

Our empty nest is no longer empty

Marsha Henry Goff

Ray and I are old enough to have grandchildren in college which means our nest has been empty for a quarter of a century. But we always knew that our nest wasn't truly empty as long as both of us were in it. However, last year, grandson Gabe came to bunk with us while he finished his education at KU. It has worked out really well, partly because our home allows everyone to have a lot of privacy. Downstairs in our walk-out, Gabe has the space and quiet he needs to study. It must be working for him because he made the honor roll the last two semesters.

His sister Sammi, a student at the University of Missouri, has gone through several roommates and learned that — when sharing close quarters — you can grow to dislike someone you initially liked. So far, Ray, Gabe and I still like each other.

Oh, there have been adjustments on everyone's part. For example, our home presently contains more junkfood than it has in years. Goldfish cheese crackers have become a staple in our pantry as have Poptarts and Ramen noodle soup. Gabe, on the other hand, has learned he can live without soda pop, although his parents take pity on him when he visits them in Missouri and send him home accompanied by a six-pack of Dr. Pepper. When that runs out he makes do with milk and Gatorade.

Another adjustment, although a happy one, for Gabe is living in the country instead of the city. He is learning the joy of seeing critters up close and personal. He likes seeing the deer and turkeys that graze in our back lawn and has even grown to appreciate the coyotes (although his first introduction to them was a little iffy because they were fighting outside his bedroom window over the meat scraps Ray throws off the deck for them or any neighborhood cats and dogs who visit).

Husband Ray and I have learned to worry when Gabe is on the road, just like we did when our two sons lived with us. You never forget how to be a parent . . . even when your children have homes and children of their own.

Gabe has provided us with some great laughs. A theater major at KU, he is required to take two of three practicum courses: lighting, staging, or costuming. This semester he settled on costuming, thinking the course would entail deciding what actors would wear for their parts. He was stunned to discover that the course actually involved sewing costumes, both by hand (some stitches are quite intricate) and machine.

This predominately right-brained boy has long been intimidated by math, another of his courses this semester. As he struggled one evening to perfect a complex stitch — sticking his fingers twice with a needle in the process — he cried out in frustration, “If anyone had mentioned beforehand that I'd have more trouble in sewing than math, I would have laughed in their face!”

But the costuming course has rewarded us with flashes of the practical man he is becoming. “At least I now know how to sew on my own buttons,” he said the other evening. Gabe is obviously learning the importance of turning lemons into lemonade.

It has been nice to have someone in residence when we travel, although Gabe is glad that we were at home when our water heater turned into Old Faithful. Gabe was studying downstairs and Ray was walking on the treadmill while listening to his iPod. Gabe heard it blow, opened the door to the unfinished area and saw water drenching everything within a 12 foot radius. Ray, blissfully unaware, continued walking until Gabe alerted him to the spewing water. After that incident, Ray showed Gabe how to turn off the water to the house, but we hope he never needs that knowledge.

It is estimated that four million grandchildren in the US live with their grandparents, though not all of those grandchildren are college students. I'm sure that living arrangement doesn't always work out, but for us — so far, so good. Besides, in another year, our nest will be empty again . . . but not really, because Ray and I will still have each other. Whether shared with three or two, we believe a shared nest is best.

