

When mom (or dad) moves in

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For Linda Everson, Mother's Day used to mean a five-hour drive north to Memphis to fete her mom. But including her in this year's extended family gathering was far simpler: Everson just took a five-step walk from her living room into the 1,000-square-foot addition she and husband Tillman built to accommodate "Miss Jane" Spencer.

That's right, Mom has moved in with the kids. And she's loving it. "I can't say I don't miss my old life in Tennessee, my pastor, my friends, my 92-year-old brother," says the 81-year-old matriarch, who is dwarfed by the 12-foot ceilings of her antique-appointed bedroom. "But on the other hand, it is so great to be with my family, and they seem to enjoy having me."

Hold off on those mother-in-law jokes. Many baby boomers are finding that retooling their homes to make room for parents offers peace of mind about a loved one's health and assurance that their senior-suitable houses will be ready for them as they age.

To date there are no statistics specifically dissecting this add-on-for-Mom-and-Pop phenomenon, as most such home improvements involve getting a handyman to make modest changes to spare rooms.

But various indicators point to the Eversons being on the leading edge of a surging wave. The 2000 Census was the first to ask questions about who is under each roof: 4% of U.S. households (3.9 million) now have three or more generations living together, and one-third of those feature parents who have invited grandparents to move in.

As Americans live longer, they're embracing a European style of intrafamily care that was common here before children started moving time zones away from parents. A 2004 study by the AARP and the National Alliance for Caregiving revealed that 34 million people are looking after someone 50 or older. Of those, nearly 9 million live with the person they're caring for.

And prompted by a growing number of member requests for information about making homes grandparent-friendly, the AARP designed a course for contractors that is overseen by the National Association of Home Builders. Its three-day CAPS (Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist) program "is the fastest-growing course we offer," with more than 1,000 graduates, says Vince Butler, a Clifton, Va., contractor who is chairman of the NAHB's Remodelers Council.

"Originally, the goal was to explain that there'd be demand for this in the market," he says. "That's not necessary (now)."

The Eversons are well aware of the market appeal of their newly expanded 4,000-square-foot California contemporary home here in the leafy suburbs of Birmingham. But the biggest improvement has been to Spencer's state of mind.

"Mother was all alone and very sad. We'd worry about her constantly," says Linda, 59. "These days, she's just so needed. My husband and I both work, so when Mom's not watching her two great-grandkids, she's helping with the cooking and the laundry. She hasn't been this vital in 10 years."

The Eversons are now hoping Tillman's 86-year-old mother, Frances, will enjoy a similar renewal, courtesy of a second remodel. The couple has commissioned architectural plans for an 800-square-foot suite — bedroom, walk-in closet and sitting room — that would connect with Miss Jane's bathroom. Frances Everson is mulling over the offer.

"My mom's got her life there in Memphis, and I understand it's hard to leave it behind," says Tillman, 63, a longtime BellSouth employee who, with Linda, runs his own business placing high-tech workers in part-time jobs. "But there's a good chance that one day, we'll all be here under this roof."

And he does mean all. Though the Eversons' three children are grown, they live nearby. Which means that on any given afternoon, four generations are racing around the split-level home surrounded by oak and dogwood trees that has been in the family since the 1970s.

Bonding aside, aging-in-place experts note that there are practical reasons for empty-nesters like the Eversons to be expanding, not shrinking, their footprint.

"Many women in this sandwich generation, where parents care for both their parents and their kids, are also working," says Elinor Ginzler, director of the AARP's Livable Communities program. "So it's logical and smart to try and have everyone in the same place."

By having multiple generations live together, you also tackle two emerging problems with one solution, says Bob Brooks, CEO of online resource ElderCareLink.com. "Today's elderly tend to resist nursing homes. And they're also on very tight budgets, trying to stretch dollars as they live longer," he says. "If you're in your 90s and on a fixed income, there's a good chance you'd love to be with your children."

Additions are a way for aging parents "to pass on early inheritances, since they'll often offer to pay for some or all of a project that ultimately makes their children's homes more valuable," he says.

There's no doubt that overhauling a house using "universal design" will boost both the property's value and functionality. CAPS contractors use that sales pitch often; they just try to do so without reminding boomer clients that they'll soon be getting old.

