

# ADIRONDACK

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# ADIRONDACK

## L I F E



A local probation officer spent more than a decade working on his Middle Ages-inspired dream home.

## Knight Life

### GOING MEDIEVAL IN TUPPER LAKE

**"EVERYBODY'S HOME IS THEIR CASTLE,"** says Andy Ramsgard. "This just happens to be a castle." Indeed, Ramsgard and his wife Sherie's four-story, 6,000-square-foot concrete-block colossus on Old Wawbeek Road pokes out of the Tupper Lake forest—and the twiggy birch-bark Adirondack architecture scene.

Last spring when the Skaneateles couple bought the 60-acre property and chose to work with its partially constructed building instead of demolishing it, they continued the vision of the late Edward Leary, a local man who so admired the medieval lifestyle he spent more than a decade erecting, block by block, the backwoods palace. Leary was a probation officer with zero architectural training, but "he did a really good job," says Andy, whose Ramsgard Architectural Design firm has dealt in building high-end residences, restaurants and boutique hotels since 1995. "He got the bones of the structure right," blasting a solid foundation out of the granite hillside. At the time of his death Leary had almost finished an "ingenious" four-story spiral staircase, a feat with a complicated formula that would take most folks years of schooling and practice.

According to Andy, Leary's plans—hand-scrawled notes on the backs of cereal boxes, corners of receipts, whatever he had handy—reveal a man who created as he went, often changing his mind on the spot, mulling obsessively over details. Leary's fantasy and his execution of it make the castle an extraordinary example of outsider art. That's one of the reasons "I didn't want to go backwards or undo anything he did," says Andy. "I want to embellish the design, make it my own while keeping its character. Houses get built every day ... homes are the creation of experience."

The Ramsyards have turned their funky fortress into the ultimate family project. Each summer weekend they've made the three-plus-hour drive to Tupper with their 12-year-old son, Rex, nine-year-old daughter, Ruby, and golden retriever, Tosh, for castle-work powwows. Sherie blogs about their progress on her [www.learycastle.blogspot.com](http://www.learycastle.blogspot.com). One entry shows photos of Ruby cutting rebar. Another follows Rex overseeing the cement mixer. Always posted are Andy's sketches, as well as an open invitation to anyone willing to lend a hand.

The kids have a say in their seasonal getaway's design: a trap door, hidden passageways, secret room behind a bookcase, plus a drawbridge and moat—all doable, says their father. There's even a "fungeon" with a pool table and darts. And Andy picked up a 1970s-era fiberglass knight at a garage sale. By carving openings in the sculpture's eyes it will work for Scooby Doo-esque spying. The home's furnishings will be spare—no "Queen Elizabeth-style ornate pomp and circumstance"—with refurbished flea market finds and handmade pieces. The Ramsyards, says Andy, are going rustic "in a medieval sort of way."

Because an uninsulated concrete structure in the Adirondacks' often freezy climate would really mean a return to the Dark Ages, Andy, whose firm built the first Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)—certified gold house in New York State, is incorporating the same alternative-energy designs he would for his professional jobs. One step for energy-efficiency will be coating the cement blocks' exteriors with insulation board and stucco, creating a thermal envelope and a monolithic look. Sixty-five feet up, on the roof, rainwater will be harvested, and a greenhouse will extend the veggie-growing season. Such elevation also eliminates deer and other pests.

The Ramsyards' move-in date is 2012, though, like the great European châteaux, this castle will be a work in progress. In the meantime, Andy's trying on his "King Andrew" title. When asked what Sherie thinks about being queen, Andy says he'd only call her that "with the utmost respect. And humbly, on one knee." 🌿