

Relationships

Roommate wars don't have to end unhappily

By ERIN HILL PERRY
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Friends since they were students at King High School during the late 1990s, Candice Fortman and Nesia Willis wanted nothing more than to be roommates when they were headed to Ferris State University.

"Our mothers 100% did not want us to live together," says Fortman, 29, of Detroit. "But we were friends. It was gonna be perfect."

They even decided on a Disney theme for their room. "She was Mickey Mouse. I was Winnie the Pooh," Fortman recalled.

But early on, Fortman learned that she was the get-up-and-go type who could only get dressed with her stereo on. Willis turned out to be a sleep-

er who enjoyed talking to her boyfriend in the wee hours of the morning. One was organized; the other — not so much. And then, a little jealousy emerged.

Willis "became really involved around campus, and I was a little jealous being stuck in the room, scared to leave," Fortman says.

Things were miserable in Room 142 of Merrill-Travis Hall during their 1999-2000 freshman year.

They called home and said they wanted out.

Their moms' answers: No and no.

"The tension was very uncomfortable, almost unbearable," says Willis, 29, of Detroit.

Eventually, Willis moved into their suitemate's room, and Fortman had a room to herself. All they had to do was

be cordial enough to share the bathroom.

TALK IT OUT

Andrea Gerber, associate director of operations in the Office of Housing and Residential Life at Wayne State University, says a simple conversation could have eased the tension between the two.

"Most roommate conflicts can easily be resolved by communicating with your roommate," Gerber says.

"Friends don't always make the best roommates," Gerber says. "Roommates don't always make the best friends." Gerber said most institutions try to match roommates based on preferences. Some even have contracts that get students to agree on things like room temperature and bed times.

The problem is: When stu-

dents fill out roommate questionnaires, they're still in high school. As their first semester of college progresses, they change, she says.

'YOU COULD HAVE CALLED'

Fortman stayed at Ferris the summer after her freshman year, and Willis went back home. The two still weren't on good terms.

"That summer, Nesia and her boyfriend were in a serious car accident," Fortman says.

"I didn't call her. My mom called, my grandparents called. But I didn't call. It had gotten so bad that common decency and courtesy went out the door. I was wrong. I knew I was wrong."

When they saw each other for the first time the following school year, Fortman says:



WILLIAM ARCHIE/Detroit Free Press

High school pals Candice Fortman, 29, left, and Nesia Willis, 29, both of Detroit, had a falling out after sharing a dorm room at Ferris State. They later resolved their differences and are now the best of friends.

"She just looked at me, and she said, 'You could have called.'"

More than six years after graduating from Ferris, the two remain close. "And now her child sucks me dry of money," Fortman says. She's godmother to Willis' 5-year-old daughter,

SaNiya.

"I wouldn't trade any of the experiences — both good and bad — because it shaped and molded us into the best of friends," Willis says.

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DEAR CAROLYN: I'm taking my twin daughters, 2, to visit my parents, who live several states away. They are always



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thrilled to see the girls, but my mother favors one of

my daughters. She is famous for taking huge offense at the slightest criticism. I have a feeling that anything I say will result in her becoming incredibly defensive, devolve into "Well, I must be the worst grandmother ever," and end with a tearful description of everything she's ever done for me and how ungrateful I am. Can you help?— **Ohio**

DEAR OHIO: Not as much as either of us would like. That's because this isn't just about a grandma who needs a little prompting toward fairness. The way you describe your mother, she has deep insecurities and lacks the maturity to recognize them, much less plumb them, confront them and repair them.

If I'm right about her, she needs to be the hero, to be needed. Thus the dramatic defensiveness: She's buying love, and throwing up barriers to criticism.

By turning even mildly negative feedback into an interpretation of "huge offense" and tearful hyperbole, your mom stifles familial dissent. She will be indulged, or you will be punished. It's a powerful weapon.

If this is true, she might respond to any criticism by focusing more on Twin A, or, worse, shunning B. For that reason alone, consider running this by a family therapist.

I suggest protecting your kids on many active fronts. Interrupt Grandma's sustained attentions to A; say openly, "Time for B to see Grandma," recruit Grandpa or other loved ones to give extra attention to B (but be careful not to punish Twin A for your mother's indulgence); supervise Grandma closely with each child. Limit the unhealthy exposure, too, by keeping visits short. As your children grow, adapt your interventions accordingly.

READ CAROLYN HAX EVERY DAY IN THE FREE PRESS. WRITE TO HER CARE OF THE WASHINGTON POST, STYLE PLUS, 1150 15TH ST., NW, WASHINGTON, D.C. 20071 OR E-MAIL TELLME@WASHPOST.COM.



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