

**SHE BAKES BROWNIES FOR YOU,  
GIVES ADVICE ABOUT YOUR FRIENDS  
& HELPS ORGANISE YOUR LIFE ...**



Australian writer Alice Wasley (right) enlisted the services of surrogate mum Nina Keneally (left) in New York.

... all for \$50 an hour  
**WOULD YOU RENT A MUM?**

Moving overseas might equal adventure and excitement, but it also means living far from family. What if you could pay for a healthy serve of home cooking and maternal advice? Alice Wasley dials up a stand-in mum, whose business is booming

**T**rudging up the snowy street after a long week tied to my computer, I'm tired and grumpy and my nose is cold. I can't confirm or deny that I'm also kicking stones and mournfully humming "All By Myself" à la Bridget Jones, but I will admit that all I want is a sympathetic ear and some home-cooked food. Looking up at the classic New York brownstone that is my destination, I push the buzzer and feel myself perk up. Finally, some Mum time.

I should mention that my real mum lives in Adelaide, where I grew up, and that's where she is now with my dad. I haven't seen them for a year and I hadn't lived at home for more than a decade when I moved to New York two years ago. I'm used to not being able to drop in for a meal or a glass of wine and a chat after a crappy day. I definitely feel the extra distance over here and I miss her. Which is why, on this icy winter's day, I'm getting ready to bake brownies with a mother I have rented to fill the gap.

I'll be honest. After living in New York for a while, services that used to seem warped and indulgent start to make sense. Why wouldn't you pay someone \$20 to stand in line for you, hire a "virtual dating assistant" to impersonate you on dating apps or order up some dude to put together Ikea furniture? So when I discovered a woman in Brooklyn who offers her maternal services to fully grown adults, I was intrigued but not surprised. Intrigued enough to pick up the phone and book a session with my new, New York "mum".

Nina Keneally, 64 and a mother of two grown sons, came up with the idea for "Need A Mom" after moving with her husband from suburban Connecticut to

Bushwick, a rapidly gentrifying Brooklyn neighbourhood full of 20-something creatives. Getting to know a few of the local millennials in her yoga class and local restaurants, she realised many of them were living on the other side of the country to their families and were in need of some motherly advice and comfort, but preferably without the added baggage and judgement. So, last year she decided to step in, for \$US40 (\$54) an hour. Her slogan: "When you need a mom, just not YOUR mom".

Ready to soak up some motherly vibes, I'm greeted at the door by Keaton, a boisterous Shar-Pei, followed by Nina, a slim brunette with a friendly smile. The presence of a fun dog is an excellent start, as my main criticism of my parents is the gaping dog-sized hole in their lives these days. Nina takes my coat and we head to the kitchen with Keaton trailing behind, tail wagging expectantly. "He gets extra treats if he behaves when visitors come over," says Nina. So he doesn't really love me for me, then? This really is a tough town; even New York's dogs have an agenda.

All the brownie ingredients are laid out neatly on the long bench in her spacious kitchen. Nina makes coffee and we start to bake. She's warm, cheerful and easy to chat to: she's a switched-on New Yorker, without being intimidatingly cool or some kind of '50s throwback, although in classic mum style she hands me a spoon so I can taste the batter.

We talk about being single and youngish (I'm 34) and how it compares with her experiences when she moved to New York in the '70s.

"I have a pretty boots-on-the-ground understanding of what it's like to be young and live in this city," she says. "I came to [New York] with a dream when I was in my 20s knowing no-one but a few college and drama school friends, but then I lived here for a long time before I got married, and both my sons live here, too. So, I realised I have a perspective many parents don't have about what it's like to live in New York City."

According to Nina, the city was a lot more affordable back then and less competitive, which made life easier. "Our idea of a big night out was to go for a burger and beer ... there wasn't that pressure of, 'Oh we have to go try that new ramen place', like there is now."

I'm sent home to Manhattan with a tin of delicious, warm salted fudge brownies. All in all, a pretty satisfying mum-like encounter. Speeding through the city on the subway, I feel a little bit more grounded, which is no small feat in a relentlessly confronting city like New York. I'm ready to face the world again - right after I go home and demolish these brownies, of course. I decide to book another session with Nina but I do have a nagging sense that I'm cheating on my mum.

The next day I speak to my real mum and dad. They have me on speaker, which, as always, is annoying because we all talk over the top of each other. I tell them a little about my week and about Nina, and soon enough Mum and I are bickering over something entirely unrelated. "You know," I say, "this would never happen with rent-a-mum."

