stern  
listens to  
the needs  
of a  
hearing-  
impaired  
client



Leslie Stern



A strong light placed in close proximity to the front door is a must for any hearing-impaired person. Eileen Sudling's lamp blinks on and off, alerting her to a visitor who has rung the doorbell. Designer Leslie Stern searched for just the right light, from the standpoint of both function and appearance. And Sudling's special telephone, below, equipped with a keyboard keeps her in touch with the outside world, as well.

Daily Herald Photos/Vince Pieni

## a SOUND partnership

By PAT GERLACH  
Daily Herald Home & Garden Editor

Meeting challenges head-on is one of designer Leslie M. Stern's strong suits. But a recent experience gave a whole new meaning to the familiar experience.

It all started when Stern needed to find a lamp for her client, Eileen Sudling. The lamp had to be strong but attractive, a piece small enough to fit on one shelf of a wall unit near the front door. And, of course, it needed to work, or at least not compete with the living room's floral color scheme in which shades of blue and rust predominate.

While some decorating and design rules are made to be broken, the restrictions on the lamp were absolute. Because Eileen Sudling is impaired, the lamp in question serves as one of the woman's links to the outside world, blinking to let her know someone is ringing her doorbell.

After scouring her usual trade

sources for an appropriate lamp, Stern hit pay dirt at City Lights, a specialty lamp and lighting store at 363 W. Erie St., Chicago.

The lamp Stern found is a plain, desktop model that fits on the mid-level shelf of a wall unit in the living room. It is only a couple of steps from the front door and has been wired (in a hidden manner) to the doorbell. When a visitor rings the doorbell, the light blinks on and off, alerting Sudling to a caller's presence.

But the lamp is only one component in the decorative makeover of the Skokie home Sudling and her husband (he's also hearing impaired) bought about two years ago. The two-story house (the attic is being converted to a bright and airy family room) sits conveniently on a cul-de-sac near an expressway, making for a quick commute to Bell Elementary School on Chicago's Northwest Side, where Eileen Sudling teaches hearing-impaired students who range in age from 3 to 14.

"Most people wouldn't want (to live in) this house because of the noise of traffic on the expressway," remarks Sudling in a combination of spoken and sign language. "But, for us, it's great."

But for all its convenience, Sudling knew when she bought the house that it needed renovating and updating to become the pleasant home she desired.

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Stern and Sudling collaborated on the living room design, turning the space into a light, bright floral oasis. While Sudling concentrated on finding just the right art, Stern ordered new furniture and a custom-designed area rug.

# SOUNDS: Designer listens to hearing-impaired clients

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Before the ink dried on the contract, Sudling contacted her old friend and former teaching companion, Leslie Stern.

The two met almost two decades ago when Sudling (one of the first hearing-impaired women to earn a teaching degree at Roosevelt University in Chicago) received a student teaching assignment at Whitney Young High School in Chicago. Leslie Stern, then a classroom teacher of the hearing impaired, was her supervisor.

Sudling began teaching in the Chicago public schools about the time that Stern resigned from her job as a teacher and enrolled at Harrington Institute of Interior Design in Chicago.

When she majored in fine art at Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa, Stern hoped to find work as an art teacher. After receiving a master's degree in education of the hearing impaired from Northwestern University in Evanston, Stern often used art to teach her challenged students to express themselves.

Stern's career change was supported by her friend, Eileen Sudling, who, after the birth of a son, had abandoned her work as a fashion illustrator to become a teacher.

So, collaborating on a design challenge in Sudling's home was a project that intrigued both women. One of Sudling's priorities was establishing a bright, light atmosphere in her home. While the living room windows are large, the former owners had swathed them in an abundance of fabric which both darkened and narrowed the room.

Stern replaced the conventional draperies with white pleated shades topped by a neat balloon valance that frames the windows without overpowering them.

Guided by Stern, Eileen Sudling chose upholstery for her new sofa and love seat (both by Hickory Chair Co.) that combines her favorite earth tones — blue, brown and rust. Those colors are repeated in a large area rug Stern designed to help personalize the room for her client.

"Eileen likes a feeling that's warm but has vibrance, too," says Stern.

From start to finish, including time both Sudling and Stern took to

find appropriate artwork, the living room makeover took about nine months.

At the same time, Sudling followed Stern's lead, choosing pleated shades and balloon valances as treatments for her dining room windows as well.

And the pair continue to collaborate on the kitchen and dining area, where a wall has been removed to open up the space, making it more comfortable and convenient for family use.

Thus far, the kitchen remains Sudling's most used, if not favorite area in the house.

"No matter what, I seem to spend most of my time at the kitchen sink," Sudling says.

Known by friends as an excellent cook, Sudling excels at organizing, Stern says. A huge calendar and multiple and detailed "to do" lists cover the top quarter of the refrigerator.

The fact that Sudling's TTY equipment (a telephonelike device provided by Ameritech that sends and receives messages via keyboard) is located in the kitchen helps make that space her hub.

She proudly points out that the desklike cabinet that holds the TTY equipment was made for her by a hearing-impaired friend. "Someone who knows firsthand what's needed in this type of work station is the right person to design and make it," notes Stern.

While Leslie Stern has a long history of helping challenged clients meet their special needs, she is a full-service interior designer with a broad knowledge of architecture. Her work often ranges from space planning to solving kitchen and bath problems to designing furniture and cabinets.

She especially enjoys working with folks from the time a house is designed until it's completed and they move in.

"Being involved right from the start can save lots of headaches and prevent costly mistakes such as light fixtures or fireplaces that are misplaced," says Stern.

While Stern knows that her second career is something she will stay with forever, her friend Eileen Sudling has plans for when she eventually retires from teaching.

"I think I'd like to spend time growing things. Plants, flowers," signs Sudling.