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Couple takes care of houses, maintains homes

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A few years ago Kevin and Alicia Shea were in Jackson Hole, WY, for a friend's wedding and mentioned to other guests their desire to explore other areas of the country before choosing a site. One of the other couples suggested housesitting - more specifically, their house, as they were going on vacation right after the wedding.

So the Sheas extended their visit to Wyoming and watched over the house, and the cat, for a week.

"We stayed in their house for another week, and we said, "Well that's kind of fun," Kevin Shea said. "House sitting was something new to us, so we thought we would look into it some more."

The two are approaching retirement and were looking at downsizing, they said, and this would be a prime opportunity to see what life is like in other parts of the country. There were many options - settling in the city or the country or somewhere in between, buying a second home there or throwing it all to the wind and purchasing a Winnebago - but each of those options involved complications.

"We'd like to spend the summer in Yellowstone, but we don't want to spend the entire winter in Brownsville, Texas," Kevin Shea said of the mobile home concept.

They began to explore the idea of housesitting, and discovered that "it is, in fact, something that people want to have provided to them," Kevin Shea said.

In June 2008, Alicia Shea set up the Web site that attracts clients from all over the country and the world. In her "semi-retirement," she cooks, entertains and designs Web sites, Shea said.

The site helps explain what the Sheas are about, and assuages some of the early fears of clients.

"We understand the way you have to balance your lifestyle, your family and your home against everything else," Kevin Shea said. "One of the ways you can convince people that you are the right person is to show them what you live like."

Having a house sitter is "predominantly for peace of mind," he said. "And secondarily for the peace of the animals that they have. An awful lot of people want to have their animals left in their homes. The animals go to the kennel for two weeks, two days, two months, and they come back a different animal."

One of the Sheas' favorite recommendations, from the family they sit for in Plymouth, N.H., lauds them as "speaking dog and cat fluently," though they currently have no pets in their Clark Street home.

As business professionals who traveled extensively throughout their careers, the Sheas know what they wanted in their own home when they were gone for long periods of time. Friends and relatives have long been their go-to source of housesitters, they said, and offering that service to others is both fulfilling and exciting.

"It's a very trusting relationship," Kevin Shea said. And it's important for clients to know that "we're older, mature, are homeowners, and so when something goes wrong with their home, we know what to do," Alicia Shea said.

Each family or couple meets with the Sheas to explore the parameters of the sit, and to make sure everyone is comfortable with them. They will take on the care of cats and dogs, but the man with a horse and two pigs was a bit much. They will not accept the responsibility of caring for children or aging parents.

Once they are set up in the house, though, it becomes a home for them, if only temporarily.

They take the dogs for long walks, exploring the town or the woods. Kevin Shea has been known to repair a hot tub, and Alicia cooks a hearty meal and leaves in it the refrigerator, ready for reheating, for the returning owners. They have made friends with the friends of the homeowners and now go out to dinner with them when they are in town. And for each sit, the couple prepares a CD log of their adventures with pictures and stories of their time in the house.

So far the couple sits regularly for a family in Connecticut, a couple in New Hampshire, residents of Maine and Rhode Island. They weathered the recent ice storm that crippled Derry, NH and they dealt with the rising flood in another home's basement.

They have had to turn down several requests for being too far from home and too much of a time commitment, including a house in Brussels, Belgium and an estate in Provence, France, but think they may be able to do a sit abroad in the future.

The original thought, that they would explore different areas of the country with an eye towards settling in one of them, has taken a backseat, they said.

"At some point, who knows, we may say, "yes, this place is nice, let's settle here," Alicia Shea said. "But the goal right now is to just travel around and have some fun. Be in nice places and help people go on vacation and not have to worry."

For more information about Kevin and Alicia Shea's housesitting service, visit their Web site at www.kevinandaliciashea.com.