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# WHY HOUSEMATES

by Teresa Micallef

**Teresa Micallef** has worked in grassroots, not-for-profit organisations for over 20 years. Her work has been alongside people with disability, families, children and communities in creating more meaningful, fulfilling and empowered lives. She incorporates a range of approaches in her work, including community development, deep listening, person centred and Social Role Valorization. Teresa has been employed by Living Distinctive Lives, a small family governed group, for the past six years. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Disability Studies, a Cert IV in Reflexology, is a Wisdom Teacher and an active Reiki practitioner. A student of life, Teresa is constantly learning from those she has the privilege to work alongside.



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## WHAT IS LIVING DISTINCTIVE LIVES?

Living Distinctive Lives (LDL) is a small, family-governed collective made up of people who share the simple vision of living a life of meaning within community. While this is a simple vision in many ways, the achievement of that vision takes much consideration, effort, love and caring on the part of LDL members who experience disability, and the families, friends, peers and supporters who are an integral part of their lives. The vision is about creating a life that a particular person wants, taking into consideration their preferences, needs, interests, etc., and focusing on what can be done to support the individual to live in their own home with the supports they need.

There is a focus on the reciprocal and interdependent nature of all our lives, and to empower the creation of natural supports that can galvanise and scaffold people as they go about living. The vision is for a life in community, a life in a home of one's own and not in segregated

care settings that have been designed by others specifically for people with a disability. Each person is an individual, with a specific life, set of circumstances, particular family, friends,

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connections, interests and passions, particular needs, desires and aspirations. The LDL families each hold a vision, and each individual creates a life that is uniquely theirs. The families that make up LDL continue to trial various ways and approaches to achieve their vision.

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## WHY HOUSEMATES?

Over the years, families have been inviting housemates to become an integral part of making this vision come alive for them. By sharing a home, housemates are given an opportunity to come to know someone with a disability in a very real way. They learn about their trials and triumphs, their hopes and dreams, what struggles they may have and

what successes they achieve each day. They get to know someone for who they are, and not for whom they assumed them to be. This is the same for the person with a disability. As they share with a housemate, they come to realise who they are and what it's like to live in their own place, with all the responsibilities this entails. They relate with a housemate in everyday, normal ways. They are no longer just in relationships with their parents or paid staff. They get the opportunity to step out of a preconceived or long-existing role, and discover what it is to be 'them', in their own place, sharing with another. All the regular housemate things occur: sharing, arguing, discovering about each other, working out rules and who does what chores, etc. Added to that is a unique and rich experience of interdependency, acknowledging the importance of belonging, friendship and genuine care, discovering and acknowledging strengths and weaknesses, and of working together to make a home that works for all. This has not necessarily been an easy road for many, but it is one that LDL



vibrancy to the house, and has been pivotal in helping Bec create a place they both call home. Sarah has been a strong advocate and mentor to Bec, who is becoming a strong and independent woman. Bec has ventured out of her previous comfort zones and grown immensely while sharing a home with Sarah. Bec also has a number of paid support workers who support her in daily life chores, activities and errands.

#### **WHAT HAS WORKED IN IN YOUR HOME-SHARE ARRANGEMENT WITH BEC?**

"The great thing is that it's a very human household. We all pull together and there's a

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lot of tolerance for human mishaps and foibles. There's no problems with people not trying to do the right thing, like you may get with

families continue to choose, as the value of real relationship, of giving and sharing and of regular community life outweighs the time, energy and effort it can take to make these arrangements a success.

other housemates, e.g. people not pulling their weight with housework, or hassles over housemate or bill quibbles. There's no sweating small stuff around here I suppose is what I'm saying, we really do just get on with things."

#### **SARAH AND BEC**

Sarah has lived with Bec for two years. She initially responded to a housemate advertisement online, and after they met, Sarah moved in for a trial period and then decided to stay. She receives reduced rent in exchange for offering Bec support that is detailed in an agreement. Sarah has brought a new energy and

#### **WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME CHALLENGES?**

"It was difficult at first, as a lot of energy is spent in the early days while I adapted and adjusted to becoming a housemate, as well as Bec and I getting used to each other's rhythms and personalities. After that was established, it's was easier and the rhythms of life are pretty normal".

### **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE QUALITIES, SKILLS AND STRENGTHS THAT YOU HAVE BRING TO HOMESHARING WITH BEC THAT MAKE IT WORK?**

“Bec has complex needs, so making this work took considerable time and understanding of her situation. Through understanding details about Bec; what her life is about, what her hobbies are – even small things, like she enjoys sweeping up the leaves; her preferences and such, has brought greater depth and empathy, as well as a platform for relationship. I don’t think I could’ve done this on a superficial level; it wouldn’t have felt fair to just come and go without building some authentic relationship”.

