

Cassidy

WR 13300

Professor Clauss

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Letter from a Madison Chicken Coop

Situation: In the city of Madison, it is legal to own up to four hens per household within city limits. Following this ordinance, my family and I have owned and cared for more than twenty pet chickens in total over the past ten years in our urban, Madison home. As someone who has thoroughly enjoyed the entire process, I am writing to my father's coworker, Marilyn, who is considering keeping pet chickens as well. Her husband, David, is the carpenter who built our coop. She is open to the idea of owning chickens, but cannot decide if it is a worthwhile venture, so I hope to convince Marilyn to adopt chickens of her own.

Hello Marilyn,

How are your grandchildren? The last time I saw Nick I was amazed at how tall he has gotten! How has work been? My dad says you've been doing an excellent job managing the office, considering all of the radical changes in the computerized medical record program. I'm not surprised; I've always admired your ability to balance so many responsibilities and master new skills. I am writing in regard to something that you are considering trying; my dad told me you are thinking of buying pet chickens. Our hens have been such a big part of my life that I can't imagine growing up without them. Knowing your family as well as I do, I believe you would all enjoy this experience too. I cannot help but voice my feelings. As someone who has essentially grown up owning hens, I hope I can address many of your concerns. I am grateful for these wonderful memories, and I hope you'll choose to adopt pet chickens, for a number of reasons. If you do, perhaps your family will have the same experiences I did.

Keeping chickens is a low-cost endeavor. The biggest expense is the coop. We keep our hens in a wooden house in the backyard, which your husband built for us. If you get chickens,

you could easily minimize the money you spend by having David build the coop himself. In the winter, we turn on a space heater, and occasionally tune an old radio to the classical channel, to keep the girls comfortable enough to lay eggs throughout colder months. Heating will increase your bills, but that's a small price to pay for fresh eggs at Christmas breakfast. Besides, it makes for a convenient place to get away from the stresses of 25 grandchildren! Don't tell my parents, but I can often be found hiding in our coop with a good book. Otherwise, the costs are low. Chicken feed is cheap; a 50 pound bag of organic feed costs only \$12.49 ("Agrimaster"), but they won't eat much of that anyway. They are hunters at heart, and prefer caterpillars they find in our garden over store-bought food any day. And their appetites aren't restricted to just that. Our girls will eat anything except for citrus and potato peels. They especially love mac and cheese, watermelon, and spaghetti. (I think it's because the pasta looks like worms.) We scrape our dinner plates into a bucket and the chickens are fed all week. Keeping chickens is truly a low cost endeavor.

They are as low-maintenance as they are low-cost, and the time that they do take is enjoyable. Often people think of them as farm animals and assume hens would take a lot of work, but they take a lot less effort than other pets. There's no walking on leashes on rainy nights, no hair balls on the rug, and no pet sitters when we go on vacation, just asking neighbors to come pick up fresh eggs. In high school I usually wouldn't get home until nighttime. This is similar to your schedule, so I can understand how you may not want to tack another chore onto an already long day. But I treasure my trips to the coop to do "chicken chores," as we call them. Completing these easy tasks, like filling their food and water, gives me a chance to clear my mind as I listen to the girls scratch and coo. It's always satisfying to leave the coop with warm eggs stuffed in my jacket pockets, and pour my bounty on the kitchen counter for the family to

admire. Even when I was in third grade, I proudly took care of the birds, because it was a responsibility I could handle completely on my own. They take a very small amount of time to take care of, and every moment they take is enjoyable. I bet that you, or even your grandkids, would enjoy caring for hens as much as I did.

While they don't require much attention, they still draw a lot of collective interest from the neighborhood, and make our street a fun place to live. In my grandfather's day, many backyards were home to chickens, but these days they are a local tourist attraction. Babysitters bring toddlers, neighbors bring visitors, and kayakers pause and point when our hens are foraging along our lakefront. I will never forget how much our eighty-year old reprobate of a neighbor, Dave, enjoyed when we let the hens out. Before we got chickens, our interactions with him were limited. He would open his window while my mom watered our yard and drunkenly rant about whatever the liberals were doing lately. He wasn't very mobile when he lived next door (he has since moved into an assisted living home), but whenever our chickens were out, he would grab a glass of scotch on the rocks, shuffle out to his back porch, and quietly drink with the hens until sundown. He loved these afternoons so much that he bought a bag of feed to lure the chickens to his yard, and also a sign to display proudly on his mailbox. It read, "Chicken X-ing." Our quirky pets made for an even quirkier relationship with our neighborhood, and I wouldn't have had it any other way. The neighborhood interest in our chickens made my street a fun place to be.

