

# HOMIE

## & Garden

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PHOTOS BY KIM KOMENICH / The Chronicle

The families' six adults and five children have dinner in the ground-floor great room in the 6,800-square-foot, "three generation" house on 4.8 acres along the Putah South Canal in Fairfield.

# A full table

*Three generations of a Fairfield family live together in a home designed so each is comfortable and each has a role*

By Judy Richter  
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It's 5:55 on a Sunday afternoon at the house in Fairfield. Five-year-old Grace Curry walks around ringing a small bell to summon everyone to dinner.

By 6 p.m., they're all seated around the dinner table: Grace's parents, Bernadette, 37, and George Curry, 42; her brother, Jack, 3; her aunt and uncle, Teresa, 41, and Steve Lavell, 42; their children, Jennifer, 15, Michael, 13, and Danny, 11; and her grandparents, Gretchen, 70, and Joe Shilts, 72. The family dog, Roxie, also shows up.

They all live in a 6,800-square-foot house on 4.8 acres along the Putah South Canal. The Shilts live downstairs, and each of the other two families has an upstairs wing.

The idea for the family compound started after Joe was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 1999. The five Shilts daughters had all moved out and married, so the Fairfield house where they had grown up was too big and too much work.

In the meantime, the Currys and Lavells were outgrowing their Fairfield homes.

Teresa Lavell came up with the idea of everyone living together. She and Steve had moved all over the world while he was an Air Force pilot. After he had completed his service, "She said, 'We're moving back to Fairfield, and then we're going to live together,'" Gretchen Shilts said.

Three of the Shilts daughters and their families had moved away, but the three Fairfield families were already spending time together, "so



there was a natural integration of our lifestyles," Bernadette Curry said.

The search for a site began in 2000 and ended with the purchase in November 2000. Next the family settled on an architect, Jacobson, Silverstein & Winslow in Berkeley. "We spent hours not only talking with them but also poring over

**Bernadette Curry** and Grace Curry, 5, huddle in the library, in which some details were decided in collaboration.

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The back side of the 9-bedroom, 6½-bath house rises above the swimming pool.



Photos by KIM KOMENICH / The Chronicle

Gretchen Shilts (left) and Bernadette Curry relax in the "Curry Wing" of the house — a \$1.4 million project that the three families pooled their finances to build.

## '3-generation' home for 11 people and dog

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books" to get ideas, Gretchen Shilts said.

Finding financing for construction was difficult. The family invited loan officers to lunch to explain the dream, but possible default was a worry. Finally a loan officer from First Northern Bank agreed to lend the money. "He caught the vision," she said.

The project cost \$1.4 million — the equivalent of \$466,666 per family — for the land, design and construction except for the pool, landscaping and solar panels.

The Shiltses used some of Joe's retirement money to buy the land, and all three family groups pitched in for the down payment after selling their houses. They own the house as joint tenants, and each family contributes to a joint account that pays for the 15-year mortgage and other shared costs.

Although the new house is unique, Joe Shilts estimates that buying three new Fairfield houses suited to each family's needs would have cost "at least twice what we paid." New single-family detached houses in Fairfield can cost anywhere from about \$600,000 to more than \$1 million.

If the families had built three separate houses, they would have had to buy three lots because city zoning allows only one house on the lot they have.

Shilts estimated that three lots would cost a total of \$100,000 more than they paid for their land. Construction costs would have totaled nearly \$500,000 more.

They also would have lost some economies of scale. For example, "we wouldn't have been able to install solar panels" because they wouldn't be cost-effective, he said. The houses would have needed three controls rather than one, tripling the cost, yet there would be only a third as many panels.

There would be cost of three garages rather than two. Hiring a contractor was helped by Joe Shilts' expertise. He had served as Fairfield public works director until retiring in 1983. He then opened a consulting business where he worked until retiring again in 2003.

The family settled on Fairfield contractor Steve Sutton of Sutton Construction after the house plans were complete in the fall of 2002. Move-in day was Aug. 1, 2003.

The two-story house has nine bedrooms, 6½ bathrooms and two two-car garages, one at either end. Outdoors are a swimming pool with deck and spa, a sports court and landscaped areas, which, except for the lawn, are on a drip irrigation system.

The entryway is flanked by a hall spanning the center section. The hall is lined with book shelves beneath large windows on the outer wall and openings into the great room with its two-story-high ceiling.

On the left end of the great room is a conversation area with a fireplace, TV, piano, a window seat and another wall of windows overlooking the backyard, which has decks, pool, lawn and a dry, grassy hillside



Above: Danny Lavell pulls down a Murphy bed in the guest room as Steve Lavell watches. Right: Jack Curry, 3, looks on as Danny tosses Grace Curry onto a big foam chair.

sloping down to the canal.

The center of the great room is dominated by a long dining table that can seat up to 20. It was the first joint purchase because of "the communal value of sharing a meal," said Bernadette Curry.

This table also has allowed the family to have Thursday night soup suppers during the winter. They started with friends and neighbors who sometimes brought others along, making for lively discussions. "It was a way to have a wider community," George Curry said.

