

Tales from two-family houses Different generations adopt the duplex lifestyle

By Joyce Rosencrans
Post home editor

Multi-generations often lived together under one roof before the 20th century. Big farmhouses belonging to grandpa and grandma became home to married children and their offspring. After all, the family business was bringing in crops and tending livestock. Many hands and skills were needed.

There was no Social Security, so people expected to work to the end. The home office might have been the kitchen table swept clear of crumbs.

But the agrarian economy faded away, and the population shifted to urban areas where the jobs are. Families scattered.

Now, many extended families are reuniting under one roof as the World War II generation lives longer, healthier lives. Many of the older empty-nesters feel the need to downsize, and to drive a car less or not at all. They might need help with errands and the endless job of grocery-shopping. And some long to lighten the load of property maintenance, including mowing, pruning and cleaning out gutters. But they're definitely not ready for assisted living or a retirement community.

An AARP housing survey says 83 percent of older Americans polled would rather remain in their current homes for the rest of their lives. Understandably, this is where seniors say they feel the most comfortable, convenient, secure and independent. But it is not always practical.

A happy and affordable compromise between complete independence for seniors and the drastic move to some assisted living facility is the move to a duplex or at least a house that can be easily subdivided to comfortably accommodate different generations - usually boomers and their parents.

Some neighborhoods, such as Covington, Newport and Fort Thomas, include older two-families on tree-lined streets. There's side-by-side architecture with two separate entrances, and other houses long ago remodeled to include an apartment up, down or in the rear. Newer homes in the suburbs are more likely to have a small apartment over the garage or a tiny guesthouse linked by patio to the main house.

Two women, Cathy Rudert of Fort Thomas and Bev Holiday of Newport, have each opted to own one of the fine, older houses in Northern Kentucky neighborhoods in order to have the right room arrangements for live-in parents. The Ruderts, Cathy and her parents, J.W. and Hilda, already have a decade of experience in domestic blending of the two generations.

Bev is just beginning the process - still hoping to persuade her parents, Harry and Ruth Glaser, to move in with her. They're still enjoying their house in Erlanger, about 12 miles away from wherever Bev usually is. They've lived there since 1953.

To be ready for the transition, Bev is currently selling her Amos Shinkle rowhouse on beautiful Second Street in Covington - with river views from all three floors. And she's already bought a new "old" house in Newport, mere blocks from the commercial building she owns at 10th and Monroe. It means a shorter commute to her shop, the Kentucky Haus Artisan Center, which stocks a wide variety of quality crafts, books and food products from the commonwealth.

But the most important reason for her move is that the Newport house will allow separate but equal living spaces for both Bev and her parents. There's a good spot to build a ramp from the side yard into the house, if needed. There's enough room for some tomato vines and a pepper plant. Washer/dryer hookups are on the first and second floors. A door can be closed to the first-floor living room for more privacy, leaving a rear hallway passage leading to other parts of the three-story house.

Meanwhile, Cathy Rudert and her two basset hounds, Emma and Chaps (Chaps being a former show dog weighing in at 90 pounds), live in the heart of Fort Thomas on a pretty one-way street lined with many two-family houses. There's only one front entrance to Cathy's home, but completely separate living quarters, including a second kitchen upstairs for her parents, J.W. Rudert and his wife Hilda. They had rented for many years, moving occasionally to be near one of their three daughters.

Cathy had been traveling the world for 14 years as a GE employee, but that job and her marriage had ended. She wanted to settle in one place to begin an online career as a children's author and office manager for Wellington Orthopedic and Sports Medicine clinic. She asked her parents if they wanted to move into a stately, red brick Fort Thomas house - easily divided up to accommodate two lifestyles and two generations. They said yes.

That was 10 years ago, and Cathy says the arrangement has been a happy one. Her dad loves to walk the dogs. (Cathy occupies the first floor so Chaps and Emma can use a doggie door dozens of times a day.) These hounds are traffic-stoppers, the inspiration for Cathy's first children's book, "Lily - A Basset Hound's Tail of Love." She is founder of Basset Hound Town Publishing and owner of Bassethoundtown.com. Her Web site gets 1,000 hits a day because she is "so well networked" online and is active in basset hound rescue.

Cathy says the Fort Thomas house is perfect for their extended family, though there is only one main entrance. "We've furnished the hall to be homey and welcoming." She says the first and second floors are exact copies, each with its own kitchen, two bedrooms, a huge living room and dining room. She also had a sunroom upstairs glassed in for her parents, adding AC and heat to the living room extension.

"My mother practically lives in the sunroom," she says, adding that the strong light there is so good for reading.

Cathy wanted the domestic arrangement with her parents to feel more like they are neighbors. Her mother phoned from upstairs one day last week to say she was going to the supermarket. Cathy gladly rattled off her own grocery list. But they rarely dine together, though they see each other daily. Another example of neighborliness is when Cathy phones from her home office on the first floor to ask her parents on the second floor if they feel like taking a walk. Or, her mother can phone Cathy to report that her sink is draining too slowly. Cathy, as homeowner, takes care of it.

"I didn't want there to be an open-door policy," Cathy says. "I never go upstairs and just walk in. There are boundaries. We respect each other's privacy."

Even the dogs benefit. While Cathy was out last week, her mother heard a rumble of thunder. She went right downstairs to Chaps - terrified of thunder - and held his paw for awhile.

Yet another dog may benefit from extra attention - if and when Lacey the toy poodle gets the chance to live with her owner Bev Holiday's parents, Harry and Ruth Glaser. They all get along just fine, and Bev's Newport house allows each living space to be self-contained. (A full bath is on each floor.)

A minor glitch is that Lacey can't get a grip on the shiny hardwood floors in the late-1800s house. The little dog went flying off the landing once. Bev and her mother agree that a stairway carpet runner might be a good idea. It's still up in the air as to which rooms will have cable, but they're working on it.



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Two generations and two dogs coexist happily in a Fort Thomas house with duplicate room arrangements on two floors. Cathy Rudert and her basset hounds, Emma, left, and Chaps, are glad to share an address with Cathy's parents, J.W. and Hilda Rudert.