

Boarder Patrol: Recession forcing older New Yorkers to take in roommates

BY Tripp Whetsell

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Suzie Sims-Fletcher is a divorced mother with grown children. She has two advanced degrees and has traveled the world. You'd think she would live alone. But the 50-year-old communications consultant, who bought her Astoria co-op in 2004, needs someone to help share expenses while she commutes weekly to Boston, where she's a college professor. Because she struggles to pay the maintenance and mortgage on her apartment, she has a roommate.

"Honestly, if I had my druthers in the real world I would have my apartment all to myself," Sims-Fletcher says. "It's sometimes a blow to my ego, but under the current circumstances with the economy you do what you have to do and I've been lucky because I get along really well with my roommate. Every once in a while we have bathroom coordination issues, but we pretty much have the rhythm of it by now."

Jooyoun Sung, the 29-year-old woman who lives with her, agrees.

"The nicest part about living with Suzie is that it's like having built-in family, which is great for me because I'm fairly new to this country," says Sung, who works in Manhattan. "We both have different schedules and are busy, but we can meet at home after work and talk about what happened during the day."

Indeed, Sims-Fletcher's and Sung's domestic arrangement may sound more like an episode of "Friends" even though Sung is young enough to be her daughter. The pair, who met after Sims-Fletcher posted an ad on Craigslist last year, occasionally socialize and eat together.

Such harmony hasn't always been easy. Sims-Fletcher's previous roommate, also in her 20s, got drunk shortly after moving in in January 2009. Then she tried to pick up one of Sims-Fletcher's male acquaintances in a bar.

An authority on roommate survival skills, Sims-Fletcher is among a growing number of adults in New York and across the nation who are being forced to open up their homes to share their living spaces with complete strangers because of the sluggish economy.

The high housing costs and low entry-level salaries in industries like media, fashion and the arts practically dictate that two or more single people live together well into their 30s.

But for those in their 40s and beyond who have had to take in roommates after losing their jobs, taking pay cuts or seeing their stock portfolios evaporate, it can be difficult. Many have either lived on their own for decades or raised children, which often makes their predicaments far more painful to come to terms with.

"It makes it a little bit easier psychologically when roommates realize this is an established thing in a place like New York and you're probably not the only one on the block who's doing it," says Bob Yingling, CEO of roommateclick.com, one of several Web sites, including Craigslist and roommatefinders.com, that report local inquiries have been way up over past years.

Yingling advises would-be roommates of all ages to ask for references, run credit checks and protect their confidentiality for as long as possible until they really get to know the person.

"When you're interviewing someone, I think it's just a matter of being very open and establishing the parameters right from the start," Yingling says.

While having a roommate may have financial advantages, there are drawbacks. Loud music late at night, dirty clothes on the floor, using up the last of the milk and not paying the rent on time can provoke major arguments with someone who has long been accustomed to being on their own.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg, according to Sheila Mart, 65, a veteran Broadway actress who has appeared in

"Law & Order" and "The Sopranos." In between acting gigs 12 years ago, she began renting out the lone bedroom of the Chelsea apartment where her son and daughter were raised, most recently to 36-year-old Deborah Pierre, a curator at a nearby art gallery who moved in about three weeks ago and pays \$650.

Mart bunks in the living room while Pierre sleeps in the bedroom that belonged to Mart's two children. So far, both women say the arrangement has worked out well, although Mart describes her initial foray into the roommate world more than a decade ago as "an adjustment with a capital A."

"It was never something that I wanted to do or dreamed that I'd ever be doing," she says. "Especially since I've got two kids who lived here for years in the same space and this is very different. You figure it's normal when you're in your 20s and early 30s, but not when you get to be my age. For me, the biggest adjustment was the loss of privacy and constantly having to make compromises even though my name is on the lease."

Mart also echoes roommateclick.com's Yingling's sentiments about establishing the ground rules up front — lessons she learned the hard way several years ago when one of her former tenant's checks bounced.

Another renter had a jealous ex-boyfriend who broke into the building and got into a fistfight with one of the other residents. Mart's neighbor had to call the cops. Since then, Mart won't allow her roommates to have any overnight guests and has them sign a letter of agreement before they move in.

Similarly, Sims-Fletcher says she had Sung and other candidates fill out a questionnaire about eating and drinking habits and how often they bring people home. Unlike Mart, though, Sims-Fletcher does make occasional allowances for overnight guests.

Still, while such cohabitations may be more commonplace these days, they're clearly not for everyone, says Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a psychology professor at Clark University in Wooster, Mass., and author of "Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road From the Late Teens Through the Twenties."

"Living with someone of any age requires an enormous amount of give-and-take and not everyone has the DNA for it," Arnett says. "When they're two people who aren't related it's especially hard because there are a lot more surprises involved that can arise at any time."

Then there's also the scenario in which a New Yorker of a certain age decides that living with a roommate is simply no longer a viable option and they leave.

