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Welcome to my guest room -- I'll be your aunt / Extend a hand, extend a family; it reaps rewards

Wendy Lichtman, Special to The Chronicle

I call the seven young people who have lived in my guest room my nieces and nephews, but with the exception of two - - my brother's son and daughter -- they are not. They are the children of cousins and old friends, and they pass through my home for a few months on their way to adulthood.

The guest room is out of the way -- it's at the back of my house behind the kitchen and across from a small bathroom, which is, I'm sure, one of the reasons I've felt comfortable inviting people to stay with my family for a while. Still, sometimes I get claustrophobic when the house is too full, and I start barking commands about cleanliness and thoughtfulness. (Oh, I was not happy when one nephew's dog took to eating quarter-pound sticks of butter from the kitchen countertop.) Sometimes the guests take too much of my time and energy, and I feel myself pulling back from contact. But I've never actually kicked anyone out of the house, because by the time it becomes too much for me, my guests have lived here long enough to be woven into the fabric of my life. By the time I get sick of having another kid around, it's too late: I'm already his or her aunt.

Like my guests, I was in my mid-20s when I arrived in California. My first marriage had just ended and my mother had just died, and the only thing that I thought might help was to fly far away. After six years of living here I'd remarried, found work and friends I loved, and was pregnant with my son. This was in 1978, before you could see the inside of your womb with a sonogram, so I went to a psychic for a little reassurance that my baby was well. And this particular psychic, my neighbor explained, was a deal -- she charged only \$15 an hour, in contrast to others who charged \$60.

"Your baby's fine," the psychic declared as she stared at my belly. "But your aura," she said, "is dark gray." Then she squinted at my feet and shook her head. "You've been

uprooted," she announced. While she waved her hand back and forth past her face as though she were trying to blow away cigarette smoke, and chanted "gray, gray, gray," I wondered if I should have sprung for the full-price psychic. But the word "uprooted" stayed with me.

How, I worried, could a baby raised a continent away feel connected to the rest of his family? And five years later, when I discovered that my second child, my daughter, was deaf, I worried more. Maybe some of my family would learn sign language, I thought, if I lived nearer to home. But that was before the guest room started seeing action. My children, who were 7 and 12 when the first visitor arrived, began using the generic word "cousin" to introduce anyone who lived with us. Following their lead, sometime during the first guest's stay, I realized that I'd stopped introducing Stacia as my cousin's daughter, and started calling her my Niece.

And mostly, I love this aunt business. There's both a natural intimacy and a natural distance that suit me well. Jake, the son of my childhood best friend, had been living with us for a couple of months when he asked me to help choose an engagement ring for his girlfriend back in New York.

"Most mothers and sons get into squabbles while they're here," the jeweler said as she raised a magnifying glass to her eye. "You two seem to have a wonderful relationship." In fact, Jake and I had had a talk at the kitchen table that morning that, had he actually been my son, might well have turned into a squabble.

"I don't like engagement rings," I'd told him when he invited me to go shopping with him. "You don't like the looks?" he'd asked, pouring us each a cup of coffee, "or you don't like the symbol?"

"The looks are beautiful," I admitted. "But I don't like the idea of wearing something that announces your marital status and economic class at the first handshake." He nodded, then, sidestepping an argument, he leaned back, pulled a small package out of the pocket of his jeans and handed it to me.

"I want to use Grandma Essie's diamond," he said. As I took the ring out of its tiny flannel bag, I thought of Jake's grandparents. I remembered his grandfather teasing me about my short skirts and long golf shots; I remembered a thousand snowy Buffalo afternoons sitting in his grandmother's warm kitchen. "Your Grandma Essie," I told Jake, looking at her ring, "used to make the most remarkable almond cookies -- buttery crescent-shaped things that were covered with powdered sugar."

The jeweler placed two dark blue sapphires on Jake's palm, and when he went to the window to look at the stones in the daylight, she complimented me. "You're so good," she said, "at not trying to influence your son's decision."

"I'm so good," I confessed, "because he's not my son. He's my friend's son; she's in New York." Taking the magnifying lens away from her eye, the jeweler smiled at me. "It's always easier to teach someone else's kid how to drive, isn't it?" It is.

Unlike what happens with my own children, when one of the guests tells me a problem, I don't feel guilty that I may have caused it, and I don't feel obligated to solve it. I feel free to give an honest response or a wrong one - - I feel free to explore my own ideas with them. I find it relatively easy, in my role of aunt, to love and let go. Jami, my brother's daughter, lived with us two times -- once for three months and once for three weeks. The other night, she was over for dinner. "Do you know that you eat chocolate exactly like my father?" Jami said, as I rolled a small piece of creamy fudge between the tip of my tongue and the top of my front teeth, sucking the sweetness. My daughter was at the table, so, like the rest of the family, Jami signed as she spoke.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Way up front," she explained, touching her own lips. "As if it's stuck to the roof of your mouth. It gives me the creeps how you can be so opposite from my father in some ways and just like him in other ways."

My brother lives in Florida and I believe we have canceled out each other's vote in every presidential election. I know we did in the last one. "I'm nothing like your father," I insisted. "For one thing," Jami said, "you both use superlatives all the time -- everything is either the best and most remarkable, or the worst and most awful. " She broke off a piece of the fudge and held it in her palm. "Like, how would you describe this?" she asked.

"That's not fair," I said, "because this happens to actually be the most fabulous fudge in existence." "Right," she grinned. "And you and my dad have the same mouths," she added. "You both have huge smiles and big laughs." Then she tilted her head and looked at me. "I imagine Grandma Lenore was like that, too. Was she?" "She was," I said. "Grandma Lenore was the original big laughter," I told the grandchildren she never knew. I don't know any wholesale psychics now, but I can't imagine that anyone could peer into the space around me and see me as uprooted. I'd bet anything that my aura isn't dark gray anymore.

I would never have predicted, 27 years ago when I was pregnant with my son, that my children could grow up surrounded by cousins; I would never have imagined that the young people who have lived in my guest room, all eager for their futures, would help connect me to my past.