



The Reality of Roommates for Senior Women

'The Golden Girls' It Isn't, But More Older Women Are Joining Up in Unique Living Arrangements

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Rose Nylund, Blanche Devereaux, Dorothy Zbornak, and Sophia Petrillo are characters from "The Golden Girls," a popular late-80s television show about four elderly women sharing a house in Miami. Life doesn't often mimic the fictional story of the four wise-cracking ladies who exchanged quips over men and life, resolving issues over cheesecake.

"It's a lot different in real life," says 88-year-old Alice Fecas.

Alice and her 86-year-old sister Madeline Sergios share a residence at [Vi Living](#), where they moved once the stairs became too taxing at their Florida townhome.

"When we first started out we used to argue a lot," says Fecas. But the two weren't bickering over finances or dirty dishes. "We ended up arguing over ancient things that didn't matter anymore," says younger sister Sergios.

The inconsequential fights stopped long ago because it was waste of time, say the siblings.

go out frequently, attending birthday parties and socializing with two very good friends in their community.

The youngest of nine children, the women were fresh into their 70s when they merged their lives together and became roommates. A retired sales lady and a retired school teacher, the two who last shared a house as children began bunking together following the death of their mother, a sister and a beloved only son.

"We help one another," says the never-married Fecas. "It's really a convenience to live with someone else. We were lucky we're together even though we're sisters. I have a very good sister."

"It's nice to have the company," says Sergios. "If I didn't have her, I'd be alone," says Sergios, a divorcee who lost her son many years ago.



The elderly sisters are ahead of the curve as a part of the growing number of women co-sharing a home for companionship and community. Like any new living arrangement, there can be some hiccups but the rewards can be immense. The two active seniors



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In the current economy, the financial outlook for many retirees has taken a turn for the worse. These days retirement looks a lot bleaker with more people expected to work longer following the stock market collapse that sent many retirement accounts spiraling downward.

According to Census data from March 2010, more than one million women over age 45 live in roommate situations with nonrelatives. The figure is a 15 percent increase since 2007 before the the great recession began.

At the **Housemate Match**, a program that's a part of the **Marcus Jewish Community Center in Atlanta**, 82 percent of the people seeking affordable housing are women and the majority, 72 percent, choose women as tenants.

"Lots of people in the state of Georgia are unemployed and they are coming up with innovative ways to find shelter and live in a safe and affordable place," says Rita Zadoff, director of housing services at the non profit organization.

Shared housing is definitely on the upswing, says Annette Leahy Maggitti, program director at St. Ambrose Homesharing. "We have noted a 23 percent increase in women applying for shared housing the last year," says Maggitti.

The new trend of shared housing can be attributed in some cases to companionship, longer and healthier lives for senior women, and financial needs.

Women who retire at 65 will live three more years than their male counterparts, according to [the U.S. Department of Labor](#).

Most women would like to live with another woman because they feel they are compatible, says Zadoff, whose program assists 2,600 people a year but is unable to match them all. "We have many more inquiries than we used to have."

What's responsible for the increasing figures? "This thing called the economy is why women are more interested now," says Marianne Kilkenny, founder of Women Living in Community, an organization committed to creating groups to live in communities or co-share housing.

A retired human resources executive from Silicon Valley, Kilkenny has first-hand experience in community living and roommate situations.

As with any big decision, you have to have a push and pull, says Kilkenny. "My push was to leave corporate America and both my parents had passed away. The thought of me and my future was the push. The pull here was two things: Asheville is a woman's town and I was reading [Joan Medicott](#)."

After moving to Asheville, N.C., in 2006 the retiree has experimented with numerous living arrangements since relocating to her small community consisting of three separate homes.

"I shared a home with another woman," says Kilkenny. "We shared the same name."

The two Mariannes found each other after attending the same spiritual home, and before long were sharing everything from common space to cooking.

Are Women Blazing a Trail?

"I think women are ahead of the curve. Monetarily this makes a lot of sense," says Marianne Kilkenny.

Joan Medicott is unsure of what inspired her to begin writing her novels centered around older women sharing a home but the idea came to her many years ago. "I was in the bathtub one night and



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these ladies appeared [not in physical form] and started talking to me," says Medicott. "It just came through the top of my head. Maybe somewhere deep down inside I remembered the Golden Girls. I used to watch them. Perhaps that was the original inspiration."

Although the write has never co-shared a home, she's a proponent of shared living.

"From my vantage point looking backward, I'm 78, I would prefer to live with a group of women. It would be companionable," says Medicott. I think if something happened to my husband I would absolutely never have another man in my life."

"I don't think it's necessary for people to live lonely and in isolation, I just think that is the worst thing," says Medicott.

If you're going to share a home, Medicott says you need tolerance, communication and a framework for dealing with issues that may crop up from sharing a home.

But, seniors aren't repeating the follies of their youth. Where many times financial needs or college roommate selection could pair off two individuals who fail to mesh, seniors who are exploring senior communities, home-sharing or roommate situations avoid strife by matching personalities.

"You think you know your friend and then when you move in and you might be in for a big surprise," says Sandra Timmermann, a gerontologist and director of the MetLife Mature Market Institute in Westport, Conn. "It could be an odd couple situation."

To prepare for co-sharing those considering a roommate should approach it like a marriage or business relationship. A few questions to ask before co-sharing, says Timmermann: How are both of you prepared for illnesses? How do you really deal with that as you're both aging?

The [State of Grace website](#) provides questionnaires and other documents that can help match personalities, and the book "[The Sharing Solution](#)" offers agreements for individuals seeking to build relationships or establish communities.

Retirees Find Communities More Interesting than Shady Pines

The quest for roommates or creative home sharing solutions goes beyond Asheville.

Home Share Program, an organization that matches providers and seekers in Pinellas County, Fla., says the majority of its clients are women of about 57 years old, and most are seeking same-sex roommates. In 2010, the amount of women paired with roommates rose to nearly six times the 2007 figure. "Our numbers are increasing as the program gains popularity," wrote program assistant Shawnda Green.

Robert Fowler, the president of retirement directory [55CommunityGuide](#), has stayed at numerous communities geared towards seniors, and has begun to notice more women moving into their own smaller homes or sharing a home.

Part of the appeal of single women moving to 55-plus housing is the safety and security the mostly gated communities give them, smaller more efficient homes, and socialization through planned activities, says Fowler.

The number of women taking a look at alternate living like roommate situations and house shares may be on the rise because there are more women separated, married, or divorced, based on U.S. Census figures.

Keep Your Home Sharing from Becoming the Odd Couple

"A lot of older women who have never been married or who have been divorced struggle in our economy and even with my Social Security and retirement it is not easy," says retired teacher Betty Roth.

Some 47 percent of women fear working for an extended period to supplement Social Security income, according to a survey by TD Ameritrade.



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While Roth and her circle of friends have discussed living together, they ran into trouble when planning the details. "We thought about living together but people were pretty much entrenched where they're at," says Roth. "For someone to move to a different part of town would be complicated."

Where you're going to live, and who owns where you're living is important to avoid a power struggle, says Kilkenny. A power struggle or even a hierarchy can result if one person owns the residence. "Even if everyone is singing Kumbaya, we all don't know the words," says Kilkenny.

The 66-year-old Roth decided to post on a website dedicated to exploring creative living arrangement for women. An active senior who enjoys kayaking and hiking, Roth went out in search of a same-sex roommate in August to share her home in Minnesota. Since posting, Roth has altered her living situation and is interviewing women graduate students for a converted apartment area in her home.

As for her Roth's Golden Girls future, "It's an interesting process, I don't know -- it still might happen."



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