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# MY HOUSE, MY CHOICE, MY HOME

by Anita O'Brien

Anita is married to Allan and they have two sons, Matthew, married to Debra, and Warren. They are also blessed with grandson Isaac and granddaughter Alice; Anita says they are the best grandchildren around! For the last ten years, Anita has been a member of the family-governed initiative 'Living Distinctive Lives' (LDL). LDL families believe that their adult sons and daughters have the right to have a meaningful lifestyle that is typical of other members of society. Anita shares Warren's story through seminars and conferences because she knows what a difference it makes to people walking a similar road.



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Home is a place to be you, to share one's life – its joys and pain – with the people you choose to live with and who understand and care about you. Home is a place where you feel comfortable, valued and respected. Home is not only a wish; it is a fundamental right!

We are all interdependent, and even more so if we live with a disability. But when I considered

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what support our son needed to have his own home, it seemed unattainable. Nevertheless, it was important that Warren could live his life independent of us, his parents, before we are no longer here.

First, let me introduce our son, Warren. Warren is 40 years old, has a good sense of humour,

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is caring and sensitive to the needs of others, loves to socialise and has a strong sense of justice. His disability is cerebral palsy, with

an intellectual and some physical disability, which limits his capacity to plan, work and travel without support. To thrive, Warren needs to be in environments where he wants to be and with people who value him, talk to him, and with whom he relates. He needs lots of different relationships, and it is very important to Warren to know and independently negotiate his surroundings. He has an anxiety

disorder that is particularly debilitating when he experiences high levels of stress or emotional pain.

He works as an artist and volunteers at the Victorian Police Museum, the Victorian Police Academy, and the Salvos.

Due to the support Warren needed, it seemed a big task to set him up in a typical home. The breakthrough came when we were introduced to the idea of a housemate to provide him specific support when needed.

The purpose behind a housemate arrangement is to build reciprocal

relationships based on common values, respect, and a belief in and commitment to recognising the gifts that all people have to share.

Ten years ago, Warren was living in a group home set up by parents of adults with a disability. Unfortunately, Warren was not happy there, so we brought him back to the family home with the idea of setting him up in the flat that was on the lower

level of our house. I decided to search for a housemate without a disability to support him in the arrangement. I discovered that networks are a great avenue for sourcing what one needs: on chatting to a young couple about what we were trying to do, I found that their values were the same as mine. Also, they were in a situation where rent-free accommodation in exchange for supporting Warren was something they were very interested in. So they came to live with Warren.

What was the arrangement?

- The flat below our home had two bedrooms and two bathrooms, with a shared lounge, dining room and kitchen, and laundry
- The housemates ('homesharers') had rent-free accommodation
- We provided a list of things that would help everyone, and specific support Warren would need – for example, arrangements for shopping, cooking, washing, and help with choosing clothes, reviewing Warren's weekly plan with him, and reminding him about taking his medication, etc.

After twelve months, Warren's housemates were expecting a baby, but they stayed on for another twelve months. We then needed to look for another housemate.

Warren's current housemate Darren was sourced through Wesley Homeshare, which

no longer exists. But a Uniting Care initiative, 'Life Assist', currently provide a homesharer under similar conditions – no rent, and shared utilities in exchange for approximately ten

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hours of support.

Darren has lived with Warren for over four years, with a one-year break after two years



due to work commitments. We are grateful to Darren for his commitment to Warren, as well as his genuine desire to balance the need for support with giving him space to be 'at home' in his home, and as independent as possible within his home and community. He wrote the following on his experience as a housemate:

"I discovered the Wesley Home Share advertisement on the internet. After deciding we were a good match I was introduced to Warren. I met with Warren and his Mum and Dad, and the meeting was facilitated by a representative from Wesley Mission Home Share. I chose to be a housemate because it helps people with a disability, like Warren to live in their own home and not be institutionalised and it offers an at-home-support to them. I help around the flat doing things the flatmates do and more. We'll go shopping, visit cafes, and even cook

a BBQ together. Home-sharing provides safety, companionship and someone to prompt little things Warren may need to remember. Visiting my friends together is especially good socialising for Warren. In exchange for these things I have free board,

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but pay for food and other expenses that come when sharing accommodation such as electricity bills, internet connection and so on. It gives me great satisfaction to help another person, and learn how to interact, observe and assess situations I may not have had a chance to so closely participate in. It is definitely an eye opener to another person’s personal difficulties, their strengths and their achievements. It has been great living with Warren. Being a housemate certainly can help you to become more “other people centred”, which is a trait not displayed enough in our time, yet a powerful motivating trait to have.”

