

detours & travel

SACRED MOUNTS

Nature, art and religion combine in the Italian Alps >> D7

K-DRAMA >> D3
PUZZLES >> D4-5



GEORGE F. LEE / GLEE@STARADVERTISER.COM

Martha Ross, left, director of Homesharing Hawai'i, invited her niece, Leanna Bair from Maine, to live with her in Kailua. The two share cooking and kitchen duties.

Under one roof

Homesharing Hawai'i aims to connect older and younger generations to discover the advantages in sharing a house

By Pat Gee
pggee@staradvertiser.com

When there's a generation gap between roommates of about 40 years, their differences might seem too problematic for a peaceful co-existence, but Catherine Graham of Alewa Heights enjoys having a young person around.

In June, Graham, a retired social worker in her mid-70s, found a very compatible 25-year-old to share a three-bedroom house through Homesharing Hawai'i, a nonprofit that matches homeowners on Oahu with people seeking a home for mutual benefit, financially and socially.

"It's really fun to watch this new person making her way in the world, finding a job, and she's just starting school," she said. "I really enjoy having that perspective. It keeps me younger."

Ideally, Homesharing Hawai'i tries to match people of different generations in the belief that older and younger adults can learn from each other and benefit from living together. The organization was formed in 2019 by the nonprofit Hawai'i Intergenerational Network, which is devoted to promoting intergenerational connections that enrich everyone's lives. The project, which stalled in its infancy for a few years due to the pandemic, really hit its stride in 2022.

Graham said the best thing about the program, which she joined last spring, is the service it provides by vetting potential housemates to be sure they are compatible with the owner. It's far less stress to have Homesharing conduct the interviews and it avoids hard feelings if the match is incompatible.

Melody Heidel, a lead navigator who matches owners with seekers, interviews both parties to make sure they are compatible, assists with background checks, introductions and follow-up.

Each arrangement is tailored to the unique needs and interests of the people involved.

Heidel said since the project began four years ago, there have been 135 applicants as of September, about five times as many homeseekers than there are homeowners. Currently there are 22 homeowners, and 62 homeseekers actively enrolled, she said.

In spite of Homesharing's attempt to match young and older generations together, most of the owners have been "kupuna" (older adults) and about 75% of the seekers also have been the same age — approximately 60 to 70 years old — and "a lot are vulnerable to being homeless." For instance, two kupuna in their 80s on the verge of

losing a place to live were recently matched by the nonprofit.

Heidel said not many people without housing have applied, but she speculated that perhaps they have not heard of the program.

"We will certainly help them, and what we do definitely has helped with preventing homelessness," Heidel said.

The great advantage of this program is that "it uses existing housing to expand affordable housing; it's already there and it's helping kupuna age in place," she said.

If seekers cannot afford the rent, they may offer to do chores and provide other services, but most are able to pay. Most owners are asking about one-third less than the average market value for rent, charging between \$500 to \$800 for a room, usually including utilities and the use of common areas such as the kitchen and living room.

Please see HOMESHARING, D6

LEARN MORE

To apply at Homesharing Hawai'i, visit homesharinghawaii.org, call 808-308-5291 or email homesharinghawaii@gmail.com.



the other retiree spend the majority of time at home. The young woman, who preferred anonymity, attends classes outside of the home most days, and is otherwise quite compatible.

“It’s kind of nice having a younger person around, and I asked her why she would want to live with two old farts,” Graham said.

Her roommate said she wanted a quiet, stable life and to find a good job. She felt it would be harder to attain that with the drama that can come with people her own age, involving wild parties, drugs and having boyfriends hanging around, Graham said.

Having rented spare rooms since 2005, Graham knows from experience about the difficulties that arise. But living with housemates has been a necessity for her to be able to afford living in Hawaii, with its notoriously high prices and housing shortages, she said.

Martha Ross, Homesharing Hawai‘i’s director since 2020 and a retired social worker, thought she’d find out herself how well the program worked when her niece moved in with her two years ago. Ross said her niece, Leanna Bair, who came from Maine, wouldn’t have been able to afford living here on her own, even with a full-time job.

Even though they’re related, Ross and Bair went through the nonprofit’s formal application process, which addresses issues that may arise between owners and seekers, such as overnight guests, loud music at night, smoking, allergies and other possible points of disagreement.

Bair, 25, pays \$600 a month to live in a two-bedroom, two-bathroom house in Kailua. Ross said the affordable rent offered to Homesharing participants is attractive to young people who are just starting out and often work at low-paying jobs before their careers become established.

Bair, who is Asian American, said she wanted to experience living in Hawaii, which is known for its multicultural diversity. She originally planned to move here with a friend, but when that didn’t work out, Ross invited Bair to move in with her.

“She’s introduced me to all kinds of food and teaches me every day about the world. She has so much more life experience,” said Bair. “It’s refreshing to get another perspective because people my age have similar views on life events.”

She’s learning hula and has been welcomed into her aunt’s circle of friends. Ross, 66, invited her to join her hula halau.

“It’s just aunties in the backyard dancing. It’s been a real joy for me to be a part of,” said Bair.

“I would consider her one of my close friends at this point. I talk to her just about anything. She helps me rethink about it in a different way. I always let her vent to me if she needs to. We’ve been a sounding board for each other.”

She appreciates Ross’ maturity in the way they can be straightforward in discussions about any disagreements that may arise. Luckily they are both easygoing and share household chores without a problem. Bair said she volunteers to do additional chores such as washing the car and cleaning the higher windows that are hard for Ross to reach.

When roommate matches are made, Heidel said they are based on personality types, location of the

A two-week trial period is scheduled with no rent charged before a commitment is made, though some don’t want a trial. Either side can drop out of the program before the actual move-in if they feel they’re not ready for the living arrangement, Heidel said.

As Homesharing Hawai‘i is still a pilot project that relies on grants, Ross and Heidel are its only paid staffers and are assisted by volunteers. The biggest hurdle to increasing its capacity has been the lack of funding to hire more staff and recruit more applicants (homeowners and seekers), Ross said. Based on advice from mainland programs that have been in existence for more than 30 years, more matches are possible when the pool of applicants becomes larger.

Ross joined the nonprofit as an employee because she believed in its mission.

“It may not solve the entire affordable housing problem but it helps seniors live in their home longer,” she said. “It’s a viable option and no one has to wait until a house is built, and it helps two people.”



Homeowner Rose Calma, left, shared her home with Ocean Tennant-McCubbin in November 2019. They were an early pairing for Homesharing Hawai‘i. COURTESY HOMESHARING HAWAI‘I



Martha Ross, left, and Leanna Bair spend some leisure time in the living room. Bair, 25, pays \$600 a month to live the two-bedroom, two-bathroom house in Kailua with Ross. GEORGE F. LEE / GLEE@STARADVERTISER.COM