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Company has a prescription for grout

JOAN TUPPONCE SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT Nov 2, 2008

Monika Fitzgerald knew she had a moisture problem under the shower floor in one of her bathrooms.

But she didn't know how bad it was until she got an assessment from David Morrison, owner of GroutRx, a company that specializes in grout cleaning and repair.

Fitzgerald originally asked Morrison to regROUT the floor in the master bathroom of her Brandermill home.

Morrison removed the old grout and saw the problem. He asked her not to use the shower for a month so the flooring underneath could completely dry.

"He was very concerned about moisture and mold," Fitzgerald said. "He left a heat lamp and asked us to use it on the floor."

When he felt the floor was completely dry, Morrison regROUTed it.

"He is meticulous," she said. "He really sticks to a project. I am very happy with the shower."

Morrison opened GroutRx during the summer of 2007, six years after moving to the Richmond area from Savannah, Ga.

In addition to grout cleaning and repair, his company provides mold treatment and prevention services; water-damage repairs; grout glazing, cleaning and sealing; and new tile installation.

Morrison was the company's only employee when he opened the business. He has since added two employees to help him handle the workload. The company averages about eight to 10 jobs a week.

"At this point in time, our business is about 30 percent referrals," he said.

Morrison became interested grout repair during high school and college when he worked part time with one of his high school teachers who did home restorations.

After moving to Richmond, Morrison worked occasionally for a franchised company that has since closed.

"I was interested in doing work that helps customers on a long-term basis," he said. "I saw a need for that."

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Morrison considers himself a sleuth. He looks for a solution to a problem instead of a quick fix.

Morrison wanted to learn more about mold remediation after he discovered that many homes in the Richmond area had mold issues.

"I wanted to solve those issues," he said. "People can work to reduce and control mold. When we regrout, we mix the grout with an antibacterial product that helps prevent the growth of mold."

He recently had to figure out how to remove cracked tiles in the bathroom of an older home without breaking the surrounding tiles.

"That took me about four weeks to figure out," he said. "There's an aspect to tile restoration and repair that requires problem-solving that, in the end, is very rewarding. Every job requires you to think of ways to raise the bar."

Morrison has found that many homes built in the late 1940s to 1950s have bathrooms with white tiles bordered by black tiles.

The tile is often laid so close together that it causes stress cracks.

Whenever he can, Morrison tries to salvage older tiles from those jobs so that he can keep them in stock for customers who need to replace only a few tiles.

"There is a need for those white tiles from the late 1940s and 1950s," he said.

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Even though his jobs include older properties, Morrison estimates that 40 percent of the homes he works on are between 10 and 15 years old.

Many of the problems with the tiles stem from contractors putting tile on drywall or wood instead of concrete backerboard.

"Both drywall and wood absorb moisture," Morrison said. "They will collect moisture to the point that they mold and rot."

Amanda Hundley discovered she had some rotting issues around the faucets in her bathroom tub and shower. Her tile had been installed on drywall years ago.

"David took the tile out and replaced it with new tile," she said. "He also regROUTED the tile in my shower, which hadn't been regROUTED for 30 years, and he cleaned my tile floors."

Hundley was impressed that Morrison put down dropcloths around the house so he wouldn't track dirt throughout.

He also takes off his shoes when he walks in the door and leaves a thank-you packet with information on how to care for tile when he completes the job.

"He's very professional," she said. "He's also very reliable. He was there when he said he was going to be there. He did a great job. I was very satisfied."