We had twelve months where Warren did not have a housemate, and we sourced housemates by placing an advertisement

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online with ‘Gumtree’. Applicants were screened with the help of the coordinator of LDL, a family-governed initiative. During that time, we learnt from experience how important it is to not rush when choosing a housemate. Today, we take much more time getting to know an applicant, and have developed ‘Guidelines’ to the process

of finding a housemate. The following is an outline of that process:

- Decide with your son/daughter what kind of housemate/s they’re looking for; who would be a good match and what your expectations are. Include how they can assist, how much rent to charge, sharing of utilities, etc.
  - Create written communication on what you are seeking, and include when the house is available
- Advertise on Gumtree and/or post ads around the local area; particularly in places where your son/daughter may know people. Advertise through family, friendship group, local libraries, TAFEs, churches etc.
- Develop a list of Questions for Potential Housemates – a document you can send and request written answers to. This can further screen people who are just in it for financial benefits. Questions such as: ‘Why are you interested in a supportive housemate arrangement? What do you enjoy about sharing your home with someone? What do you look for in a home? What do you look for in a housemate?’
- Receive and screen phone calls: if you can, have someone else other than family members do this. Ask basic questions, such as: ‘Why are you interested in this home share arrangement, how long do you hope to share for, what can you contribute?’ If they seem interested, send your Questions for Potential Housemates for them to complete
- Arrange to meet with the ‘screened’ potential housemate to discern whether they would be a good match to live with your son/daughter. It is helpful to have someone else who knows your son/daughter to be part of the interview if possible
- If this goes well, arrange for them to meet your son/daughter. This could be done with the

help of an ally or support worker. At this point, you can show them through the home

- Discuss when you will be in touch next, and aim to spend some time with them to get their impressions and answer any questions
- Undertake reference checks, and explain the requirement for a police check
- Discuss with your son/daughter if they wish to trial the person as a housemate
- Request a minimum 12-month commitment
- Draw up a housemate agreement and have both parties sign
- Give the new housemate some kind of induction.

Warren and Darren recently shifted from the flat in our family home to their own home in the same suburb! This is the next step in Warren's independence, and Darren shifting with him provided important stability in a time of change. I wrote this message to our friends and supporters on the day Warren and Darren shifted. It seemed like a monumental day and I'd like to share it with you!

#### THE DAY HAS ARRIVED!

*I am sitting here for a moment with a cuppa*

*contemplating as the removalists pack Warren and Darren's belongings. It has been quite a journey to this point as you all know, but it is happening! Warren is moving into his own home with the support of Darren. It is a three bedroom unit, one of five! Warren seems reasonably cool about it, with some assurances that his support team are there for him. Thanks for the part you have all played in bringing Warren to this point over the last ten years. Love to you all. Anita*

Warren and Darren had a very successful house-warming with all of their friends, and received some thoughtful gifts. Supported by Alison, one of Warren's support workers, they planted the flowers and herbs they received. Warren's home is in the community that he has grown up in, and he has come to know it

well. Being in the same location means he is still able to confidently go for walks by himself to his local shops, usually to get a coffee! He is still close to his local gym and uses it twice weekly. He lives even closer to the bus stop he uses on a Friday to go to his job at the Police Museum in the City with his support worker.

In addition to practical assistance, some



personal care and companionship, Darren also takes Warren to meet up with his friends, and Darren sometimes has a meal with our family. Warren also has a team of support workers who provide further assistance as required, i.e., heating up or cooking a meal, buying food supplies, folding clothes, and accompanying

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him to events and places. The arrangement works because Darren is not Warren's sole support, and because they work together at creating home with consideration for each other. Warren also has the support of unpaid, informal supports, including his family and friends.

The 'housemate model' has many benefits, not the least being provision for a person with a disability to live in their own home, with tailored supports when needed. It is an arrangement that gives the person autonomy, choice, security, value, respect, meaningful friendships and relationships, and love. It

also helps us to be more confident about the future, when we'll no longer be here.

Further, in developing a range of formal and informal supports, we have found that:

- The inclusion of housemates in supporting a person with additional support needs is most beneficial, and renders the budgeting of available funding affordable
- The natural support of housemates can be targeted at the times and in the way it is required
- The arrangement provides opportunities for the development of natural relationships and friendships
- Housemates can be a pivotal link to other supports (both natural and paid), and they can provide invaluable insight when participating in Team Meetings/Circles of Support, a crucial element in a person's support plan
- While it may not be for everyone, this is one of the most valuable ways to support an individual with a disability in their own home; to live a life typical to that of others in the community.

A quote from the L'Arche Community is relevant here:

*"Whatever their gifts or limitations, people are all bound together in a common humanity."*

*Everyone is of unique and sacred value and everyone has the same dignity and the same rights. The fundamental rights of each person include the rights to life, to care, to a home, to education and to work. Since the deepest need of a human being is to love and to be loved, each person has a right to friendship, to communion and to a spiritual life".*

Warren has his own home, just like his brother!

#### **FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

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