Our chickens weren't just a part of our neighborhood, but also members of our family. When my chicken, Violet, roams in our yard, she often fearlessly hops up our porch steps, over to the armchair, and snuggles onto my father's lap. Violet is so much a part of the family, that one evening she was invited to eat dinner with us. My father let her sit on his shoulder, as if she

were a parrot, for an entire meal. Our hens are truly members of our family, who provide us with companionship and the occasional cuddle.

While hens make wonderful companions, the bonus is the eggs they provide. These eggs are an easy way to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Knowing that, like my family, you and David are avid gardeners and frequent shoppers at the Madison Farmer's Market, I'm sure you already agree that it is important to eat locally-sourced foods. I love Whole Foods and the Willie Street Co-op as much as the next Madison grocery shopper, but I love our fresh eggs even more. I once compared a few brands of store-bought eggs with the ones I had watched our hens lay just hours before. When they were cracked it was obvious that the fresh eggs, laid by our chickens of all different breeds, consistently had brighter, firmer yolks than those that were store-bought. Furthermore, research shows that when chickens freely roam in the yard, their eggs will be higher in Omega-3 fatty acids, Vitamin E, and beta carotene, which are antioxidants thought to decrease the risk of heart disease and cancer ("Study"). There is nothing more comforting than biting into a fried egg when I know exactly where it came from, how old it is, and which beneficial nutrients are present. Owning chickens allows for this, and is a great way to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Also, caring for chickens has given me a greater appreciation for nature. I was in third grade when my parents decided they wanted pet chickens. I somehow got the idea that it would be fun to hatch my own eggs. Like you, my parents think it's very important for kids to learn with play, so they agreed. My mom went online to a website called "EggBay," which is a cheap place to buy or swap eggs. She ordered half a dozen fertilized eggs and an incubator. For 21 days, I zealously recorded the temperature of the incubator, turned the eggs four times a day to minimize birth defects, spritzed them with water to keep a certain humidity, and let my

excitement grow as I created this miracle of life. One day, I arrived home from school and my mom greeted me with good news: the eggs had begun to hatch. I ran to our incubator and watched one of the six eggs shake and slowly crack open to reveal a tiny, breathing, soaking-wet chick. We named her Martha. She was the only one to hatch, so we felt lucky to have her. For the next month, she lived in a cage in my living room, where I would sit, mesmerized, watching her for hours, transfixed by everything she did. When she was old enough to move outside, I was old enough to help with the “chicken chores” as we called them, bringing her food and water every few days. Martha and I truly grew up together, and in the process, I learned more about natural wonders than I ever did in science class. Today, I appreciate nature so much more because I owned chickens, and I bet your grandchildren would too.

I realize that while nature can be beautiful, it also contains harsh realities, like death, to which you may not want to expose your grandchildren. I do agree that the death of a pet can be upsetting for many young children, but in my experience, owning chickens teaches young ones how to handle their feelings. For example, my mom once let my hens out to forage in our backyard, and she forgot to lock the door to the coop that night. Two of my chickens, Martha and Millie, were caught and killed by a fox. My mom felt sick with guilt for days, and I was so sad to have lost them. However, we recently had a conversation about it, and she told me she had come to terms with what happened. She said, “I told myself I needed to let them out to graze because they were nearing the ends of their lives anyway, and I wanted them to be happy in their old age. They died before they should have, but what happened was natural, and I’m just glad I gave them a good life” (“McDonald”). Hearing this logic made it easy for me to accept their deaths also, because I realized death is inevitable and natural. I learned to manage my sadness by focusing on the great lives they had. Growing up with chickens taught me that not every part of

nature is beautiful, but having firsthand experience with those more ugly realities, like death, makes them feel less upsetting, and more manageable.

I am so grateful for the wonderful experiences I've had because I own chickens, and I hope that you adopt hens as well, for many reasons, and perhaps your family will have these same experiences. If this letter hasn't given you enough information for you to make a decision, please don't hesitate to call. I could talk about my girls for hours! I'll see you in the office this December. I'll bring you a dozen eggs.

Best Wishes,

Cassidy

Works Cited

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