

## Baird: Wearing a vest has her down

By Esther C. Baird/ The Baird Facts

Thursday, November 9, 2006

The house I grew up in, outside of Philadelphia, was built in 1773. And while electricity and plumbing made their way in, modern heat did not. We heated exclusively by wood stove. As a child, one of my regular chores was to go out to the woodpile and bring a supply back for the evening. On very cold nights our dog's water froze over and I thought nothing of the fact that my mom wore a down vest around the house. It was an adventurous way to grow up; one that I prefer to describe rather than relive.

You can imagine then, how I feel to be wearing a down vest as I type this. Our Beverly home, a full 100+ years older, does have central heat but it's gas, which means it's expensive, and it's baseboards, which means it's fleeting. And, like many homes, our thermostats are in out-of-the-way places. I could care less how warm it is in the hallway outside the bathroom - I want it to be warm in our living room.

I went to Lowe's in search of heat solutions.

Walking down the aisles nodding at others in their down vests and polar fleeces, I couldn't believe all the ways I could stuff and seal my house - caulk, putty, door guards and even little socket blankets to put behind our outlets.

My favorite though was the saran wrap for the window. Here's a winning combination: Body-sized sheets of thin, clingy plastic and double-sided sticky tape. Throw in the final hair dryer 'sealant step' to create a swirling wind and you can be sure that something, though not necessarily the window, is going to get wrapped up like leftovers. I followed this process for one window in my daughter's room and felt like I'd been in a fight with a sandwich bag. It was exhausting.

Finally, we had an insulation contractor come in and check out our attic. He poked around in all the dark scary corners and hemmed and hawed about all the many options we had. Visions of 75-degree bedrooms danced in my head. But on his way down, as he descended our two flights of stairs, he said with steps like ours it would always be hard to keep the house warm.

I nodded, staring at our stairs that were narrow enough to make moving beds an impossibility, and yet wide enough to let our heat fly free like a bird, up, up and away.

I shook the contractor's hand and he said he'd call me with an estimate.

Two days later he did and his estimate was completely within the range I'd hoped for. I was thrilled. I even said, "That's thrilling!" We seemed to have a deal, when I almost rhetorically (based on my husband's instructions to always ask one more time) asked him if he thought this was the right move for our home.

He didn't even pause, he knew this last question was coming and was ready, "You know I really don't." Gently he explained why it wouldn't really save us any heating expenses nor would it make my visions of 75-degree bedrooms come true. He closed with words I couldn't refute. "If it was my house, I wouldn't do it." Sigh.

I had consulted the most honest contractor in Beverly. I wanted to beg him to insulate my attic; I was desperate that our house be warm and toasty like a 10-year-old, modern Tyvek-wrapped home. But it was not to be.

So I did what the news channels hope for so they can get us to watch their sensational stories. I bought a space heater. Back in my childhood home we had kerosene heaters (actual flammable gasses and open flames encased in mitten-melting metal) right in the center of our kitchen. Surely the new modern space heaters can't be more likely to spontaneously combust. I can also heat just the room I am in and not worry that all my heat is whisking up our escape-shoot stairwell. I love my space heater. It is like a little pet that I carry from room to room with me; it gives me warmth and comfort without shedding or having to be fed.

So we are hunkered down, ready for another New England winter. Maybe when my daughter has a house of her own someday she'll be able to get thru the winter without the down vest.

Esther Baird is a Beverly resident and writer. Her column appears regularly in the Citizen. If you have any suggestions or comments about The Baird Facts please contact her at: [esther@estherbaird.com](mailto:esther@estherbaird.com), or visit her website at [www.estherbaird.com](http://www.estherbaird.com).