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## Not Home Alone

Seniors are signing up for semi-communal enclaves, with separate homes but a supportive community

By SALLY ABRAHMS

Walking out of the doctor's office to her car, Clare Marie Ackroyd slipped on wet grass, fell and broke her right shoulder. When she got home from the emergency room later that day, her arm was in a sling, and she couldn't dress herself, fix a meal or even sign a check. That's an inconvenient situation for anyone, but for someone who lives alone, it can be a total nightmare. Ackroyd, 62, is divorced and has only one child, who lives in England, but her eight-week convalescence has been far easier than she expected. Ackroyd lives in ElderSpirit, a cohousing community in Abingdon, Va., and her fellow residents have rallied around her as her shoulder heals. One of them has taken on the assignment of helping her shower, dress and make breakfast. Others prepare and deliver lunches and dinners for the rest of the week. Just as important, emotional support has been constant too. "It's wonderful because I feel all the love and care from these people," says Ackroyd, a former librarian, who had moved into ElderSpirit from Bath, Maine, just two months before the accident. "This experience has really opened me up and shown me just what the community is."

Cohousing, which debuted in Denmark in the 1970s, is a semi-communal concept in which separate living units--usually attached condo-style--are clustered around a "common house," which, at the very least, has a kitchen, a dining room and a third area for gatherings and activities. The idea is to bring back a time when neighbors were an integral part of one another's lives, sharing meals and recreation--and providing companionship and a helping hand. That concept has been co-opted recently by older people looking for a way to combine their autonomy with access to a supportive community. Elder cohousing features single-story units; step-free entrances; grab bars; and wide, wheelchair-accessible doorways.

The first senior-cohousing development, called Glacier Circle, opened in Davis, Calif., last December. ElderSpirit's residents started moving in during the spring and summer. The common house in each cohousing

project is tailored to the resident group's interests and needs. For instance, the one at Silver Sage Village, a 16-unit development that broke ground in Boulder, Colo., in August, will have a gourmet kitchen, dining room, library, crafts and multimedia rooms, plus two bedrooms for caregivers or visiting family members.

Ackroyd, a self-described nomad who has lived in Ohio, New York and Massachusetts, as well as Maine, says she chose ElderSpirit because she wanted to be part of a caring community that shares her interest in spirituality and a desire to assist one another as its members age together. In addition to three former nuns who came up with the ElderSpirit concept, its residents include a substance-abuse counselor, a city manager, a painter, an attorney, a secretary, a female police officer and a teacher, all now retired, plus a speech therapist and a tennis coach who are still working. They came to ElderSpirit from 10 states; there is even a resident from the tiny European country of Andorra. Although ElderSpirit members must be 55 years or older to buy or rent, the current residents range in age from 62 to 84, with the majority in their 70s. Once they have all moved in, the community will consist of nine men and 30 women, including seven couples.

Proponents of elder cohousing see it as an affordable and creative alternative to assisted living and nursing homes. Sixteen of ElderSpirit's 29 units are federally subsidized rentals that cost from \$300 to \$350 a month for a one-bedroom and \$484 a month for two bedrooms. The remaining 13 homes have sold for \$90,000 to \$100,000 for a one-bedroom and \$113,200 for two. All residents chip in \$150 a month for expenses, including maintenance and, when the common-house kitchen is completed, communal meals available to all. And everyone makes a commitment to help one another as they grow older.

Prospective elder-cohousing residents, attracted by newspaper ads or word of mouth, meet with a developer, architect, banks and other financing agencies before ground is broken to come up with a project to fit the personality of the group. They get to know one another through regular meetings as the project develops. Impatient or authoritarian types tend to drop out because it takes about two years to complete a project and all decisions and rules for the community are by consensus. New members can jump in at any time, even after the project is built, but must pledge to abide by the agreed-upon bylaws.

"People 55 and older are at the beginning of a revolution to reinvent the kind of housing they want to live in for the rest of their lives," says Zev Paiss, 48, a co-founder of the Elder Cohousing Network in Boulder, Colo. "There have been no models before about how to grow old and stay in your home but be surrounded by a group of neighbors with a connection. This is something people are craving." Interest in the elder-cohousing movement is spreading. Charles Durrett, who brought the housing concept to the U.S. and is the author of *Senior Cohousing: A Community*

Approach to Independent Living, says he receives calls daily inquiring about the idea. Durrett and his wife Kathryn McCamant are the architects of Silver Sage and are also designing projects in the Sierra foothills of Grass Valley, Calif., and Arvada, Colo. ElderSpirit, meanwhile, is helping groups in Florida, North Carolina, Kansas and Ohio start other elder-cohousing developments with a spiritual component.

Ackroyd and her shoulder notwithstanding, current elder-cohousing residents tend to be healthy, active and independent, so no one is sure how the concept will work when increasing numbers of residents become frail and in need of assistance. Advocates say that when residents get sick, they will pay for and arrange their own care but that the communal-living arrangement may offer an advantage since infirm members could share the expense of hiring a health-care provider to tend to several of them. And, of course, members will continue to enjoy the support and physical presence of people who have become part of their lives. "I expect to live and die in the community I took part in creating," says Catherine Rumschlag, 80, one of the former nuns who helped found ElderSpirit. "We'll help each other. I don't want to go to a nursing home with strangers."

Still, being a pioneer has its growing pains. The ElderSpirit group ran out of money when it unexpectedly had to pay \$250,000 to construct a retaining wall on the property. Residents are looking for funds to complete the interior of the common house and four adjoining apartments. In the meantime, they try to keep team spirit going with communal meals about twice a month. One was recently held at the town's senior center, and residents have picnicked on the nearby Virginia Creeper Trail. At other times, there are informal meals in one another's kitchens.

Silver Sage is still in the planning stage. The Boulder community's 16 homes will range in size from 800 to 2,000 sq. ft. and cost from \$100,000 to \$695,000. All the porches will open onto a courtyard with an amphitheater. Architecturally, says Durrett, "it is embracing. You can almost draw a pair of arms and say, 'We're all in this place together, and we're going to solve common problems together.'"

Annie Russell, 66, who is divorced and works for the company developing Silver Sage, moved into a nearby intergenerational-cohousing project three years ago. "I love the shared meals, the camaraderie in the kitchen when we're chopping vegetables--and the children," says Russell. "My son isn't married, and I don't have grandchildren. Two more babies were born this year, and they get passed around the common house." But Russell has already put money down on a unit in Silver Sage because she feels she will have more in common with its residents than with her current neighbors, many of whom are young families "wondering where to find the next baby sitter and getting dinner on the table." At Silver Sage, by contrast, there are monthly meetings at which members discuss aging issues. "People are going to get sick and die, and we want to have a plan

about how we as a community are going to embrace and support that," says Russell. In the process, they'll also be pioneering a new way for the elderly to live.

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