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Keeping childhood home in the family

BY MARLAINA COCKCROFT

SPECIAL TO THE RECORD | THE RECORD

If your house was also your parents' house or your grandparents' house, you're in good company in North Jersey.

Many area residents either inherit the family home or buy it outright, raising their children in the same house they grew up in, continuing to sleep in their old bedroom or keeping the living room furniture arranged the same way. They renovate the house to accommodate new generations, or they don't change a thing. And if they never leave their house or their hometown, that's fine by them.

The National Association of Realtors isn't able to track these types of transactions, many of which are handled privately and don't involve real estate agents, but several Record readers were recently willing to share their family home stories.

Not only does Heather Hofmann-Hayden live in the house her grandfather built; she also lives next to her great-grandfather's house and in front of the house that belonged to her grandfather's first cousins. "We've been in Dumont for a very long time," she says. "All my second and third cousins live here. Fourth cousins, even fifth cousins."

Hofmann-Hayden, her siblings and her parents moved from the other side of town into her grandparents' house after her parents inherited it in 1991. When she and her husband — whom she met after joining the Dumont Volunteer Ambulance Corps as a teenager — first got married, they thought about moving out of state. But they didn't like leaving the ambulance corps, and moving away from family didn't make sense once they had their first child. Their children are now ages 17, 15, 12 and 9.

It was challenging when they lived with her parents in the house, she says. But, "my kids loved having Grandma and Grandpa right there. And that part also made it a little easier to ride on the ambulance. I had somebody to watch my children."

They bought the house from her parents (who moved to Virginia) in 2001 for \$317,000.

"The house has evolved to fit the needs of everyone living in it. When my grandparents lived here, it was a cape. And then when my parents moved in, they were with three kids, it became a colonial. And now, we have extended family living [here], so we put an addition on."

Her third cousin, who is ill, also lives with them. Hofmann-Hayden, now president of the ambulance corps, serves as her cousin's caretaker.

She says seeing the house evolve over the years has made it feel like a living thing. "My grandfather would be so proud of how the house just continued to take care of his children and the family that was so important to him. That is a cool thing. And new memories are made in different parts of the house." In the living room, "my husband's chair is really kind of where my grandfather's chair was. It's so familiar. And it's comforting."

It can also be strange. Her bedroom as a teenager is now the bedroom she and her husband share. Their first night there, "he got into bed



CARMINE GALASSO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

This Dumont home, above, was built in 1958 by Heather Hofmann-Hayden's grandfather. She lives there with daughter Bridget, 17; son Rory, 12; third cousin Mary Zeisel; son Liam-Patrick, 9; husband Ronnie; son Jack, 15; and their Westie, Bonnie-Kate. Right, a family photo of the house years ago.



and goes, 'This feels wrong.' Like my dad was gonna come up and murder us."

But Hofmann-Hayden likes raising her children in the house where she grew up. "I compare pictures, like when I first started to learn to walk, they're in this living room. Or ... pictures on the front stoop as a little girl. I have the same pictures of my kids as small children. So that part is really nice."

Nancy McGrady lives with her husband, her sister and her 20-year-old son in the Packanack Lake house that her parents bought in 1956 for \$28,000. The stone front of the Tudor house hasn't changed since then, she says.

"It's really a nice, comfortable place. We really would like my son to live here eventually when we're gone and he wants to start a family."

After growing up in the house, McGrady's sister, Nora Brandt, moved to Florida, where she was a teacher and principal in Miami for 40 years.

McGrady stayed in Wayne, moving just a few blocks away with her husband. "And then my mom started to fail in her health, but my sister lived in Florida and my brother was in Sparta with his own family." McGrady and her husband moved in to take care of her mother in 1996, when their son Danny was born. "And then around 2001, my mother was still alive, we decided to buy the house from her."

McGrady, a teacher at DePaul Catholic High School in Wayne, says many people in Packanack grow attached to the community, which features recreational activities on the lake as well as its own fire department. (McGrady's father was once the fire chief.)

"A lot of parents, when they're 80, 85, 90 years old, they sell their house to their kids or their grandkids. And then many of the seniors move somewhere else but they still come back here," says McGrady.

She and her husband worked out a private deal with her mother when they bought the house, but McGrady estimates it's worth just under a million dollars now. "I always loved this house. I just obviously couldn't afford it when I first got married."