### **WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER TO OTHERS WHO MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN HOMESHARING?**

“This depends on who your housemate is; of course personality clashes are possible with anyone. I suppose my advice to others is to take time to understand your housemate, and take time to appreciate it as a relationship and a heartfelt experience and journey that is win-win and a two-way street. I think it needs to be real, and this means genuinely making some effort to understand and know who your housemate is, as well as responding to your own limits and boundaries. Take time out for yourself, too. It’s an extraordinary experience and can be a great gift”.

### **WHAT IS A HOUSEMATE ARRANGEMENT?**

This varies greatly depending on each person, their housemate and their combined circumstances. Generally, LDL families have rented a house or flat for their son or daughter and invited a housemate to share the home. The housemate’s rent is either paid for or significantly reduced in exchange for some agreed

support. This has included things like sharing and preparing evening meals, assisting with daily living tasks like getting up and ready in the morning or preparing for bed, sharing the chores, prompting and reminding about certain things, a commitment to be home overnight on certain days, etc.

This is discussed and agreed upon before entering into the arrangement, and a basic contract is written up and signed by whoever is living in the home. It is important that the responsibilities of each house member are noted so that the arrangement is fair and equitable. Having said that, we have always fostered an approach that understands that life emerges and changes, and we therefore need to be responsive to each of the householders’ needs. Reviewing the arrangement is a good practice to keep things open and clear. Housemates usually share utility costs and work this out between them, with support if required. LDL can help work out how to split bills, chores, shopping and other household responsibilities.

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Paid supports are sometimes used to assist a householder with a disability to undertake their responsibilities around the home, such as cleaning, making dinners, putting bins out, gardening etc. Providing support to all housemates is very important – having regular catch-ups, meetings, dinners, coffees, etc; some way of touching base with each person to see how things are travelling and to assist as required. Support can also be from family members, friends, paid workers – again depending on what works best for all involved.

Finding the right housemate match is vitally important, and taking the time to find the right

person or people is well worth it. As a general rule, successful housemates have been the ones who have time to get to know one another a little before making any kind of commitment to share a home together. It is important that everyone has a chance to meet several times and in various situations, before entering into the arrangement. This gives everyone time to adjust to the possibilities, changes and responsibilities they are taking on in sharing a home together. It gives time for questions to be answered and for logistics to be worked through.

We generally do reference checks, and ask for a police check as well. Once all of that is done and people are happy to move in together, the general house moving thing happens... packing, trucks, etc. We like to have some support in the home; via a friend, family member etc., who can guide and assist with any particular support requirements that a new housemate may need to know about to ensure they understand and feel supported. There are often lots of questions, phone calls and catch-ups in the settling-in phase as the housemates come to know each other in the first couple of months. This is a really important time, and fine-tuning of the arrangement will happen as housemates come to know one another.

### **CREATING A HOME**

One important thing to consider is that people have come together to create a home. A home is generally a place of safety, comfort and a haven; a personal, private place where one can be oneself. This is an important challenge to consider in supporting someone who may have quite high support needs to create a home. A parent's expectations of what constitutes a good home may be different to their son's or daughter's. Housemates' ideals around this may be different too, and support workers and friends may also have something to add. How do you balance and consider what 'home'

is with so many people in the picture? A person's home may be one with many visitors, family members popping in, support workers around, friends, housemates and a myriad of influences. It's important to always remember whose home this is. Assistance, support, love and care are of course valuable and necessary any time anyone moves into a new home with new people. Just as important is the ability to stand back sometimes and allow the people who live there to develop the natural setting up of home, the culture of the home, the spoken and unspoken rules of the place, the relationships that are formed and the strength and importance of these relationships. We as family, friends, and supporters may, in our desire to "help", override or limit a naturally and newly-forming relationship that really needs to be formed by those who live in the home. It's a fine balance, but one that can be best achieved with an open and generous heart, clear and defined expectations and vision, and a willingness to 'allow'. Allowing the unfolding of a new life as it emerges in a new home with new housemates is often a scary and exhilarating time for all involved.

### **CONCLUSION**

Creating your own home is one of the most important and influential ways to create our own sense of belonging. It is a fundamental expression of who we are and what we value and love in life. Most young adults have the opportunity to take flight from the family nest to find their unique place to make and call home. As a person grows and develops over many years, so unfolds their unique creation of home.

Home is different for each and every one of us. And whilst a son or daughter's choices may reflect their upbringing, they will undoubtedly have tastes all of their own and should have the opportunity to create a home and a life of their design. This includes who they live with! In service culture, often people with a disability

have no say over this fundamental relationship. Often being forced to live with people they did not choose and with staff they did not employ. Housemates are a more typical way of gaining support and sharing one's own home. In our efforts to assist others to create a home of their own, we should ask "How can I assist and empower you to create your own home?"; "Who do you want to live with?"; "What type of person or people are the best fit for you?" and "How can we support you in ways that respects and ensures your preferences, tastes and integrity over time?"

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

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