

# MIDWEST Home

## Jackie Millea Introduces a New Benchmark in Assistive Devices

Midwest Home

Camille LeFevre

Published: June 21, 2019

In the Midwest Home article celebrating Jackie Millea as the 2018 Emerging Talent, the founding principal of Shelter Architecture in Minneapolis talked a bit about an innovative project fast emerging on her horizon. She was in the midst of designing a line of assistive furnishings “that mix engineering with artistry,” she said. “My dad and my mother had to live with such ugly stuff. Just because you have a disability doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have a beautiful, functional home that imparts a sense of dignity, autonomy, and well-being. This is an important mission for me. I want to shake up that industry.”

Now she has. Via her new company Millea Living, she’s released the Judith Bench, an aluminum and plastic bath seat with such clean, modern lines and exquisite fabrication it could enliven any place in a home—not just the bathroom. The bench, with its adjustable legs, non-slip feet, textured grab bar, and storage caddy was designed to “provide safety, comfort, and style in the shower, bathtub, and around the house without the clinical feel of other assistive furnishings,” Millea says. “Every aspect has been carefully engineered to create an intuitive and reassuring experience every time.”

Millea focused on the bath experience, she explains, “because in the bathroom it’s all about balance and safety; bathrooms are scary places if and when you fall.” She wanted to create a modern piece that would help less able-bodied people get in and out of a tub safely. “We worked on this bath transfer bench, so people don’t have to lower themselves into the tub to use it, they can just sit on it.”

Currently, Millea and her team are engineering an over-the-bed table that’s fully adjustable—a table that could be used, actually, in any number of settings. Her inspiration for this new product line? Her father. When Millea was a young woman, her father—a salesman and inventor—had a stroke that left him a quadriplegic in his 40s. The family quickly learned to adapt to the challenges of caring for the 6-foot-4, now-homebound paterfamilias. With family, friends, and neighbors, he invented a series of devices that would help him thrive at home, including beds, slings, chairs, and ramps.

Still, Millea wondered: Could she design a line of home products that offer comfort and assistance paired with elevated design? She decided she could, and so she did. One challenge, she says, “is integrating adjustability while making sure the pieces are super stable.” Another was finding materials both durable and beautiful. For the Judith Bench, she says, “bending aluminum for the frame kept the piece light yet structurally sturdy, and thermoplastic for the seat is naturally anti-microbial and easy to clean.” The waterfall edge on the bench “falls nicely under the knees,” she says. “I kept thinking about how someone would use it, how it would feel, and what the materials would do.”

Others have tried infusing a bit of design sensibility into assistive devices, and yet “they still look clinical,” Millea says. Not so the pieces available through Millea Living. “These pieces were designed for residential, to fit in the home.”