

More seek roommates to offset sour economic conditions

By Tiffany Myers | Special to the Tribune

When the economy forced Michael Jones to close his Chicago-based event production and floral company in 2008, he realized that roommate living would provide financial relief. But at 34, he wasn't exactly enthralled with the prospect.

"I think recent grads or students are used to having roommates," says Jones, now a systems analyst. "But it's harder on [older] adults. We've earned our portion of the American dream, whether that's home ownership or renting your own place. Suddenly, you have to give that up."

Actually, Jones' current living situation achieves levels of harmony not even the Brady household managed to reach in its day. He cooks dinner nightly for his two housemates, who do the dishes—and call ahead if they're running late.

But it didn't come easy. One of Jones' earlier roommates, a flight attendant, paid for his first two weeks and promised the rest the next month. The day his payment was due, however, the flight attendant flew the coop. He owed a little more than \$1,000.

Today, Jones is an accidental expert in roommate-survival skills, most of which he learned the hard way. He's also among a growing number of adults facing similar ups and downs as they enter the roommate life. According to online roommate finder roommateclick.com, users in Chicago who posted ads for a tenant/roommate on their site during the 12-month period ending in January increased by more than 162 percent over the same period in the previous year.

During the six months between August 2008 and January, a time when economic uncertainty soared, Chicagoans using the site to advertise for a tenant/roommate increased by 200 percent over the same six-month period a year earlier.

"[Older] adults bring a little more trepidation to the process because it's unfamiliar," says Bill Schneider, vice president of sales and marketing at Lifetopia, which operates roommateclick.com. He advises soon-to-be-roommates of all ages to run credit checks, call references and hire a legal professional to draft a rental agreement. "But adults also have a major advantage. They're mature enough to know what they need from a living arrangement."

Stephen Kuhn, a 30-year-old Realtor who says he dislikes coming home to an empty house, argues that self-awareness is critical. "Before you do anything, you need to know what kind of roommate you are."

Do you want to socialize or hole up in a room? Do you get twitchy if your kitchen isn't clean? Are you allergic to cats? Houseguests? "If someone eats your last can of SpaghettiOs, are you going to lose your mind?" says Kuhn. "Figure out what you can handle, because I guarantee, it will happen."

From there, you'll want to establish a clear set of ground rules—the kind Jones did not have with his first housemates. "I made the mistake of thinking common courtesies were understood. Now I realize everything has to be spelled out explicitly."

In fact, Jones can't understate the importance of communication. One past roommate frequently bedecked the home with yellow Post-It notes, each sticky rebuking a different domestic transgression. To roommates of the world, Jones beseeches: "Please don't do this to people. It's much better to talk it over in person."

And if possible, make it familial. Jones and his previous housemates bought separate groceries, but that led to arguments. Now he shops for communal groceries twice monthly, splitting the cost three ways. "We don't worry about the incidentals. If I pick up a gallon of milk today, no big deal. You'll pick up a gallon next week."

Jones has also learned that experience isn't the only thing people accumulate as they age. Where three adults move in together, so move in three sets of ... everything. "It's not an issue people think about when they decide to room with someone," says Jones. "But it's important. If you have to rent a storage unit, that's an additional monthly expense to factor in."

He and his current roommates took time to select the nicest, most neutral of two or three couches, coffee pots and so on. For his part, Jones is selling off his old items on eBay.