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Housing trends exposed at Home Expo

By Lou Fancher

Every current or prospective homeowner has heard or at one time experienced a residential remodeling or home improvement nightmare story. The narratives range from shady contractors to unreliable or uncommunicative construction or design firms to inflated estimates with hidden costs that spring out of nowhere like phantoms-or to the horror of simply existing in the fragile space-time warp of a project-that-will-not-end.

Which is why Lamorinda Home Expo '19, held this year on Jan. 27 at the Lafayette Veterans Memorial Building, was a welcome event. Presented annually by The HomeMag East Bay, over 30 exhibitors limited to between three and five per category, offered a wide but reasonable array of services.

Joe Gordon, from Orinda, heard about the show on the radio.

Curious about the services offered and thinking about upgrades to the gutters on his home, he entered with eyes wide open. "Yes, I've had work done on my home," he said. "I like that I can come here and get a connection to a real person. It's important to trust your gut feeling: Is this a company that will answer the phone, or will I go through three voicemails and never reach a live person?"

As visitors walked along the exhibitor booths, it was surprisingly easy for them to gauge the "human factor." Across the board, the selling energy was high, but in an unscientific survey, visitors remained longer and asked more questions at some tables than at others. Sure enough, the "quick hit" locations had salespeople who turned off the charm and patience when speaking to a journalist. Others, perhaps recognizing that anyone is a potential client, spent considerable time explaining their company's services and business ethics.

"We're super niche, but sturdy staircases are vital to a home," said Gina Creamer, owner of All Things Interior. The Concord-based, family-owned company founded in 2001 specializes in staircase construction and remodeling and offers cabinet refacing and wood fabricating. "Even so, what matters most is working closely, working well, with clients. If they're not comfortable and informed, I'm not doing my job," said Creamer.

A few tables away, Jae Chyun said he has represented Napa-based Green Stock Solar for seven years. A Lafayette resident, he takes extra pleasure in spreading to neighbors among his clients that a 30 percent tax credit many assume has expired is still in force through 2019. "It was supposed to end, but it was extended. It goes down to 26 percent in 2020, 22 percent in 2021. After that, you've missed the train." The company does not lease, but sells and installs solar systems. "You own it, so there's no increasing payments, early termination fees, and it adds value to the property," said Chyun. A cost analysis showed the difference between owning and leasing: other materials outlined equipment and installation costs and the years required before reduced or free energy supplies pay for the original expenditure.

Jules is the cloud-based homeowner app created by tech entrepreneur and Lafayette resident Kent Godfrey who said having a digital record of everything in a home has unprecedented value. (Lamorinda Weekly writer Sora O'Doherty wrote a feature about the company published in the Jan. 9 issue.) In addition to keeping digital tabs on appliances and home energy systems, the app can be customized to catalogue unique garden sculptures, light fixtures, relationships and histories with contractors and home service people, insurance and tax records and more. "It gives a framework that's a win-win for owners, potential buyers, everyone. If your house burns down, the burden of proof for its contents to the insurance company rests on you. This gives you proof," said Godfrey. Multi-factor authentication and top-level encryption provides robust security. "Of the 350 item types available on the app, only about five, like your social security number if you choose to include it, are hypersensitive." Including a 90-day free trial period, current annual cost for the app launched in 2017 begins at \$99 for 15 months (\$135 after the early bird offer expires).

But many people at the expo came for less tech-centric reasons. "We're about to do a big remodel and want to see what's out there," said Orinda resident Jennifer Pister. After dreaming for 20 years about adding a master bedroom for the home built in 1950 she shares with her husband-and until recently, two children now adults-she said, "I've never gotten to create my own space. Now with the kids gone, we're knocking down their two bedrooms." A bathroom designed with areas for separate shower, tub, sinks and other features she said is "different than the way others do it, but the plan works for us."

Approximately 500 people on average visit the annual expo. Pritchett said trends this year include heightened interest in solar systems that he attributed to uncertainty about the future of PG&E; increased knowledge and interest in hi- and lo-tech solutions like smart appliances and whole house fans that cool a home without air conditioning; and notable demand for home services across the spectrum, supported by an improving economy and fueled by busy lifestyles. "Options to make life easier are big," Pritchett said, as are projects that repurpose materials. "If you can clean deck wood instead of toss it, or reuse in your home a door like one I tore down from the barn on my property-or the wagon wheel we turned into a light fixture-people every year want to make the most of their homes."

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