

Maria's Kitchen



Maria previously unable to cook on her own now can fry you up some chicken cutlets and pasta thanks to good kitchen design.

Maria, as many children do, likes to help in the kitchen. Her mother use to sit her on the counter and together they baked brownies. Years later, at age thirteen, Maria was still sitting on the counter, and her mother was still gathering the ingredients, kitchen tools, and doing the more physically challenging chores like beating the heavy chocolate batter, the difference was that she was reading the recipe to her mother as her eyes were aging.

Maria was still on the counter because she is too small and too weak to use a standard kitchen. Maria has Morquio Syndrome, a bone and ligament disease which has kept her height at three feet and her wrists and other joints very loose.

Morquio is a very rare disease, but what makes this story of universal interest is how one can come to have a kitchen whose design allows one to maximize one's abilities.



Maria's family had a standard kitchen with prebuilt cabinets and 30" counters, but it didn't function for her. Maria wished she could do more in it and her mother wished for her to have more independence, too. Finally one afternoon she and her mother began dream what an ideal kitchen might be. Their first inclination was to build a low counter at an easy height for Maria to work at. It might be a bit like long desk they had already made for her, but equipped with a stove and sink. But her mother was skeptical, thinking that working at two heights didn't facilitate working together. Their next idea was to raise Maria's table forming a kind of kitchen bar for Maria to work. The problem with this design was that Maria would need to use a rolling bar stool to move from the sink to the cooking counter which seemed a little precarious. The solution was to keep the bar idea but for Maria to sit in an office rolling chair on a platform. There, they had their idea.

Enter Sam Clark of Plainfield, who realized the kitchen. Sam was recommended by another family that built a new home to facilitate their child who also used a wheel chair. Sam is the author of [Building for a Life Time](#) and [Remodeling a Kitchen](#)



(both published by Taunton Press). Sam listened to the idea very carefully, thought it could work, and then mocked up a pretend kitchen in their living room. Moving over a bookcase to see what shelf height to use and bringing down pots and pans, *placing Maria in the center* so he could see just how her chair fit, how far she could reach, he was able to determine how much counter space Maria needed and the spacing between stove and sink. He also figured out where and how to fit Maria's space it into the rest of the kitchen space. We learned that Sam deliberately went to the mock up before too much drawing on paper.

The process of design was by no means linear. They did a lot of thinking and most of all *trying out*. For example, when purchasing the stove, Sam reminded to make sure that Maria could move the controls. (Gemma and Maria learned what happens when one guesses and doesn't try out when the on site carpentry team spontaneously built a foot rest. It had to be torn out and rebuilt.) After Sam made the drawings and we agreed on the design details, Sam mocked a more finished kitchen in his Barre shop so that we could make final adjustments and decisions.

To Maria, an aspiring architect, and her mom who loves home building magazines, Sam explained that there are two ways to look at special needs design, one was using the universal standards but the other which he practices is to start with the individual and design to their needs to create an accessible kitchen. This is what he did with Maria, and it worked so well. What we now have is a wonderful kitchen.

The first time Maria used the new kitchen she decided to cook something she had eaten almost every day but never made herself, pasta. In the old kitchen sitting on the counter Maria couldn't make pasta. She couldn't reach the sink and couldn't carry the water to the stove, but here her mother didn't have to help a bit; imagine their delight. Best of all, she reported the new kitchen made her feel safe. How so? She no longer had to be afraid her skirt would catch fire when sitting on the counter next to the stove.

Maria and her family have lived in their new kitchen for 2 months. Her mother says, "I am still continually surprised how big a difference the kitchen has made in our lives. Maria has matured and takes on more responsibilities." Also they have found the kitchen affords new activities. Now, Maria has a new activity to do with friends, cooking. See photo the space fits Maria so well she likes to do everything in her kitchen including sewing and homework!

