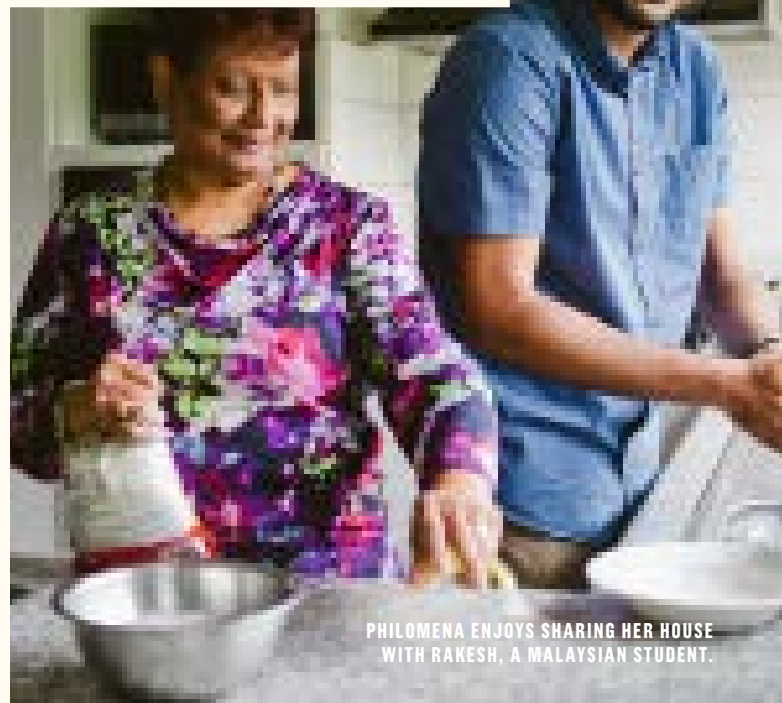




HOME SHARE HOME



PHILOMENA ENJOYS SHARING HER HOUSE
WITH RAKESH, A MALAYSIAN STUDENT.

Too many people are lonely. Too few people have affordable housing. There is a way to solve both problems with one simple, sweet solution. **Anastasia Safioleas** journeys into the world of home sharing.

THE YELLOW BRICK house sits on a sunny corner block. With an expansive green lawn, neat flower beds and a winding path to the front door, it's like any other suburban family home. Inside, a cosy living room is filled with knick-knacks and an overstuffed, well-worn couch. A tidy kitchen that's seen countless family dinners overlooks the back garden. This is the home of Philomena. She is a bundle of energy and a straight-talker – it's hard to believe she's in her seventies. Together with her husband Victor, she spent a lifetime raising three children. They are now adults and have moved out to start their own families. After a long illness, Victor passed away earlier this year.

Today Philomena lives with 20-year-old Rakesh, an international student from Malaysia studying nursing at a nearby college. It may seem like an unconventional arrangement, but they came together thanks to Homeshare, a program that matches householders in need with people who are willing to lend a hand – perhaps cooking, cleaning and doing the food shopping – in return for accommodation. Householders might be elderly people who prefer to stay in their own home instead of an aged-care facility, or people living with a disability. The housesharers, as they are referred to, are often younger and looking for affordable accommodation.

Rakesh has little income and no family in Australia, so living with Philomena provides him with accommodation. For Philomena, it means help around the house. But the benefits of this arrangement go deeper; Philomena refers to Rakesh as her adopted son. Most importantly, loneliness is kept at bay, for both of them. And with Christmas approaching, there's no other time that so reminds the socially isolated just how alone they might feel.

Homesharing is a global trend

that's growing. Also known as cross-generational co-living, there are many examples of similar living arrangements scattered throughout the world. Humanitas Deventer, a retirement home in the Netherlands, gives university students free accommodation in exchange for them volunteering 30 hours a month to "act as neighbours" to the elderly residents. It's become a runaway success. In the Spanish port city of Alicante, the government provides affordable housing for two age groups – elderly people aged 65 or above, and young adults aged 35 or below. In return, the young tenants are required to assist any elderly person who needs help by dedicating four hours a week to them. In a slight variation on the theme, CoAbode in the US connects single mothers with the purpose of sharing a home and raising their children together. Similarly, Homeshare Melbourne is aiming to extend the Homeshare model to include people who are struggling in the current rental market.

"Our target is asylum seekers, refugees, young people on limited income, women over the age of 55 and women fleeing family violence," says Homeshare Melbourne senior coordinator Carla Raynes. "There are lots of people out there who would make amazing housemates, it's just that they need to be given that opportunity. And we want these relationships to be mutually beneficial. We're working with a couple of asylum seeker programs. There is a looming crisis. The Australian government is cutting the benefits of some asylum seekers and we think more than 7600 people will be facing destitution. It's going to put a huge strain on homelessness services."

Rakesh is the third Homesharer that Philomena has welcomed into her home. The first arrived when Victor fell ill. "That's how I came to have Sukrit," she

says. "He was studying for his Masters at the time and the three of us were living together in this house. He used to take my husband to rehab. After Sukrit, came Lala, a Chinese girl from Tibet. I used to teach her English. I keep in touch with both of them. They are part of my family and I'm a part of their family."

