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Holding Back the Moving Earth

By Chris Lavin



Rick Barnette of Dig This inspects his work for the day at a home in Orinda. Photos Chris Lavin

Ward lost one of his legs in a motorcycle accident years ago, for instance, and he does not let it slow him down one single bit. "That was a long time ago," he said, deftly picking up something that had fallen off a Bobcat earthmover. "I don't even think about it anymore." He's also a professional arm wrestler, which is worthy of a story unto itself. For the meantime, he's using his prowess to build walls.

And he gets a lot of work done. The Lamorinda area is full of shifting soil and rock types - clays, mud, loam, chert, and the list of geology terms goes on - and gravity tends to make those elements flow downward, toward houses, driveways, buildings. Sometimes even the houses themselves risk misplacement.

"People can find themselves in some rough situations," Ward said. "It's not that they want to do the work, but they have to."

Exacerbating the problem with houses in Lamorinda are the natural features that surround us all - many of us live on hills, or slopes downhill or uphill, created by the oceans and volcanic activity that preceded us thousands of years ago. Sometimes we think that the earth is static, and when we move in, that's the way things are going to stay.

"People really don't know what their dirt is going to do," Ward noted. Enough said.

Paula of Orinda, who did not want her last name in the paper, had no idea what she was getting into when she contracted Dig This to fix her back yard and driveway. She lives at the bottom of a slight valley with houses on all sides, and the valley drains into a small creek. As rains came and gravity worked its magic, she found that her neighbors' properties were gradually flowing onto hers, and unless she did something, her house would eventually be underground. So she hired a company to put in retaining walls. Her adventure then began.

"I got a call at work and they said, 'We had to move some stuff around, so you don't have a driveway right at the moment,'" Paula said. She came home to find mounds and mounds of detritus filling up her front yard. It has since been removed, or put back - and her property is now protected for a hundred years or so - but the whole project was a mind-bending experience of working with neighbors about their swimming pools, their soil drift, their lack of vegetation to hold soil in place so that it doesn't flow right into the creek or into her yard.

There are not many absolutes in life, but suffice it to say that on one topic - retaining walls - no one, but no one ever opens a conversation with a good story. The words: "Wow! I just put a new retaining wall on my property, and it was a great experience! I absolutely loved it! It was so fun," could be something out of a science fiction novel. A story, perhaps, where gravity is not a factor.

That is because no one has fun, or loves to replace or build retaining walls at their homes and properties. Often, however, it must be done. "Oh, I could tell you some stories," said Pat Ward, the proprietor of Dig This Inc., a company that does its share of retaining walls and deals with homeowners whose soil is shifting. "Some of them aren't so good. But lots of them are good. Most are good."

Even the name, Dig This, Ward chose for his company reflects an attempt at humor in often troubling situations. "The name came to me in the shower," Ward said.

"I had no idea that we would have such a problem when we moved in," she said.

Once homeowners find out they need to replace or put in a retaining wall, dealing with city officials to obtain permits can be as frustrating as watching the slopes slip. In Lafayette, for instance, four separate agencies or offices have to sign off on the plans before construction (or reconstruction) even starts. Until all the offices sign off, construction cannot even begin without the possibility of a neighbor phoning in to complain about work being done without permits.

"We make sure all the paperwork is in place before we start," said Ward. "There are setbacks and variances that have to be met to get permits. It's a process that takes a while, sometimes, but we get it done."



The homeowner of this house in Orinda got a call from her retaining wall contractor who said, "Um, you won't have a driveway for a while." Photos Chris Lavin

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[back](#)

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