

Moving in with relatives, old friends, or new acquaintances, more and more Americans are finding...

# Happiness Is a Full House

by Lynn Schnurnberger

**W**HEN MADI Oliver turned 8 a few weeks ago, her mom, sister, grandparents, and great-grandparents feasted on barbecue, crab legs, and a pink-frosted cake at a dinner table decked out in full Hello Kitty regalia. While some relatives have to travel 20—or even 2000—miles to be at a loved one's party, all Madi's family had to do was walk down the hall.

After her parents separated four years ago, Madi, her 13-year-old sister, Zoee Frakes, and their mom, Kristel, 35, moved into Madi's grandma's house. Her great-grandparents moved in last fall after her great-grandfather, Ken, got sick. "It's like *The Waltons*—and *The Simpsons*—around here," jokes Madi's grandmother, 53-year-old Sandra McKenna. Seven people now live in the four-bedroom Tampa, Fla., home that McKenna once shared with only her husband, Ralph Finkenbrink, 48. "It's jam-packed and loving, and if you didn't have a sense of humor you'd lose your mind," Sandra says.



Happy together: Zoee Frakes and dog Ginger, Madi Oliver, Ralph Finkenbrink, Sandra McKenna, Kristel Oliver, and Betty McKenna

**The number of extended-family households grew by 30% in the last decade.**

## ■ It Takes a Village

Multigenerational living is on the rise. A recent AARP study found that 6.6 million U.S. households had at least three generations of family members in 2009—a whopping 30% increase since the 2000 census. More than a third of Coldwell Banker real-estate agents recently reported an uptick in buyers looking for homes to accommodate multiple generations, and 70% expect to see even greater demand in the year ahead.

The trend is fueled in part by the economy, with "baby boomerang" kids returning to the nest after college, along with 30- and 40-somethings who have lost their jobs or homes or both. But

Andrew Cherlin, a professor of sociology and public policy at Johns Hopkins University, sees an upside. "Parents and grandparents are like the National Guard—they're called up to active duty when there's a crisis," he says. "But while families may be moving in together to save money, they're discovering the advantages of shared child- and elder-care and an enriched family life."

In fact, the idea of the nuclear family—mom, dad, and kids living together in isolation—is only about 50 years old. "In the coming decade, Americans will understand that our love of independence is kind of silly," predicts John Graham, an international-business professor at the University of California,

Irvine, and the co-author of *Together Again*. Of the 6.7 billion people on the planet, he notes, about 6 billion live in extended-family arrangements. "Talking to Grandma on the phone is one thing," Graham says. "But to be with her smelling the cookies she's baking is even better for everyone's psyche."

## ■ Full House

At Madi's house, the delicious aroma of great-grandma Betty's pot roast wafts from the kitchen. Mingling four generations of personalities and palates is a serious undertaking—Sandra wants vegetables, there's meat for Ralph, cheese and yogurt for Kristel, and a special menu for 78-year-old Ken, who's battling lung disease. Living together presents

other challenges, too: Zoee regularly commandeers a bathroom to make phone calls and, in desperation, Sandra once retreated to a closet for privacy. Lines can get blurred about who's in charge. ("I shouldn't have told Zoee to wear leggings with a certain dress to school; that's not my business," Sandra admits.)

But the benefits outweigh the annoyances. "The girls keep me young," says Sandra, who enjoys taking her granddaughters shopping and to cheerleading and soccer practices. Ken says his great-grandchildren's liveliness "spices things up." And the younger generation seems just as happy. Zoee says she's grateful to have this time to spend with her extended family, and she's found a go-to guy in her grandpa Ralph. "When I'm having problems with school or life or stuff, he and I can go outside and just talk," she says. Zoee's mom, Kristel, a barista at a Starbucks, credits her parents with keeping life from being overwhelming. "For a single parent, there aren't enough hours in the day," she



says. "I couldn't work the 5 a.m. shift and be home for the girls after school if my mom didn't drive them in the morning. It's good to have that support and that extra pair of hands."

### **Beyond Family**

Kim Schuster, 31, found that an "extra pair of hands" doesn't have to belong to a blood relative. Kim, who is divorced, is one of 10 million single moms living with children under 18—three times as many as in 1970. She runs a marketing business from home and desperately needed

## **Zoe, 13, found that her grandpa is a great listener.**

help with living expenses and child care. When she heard about Coabode.org, a free online service for single moms in search of roommates, she found even more than she'd hoped for. Through the service, she met and moved in with a single mother of three in Maplewood, Minn., much to her son's delight. "As an only child, my 8-year-old, Isaiah, used to ask, 'When am I going to have a brother or a sister?'" Kim says. "Since we live here, he doesn't ask that anymore."

Sometimes, prospective roommates just find each other. Long-time friends Susan Grady, 70, a retired widow, and Sharon McAbec, 53, a business owner who is divorced, got tired of complaining to each other about how lonely they were. "It was like, wait a minute, we could just move in together," Grady says. Before long, the spacious home they purchased in Chesterfield, Va., began to fill up.

continued

### **Extended Family | continued**

Sharon's daughter, 23, graduated from college and started working at a day-care center; she moved in with her mom and Susan to save on rent. Sharon's mom, Coralee, 83, came to stay too, to recuperate from heart surgery.

Multigenerational housing will become even more popular as the number of women who are widowed, divorced, or childless grows, and as Baby Boomers choose alternatives to traditional retirement homes, predicts Donna Butts, executive director of Gen-

## **Ralph says now he'd be lonely without his family around.**

erations United, a nonprofit that promotes interaction between the young and the old. "Our experiences are so much broader when we mix generations," Butts says. "It gives older people hope for the future. Younger people hear stories about their past and get over their fear of aging." And, she says, laughing, "they find out about vinyl records."

Meanwhile, back at the McKenna-Finkenbrink household, Madi's grandpa Ralph says he's enjoying perhaps the greatest benefit of a multigenerational household—a richer, more tumultuous, multitextured life.

"When we bought this house six years ago, it was just me and Sandi," he muses. "I'd be at one end of the house, Sandi would be at the other, and we'd see each other maybe every couple of hours. Now it's the seven of us, and I wouldn't change that for the world. It would be lonely without everyone around."



# PARADE

Jay Shafer outside his  
96-square-foot home  
in Sebastopol, Calif.

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