Rakesh says he and Philomena clicked the first time they met. "Compared to renting it's cheaper because you're only paying for utilities. You also have emotional support when you come back home. This is a foreign country so, for international students, especially like me, it's good to have someone close by."

"Rakesh and I laugh all the time. Don't we darling?" interrupts Philomena. "He does all the cooking."

"I make a lot of Indian food, Malaysian food..." adds Rakesh.

"He's a *great* cook. For his age he's so focused. We have a great relationship. We talk, we laugh, we eat together. To me, this has been the best thing ever. He just sleeps too much!" Laughter fills the room. Their bond is undeniable.

For family members, having someone living with their elderly relative is also a safety net of sorts. As Tom Kenneally, a Homeshare consultant from Uniting (associated with the Uniting Church), puts it: "Homeshare is an extra circle of comfort that reassures family members." This is certainly the case for 89-year-old Cecilia.

Arriving in Melbourne from South Africa almost 50 years ago, Cecilia's only family in Australia is a younger sister. With the rest of her siblings back in South Africa and following a recent health scare, Cecilia was going to have to move into an aged-care facility. The alternative was to have someone move in with her.

"I'm not ready for a nursing home," says Cecilia, sitting in her favourite armchair, her walker within arm's reach.

PHOTOS BY MICHELLE GRACE HUNDER

"ALL AGES WILL BE HOLDING THEIR SIDES WITH LAUGHTER." THE BREEZE

PETER PAN GOES WRONG

THE PERFECT FUN FAMILY FESTIVE TREAT

"GUARANTEED LAUGH FEST!" NEWSTALK ZB, NZ **"HILARIOUS!"** MIX FM, NZ

ARTS CENTRE MELBOURNE, PLAYHOUSE • FROM 19 DECEMBER
PeterPanGoesWrong.com.au

If you are drowning, reach out for help.

Alcoholics Anonymous 24/7 Help Line
 1300 222 222
aa.org.au




PHOTO BY JAMES BRAUND



CECILIA (LEFT) AND JEAN LOVE SHARING A CUPPA AND A LAUGH.

Jean, her first and only housesharer of three years, sits in a matching armchair beside her.

"I was alone when I got sick. My neighbour saved my life. Since then I can't stay on my own anymore. I'm too scared," says Cecilia. "Then somebody told me about Homeshare. When I met Jean I told my sister, 'That's the girl I want.' I'm used to living on my own, so it was very hard for me to have somebody. I had to find the right person. She's been a great help to me."

For 61-year-old Jean, living with Cecilia is her first Homeshare experience, via Care Connect. "I was in a long-term relationship that fizzled out. I have a house in the country, but I've worked in the city for many years and when they told me about Homeshare I thought I'd give it a go. For me it was pretty simple."

Jean is unequivocal about how important homesharing is for her. Without Cecilia she'd have to resign from the job she's held for the last 40 years and move to an area with limited job prospects. "I can't stay in metropolitan Melbourne on my own because of my low income – I just couldn't afford a property around here. There are a lot of people my age

who are divorced or separated, who are in a similar position." Following our most recent census, women over the age of 55 have been identified as the fastest growing demographic experiencing homelessness.

Cecilia and Jean enjoy gardening together, and occasionally go for a meal or a coffee. If there's nothing on TV, they will watch DVDs of old movies that Jean buys at the local op shop.

"We go for drives sometimes, and we get lost," laughs Cecilia. "We have a lot of fun. My family think the world of Jean."

The companionship of Homeshare offers an antidote to loneliness – which is on the rise and, according to a UK study, is as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It can lead to chronic health issues such as diabetes, increased mental health issues, and even early death. A loneliness survey recently published by Swinburne University and the Australian Psychological Society revealed that one in four Australian adults surveyed feel lonely; that many people, particularly those who are younger, experience social anxiety, while 30 per cent of those surveyed don't feel part of a group of friends. The UK government recently appointed

a minister for loneliness, and there is pressure for Australia to do the same – to work across health, infrastructure, justice and communities' portfolios. Unsurprisingly, it helps to have money if you'd like to connect with people; there is a direct link between being financially disadvantaged and increased feelings of isolation.

Back at Philomena's house, it's time for lunch. Together with Rakesh, she begins plating up in the kitchen. A comfortable silence hangs in the air.

"All three Homeshares have been a beautiful experience," she says. "I have been blessed. In and out, Rakesh is a beautiful person. My whole family adores him." She pauses before turning to give him a stern look: "Don't be too flattered, okay?!"

After much laughter, she grows serious again and adds: "I wouldn't want my children to go somewhere and not be loved and not be comfortable or cared about. It's a huge thing. Humanity is a huge thing."

» *Anastasia Safioleas (@Anast)* is a Contributing Editor of *The Big Issue*.
 » Find out more about Homeshare at homeshare.org.au.