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Homeshare: meet the unlikely housemates

A cheap place to live in return for free care and company: with homeshare, everybody wins. Meet the new generation of housemates getting along very nicely (just don't try telling Marjory what to do with her mouldy fruit...)

SJ Butler

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Marjory Trevor (right) and homesharer Heather Lewis (left) at their west London home – they've been homesharing since the end of 2010. 'It's an odd role to be in,' says Heather, 'because you're not family and you're not just a lodger... We've both got an affection for each other.' Photograph: Mike Pinches for the Guardian

Marjory Trevor, 92, and Heather Lewis, 26, in West Ealing, west London

War veteran Marjory decided after one meeting to share her house with Heather, a nursing student. Heather gives 10 hours' help a week, cooking three or four times and doing light cleaning. They have been homesharing since 2010.

Ground rules: Heather won't throw out any fruit or vegetable without checking with

Marjory first.

MT I've been to see people who were in homes and I thought, I couldn't bear that. You're surrounded by people you don't really want to talk to. My daughter-in-law, Patience, found out about homeshare because I was on my own and I think they were a bit worried.

HL I came round for a cup of tea with Marjory and Patience, and we just got on really well. It was really quick – we only had one meeting. This is Marjory's house and it was quite intimidating for me to move into someone else's home. It's not like sharing with people my own age, where it's, "That's my space" and, "That's my cupboard", but she's so lovely and extremely welcoming.

MT We have our spats, don't we?

HL We do, we have our disagreements and things, like throwing away mouldy fruit...

MT Oh yes, she's a menace in that way. They're just getting ripe, then Heather throws them out.

HL We have a debate, ongoing, about when fruit is edible and when it is not. I think when it's furry, it's not edible. Marjory thinks that when it's furry, you can cut off the furry bits and eat the rest, it's fine.

MT Well, you see, I was brought up during the war.

HL And waste not, want not. At the start I was quite, "Oh my God, she can't eat that!" but now I've relaxed a little bit. Marjory made me see that sell-by dates aren't particularly useful. It's an odd role to be in, because you're not family and you're not just a lodger, and I think it can be difficult at first finding out where the lines are drawn and the boundaries are. But not for us – I think it's worked well, we've both got an affection for each other.

MT Yes, you're my friend. A bossy one, but still my friend.

Cilly Haar, 90, and Joanna Nabrzyska, 41, in Swiss Cottage, north-west London



Cilly Haar (left) and

homesharer Joanna Nabrzyska (right) in Swiss Cottage, north-west London. Joanna stayed 16 months. 'Joanna was very, very thoughtful and it just worked beautifully,' says Cilly. 'With a previous homesharer, I was not as comfortable... I felt sometimes that my home wasn't my own any more.' Photograph: Mike Pinches for the Guardian
Cilly came to the UK from Berlin in 1939, aged 17, to escape the Nazis. Joanna is from Poland and was studying social work during the 16 months she lived with Cilly. She offered 10 hours' support a week and stayed at home each night; they shared four evening meals, cooking two each.

Ground rules: Joanna was not allowed to burn candles in her room; she could use the washing machine once a week.

CH Homeshare has enabled me to stay in my own home rather than go into an old age home, which I don't want to do if I can possibly help it. I don't want to be institutionalised, to be in a row of rooms. So far, I'm still fairly independent. I still do my own shopping. I don't do much housework, but I keep the place tidy, and I socialise as much as I can. It worked out very well with Joanna – I was very happy with her and I hope that she was happy with me. The nice thing was that I think we respected each other and we didn't have to say much about it. Joanna was very, very thoughtful and it just worked beautifully.

With a previous homesharer, I was not as comfortable. She was very nice but she took things very much for granted... I felt sometimes that my home wasn't my own any more. When Joanna had a friend over, she asked me, and I appreciated it so much. She could have had her friend here every day, but I liked to be asked.

JN I agree it's a lot about mutual respect and I was aware that I was living in someone else's home, so I didn't want to invade too much. I tried to follow how the house was established and what Mrs Haar's wishes were.

I think we had very similar boundaries and a similar approach. We didn't have a

conversation about it, it just fell into place. It's mainly about companionship, and I suppose security as well.

We cooked for each other during the week. We shared the meal and we washed up together, then we'd have a conversation, a cup of tea. Mrs Haar is a great cook – she's got that continental style of cooking that's similar to what I know from Poland, so it reminded me of home as well. It brought back nice memories.

Maureen and Keith Balmer, in their 70s, and Viktorija Gorelconokaite, 27, in Penrith, Cumbria



Maureen (right) and Keith Balmer (centre) with homesharer Viktorija Gorelconokaite outside their home in Penrith: 'I just wanted some nice people to see every day and to have a conversation with, some atmosphere at home,' Viktorija explains. 'That's why I went for this kind of project.' Photograph: Mike Pinches for the Guardian

Keith and Maureen ran a bed and breakfast until Keith was diagnosed with a brain tumour. Viktorija is from Lithuania and is a manager in a fast food chain. She lived with Keith and Maureen for six months last year, giving 10 hours' help a week, mostly cleaning, gardening and spending time with Keith.

Ground rules: Viktorija was not allowed to smoke or bring a man back to her room.

VG I just wanted some nice people to see every day and to have a conversation with, some atmosphere at home. That's why I went for this kind of project. It's nice to have a little bit of family around you. I'd come in in the evenings, pop into the living room, say hi, how are you, how was your day. It's nice to know that someone is there to support you, to have that shoulder to lean on if you need one.

