

---

# HOME, CONNECTION, AND BELONGING: TWO HOMESHARE STORIES

by Bess Harrison  
For Community Connections

**Bess Harrison** is a freelance dabbler, maker and thinker. She has a background in medical anthropology and cultural studies, and has worked in social research, community development and policy roles in the ACT community sector. In this article, she writes about Community Connection's Homeshare service.



---

Melinda answers the door and invites us in with the cordial “excuse the mess” routine we all do. Melinda’s housemate, Mary, will be home shortly. While we wait, Melinda shares a poem she wrote this morning, moves around the clothes rack by the glass doors and offers us a cuppa.

The fridge is covered with notes and pictures and novelty magnets. Dishes are drying in the rack, schedules are pinned on a corkboard and small talk ensues. Then there’s a sound only Melinda hears. She yells, “Hi Duckee! Hey! I’ll get it!” How well we know the specific symphony of someone we live with coming home each day!

Mary comes in, unwrapping layers of autumnal Canberra cycling gear and heads straight for

domestic moments “I got these, are they the ones you like?” “Is the front door shut?” “Where is that...” “Have you had lunch?” “I got some wool today.”



Melinda (58) and Mary (53) have been living together for nine months. Over that time, their relationship has naturally evolved. Mary says, “When I first moved to Canberra, I was going

for bike rides to the museums and galleries on the weekend. Then as I got to know Mel, I realised she enjoyed

“It is all frightfully normal. That is the point. However, Melinda has an intellectual disability, which means that some elements of this picture have been deliberately constructed.”

the kettle. “Sorry I’m late, I set off and forgot my helmet, so I had to ride back and get it!” Mel and Mary hover over the kitchen counter preparing cheese and bikkies and share a few

the same things I did, so now we go together.” “And Mary is teaching me how to knit” says Mel.

It is all frightfully normal. That is the point.

However, Melinda has an intellectual disability, which means that some elements of this picture have been deliberately constructed: Mary and Mel have a 'Homeshare' arrangement.

The concept is simple. Homeshare brings together two people – both with needs and both with something to offer the other.

Melinda, the 'householder', has a vacant bedroom in her home, but needs help with some domestic chores. She is also looking for companionship. Mary, the 'homesharer', can help with domestic tasks, and needs somewhere affordable to live. She too, is looking for companionship.

A Homeshare arrangement formalises the connection between the householder and homesharer. Melinda agrees to provide Mary with affordable (or free)

accommodation in her home, in exchange for agreed help each week.

The Homeshare arrangement is negotiated between each party, and is written as an Occupancy Agreement. The support offered by the homesharer will vary depending on the needs of the householder, but often involves things like helping with shopping and cooking, and committing to being home a certain number of nights a week. It never includes personal care or administering medications. Homesharers are not carers; they are housemates. Mutuality and the organic development of adult housemate relationships are major benefits of Homeshare.

The benefits of sharing a home evolve. You initially choose a housemate on the basis of a checklist, a well-timed joke, a coincidence or a mysterious inkling that it will work. But you get to know a housemate through the everyday minutia of life. You come to know their habits, their moods. You learn what it means

**"Melinda agrees to provide Mary with affordable (or free) accommodation in her home, in exchange for agreed help each week."**

when they make popcorn and peanut-butter sandwiches at midnight. Housemates are often the first person you say good morning to, or the last person you say goodnight to. When you live with someone from outside your existing circle, your lives cross-pollinate. Your worlds get bigger.

Homesharing is something that many people can, and do, arrange for themselves. There are many good online resources to help people

**"When you live with someone from outside your existing circle, your lives cross-pollinate. Your worlds get bigger."**

set up (see [www.nationalsharedhousing.org](http://www.nationalsharedhousing.org) or [www.homesharevermont.org](http://www.homesharevermont.org)). There are also services around Australia that help people set up and manage a Homeshare.

One service in Canberra is run by Community Connections, who established their Homeshare program in 2012. Ian Ross, Executive Director of Community Connections, explains: "A Homeshare service like ours has experience in setting up and supporting Homeshare arrangements. This adds value to the matching process, and can add safeguards and problem-solving as the relationship between a homesharer and householder evolves.

