



dispatches from the world of ideas

# FAMILY TIES

**“I have had a wonderful life helping people,”** says Sharon Graham Niederhaus. As a California public school teacher, she gave many a child a good start in life, but Niederhaus is also talking about the years since her retirement.



With time on her hands, Niederhaus, a Northwestern Mutual client, pursued a master’s degree and began studying the dynamics of aging populations. Her thesis explored alternative housing arrangements, including accessory apartments—self-contained living areas within a single-family home, such as for an aging parent—which were becoming a practical option for many seniors.

“We have had a 50-year experiment with the nuclear family,” Niederhaus says. “Now we’re looking at the extended family. The double whammy of a weak economy and an aging population are causing the baby boomers’ kids to return home and, more important, their ailing parents to move in with them.”

In the course of her research, however, she found that many families

were attracted to intergenerational living in theory, but weren’t sure how to make it work in practice.

“My younger brother, John Graham, a business school professor, kept telling me there was a book opportunity there,” says Niederhaus. “When *The Wall Street Journal* ran an article about families staying connected, I realized that if I didn’t write the book, someone else would.”

So Niederhaus, with her brother as partner and co-author, began an unanticipated adventure that has filled the past decade of her life. She had already done her academic homework, so the next step was to interview families who were actually practicing intergenerational living and see what she could learn from their experiences. If her method of finding them was unscien-

tific—“I asked around”—it was effective. Over time, she interviewed more than 100 families with multiple generations under the same roof, giving her real-world stories to bring life to her scholarly research. Moreover, the same two keys to success or failure—a separate entrance and a separate kitchen—kept cropping up, providing the foundation for a how-to approach for other families thinking of taking the leap.

The 2007 publication of *Together Again: A Creative Guide to Multigenerational Living* couldn’t have been better timed, because the United States housing bubble was about to burst. Good reviews and a bad economy put the book in the news and Niederhaus on the lecture circuit.

“My basic message is always the same,” she says. “You need proximity and

privacy, as well as some type of cohabitation agreement before you move in that says who is going to do what, and when.”

The continuing impact of the Great Recession on American families resulted in the publication of an updated version of the book under a new title: *All in the Family: A Practical Guide to Successful Multigenerational Living* (Taylor Trade Publishing, 2013).

“Fifty-one million Americans now live in intergenerational homes, and more housing developments are being built with them in mind,” she says. “The high cost of assisted living is forcing all of us to rethink how we will live and care for one another. It is important to plan ahead, but you need to take action by the time you are 70. Once you hit 75, it’s pretty hard to make the move.”