Creating the village that will raise the children

Cohousing development offers homeowners a close-knit community

BY NESHAMA ABRAHAM

When Sarah and Matt Brady were looking for a new Aurora home for themselves and the family they plan to have, they did the usual: looked at schools in the area, checked out the recreational facilities and met with their future neighbors.

Met with future neighbors?

The Bradys are planning to move to Aurora's HomeTown Village and have joined with others to create a new type of neighborhood where residents work together to organize the community before construction. In the process, future residents get to know one another before they move in.

Parents are realizing that it takes more than a busy, nuclear family to raise a child. In response, cohousing came to the United States from Denmark 12 years ago. There are now nearly 70 completed cohousing neighborhoods in the United States; about

life for their daughter Jessie, now 12. They have lived in cohousing in Emeryville, Calif., since Jessie was 1.

Says Durrett: "We were recently in Calgary, Canada, and when we were picked up at the airport Jessie started easily talking with the four adults in the car. By growing up in cohousing and having weekly meals with adults and children her whole life, she has a high comfort level with adults and has learned to talk with any person without intimidation.



"Moreover, she has learned an ethic that people are useful. When we have a community dinner or a workday, she has seen that people pull their share."

Dave Schneider, a 10-year resident of Nyland Cohousing in Lafayette, Colo., where his children, Ben, now 25 and Emily, 23, grew up, says, "I believe both of my children are more flexible and open-minded because they grew up in cohousing in what was an extended family. They saw people with different ways of being in the world coming together to create a community."

Living in cohousing also offers a child the advantage of having ongoing contact with many adults, each with specific skills to share. Laura Weathered is the founder and a current resident of Acme Artist Community in Chicago, where 25 households share residential and work space. "In our community of writers, poets, painters and photographers,

Residents and friends of the Nomad Cohousing community in Boulder, Colo., gather in the common house for a solstice celebration and gift exchange.

are in the development stage. Aurora's HomeTown Village is one of them. It will be a cohousing neighborhood where members own their own homes and are equal owners in all land and common facilities.

Cohousing neighborhoods are mainstream communities whose residents come from a variety of lifestyles and careers, including retirees, singles, couples and families with children of all ages. What they all share is the desire for a supportive, close-knit community where people stay connected, enjoy meals and social activities together and help one another.

Socialization and mentoring

There are clear advantages for children who grow up in cohousing communities: They become friends with younger and older people, and they have opportunities to learn from adults other than their parents.

Chuck Durrett and his wife, Katie McCamant, co-authored *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*. The book talks about the advantage of a rich community social

Neshama Abraham is a professional writer, mother and resident of Nomad Cohousing in Boulder, Colo., where she and her husband are raising their two daughters in a 25-person urban cohousing neighborhood.

Cohousing developments

Acme Artist Community. This neighborhood was completed in early 2003 and is built around a rehabilitated 50,000-square-foot warehouse on the North Side of Chicago. The $3.2 million project created 25 affordable living and work spaces, plus common areas for three nonprofit organizations. Residents in the community include artists, writers, theater artists, photographers, media people and visual artists. Contact Laura Weathered, director, Near NorthWest Arts Council at (773) 278-7677 or by e-mail, *nnwac@artswire.org*.

Chicago Village Cohousing. This group of eight households (singles, single parents and families) is currently looking for a site to create a cohousing community in Chicago. Contact Marty Becklenberg at (773) 764-5065 or by e-mail at *MBecklen@earthlink.net*.

Chicago Cohousing Network. This 10-year-old organization produces a bimonthly newsletter about cohousing activities in the Chicago area. Contact Hal Mead at (847) 869-8493.

Cohousing Association of the United States. The nonprofit national organization supports the creation of cohousing, *www.cohousing.org*

HomeTown Village. This is a new cohousing community now forming and open to new families. A two-acre site has been set aside by Bigelow Homes for an energy-efficient, affordable cohousing neighborhood of 27 to 30 homes in the HomeTown Aurora project. The site plan is completed and five different models homes are available for walk-throughs at a price range of $150,000 to $200,000 for two- to four-bedroom houses. Several households have begun meeting and the group is focusing on community building. Construction is planned to begin this year, with families moving in during 2005. Contact Sarah Brady at (630) 605-8370 or visit *www.HomeTownVillage.org*.

Safety and support

Parents choose cohousing neighborhoods for the supportive, involved community. Future HomeTown Village member Brady says safety was a key factor in choosing the cohousing neighborhood in Aurora.

In addition to having lots of "aunts and uncles" they can count on, children living in cohousing develop a close relationship with one another, residents say. Playmates are next door. There is no need to drive across town to someone's home; kids just run out the door. Adults take turns keeping an eye on children. And childcare and time with the children is shared with the elders of the community whose own grandkids may be miles away.

Aurora's cohousing community will host a "Parenting in Community" discussion at 10 a.m. on March 13 at the Four Winds Waldorf School, 30W160 Calumet Ave., Warrenville. In the spring, future residents will participate in a workshop to design the community-owned common house, where families can go for optional shared meals several times a week, meetings and social gatherings.

Says Brady, "I can't imagine a safer and more supportive environment for raising my children. When neighbors know each other, people take turns watching each others' children—it's easy and natural to help one another."