That's what happened to Abby Ehmann, a 50-year-old writer who divides her time among Marin County, Calif., Nevada and New York. She and her husband purchased a one-bedroom apartment on the lower East Side in 2000, but are getting divorced. The Manhattan property recently went on the market. Until it sells, she's living with a roommate named Steve whenever she's in town.

"You feel poor, pathetic and sad because at this point in my life I feel like I should be way beyond this," Ehmann says. "But there's also kind of an ironic positive flip side. In other ways, it makes me feel like I'm a lot younger and that isn't all bad, either."

Financial well-being for some means marathon trips to work and days away from loved ones

BY Tripp Whetsell

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It's unclear when they'll see each other next.

Like so many couples throughout the New York area and the nation amid the rough economic times, the Narcisses - who live in Tannersville, Pa., nearly 90 miles from midtown - make a sacrifice in their relationship in order to ensure their financial stability.

Because Clinton Narcisse's work day sometimes can last 12 hours, he spends an average of three nights a week with his parents in Brooklyn to cut his travel time and expenses.

Rena Narcisse, who works for the Pennsylvania Department of Parks and Recreation, stays behind in Tannersville.

Clinton said being apart so much of the time is difficult because their two kids are away at college and Rena, also 46, is alone most of the time.

But they plan to continue their long-distance arrangement indefinitely.

"It's tough and there are a lot of sacrifices," Clinton said. "But I've also got a great job here with a lot of responsibility and I'm not going to give that up, especially right now with times being as tough as they are."

Of course, commuter marriages are hardly a new concept, especially in New York, where globe-trotting power couples have long been the norm.

But so are scenarios such as the Narcisses. A report released last year by Worldwide ERC, a relocation services industry trade group, found that three-fourths of relocation agents dealt with at least one commuter marriage in 2007 - a 38% increase from 2003.

"You have to be a well-rounded, patient person because there are a lot of things that happen during the course of your weekly commute that are beyond your control, and you just have to roll with the punches," Clinton said, adding that modern technology has made the commuter marriage life easier.

Though such arrangements may still raise eyebrows about the conventional notions of marriage, the economic crisis rewrote old rules, said Jim Fannin, author of "Score for Life: The Five Keys to Optimum Achievement." Fannin, who works the consulting and lecture circuits, spends an average of 25 weeks a year away from his wife and daughter, who live in Chicago.

"Today's families are undergoing all sorts of changes and challenges that didn't exist before," Fannin said. "In many cases, they are having to completely readjust their way of life for the sake of a paycheck, which is why more people are opting to go the commuter route out of necessity rather than choice."

Brad Wilcox, director of the University of Virginia's National Marriage Project, agreed.

"I think that in the months and years to come, especially in the short-term, it's no surprise that we're seeing more and more commuter marriages where couples are holding down jobs in two different places as people scramble to rebuild their lives in the great recession, and as we have more and more women in the workplace," Wilcox said.

With unemployment hovering at 10%, and underemployment - people who want a job but have stopped looking for now and workers employed part-time who want full-time jobs - at 17.3%, more couples are willing to consider such a setup. Some embrace it.

Rihan Hassad, 34, a program coordinator at NYU's School of Medicine, and her husband Akim, 39, a billing analyst at

Thomson-Reuters, have been commuting between Manhattan and Bethlehem, Pa., for nearly two years.

Before the recession, they had planned to find jobs closer to home. Most weeks, they make the two-hour trip into Port Authority together and, when work responsibilities dictate, stay with family in Queens or New Jersey.

"Even though we commute a lot and we're apart a lot, we're luckier in a sense, too, because our unique situation forces us to spend more time together than we probably would otherwise," Rihan said.

"I think we're also much more adaptable in being able to deal with things when they do get tough," Akim added. "It's all about attitude. Anything can be a problem if you make it a problem, and we try not to make it a problem."

Many commuter couples aren't as fortunate.

"One of the big issues is that there's a greater likelihood of people growing apart because they aren't living together," Wilcox said. "Another major issue is that there are more opportunities for infidelity because you're outside the boundaries of your normal everyday life."

Yet Tim McGilloway, a technology manager for Procter & Gamble in Manhattan who commutes three days a week from Belvidere, N.J., more than 70 miles from midtown, insisted there's validity to the old saying about absence making the heart grow fonder.

"It's certainly very tough being able to spend so little time with my wife and kids and then when we are together calling it quits and doing it all over again," he said. "You become a zombie after awhile and then it becomes even harder to get back on a normal schedule.

"Even when I'm stressed and tired over my work situation, I have to make a conscious effort to leave all the work stresses and the commuting stresses outside, knowing that when I walk through the front door there's only one thing that has to happen, and that's that I have to love my wife and kids and be there for them," McGilloway added.

But the time on the bus, in the car or on the train can take a big toll.

"The most stressful part about it is the time and what you're trading with one thing in order to get something else," said Bob Fisher, 63, a technology manager for Conde Nast who commutes about two and a half hours by bus from Breinigsville, Pa., near Allentown, each way.

"You have to have a strong foundation in a relationship to make it through this kind of commute. If you don't have that, then you're just going to be lost."