

Homeshare: companionship in return for a roof

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Rose (left) and Olympia have been homesharing for more than a year. Photo: Simon Birch

Wonderful neighbours, a familiar community and filled with a lifetime of "treasures"; it's not hard to see why Rose, 85, did not want to leave her home in one of Melbourne's established suburbs.

But after the death of her husband, Rose realised she needed help with everyday tasks, and longed for company in her quiet home.

“ They eat better, they feel better by not being lonely. ”

Beris Campbell

Enter homesharing, where older householders or householders with a disability provide a bedroom and shared facilities in exchange for about 10 hours a week of practical assistance, like cooking or gardening. The arrangement also gives the householder the security of someone else sleeping in the home.

More specifically, enter Olympia, who returned to her birthplace of Melbourne after more than 30 years living in Greece and was struggling to find affordable accommodation in the city's competitive rental market.

A year ago she was matched with Rose by one of the [agencies](#) that take part in the [Homeshare Australia and NewZealand Alliance](#).

Olympia shops for Rose, cooks her dinner and runs errands, but the arrangement has also blossomed into friendship and they sometimes socialise together. "We treat Olympia as one of the family at Christmas time", says Rose.

"It's wonderful; I think anyone living on their own should have a homesharer. As well as being safer it's more companionable."

The concept of exchanging housing for practical help has existed for centuries, but its modern incarnation was devised in the '70s by American activist and "grey panther" Maggie Kuhn, a nursing home reformist, says Homeshare's Beris Campbell.

Ms Campbell and half a dozen other women with aged care expertise founded the Australian alliance 15 years ago, frustrated at seeing older home owners go into aged care prematurely because they could not afford the astronomical cost of overnight help.

"They eat better, they feel better by not being lonely, and for the younger person it has enormous value. It can often be a real saviour in terms of homesickness for international students, feeling they are part of a family," Ms Campbell said.

The arrangement does not take the place of existing support and care services, and people who share the house are not there to provide personal care.

Both people go through an intense vetting process, and have to provide police and working with children checks. They are matched through a series of three interviews, as well as a one-month trial period when they move in together.

This growth in homesharing comes as a [recent report showed 50 to 60 per cent of freestanding houses in the middle suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney are occupied by Australians aged 50 and over](#), and claimed homes with a backyard would soon be unattainable for families with children.

Like other [advocates for seniors](#), Ms Campbell feels this report was patronising, and said interest in the homeshare program showed older home owners were keen to open up their home safely to other people.

The Homeshare Alliance is hosting an international forum in Melbourne this week, the first time it has been held outside Europe.