

## RETIREMENT LIVING

# When Neighbors Are Like Extended Family

**S**UE AND ART LLOYD don't seem like revolutionaries, but since 1999 they've been on the cutting edge of retirement-housing trends. Sue, 70, and Art, 78, are among 35 residents who live in a cohousing community located on half a city block near the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

On Sunday nights, the Lloyds leave their three-bedroom townhome to meet their Village Cohousing neighbors at the "common house" for a potluck dinner. Over a glass of wine, the residents of this new-fangled commune-like development sit by the fireplace talking, folding laundry and watching TV.

Sharing is key at Village Cohousing, as it is at similar communities nationwide. Several households have designated their cars for use by other residents. If Sue needs a plumber, she'll alert her neighbors so they can coordinate the visit. Some older residents provide child care for younger families. Not long ago, when a young neighbor went into labor in the middle of the night, an older resident stayed with the sibling until the parents and new baby came home.

Like all of the residents at Village Cohousing, Art, a retired Episcopal chaplain, and Sue, a treasurer for her church and several nonprofits, each spend at least 12 hours a month helping to manage the place. They serve on committees that oversee maintenance, book-keeping and the organic garden that provides some of the food for the twice-a-week communal meals. "Our dream was to live in a close-knit, supportive, inter-generational community," says Sue.

If you like the idea of living in a community where neighbors are like an extended family, perhaps you should consider cohousing. Since the first cohousing projects in the U.S. opened in the late 1980s, the number of such developments has grown to about 95 in nearly two dozen states, according to the Cohousing Association of the United States. The developments range from the quarter-acre, eight-unit Ujima Place in Chicago to 67-unit East Lake Commons on 20 acres in Decatur, Ga. Another 100 communities are in various stages of development.

Most cooperative developments are intergenerational, such as Village Cohousing, where residents range in age from six months to 86. About one-third of residents in intergenerational housing are age 50

and older. A growing trend is the creation of seniors-only cohousing. Three elder communities exist now, and about 15 others are in the planning stages.

Developers and gerontologists expect that both types of cohousing will grow in popularity as the aging Woodstock generation seeks a way to recreate the community-like experiences of their youth. Many experts also consider cohousing a way for seniors to avoid isolation and to find the help they need without turning to assisted-living or nursing-home care.



Members planning the Silver Sage Village enjoy a summer picnic.

Dr. William Thomas, a geriatrician and nursing-home reformer, says that people he meets are always telling him that they will avoid institutional care by living with friends. "It's rarely more than wishful thinking," says Thomas, author of *What Are Old People For? How Elders Will Save the World* (Vanderwyk & Burnham, \$25). "What few people realize is that there really is a practical way to create the self-sustaining community they seek."

Charles Durrett is a Nevada City, Cal., architect who's been designing cohousing projects since importing the concept from Denmark. "When you get to know your neighbors, you develop a relationship involving caring, exchange and support," Durrett says. He offers one example: "When a cohousing member in my community broke a hip this summer, other members stopped by every day. Every adult and child had something to do with her convalescence. We took her places and took care of her cat."

Turnover tends to be low at existing communities, although you can search the Web site of the Cohous-

ing Association of the United States ([www.cohousing.org](http://www.cohousing.org); 314-754-5828) for openings. Typically, the projects are created by a core group of future residents. The Lloyds, who lived in a single-family house in Madison for 31 years, spearheaded the effort after attending a cohousing seminar sponsored by a local architectural firm in 1991. Along with others who attended the meeting, the Lloyds spent the next nine years scouting sites, securing financial backing, hiring builders and creating the governance system.

Like many developments, Village Cohousing's common area includes a kitchen, fireplace, laundry room, guest rooms and play area. Most cohousing is designed to encourage togetherness. Single-family



The homes of Glacier Circle Senior Community share a courtyard.

homes, apartments or townhouses, all with their own kitchens, often face each other across a pedestrian street or courtyard. Some have front and back porches: If you sit on the front porch, it means you are open to socializing, while sitting on the back porch signals a desire for privacy.

In most cases, the cohousing units are more expensive than other homes in their areas. In addition to the private home, the resident buys part of the common land and buildings and amenities. Monthly homeowner association fees range from \$100 to \$350. Still, cohousing residents contend that these higher costs are more than offset by energy efficient design, group purchasing and free management.

### For Elders Only

Thirty-three residents live in the ElderSpirit Community, a senior-only development in Abingdon, Va. Dene Peterson, 77, a founder of ElderSpirit, says multigenerational cohousing tends to focus on children. Elder-cohousing residents have more discussion

and activities related to spirituality and caregiving.

Residents of the ElderSpirit and Glacier Circle Senior Community in Davis, Cal., have participated in training for Share the Care ([www.sharethecare.org](http://www.sharethecare.org)), an educational program that helps caregivers avoid burnout. Cohousing members help care for frailer residents with meals and doctor visits.

But ElderSpirit residents also have fun. They play bridge together, participate in a weekly meditation group and take adult learning classes at the local college. "Your social life is easy," says Peterson, a nun and retired administrator from Ann Arbor, Mich.

This desire to belong to a group of like-minded seniors was what inspired Patrice Morrow, 60, a semiretired professor in Minnesota, to help plan Silver Sage Village, an elder-cohousing project that will open soon in Boulder. Morrow, who lives part-time in Boulder, will move there permanently this year.

Morrow notes that her friends and family are scattered around the world. She wanted to retire to an "intentional community," where her new friends could become a surrogate family. "It is your neighbors that you call on if you want to go to a movie, or if you are sick or sad," she says. "Even if you have grown kids in the area, they are busy with jobs and kids, and can't be your entire social scene."

### Cohousing Is Not For Everyone

Cohousing may not be a reasonable option for those who want to move into a ready-made retirement community. Developing a project can take two to six years to complete. You also need to be prepared to make decisions by consensus, says Durrett. You must have good interpersonal skills and the time to participate in planning meetings.

If you're interested in cohousing, review the cohousing association Web site as well as the site for the Elder Cohousing Network ([www.eldercohousing.org](http://www.eldercohousing.org); 303-413-8066). Both have directories of existing and planned cohousing developments and other information on how to create and maintain a cooperative-housing community.

To delve further, read *The Cohousing Handbook: Building a Place for Community* by Chris and Kelly ScottHanson (New Society Publishers, \$27); *Senior Cohousing: A Community Approach to Independent Living* by Charles Durrett (Ten Speed Press, \$30); and *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves* by Kathryn McCamant, Charles Durrett and Ellen Hertzman (Ten Speed Press, \$30). **K** —LEAH DOBKIN