

# PERSONALOZ

## Work & Family



Joan McCue and daughter Jill Ravens, with her dog Pablo, at their shared duplex in Killara on Sydney's north shore

JAMES CROUCHER

# IT'S ALL RELATIVE

In this era of the individual, researchers are fascinated to discover a rise in family members from different generations choosing to live under the same roof

NATASHA ROBINSON

**FAMILY** THE picture seemed idyllic: Joan McCue, a sprightly woman in her mid-70s, taking a walk by the placid lake that lapped close by her retiree's retreat at Copacabana on NSW's central coast.

At the same time, a world away on Sydney's bustling north shore, 90 minutes' drive south, Joan McCue's daughter, Jill Ravens, was preparing to move into one half of a smart duplex that was in the final stages of construction. The plan was for the other half to be rented out as an investment property.

Yet despite the beauty of life in Copacabana, loneliness was a frequent companion for McCue, who lost her husband in the late 1990s. "I really thought I could finish the days at Copacabana," she says. "But one morning I was walking about the lake and I thought, 'I'm missing (husband) Reg more than ever. Perhaps I've got to have a change.'" So 12 years ago she

moved into the duplex in Sydney's leafy Killara to live next door to her daughter, who at the time shared the other half of the house with her two daughters, aged in their early twenties.

It was a decision born not from necessity — McCue, who remarried eight years ago, is still fit and active, as well as financially comfortable — but of a desire for companionship.

Although our current social era may be ostensibly all about the individual — and single-person households are the fastest-growing demographic — decisions to cohabit or live in close proximity to family members are being taken by many thousands of adults throughout the country.

So much so that researchers at the University of NSW are surveying those who live in multi-generational households in Australian cities in an attempt to determine the drivers behind the rising trend of family members living

under the same roof. One in five Australians lives in a multi-generational household. And though so-called KIPPERS (Kids in Parents' Pockets Eroding Retirement Savings) have stolen much of the attention, census data reveals only 30 per cent of those aged 18-29 living in multi-generational households are dependent students, while almost 70 per cent are non-dependants.

**'It's emotionally supportive to know you've got that (person) next door'**

JILL RAVENS

Of the general population, a smaller yet significant percentage of older people are choosing to live with younger family members.

Hazel Easthope, a chief investigator on the UNSW City Futures

project, Living Together: The Rise of Multi-generational Households in Australian Cities, says the research will probe concepts of dependence and independence, and how they come into play when living under the same roof or close by family members.

"What we are interested in looking at is different kinds of dependence and reciprocity," Easthope says. "We are interested in social supports, emotional supports and practical supports flowing both ways. We're exploring the connections between family members. We're also exploring to what extent people feel that they're living in these situations out of choice and to what extent they feel constrained."

The homes of McCue and Ravens are separated by a dividing wall, but they share a sprawling, lush garden and backyard terrace, which have become the backdrop to some of their most treasured memories. "We have little chats,

we garden," McCue says. "Jill and I love going to the nursery and buying things to plant. Often on the weekend we'll just take a sandwich and have lunch down on the terrace. We have such fun. We just laugh all the time."

"In the week, Jill gets home at a quarter to five, and she'll say, 'Do you feel like a walk?' And she and I will go for a walk with (dog) Pablo and we catch up with all our news. I get a real kick when I hear her car come in and I hear her voice and Pablo starts to bark and I think, 'Oh, she's home'. I don't have to see her, I just hear her voice."

Ravens, 62, whose children have long since moved out and who now lives with partner David, says her life is made richer by living in close proximity to her mother. "It's the sharing, I think, of each other's lives," she says. "When you're physically close you do have the opportunity to hear about what's happened during the day, to share things. It's very

emotionally supportive to know that you've got that next door, to know that person is there.

"The situation works so well because Mum and (her now husband) Ron are fairly unusual. They're 88 and 89 and they are so fit and active and with-it; they lead very independent lives.

"There's been no role reversal going on where the child becomes the parent and the child is then in a position of caring — it's not like that at all. Living next door to Mum and Ron is a constant reminder to us in our sixties that you can lead very active, joyful, productive lives well into your eighties. And that's inspirational."

But Ravens says she is also prepared for the possibility her mother may become more dependent as she ages. "If it was just that, she could stay here, but she would need more (help), it would be ideal that I could be so close. It's good to know that that could happen so easily and readily."

**LIVING TOGETHER** 1 in 5 Australians (19.7%) live in a multi-generational household, equivalent to over 4 million people

Sydney has the highest proportion of people living in multi-generational households (24.5% of the population) of all the major cities

Between 1981 and 2011, the number of multi-generational households in Sydney increased by 51 per cent, outpacing the city's 38 per cent population growth

More than 19% of Brisbane residents live in a multi-generational household



The number of people living in a multi-generational household in Brisbane increased by 71.5% between 1981-2011, but this was dwarfed by the city's population growth rate of 92%

SOURCE: CITY FUTURES RESEARCH CENTRE, UNSW