After Brandt's husband died and she retired, Brandt visited her sister so often that McGrady and her husband decided to put on an addition so Brandt could live there permanently. "My sister really came back from Florida because my son was, I guess when he was about 5 or 6, she came back here because she wanted to get close to him, and now they're really close," McGrady says.

They added a family room, a bedroom for Brandt and a deck, and finished the basement to "make it into a man cave for my son," McGrady says. They also ripped up carpets to expose the hardwood floors and updated the kitchen and the first-floor bathroom. But even with the updates, she says, it feels like the same house to her.

The living arrangement has worked out well, McGrady says. "Everyone gets along, and we have a really beautiful home."

John McLaughlin moved with his parents, sister and brother from New York to Allendale in 1950, before the town had its own police force or high school, and he's lived in the same two-story house ever since. "The house is still the same," he says. "We haven't painted, no changes. Well, we had chicken coops in the back, they're gone. The coal furnace, we had of course changed to gas. The back yard still has ashes from that furnace, here and my next-door neighbor, too. People say, 'What is that?'"

He's been living alone for 10 years, since his mother died at age 96 and he inherited a one-third share of the house; at his siblings' suggestion, he bought out their shares as well. "I had plans of somewhere else. Vermont, New Hampshire. They said, 'Do us a favor, keep it for a while. See what you think.' ... And they were right. They were right. A lifetime in this house, I don't want to leave it. I'm older now, counting the blessings. I can walk to town, and everything is handy around this area."

McLaughlin had continued to live in the house after he grew up, because his work — first as a roofer, then for Stryker Corp., then the post office, then for Seiko in Mahwah — were always within five miles of the house, and it seemed practical. His father died in 1960, and his mother didn't want to live alone as she got older.

He had planned to buy his own house when he got engaged to a woman from down the street, but tragically, his fiancée died of melanoma in 1984.

"I sometimes think I had no business asking someone to marry me when I had four dollars in my wallet. But I know that was meant to be. I still feel it was."

Retired now, McLaughlin says his house hasn't changed, and neither has the way he lives in it.

"It's occurred to me I'm watching TV in the same room I did when I was 5. ... It's amusing, to think I'm watching DVDs of the old black-and-white shows in the same seat. I sleep in the same bed. If I hear a noise, I know what it is. Little tiny noise, I go, 'Oh, that's a door creaking.' ... No surprises. I know the time of day by the trains going by."

Beverly Mancini sold her childhood home in Park Ridge, then bought it back. She was living in the house her husband had built — also in Park Ridge — when her mother died in 1998, and though it saddened her to sell the ranch her parents had built in the 1950s, she knew it needed updates. Still in mourning for her husband, who'd died of a heart attack in 1996, she wasn't ready to take on such a project.

"At the time I even said, 'If my husband was alive, I'm sure he would've jumped on the opportunity to buy it and he would've done something with it,'" says Mancini, whose husband, Butch, was a builder. She estimates the house sold for \$275,000.

"We sold it to a nice young couple, they had one child. They moved in with a lot of enthusiasm, and they started to renovate it, and [the husband] was a victim of 9/11."

Mancini later met the widow, Rose Keller, through a friend, and Keller offered to show Mancini what they'd done with the house. "It was beautiful, what they did to it," adding granite counters and air conditioning, renovating the bathrooms and finishing the basement. "I said, 'If you're ever interested in selling, please let me know.' And she called me a couple of years later and she said, 'Were you serious about that?'" Keller had remarried and had another baby, and her family was outgrowing the space.

Mancini bought the house back in 2006 for around \$650,000, then did a little renovating herself, removing the deck in order to expand the kitchen. She estimates she put about \$200,000 into the house. "Without regret, because I knew that it was really the perfect house for me."

She'd already been looking to downsize, and "this house, it was in turnkey condition, and it was like going home again. The first night, I got up in the middle of the night, I knew exactly where I was going. I never felt lost there. I never felt out of place."

Conveniently enough, her son-in-law said if they could sell their house in Montvale, they'd be interested in her house. They bought it in a private transaction with her, and are raising their children in the house Mancini's husband built in 1985. Her grandchildren never met their grandfather, so the house is their connection to him. "They love it. ... They call it 'the house that Papa built!'"

Though Mancini says selling her parents' house was the right decision at the time, she's glad to be back in it now. "I'm never, ever selling this house. My kids know that. When my days are over, somebody from my family will be living in that house. Maybe it will be one of my grandkids and their family."

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