But, it's not a 'service' model. It's a way of connecting people to live together. It's adding value to what is essentially already there and

"But, it's not a 'service' model. It's a way of connecting people to live together. It's adding value to what is essentially already there and what happens naturally in people's lives."

what happens naturally in people's lives."

Melinda has lived in a residential group home in the past. She doesn't say much about it, but her face drops, she shakes her head and says she didn't like it. Her three brothers bought her this two bedroom house, but it was lonely and hard to manage on her own. Melinda and her family already had a relationship with Community Connections, whose Homeshare program was just starting up around the time Melinda was looking for different housing options. She became one of the first people to join their program.

So how does a Homeshare service actually work? Lee Harrison, coordinator for the Homeshare program, explains: "To join our Homeshare service, you only need two things. You must have a spare room available in your place and, most importantly, you must want to share your home with another person. Any other factors, including kind and severity of your disability, are pretty much irrelevant. We can work out solutions to everything else." Potential householders contact Lee, who meets them to clarify what they want out of a Homeshare and what kind of person they want to live with. Lee says, "we engage the family and other key people in the conversation. For a Homeshare to go well, everyone needs to understand how it will work and what the role of a homesharer is." It's useful to involve loved ones from the get-go – family and close friends can help someone think through their options. However, Lee is quick to emphasise,

"the householder calls the tune. It's about what they want. Sometimes family members might think Homeshare is a really good idea, but when I talk to the person, it becomes clear it's not really what they want." At other times, it is the

family who are concerned. "They are worried about risks," Lee says, "but there are risks to every relationship, and that is why you have to be careful in setting up safeguards from the beginning. You also need an unambiguous process to end it, if you discover that the person you are living with turns out to be a lazy 'so-and-so' or just 'not what's on the tin'."

Once the householder has clarified what they are looking for, the room is advertised on standard accommodation websites like Gumtree and Allhomes. Interested homesharers contact Lee, who does initial screening over the phone then meets them to assess if they are a reasonable "match". If they are, Lee sets up a meeting between the householder and homesharer. If they get along, they meet the family and see the house. If everyone is still keen, Lee sits down with both parties and negotiates an Occupancy Agreement. All homesharers also undergo police and referee checks.

Once the homesharer moves in, Lee checks in to see how things are going. "I don't walk around the house with a clipboard and inspect everything. I'll be in contact maybe once a week for a while. But it completely depends on the people involved. Every Homeshare is different because everyone is different." There are some common trends, though: "There is often a honeymoon-period lasting about three months. Then around the three month mark, there is usually some issue that rears up that needs to be worked through."

Conflicts can arise between any of the people involved in the Homeshare, including parents, householder homesharer, tenancy managers, or other services. "There are always more people involved in a Homeshare than the housemates.

It's a learning process for everyone."

Sometimes Lee plays the

role of 'agony aunt' or 'UN peacekeeper', but he is also adamant that "it's just a process of working through human relationships. This takes time and good will, but it's not rocket science."

When Melinda needed a new homesharer, Mary responded to the ad on Gumtree. Having moved from Melbourne for work, Mary knew nobody in Canberra. She stayed with friends of friends but felt like a guest. There was uncertainty about whether her new job contract would be renewed, which made it difficult to commit to high-cost private rental. Homeshare resonated with her values – Mary works for a disability advocacy organisation and has an interest in alternative housing models. What better way to see how a model works than to live it? Mary and Mel are a great match.

They have small gripes like any cohabitants. The TV is close to Mel's bedroom and Mary likes to watch TV at night. Mary took a while to get used to services coming in and out of the house. And, having brought up children, Mary says she can slip into 'mum' mode. "If Mary starts telling me what to do," Melinda says, "I say 'yes mum' – I can't help it." They laugh. "Mel picks me up on it instantly; I can't get away with it. It's great."

