

***Expect the Unexpected:  
Would an early check-in be possible?***

The reservation request began in the usual way - inquiring about availability for a two-night stay in mid-June. But it was the final sentence, added almost as an afterthought, which brought me to full attention. It read something like “Oh, by the way, we would like to get married in your garden on the afternoon we arrive. Would it be possible to have an early check-in?”

I stared at my laptop for a good five minutes, reading it over and over again to make sure I wasn't misinterpreting the inquiry. I checked my Airbnb calendar to find that the dates they wanted were available, although another guest would be checking out the same day as their requested early arrival. It only took a matter of moments while glaring at that screen to begin feeling a cloak of “Airbnb wedding planner-ness” seeping over me. I'd been hosting for a bit more than six months, and was finding the entire experience to be so much more full and joyous than I'd ever imagined. But - an Airbnb wedding - in my backyard - as a result of photos & reviews on my listing? There would be some serious weeding that would need to happen in a hurry. And god forbid that Beauchamp, the dog, would possibly be invited to march in the processional without sporting a fresh bath & haircut.

The guest/bride-to-be was a former Airbnb host in NY, a French and English translator who had recently relocated to Durham to be close to her mom. The mom had been required to come to Durham in order to be within moments' access of Duke University Medical Center, where she was on the imminent transplant list for a new lung. The bride's mom was also an Airbnb host in the mountains of NC who had spent much of her career as a medical relief services worker in Uganda. The groom was a musician from Senegal who had now also come to Durham and was working as the fishmonger at Whole Foods. I had done my Peace Corps term in Kenya - so all these threads began to weave a pretty tight arrow pointing directly to “Airbnb Wedding in the Backyard.”

Rather than going through a more-prolonged wedding-planning period that had initially been considered, the bride felt she didn't want to take any chances on her mom's health preventing her being part of the ceremony. A number of relatives had all picked this particular June weekend to travel to Durham to visit the pre-transplant patient - so it just made sense to the bride and groom to find a wedding site quickly, plan the ceremony and get on with the big event.

The bride, the mom and I met in person at my house to talk through hopes and logistics and schedule and to-do's. (The groom had had to return to Africa, due to his father's passing but would return to Durham the day before the ceremony.) We had about a week to put things in place. I notified my neighbors on each side as to what would be transpiring - and they cordially offered me use of their driveways for overflow parking. (They stood by the fence and raised a toast during the ceremony.) As the guest list grew, the bride and I realized that more food was going to be needed than originally assumed, so we went on the hunt for a local foodtruck who would take its place in my driveway and become the rehearsal dinner/wedding reception/post-wedding buffet caterer in one fell swoop. The nearby Thai Café boxed two of its homemade coconut confections to become the official wedding cake. And the bride's mom, ever the trooper, got an online certification so she could serve as the wedding officiant. On the day of the event, we had 100 feet of extension cord running from the garden shed to power the oxygen tank - and the mom made it through the long hot and humid afternoon in flying colors.

I had phoned the Airbnb guest who would be departing my space on the day of the wedding in order to inquire about her planned departure time and to explain what would be going on later that day as the new Airbnb guests checked in to begin dressing for the wedding. "Oh my god," the other guest exclaimed, "I'm a wedding singer! Do they want me to stay over and sing?!"

The day came off without a hitch.

The bride dressed upstairs in my part of the house so she could remain hidden from the groom who was dressing downstairs in the Airbnb apartment. Guests and family members began arriving, taking turns for a little spritz at the “Wedding Mosquito Repellent Station” that had been set up just inside the garden entrance. (June afternoon + eastern North Carolina + Sweet Wedding Guests = Mosquito Feeding Frenzy.) The foodtruck backed into my front drive and began firing up their grills. Beauchamp, the dog, had on his best Rod Stewart hairdo and Peyroux, the cat, found her appropriate perch to recline, be admired and wait for room service. The bride’s uncle escorted her through the garden gate, past the 30+ guests who’d gathered near the back corner of the garden that had been festooned with lights and music. The vows were read in Wolof, the groom’s traditional tribal language, and then translated by the Mom for the guests.

All in all, it felt like another successful Airbnb “hosting experience,” albeit one requiring a bit more time and energy than most, but also one that would likely remain at the top of my “Well, you think YOU have an Airbnb story?!” conversations for a long time to come.

I stood on the deck that day, looking at what was transpiring as a result of a connection to this online home-sharing network which, a year before, I didn’t even know a thing about. Yet, with guest after guest from the moment I’d signed on as an Airbnb host, right on to the recent evening of November 13 as an attendee at the Airbnb Open in Paris, a realization had become remarkably clear...

That discovery is that so very much of what Airbnb is all about at its core in 2015 is inextricably akin to the same principles as another organization from my past to which I was first introduced as a student in 1968 when I received a scholarship to travel to live with a family in India as a participant in The Experiment in International Living. Founded by Dr. Donald B. Watt in 1932 and still going strong today, The Experiment has utilized the homestay experience as a vital pathway toward cross-cultural understanding and empathetic perspective for almost 90 years. As I watched what happened in my backyard on this afternoon in June, standing with persons I had not

even met two weeks before, the by-words of both organizations hovered above my head like two feathery clouds folding into one as I listened to these new friends say “I do.”

“Belong anywhere.”  
Airbnb, 2015

“We learn to live together by living together.”  
The Experiment in International Living, 1932

I’m grateful for what I have gained from Airbnb - as well as from The Experiment in International Living. I hope I can continue to be shaped by their philosophies, outreach and vision.

With every arriving reservation inquiry since that day in June, I immediately look to see if there’s a request for an early check-in.

One never knows where that might lead...

Stephen Barefoot  
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Durham, NC