CAPS instructor and contractor Butler says his clients have embraced everything from wider doorways and halls (allows for wheelchair access) to oversized stacked closets (converts easily to an elevator shaft). "They like to say, 'Oh, it's for my parents,' but you can tell they're excited about having these additions for the day that they find it harder to get around."

A nationwide trend

The range of parent-oriented remodeling projects runs from modest to inspiring. But the mission never wavers: make the newcomers feel as independent as possible to smooth the transition from caregiver to cared-for. Among the places where moms are cozying up to their loved ones:

- In Long Beach, Calif. When Jonathan Hall's mother, Betty, 85, casually said, "I could live here," he seized the opportunity to take a small detached guest house and make it into a suite connected to his 1,300-square-foot house. "I'd heard of parents really being resistant to leaving their homes, but after my dad died, I really hoped she'd come stay with me and my wife, Marjorie," he says.

The Halls, both 51, bought their house in 1993, and spent "more on the remodel than the house

itself, but it's worth it," Jonathan says. He says it's nice having his mother around, though a bit of an adjustment for all: "Let's just say, it's been a long time since we've lived together." For her part, Betty Hall finds the setup ideal: "It's private enough that I could go all day long without seeing them. And yet I know they're right there."

- In Houston. For Scott Martin, 46, making sure his mother-in-law, Katherine Hutchison, 79, had a 900-square-foot suite attached by a breezeway to their 6,800-square-foot home was a no-brainer. "She led by example, taking care of her aging mother, so we could do no less," he says.

Not that Hutchison is packing her bags just yet. She's part of a generation "that never wants to be a burden," says Martin, whose late mother refused to move in. "It was crazy. Once, she fell down, and instead of calling me, she just stayed there all night. When I asked her why, she said, 'I didn't want to bother you.' Well, we hope Katherine feels OK bothering us." The Martins have three children, ages 10 to 17. How do they feel about Grandma moving in? "They'll be just fine," Martin says, "until she busts them on something."

- In Jacksonville. Bee Tyler, 85, says sharing a home with daughter Chris Harrill remains an adjustment, "I'm sure for them mostly."

"My mom's one of these people who say they want to be carried out of their old homes, but slowly we're converting her," says Harrill, 53. Tyler spends weekdays in the 450-square-foot area that includes a bedroom, sitting room and bathroom, then returns to her own home on weekends, a compromise that began three months ago.

A conversion driven by need

Jane Spencer's journey from her home in Tennessee to her suite in Alabama started on a grim day three years ago. She had made the trip to Pelham for a family gathering accompanied by husband Roy. "He was always the person with the most energy in any room," she recalls.

He died during their visit, the victim of a brain aneurysm. Besides being heartbroken — this was the man who could fix everything in the house, who played the organ when she sang in church — Spencer was helpless. Rheumatoid arthritis had long ago left her feet and hands in painful knots, and she was hard-pressed to even open a jar of jam.

At first, home was a guest room up a short flight of stairs. The trips up and down were a battle; mostly, says daughter Linda, "she stayed in that room and cried."

Spencer held on to her house in Memphis, largely for sentimental reasons. But it also housed a slew of anti-ques Roy had refinished, and she wouldn't consider leaving without some keepsakes, including a bed from the 1800s that belonged to Roy's grandparents.

The Eversons knew what they had to do. Build.

"It was a very mutual decision, rooted in the simple fact that families take care of each other. That's just what they do," Tillman says.

Spencer made the decision even easier by offering to split the cost of what would become a \$143,000 addition, using money from the sale of her Memphis home. Soon, CAPS-certified contractor Rob Baugher was paying frequent visits to the house, connecting his laptop to the Eversons'

oversized TV to virtually walk his clients through the planned suite.

"This isn't about designing a place for old folks, it's about designing a place where everyone can live trouble-free," Baugher says.

He says typical universal design techniques include putting wood blocks behind sheetrock in places such as bathrooms to be able to add big grip bars; using levers instead of round doorknobs; and framing windows identically to doorways, in case an adjoining room is added later.

Linda Everson strolls through her mother's bedroom and knows it's more than a well-appointed box tacked on to her family's home. It is another lasting connection between mother and daughter.

"I hope she lives to 110, believe you me," she says. "But I know that when Mom's gone, Tillman and I will use this as a master bedroom, and it'll be nice to be in here and think about her having lived right here with us."