Pete and Jim are also Homesharing. Jim wanted to return to Canberra to be closer to his aging parents, and a relationship break-

up and his adult daughter moving overseas provided added impetus to leave Queensland. A friend pointed out Pete's ad. Jim says, "A Homeshare arrangement was certainly very convenient for someone in my situation. I

"The matching process is critical. Lee says, "You can't rush it. It is better to take time to find a good match rather than spending time later trying to fix a bad Homeshare!"

also was attracted to the ethos of it. Being a disability support worker meant I was prepared for differences that maybe most people aren't. I would have wanted to be a homesharer anyway, but it did help in some ways."

Like Melinda, Pete (34) had had negative experiences in residential group homes. His parents set him up in his own place, but it was tough living alone. Pete registered with the Homeshare program and met Jim.

Jim (54) was initially worried that it might be hard to understand Pete's non-verbal communication, but once he got to know him,



Jim says, "Pete is easy to live with. Great bloke. I'm pretty relaxed with it." Pete and Jim enjoy each other's company. They have recently been apple-picking, and volunteer together at a community café.

"If things start to go pear-shaped, it's usually because a homesharer sees themselves in a formal care role..."

Living with Pete has made the transition to Canberra much easier for Jim. "When you move to a new place, it's a bit sad and lonely coming home to an empty flat. It's really great to come home to someone." Pete is increasingly enjoying living in his own place. Pete's parents, John and Pauline, have noticed the difference. Jim gets on well with John and Pauline. "They are very on the ball when it comes to looking out for Pete and supporting his development. They encourage and respect his independence."

"If people stick to preconceived notions about who a homesharer will be, or idealised notions of what outcomes will happen, then the relationship will fail."

There have been challenges. "At the very beginning, I felt drawn to work with Pete like a worker, but that didn't last long. Pete has paid workers coming every day, and I saw he was in good hands. And I understood why it was so important that I didn't play that role. There was also bit of confusion about the delineation of duties between me versus Pete, Pete's carers versus me, and Pete versus carers. But we got through it."

"It is important that everyone be flexible in this, and to be prepared for the relationship to develop naturally and be allowed to breathe."

Community Connections has brokered 36 Homeshare matches since it started. Some of these have been long-standing, with householders and homesharers renewing their match several times. Others have ended after a year or so. Mary is Melinda's second

housemate. Melinda got along exceptionally well with her first

homesharer, Maricel, but a whirlwind romance nine months into this homeshare match saw Maricel move out to make a home with her new husband. However, the end of the Homeshare match didn't end their relationship – Melinda travelled with her brothers to the Philippines to be a bridesmaid at Maricel's wedding.

What makes a successful Homeshare? The matching process is critical. Lee says, "You can't rush it. It is better to take time to find a good match rather than spending time

later trying to fix a bad Homeshare! You can't cut corners." While every Homeshare

is different, there are common challenges. "If things start to go pear-shaped, it's usually because a homesharer sees themselves in a formal care role. If that isn't addressed, it can really undermine one of the main benefits of the program: the development of mutual, natural relationships." The matching, a formal Occupancy Agreement, and regularly checking in with both the homesharer and householder reduce this risk, as does having a Plan B.

Lee says it is also important to recognise that the relationship between housemates is not the only factor that influences the

success of a Homeshare. Families and other key players in a person's life also need to be prepared to allow the Homeshare to grow. "If people stick to preconceived notions about who a homesharer will be, or idealised notions of what outcomes will happen, then the relationship will fail. Ultimately, Homeshare is just about two people getting on with their lives and supporting each other. It is important that everyone be flexible in this, and to be prepared for the relationship to develop naturally and be allowed to breathe. Each relationship will have its positives and negatives.

Each homesharer will have their own idiosyncrasies. No Homeshare match is perfect, and no Homeshare can be a universal panacea."

Homeshare may not be a panacea, but it offers a significantly better alternative to formal care for many people. Ian says, "It also makes sense when it is explained to policy-makers. It is cost-effective, it makes use of resources that already exist in our community, and it enables both householder and homesharer to achieve what we all want in our lives: a home, and a sense of connection and belonging."

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

**Email:** [Ian@comcons.org.au](mailto:Ian@comcons.org.au)

"No Homeshare match is perfect, and no Homeshare can be a universal panacea."