



# Retirees Create Alternative Communities

**More Elderly Americans Are Drawn to Communities That Reflect Their Particular Interests**

**By MARC LALLANILLA**

**Oct. 26, 2005** — - Like a growing number of retirees, Creigh and Shirley Snyder were not enthralled with the prospect of spending their golden years in a Florida retirement community.

"We had been to Florida every year for 10 years," said Creigh, 77, a retired sales rep from York, Pa.

"And we decided that we definitely didn't want to live there," added Shirley, 76.

Two years ago, Creigh and Shirley moved to The Village at Penn State, a retirement community affiliated with Pennsylvania State University, where they found a wide range of activities as well as state-of-the-art health care facilities. Residents of The Village can enroll in classes at Penn State without paying any additional fees or tuition.

The Snyders are part of a growing wave of retirees who are moving to communities that offer alternatives to shuffleboard and golf. From developments with a spiritual focus to resorts catering to gays and lesbians, the range of options for today's retirees is wider than ever.

"Going to golf courses every day isn't an option for everyone," said Jill Lillie, director of community relations for The Village. She hastened to add, however, "We do have access to Penn State's two golf courses at a reduced rate."

## Who Needs Palm Trees?

As baby boomers face retirement, they bring with them the individuality that has defined their generation -- and they're looking for that same individuality in their retirement communities.

"There's no question that the older, traditional versions of retirement have changed, and living arrangements are part of that," said Elinor Ginzler, director of livable communities for the AARP.

"The trend is diversification -- that's what's driving the market these days," said Ginzler. "We all know the boomers will buy into that completely and they will design it themselves."

So are the palm-studded golf communities of Boca Raton and Scottsdale emptying out? Not anytime soon, notes Ginzler. "People will still be moving to Sun City," she said.

But sunny weather is no longer the main criterion driving retirees to move. "Climate is not the most important factor for everyone. People want to live in a community that's significant to them. All of these

[communities] are their own unique niches and none of them dominate over the others."

## **Staying Put, Staying Happy**

Many retirees, in fact, choose not to move at all, but remain in the buildings or neighborhoods where they have lived for years.

Naturally occurring retirement communities -- sometimes called "NORCs" by people in the industry -- have sprung up where aging residents of apartment buildings and neighborhoods decide to stay put. Other such communities develop where younger residents have moved out -- such as farming or mining towns.

"There are some neighborhoods in New York that have been designated as official NORCs," said Ginzler. In most cases, services like transportation and health care are brought to these areas, instead of residents being forced to move to places where the services already exist.

The first NORC was founded in New York City in 1986. Today, there are over 80 publicly funded NORCs throughout the United States; supportive service programs provide residents with amenities like home care nursing, educational seminars and recreational activities.

Another innovative model for retirement housing comes from Denmark: co-housing, where younger residents and retirees share responsibility for the design, maintenance and management of their community.

One of the only elder co-housing facilities in the United States is now being completed in the rolling foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. ElderSpirit, a small community of homes and apartments in Abingdon, Va., is expected to be ready for its residents in November.

## **Aging As a Spiritual Quest**

What's unique about ElderSpirit is its focus on late-life spirituality. Formed by a group of former Catholic nuns, the residents are committed to exploring the issues involved in the end of life and expectations about death.

"Our mission is a community of mutual support and late-life spirituality," said Dene Peterson, executive director of the Trailview Development Corp., the nonprofit group building ElderSpirit.

"Spirituality is what people were really looking for," said Peterson. But she emphasizes that this does not refer to organized religious services. "Spirituality doesn't mean religion," Peterson added.

ElderSpirit welcomes residents from a range of backgrounds and beliefs. "We've attracted Buddhists, and Hindus, and a Unitarian minister, as well as Presbyterians and Catholics," Peterson said. The community is developing a small prayer room, but "we're not going to call it a chapel because that usually denotes a Christian place," she said.

Old age, Peterson notes, is an appropriate time for spiritual growth. "You change as you grow older and you begin to reflect more," she said. "When your hair turns gray, go grow your soul."

Peterson believes this idea runs counter to the consumer model of retirement, which accents a life of leisure and play she describes as "trivial and boring."

She added, "The one who dies with the most toys wins, gets empty."

## **Gay and Gray**

The Palms of Manasota looks like any other housing development in central Florida, with modest homes and condominiums on quiet, tree-shaded streets.

The residents are what make this community different. This is a retirement village designed and built expressly for gays and lesbians.

Mary Cumisky, 64, moved from New Jersey to The Palms of Manasota over a year ago with her partner, Carol Rinewalt, 59. "It's not really different from anywhere else," said Cumisky.

The community was started in 1996 by Bill Laing, who believed many gay retirees would not be welcomed in typical senior developments and would be unwilling to spend their final years living in the closet.

"It was Bill Laing's vision of us helping each other because we don't have the family connections that other people have," said Cumisky. Other gay and lesbian retirement communities can be found around the country, and more are planned.

Though retirement communities tend to be conservative, relationships with neighbors have been cordial for the most part.

"So far we haven't really had any problems," Cumisky said. "There've been a couple of times when kids rode around yelling out obscenities but we haven't had any real problems."

The Palms has, in fact, attracted retirees who are not gay -- a straight couple recently moved in, knowing they were buying property in a gay community, and the residents did nothing to dissuade their new neighbors.

"We decided that we've always been discriminated against, so we really shouldn't do it ourselves," Cumisky said.

"We're not very flamboyant -- we're a pretty conservative group," Cumisky added. "We're just regular people trying to live out our lives."

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