

Lamorinda OUR HOMES

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Holding Back the Moving Earth

Retaining walls work to hold things in place

By Chris Lavin



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

Photos Chris Lavin

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.

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.

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