

The Legacy of Overachievers

These handy in-laws can come to our house any time.

BY LYNN GROOM



My sister-in-law, Farrah, has never been able to sit still for long. Even as a child, she fretted without a project.

My husband's entire family, in fact, works for fun. When Farrah, her husband Jeff, my mother-in-law, Sonja, and my father-in-law, Joel, get home from their day jobs, they gleefully delve into their small businesses as home contractors or craft makers. On any given weeknight, they may be installing a retaining wall, sewing hundreds of ornaments together, or cleaning out a storm drain. (Fun!)

They also relish work on Farrah and Jeff's Pennsylvania home, a gentrified 1920s-era brick two-story. This past weekend, they ripped out the carpet and installed wood flooring in their third bedroom, then followed that with crown molding and a chair rail. After the chair rail, they decided they were tired and called it a day. Sunday was a new day though, so they had a nice, relaxing time retiling my mother-in-law's shower.

All of this leaves me feeling slightly self-conscious when they come to visit. I hide all of my novels and put paint and rubber cement in public view. My in-laws have never batted an eyelash at my own ability to sit still and do nothing, but it still feels wrong somehow.

"Hi, Hon," my mother-in-law will say when she calls.

"Hi, Sonja. How was your weekend?"

"Oh, good. We installed new drywall in our friend's kitchen. We didn't stay to paint because we need to polish and wax our own floors. Sunday we did about 300 crafts; got about 700 to go. Right now I'm making chicken and dumplings for Farrah and Jeff. How was your weekend?"

Think, I muse as I pop hot dogs in to boil. Watched *Sex and the City* re-runs . . . clipped toenails . . . did laundry . . . washed dog. Washing the dog is productive.

"I washed the dog!"

"Oh, that's great, Hon."

The shortness of my end of the conversation sounds weak to me. So I embellish.

"And next weekend, I'm going to make some pies — one for us and one for the

homeless — from fruit trees I planted in our back yard."

"Oh, how fun."

I make a mental note to run to Lowe's shortly before they come to find some dead fruit trees to throw next to our front street, so I can sadly explain how they all died from parasites.

Last year when they came to visit, Farrah begged to paint something. The whole house was the same color, a bland beige.

"Farrah, this is your vacation," I said. "Don't you want to rest?"

"How about just the half bath?" she pleaded.

"OK," I said. "You pick the color."

She chose a rich plum that looked incredible, I thought. Sonja, Jeff and David, my husband, thought otherwise.

"Oh, my God, Farrah" Sonja said when she saw it. "Look at that mess up there. Lynn, how are you going to live with that?"

I squinted upward at the 10-foot ceiling and didn't see anything. "What?"

"You see all that paint splattered up there?"

The ceiling looked beige to me. I put on my glasses and stood on the ladder. Indeed, from a few inches away, you could make out tiny plum smudges at edge of the ceiling, about 1/100th of an inch wide. "Ah."

"I know, I know," Farrah sighed. "The ceiling is uneven so it was hard to paint, and I didn't have time to fix it."

"Jeez, Farrah," Sonja said. "Our flight's leaving in a few hours. Poor Lynn has to fix that now."

"Oh, stop, it looks great," I said. I did not mention that I was just thankful to have something painted — by a licensed contractor, no less — nor that I did not have the slightest idea how to fix it as I did not have a pet flea with a microscopic paint brush.

The next time Farrah called, she asked, "Did you get the ceiling fixed?"

"No, it's the same. I think it actually looks great in there."

"Wow, I respect your ability to be so laid back," she said. "That is awesome."

"You are intimidating," I say.

"Oh, we're not intimidating; we're just hyper. What projects are we going to do when we get down there next time?"

The work ethic in my husband's family has a deep impact on my husband and me. I got my dream wedding on a budget partly because Sonja and Farrah created an exquisite seating chart and centerpieces. We have eclectic, handcrafted Christmas and Halloween decorations. When Sonja comes to visit and I get home from work, the laundry is done, dishwasher is empty, bottles are washed and something always smells divine in the oven. A hundred times, I've invited her to move in.

But my in-laws have a deeper impact on Catherine, my now three-month-old daughter. She is surrounded by them — even when they're in Pennsylvania. Tiny handmade sweaters and booties engulf her. Meticulously sewn curtains keep her nursery shaded for peaceful sleep. Art covers her now-painted walls. Retro, handcrafted toys fill her toy box. When Catherine sleeps, she holds the blanket her grandmother made tightly in her tiny fingers, and when she's awake, she often stares fascinated at the framed photo of herself that Farrah took.

I sometimes wonder whom she will resemble more in her notion of fun. She seems absorbed when I read to her, but she also loves to stare at the crown molding.

"We're so far away," Farrah laments. "Do you think she'll remember us?"

I watch as my daughter's gaze moves from the book I'm reading to my in-laws' photos, then to the chair rail.

"I think so."

**"They're
sure housework
won't kill you, but
why take the risk?"
~Author Unknown**