

Living with the in-laws

By Alice Hohl

Illustration by Mario Noche

It wasn't an easy decision, moving back home to Columbus from Chicago. My husband and I would have to say goodbye to our friends and give up our jobs. We'd have to sacrifice the privacy that comes with living hundreds of miles from family.

Yet we knew it was the right choice (even if it meant leaving behind all that expensive parking and overpriced real estate). Extended family is important to my husband and me. He grew up spending many weekends at huge gatherings on his grandmother's farm. And I lived in the same house in Northland from birth to adulthood, bonding with family over holiday traditions. The thought of our infant daughter growing up staring at just the two of us was a little unsettling. Frankly, the free baby-sitting was a big draw. We had friends in Chicago who offered to give us a night off, but once we saw how clumsily they handled our newborn, we

told them, "Sure! We'll call you."

One obstacle I faced in returning home was my own independent streak. As a teen and during college, the greatest indignity I could imagine was not doing something on my own, whether it was paying my way or changing the oil in my car. I figured raising my child would fall into the same category. But I was wrong. For me, parenthood seemed to require more than selfishness. In those first hazy weeks, it was the subversion of self, really. Every decision was about this tiny, warm, helpless person. One day when I was so sick I could barely get

out of bed, and my husband couldn't leave work, the merits of doing it myself were utterly overwhelmed by my weakness. The idea of backup help sounded appealing. It was time for a change of address and attitude.

We had a careful plan for the move, intending to find jobs and housing long

before we needed to pack up. It went awry, though, as several parts of our strategy failed—and I went directly from living 400 miles from my in-laws to living in their north-side house. As it happened, my husband's parents were on a trip to China for six of the 15 weeks we stayed there—still leaving plenty of time for a disaster to occur. Fortunately, I have terrific in-laws, but there's nothing more challenging to any relationship than being roommates. To complicate matters, two of my husband's grown siblings were living there some of that time as well.

There was plenty of room, however.

Their home is the original farmhouse in the neighborhood, built before there was a neighborhood, with enough additions to more than double its original square footage. It had to accommodate the family of 16 kids who were raised there—yes, 16 kids, of whom my father-in-law is the eldest of the brood and the current homeowner.

I didn't know that a house could be too big until we moved into this place. Something could've fallen on you at one end of the house, and people in the other end never would have heard your screams. Putting away items seemed like a terrific chore, so little piles would form. There was the stuff-that-needs-to-go-upstairs pile, the stuff-that-needs-to-go-to-the-garage pile and so on.

In addition to being large, the house is a repository of fascinating, fragile items collected during my in-laws' visits to exotic places. There are the handmade rugs they bought while living in Iran, the furniture and paintings from their Peace Corps days in Afghanistan and the wooden knickknacks from India, China, South America and Africa.

It should be noted that we own a matching pair of 90-pound black German shepherds. Naturally, one of them urinated on the cream-colored Persian rug.

Although we tried to persuade the dogs not to shed in the house, get underfoot or bang people in the back of the knees with their heads, they did not listen. One of the dogs even had to wear a plastic lampshade collar for several weeks after minor surgery, which made her more of a danger as she trotted past. My father-in-law also runs his counseling practice



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from his office in the house, and on rare occasions when his office door was left ajar, a certain dog would drop in on a counseling session, wagging her tail vigorously.

Besides frantically picking up the inevitable tumbleweedlike collections of dog hair around the house, my husband and I were hovering over our daughter, then 9 months old, as she learned to crawl and pull herself up on whatever was handy. The nice tablecloth in the dining room was one of her favorite things to use for leverage.

I'll admit I was getting a little tense. Yet, it was nice to have people around to help with the baby. Back in Chicago, I was

trapped in the house until our daughter woke up from her nap. But in a house full of people, I could just tell someone I was running out to the store. There were other advantages, too. Dinner is so much more fun in a large family, and you can learn a lot about your spouse by living with his parents. I saw albums filled with yellowed photos of my husband in his thumb-sucking days and heard stories of him playing with (or tormenting) his siblings.

Although we have moved into our own place, we still receive daily reminders of our in-laws. You see, instead of simply changing our address on all our accounts, I had our mail forwarded at the post office.

The forwarding form said "Family" or "Individual." I checked "Family." Now all the mail addressed to "Hohl" (not just ours, but all the relatives who get their mail at the family home) is sent to our new house. It's been interesting to see the kind of junk mail you get when you're a world traveler. Every few days we drive over to the big house to drop off their mail, even when they're not home.

Yes, we kept a set of keys. You never know. ■

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