"Fine, then call fucking rent-a-mum!" answers my mum, which is kind of a joke, but not really. Having pointless, nonsensical arguments with my mother makes me feel right at home, and I realise this long-distance phone conversation is actually more comforting than the baking session. No matter how much you pay someone to mother you, you can never replace the finely calibrated dynamics of your real family. In this case, one in which we push each other's buttons for sport. ▷

**"This would never happen with rent-a-mum," I say, as Mum and I bicker over the phone**

# Challenge

A few days later, on a sunny afternoon, Nina comes over to my place in Harlem. For Manhattan, it's a reasonably sized apartment (i.e. small but not microscopic). Since I work from home as a freelance writer and have a flatmate, I could use some advice about organising the space more efficiently. I frantically clean up before she comes over, just as I would for my real mum.

When she arrives she jokes about how "we all hide our junk in our closets before our mothers visit" and I glance at my bursting cupboards. Busted. She gives me some good ideas about inexpensive ways to organise my workspace although, unlike my actual mum, she doesn't secretly move things around when I'm not looking. It's actually much easier to take advice from Nina about this kind of thing, even though my own mum is an organisational wizard. I think it's because I'm less concerned about Nina's opinion of me.

We walk up the street to my local coffee shop, which is chock-a-block with people tapping away at their laptops. Squeezing into a corner with our espressos, I explain that I've recently moved here from downtown and I worry about walking home from the subway at night. I've had a great experience so far, but there was a shooting just a few days earlier between my house and the subway station, so I need to be wary. This is something I wouldn't talk to my real mum about because a) it would freak her out unnecessarily and b) growing up on the mean streets of Adelaide hasn't really made her a reliable expert in this field.

I've heard a lot about the high crime levels in New York in the '70s and how you couldn't go into Central Park without being murdered, so I'm curious to hear of Nina's experiences.

"I was lucky," she recalls over the cafe buzz. "If I walked around alone I was pretty careful to stay on major arteries. But once, when I was about 24, I mouthed off to someone in Times Square about something and he punched me in the face. I learnt not to do that!"



## MOTHERLY LOVE

Nina Keneally of Need A Mom dispenses judgement-free advice and care to young New Yorkers feeling a motherly gap in their lives.

It's one of the incidents that led to her motto: "Good judgement comes from experience and experience comes from bad judgement."

The gist of her advice is that a few dicey things will probably happen and then I'll learn how to avoid them next time and in turn, develop a better "antenna".

Along with face-to-face consultations, Nina also provides phone, Skype and text sessions, so you can contact her for advice and moral support as issues crop up in your life, just like you would your real mum. Since launching Need A Mom last October, Nina has met about 30 clients, and currently sees three or four "kids" a week. Most of her customers are women, and about a third book several sessions. She also exchanges letters with a man in Maryland whose mother passed away.

So, the next day when I need to figure out what to do to help a friend who has just had a baby, I call Nina for her thoughts. My friend's mum had been on hand but has gone back to Australia, and her husband is travelling for work. She has another child who is almost two. "How about taking the older one to the park to give your friend a break?" offers Nina.

Admittedly, this is something I probably could have thought of myself but now she's said it out loud, I'll feel selfish if I don't do it. Hang on, I'm not sure about this: I was sucked in by the brownies and Keaton's tricks and here I am potentially becoming a better person. Another classic mum move.

It's easy to see why the Bushwick 20-somethings, with parents back in Iowa and the like, began to confide in Nina. Her life experience and reassuring

warmth make her an appealing confidante. Among other things, she's worked as a theatre producer and a restaurant hostess, and is a trained drug and alcohol rehabilitation counsellor who spent seven years working at a methadone clinic in Connecticut. She's just as equipped to deal with a client questioning whether to return

to stripping as she is to console someone after a break-up or help them with their resumé, although she's quick to point out she isn't a therapist and will help clients find one if she thinks it necessary. But even mums for hire have their limits: "One woman asked me to come to Staten Island and set up and clean up her baby's birthday party, and I said, 'No, you can hire someone else to do that.'"

I'm not sure I came out of this experience missing my mum any less, but maybe that's not the point. Talking to Nina and taking time out of my normal life helped me look at things with a slightly different perspective. At first her service seemed a bit of a gimmick but now I can see the value in having someone on call for some motherly wisdom minus the emotional entanglements, especially in this city.

Living in New York is an exciting, enriching experience but at times it's also punishing, lonely and, as they would say here, can really kick your ass. I don't think rent-a-mums are going to become as ubiquitous as therapists and trainers, but Nina has certainly identified a niche that she is uniquely qualified to fill.

One of the things Nina says she notices cropping up regularly when talking to young people is that, these days, they seem anxious for their lives to conform to a timetable. In her day, she says, they just went with the flow. So, with that in mind, I'm going to head out into the city and use my best bad judgement to rack up some experiences. □

With her advice I am potentially becoming a better person. Classic mum move