I'd helped with my grandmother and my family, but I hadn't lived with people I didn't know before. It was more than I was expecting, to be honest. I didn't think it would be

as much fun, living with an older couple. We had a laugh.

MB We've always done bed and breakfast anyway, so we've always had people in and out, and we've always been very easy-going. I think that helps.

KB Yes, hospitality is our key word. We loved to hear her coming home.

Hannah Cowlin, 32, Dana Kruse, 18, and Angelica Moreno, 21, in Dunfermline



Hannah Cowlin

(centre) with volunteers Dana Kruse (left) and Angelica Moreno in Dunfermline, Fife: 'If I were living on my own and having carers coming in and out, it would be lonely,' says Hannah. 'A big element of this is about companionship, and someone being there.'

Photograph: Mike Pinches for the Guardian

Hannah was diagnosed with motor neurone disease nine years ago. She'd recently graduated and was living with her parents. She decided to move out to share with a friend, and when she became less able to do things for herself, her friend suggested live-in volunteers. Dana has just left school in Germany; Angelica, from Colombia, plans to study medicine. Both work shifts alongside paid carers who provide personal care. They help Hannah move around, go out with her and cook, but they don't share meals.

Ground rules: Hannah provides a list, for example, take off your shoes indoors.

AM When I got here I was thinking maybe she was going to be angry or depressed or something, but no, just so happy and nice. When I arrived, she greeted me with open arms.

DK I really like being here... You have to do things on your own, go to people, talk to them, find new friends, and everything is new.

HC If I were living on my own and having carers coming in and out, it would be lonely. A

big element of this is about companionship, and someone being there. At times I think it would be nice to be on my own for a day, but that isn't possible. When it works well, it's so good. And it gives you a feeling of normality, getting out... It can be a bit heart-in-your-mouth when there isn't any cover. There are no guarantees of what's round the corner. But my old volunteers are now some of my closest friends.

Jo and John Austen, 66 and 65, and Dulce Maria Burillo Lozano, 33, in Birmingham



Jo (centre) and John

Austen (left) with Dulce Maria Burillo Lozano at their home in Birmingham: 'The chemistry of the house changes every time a different volunteer comes,' John says, 'and we have to adapt to that.' Photograph: Mike Pinches for the Guardian

Dulce is a teacher from Mexico. She met John and Jo for the first time when she arrived at the airport last April. Jo has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair. She communicates using a band around her head to which is attached a small light that she shines on letters or words on a board in front of her. John is a retired Anglican priest. Dulce is one of two volunteers who work shifts; she does 35 hours a week, providing Jo with personal care, drinks and food, and cooking meals. Jo has had more than 130 volunteers since 1980.

Ground rules: none

DL I wanted a break in my life. I wanted to change everything I was doing in Mexico, so I thought it was a great opportunity.

John You hadn't done any personal care, had you?

DL No, it was the first time with Jo. But I like it.

John Most people are like you and have had no experience before, so it's quite a big thing.

Jo Changeovers are a bit of a hassle, but once I get used to somebody, it is better.

John It affects you much more, doesn't it, Jo? You have to get used to somebody washing and dressing you. All I have to do is adjust to their personalities and support people sometimes.

The chemistry of the house changes every time a different volunteer comes, and we have to adapt to that. Jo's lived in a community most of her life, and before we were married I lived in an informal community – two families and two single people – so we're used to sharing our house.

We often say we feel like we have a large extended family of daughters everywhere, all over the world. When one of our Japanese volunteers married someone in Birmingham and her family couldn't be here, she asked Jo to be her mother for the day and me to be her father. She said that Jo was the person she had known longest in Britain and she wanted Jo to have that place in her wedding. It was very, very special.

Barbara Austin, 67, Stephanie Reoch, 27, and Alexandra Giraldo, 21, in Milton Keynes



Barbara Austin

(centre) with volunteers Alexandra Giraldo (right) and Stephanie Reoch, at home in Milton Keynes. Barbara says of all the volunteers who have helped her since her accident in 1976, 'I couldn't have done it without the girls, all of them. Without their help I'd never be where I am today. I'd have been in an institution.' Photograph: Mike Pinches for the Guardian

Barbara was paralysed from the neck down in a car accident in 1976. She spent a year in hospital while her family looked after her two sons. When she came home, social services proposed putting her in a home and her sons in care. Her first volunteers ("the girls") moved in in 1981. Stephanie and Alexandra work 35 hours a week in shifts, alongside

paid carers; they eat, go out and go on holiday with her. Stephanie has a degree in criminology; Alexandra is studying physiotherapy.

Ground rules: none explicit, apart from keeping the house clean.

BA Having the girls has enabled me to bring up the boys, go to university, get a degree. I couldn't have done it without the girls, all of them. There have been some that haven't worked out, but without their help I'd never be where I am today. I'd have been in an institution. So they've given me the ability to live my life independently.

AG She is like a friend, but also like my grandma. For me the most difficult thing was the language.

BA I remember one Japanese girl – I asked if she could draw the curtains and she went and got a book and started drawing them!

SR Barbara is quite particular about some things – I'm still not very good at her hair. But it's just practice, really. We enjoy it, and if Barbara's OK, we're going to be OK. We're good friends.

- For homeshare schemes, go to sharedlivesplus.org.uk lists homeshare schemes; for full-time volunteers, go to www.csv.org.uk.

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