

## Right at Home

For the home-repair timid, Norman Becker, P.E., is the guy you want as your neighbor. Water leaking into your basement? No problem. Door doesn't close properly? Easy fix. Oil-fired boiler acting up? Here's what you do. Whatever your home-repair question, you can be almost certain that Becker has heard it, and if he doesn't know the answer off the top of his head, he knows where to find it.

For the past 22 years, Becker, an NSPE member from Hamburg, New Jersey, has written the Homeowners Clinic Expert Q & A column for *Popular Mechanics*. During that time he's answered about 1,300 home-repair questions and written *The Complete Book of Home Inspection* and *Popular Mechanics 500 Simple Home Repair Solutions*, based on many of the Q & As from the column.

"I really don't know everything, although it may look that way when you read the column," Becker says. "I do the research that the homeowner could do but doesn't."

Becker is a 1954 mechanical engineering graduate of Cooper Union who also earned a master's degree in mechanical engineering from Penn State in 1957. After working at Bell Labs for about seven years, he worked for the company that carried out the programming for the flight simulator used to train the astronauts for the first trip to the moon. He also spent a few years at environmental consulting firm Malcolm Pirnie.

In 1971, Becker started a part-time home inspection business, which grew into a full-time operation. A founding member of the American Society of

Home Inspectors, he eventually conducted inspections of larger real estate, such as apartment buildings and the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in Manhattan.

While conducting an inspection for an editor at *Popular Mechanics*, Becker was asked if he would be interested in writing the Homeowners Clinic column. After winning a writing competition against four other candidates, Becker was given the job, which he thought would last only a few years.

Since his first column in June 1984, Becker has been a home repair Dear Abby, offering advice on troubles such as leaking toilets, whistling vents, curling asphalt shingles, and flickering fluorescent bulbs. You name it, he's answered it. But, as Becker says, his goal isn't to simply give readers a solution. "I try to give them an idea of what is actually happening."

For those whose tool box consists of a hammer and not much else, Becker's advice is fear not. Almost everything can be handled, though more than a hammer may be required. "Just start tackling it. Get some books on the particular subject, and just work, just do it slowly, and you'll find out that it works," he says. "And once you do something and it works, it's a very nice feeling and you see that you can really do it." He also gives a word of caution for



NSPE MEMBER NORMAN BECKER, P.E.: 1,300 HOME REPAIR ANSWERS AND COUNTING.

the real home-repair neophytes: "Don't do anything electrical."

For the home-repair savvy, Becker recommends a deliberative, analytical approach rather than assuming you know the answer and charging ahead. "Don't jump in full bore. Try to figure out exactly what's causing the problem," he says. "Think it through before you attack it."

So, what kind of projects is Becker working on around his house? Other than his monthly column, not much. The semi-retired Becker even closed up his workshop. "I'm really not doing a heck of a lot in the house."

*To read an archive of Becker's Homeowners Clinic columns or to ask him a question, go to [www.popularmechanics.com](http://www.popularmechanics.com).*