At the right end of the great room is the kitchen, which has an island, two sinks, two stoves and an industrial-size refrigerator. A small dining table in one corner overlooks the backyard. Off the kitchen is a pantry with another refrigerator.

Angling off from the great room is a hallway to a half-bath and the laundry room, which is outfitted with two washers and dryers and lots of cabinets. A breezeway separates the laundry room from a garage.

The north wing has a guest room with a Murphy bed and a bathroom opening to the backyard, so that swimmers can use it rather than walking through the house.

Next to the guest room is the Shiltses' suite with sitting room, bedroom, bathroom and deck. Anticipating Joe's physical limitations (he still can walk around the house and climb stairs but uses a walker outside), the Shiltses have grab bars in the bathroom, wide doorways and an exit door with a ramp.

Upstairs, the Currys have the north wing; the Lavells have the south wing. Each wing has a master suite with deck, a bedroom for each child, another full bathroom and a sitting room. Bonus rooms over the garages have become playrooms with TVs, computers and exercise equipment.

Up another half-flight of stairs is a small loft called the meditation room because it's an out-of-the-way place to sit quietly and admire the



view. Having places to be alone "was one of the values we built into this house," Gretchen Shilts said.

Connecting the two wings is a passageway similar to the entry hall with windows on one side, rows of books on both sides, a library and computer area.

The house has a number of features meant to achieve the family's goal of being as energy efficient as possible.

Its outer walls are structurally integrated panels with foam insulation between two layers of recycled,

compressed wood products. The 9-inch-thick panels are about 50 percent more efficient than standard wall construction, Joe Shilts said.

Their R value is about 37 or 38, making the house cooler in summer, warmer in winter and quieter year-round. In the summer, an attic fan exhausts hot air, usually keeping the house below 75 degrees and reducing the need for air conditioning.

Both wings are angled to provide maximum southern exposure for the photovoltaic panels on the roof.

The panels generate up to 6 kilowatts of electricity, about 70 percent of the family's needs. The family got a state grant to help pay for them and sells any excess power to Pacific Gas & Electric Co. at peak rates.

"I'm proud of the photovoltaics," Joe Shilts said. "We save probably \$200 a month." In July 2004, the electric bill was less than \$6 for the 11-member household. The system is likely to pay for itself in 10 years.

The pool also is solar-heated, but the spa is gas-heated.

Everyone tries to use as little electricity as possible during peak hours for more savings.

The house has two gas furnaces and two water heaters to reduce the distance that hot water must travel. Pumps circulate hot water during peak times to save energy and water. Rain barrels collect water for irrigation.

Most rooms have ceiling fans and quilted shades for more energy savings.

Each family has its own phone, and the house has a central vacuum system and a security system.

Each family chose the colors for its living area. Colors and other details for the communal areas were collaboratively chosen. "It was work," Gretchen Shilts said. Everyone would meet around the Shiltses' dining room table to make decisions during construction.

Collaboration is a huge key to the success of this living arrangement. Families take turns cooking dinner for a week at a time. Everyone is on his own for breakfast, lunch and Friday dinner, which often winds up to be leftovers or pizza. The family that cooks also plans the menus and does the grocery shopping.

Housekeeping tasks for the communal areas are divided eight ways and rotate weekly, excusing Joe and the Curry kids. Each family takes care of its own area.

Eating dinner together at 6 p.m. is "quite an experience for the young people," Gretchen Shilts said. It gives everyone a chance to

talk about the day.

It's also a chance to head off conflicts, she said, noting that the family spent a lot of time talking about that issue before moving in. The family also tries to have regular meetings for everyone, but the kids are excused when finances are involved. "The chemistry is here to make it work. We have the commitment to one another," said Gretchen, a nurse who works on call as a lay Catholic chaplain with North Bay Hospice. She also served on the board of the Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District in the '70s.

George Curry works as a systems analyst for the state Franchise Tax Board. Steve Lavell is a Southwest Airlines pilot and Air Force Reservist. Bernadette Curry is a deputy Solano County counsel.

The Lavell children are all in school, and Grace Curry just started kindergarten. Teresa Lavell, a master gardener, and Gretchen do most of the gardening. The younger men mow the lawn, and the family has a pool service.

Teresa and Gretchen do most of the child care, along with Joe Shilts. When the Shilts daughters were growing up, Joe was so busy with work that he didn't see them as much as he wanted. "Now I interact with the grandkids in ways I missed as a father," he said.

Everyone also makes sure he's OK. Even 3-year-old Jack sees to it that Grandpa gets the chair with wheels at the dinner table. The adults drive him when he needs to go somewhere. "It couldn't be better. They're taking care of me," Joe said.

In planning the house, "we saw it as a marriage of families" and a way "to be there for Mom and Dad," Steve Lavell said. "This isn't an experiment. We're going to make it work."

George Curry agreed. "No matter what happens, we can work it out. It's a more impressive family than it is an impressive house."

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