A GUIDE TO HOME, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY.

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Rick Hartman inspires kids to shut down their computers and build classic toys.
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Neighbor to Neighbor

— *By Judy Lowe* —

Where did all this stuff come from?

When my husband and I were first married, we could – and did – pile everything we owned in a car and move wherever our jobs took us.

From Virginia to Kentucky to New York we traipsed, with our belongings in the back seat. Even relocating to Europe was a snap.

Then we acquired kids and, at various times, houses that required beds, sofas, and end tables, not to mention washers, dryers, outdoor furniture, and lawn-care equipment.

Where, once upon a time, all our clothes filled only a couple of suitcases, suddenly we possessed so many outfits that our closet doors would barely close. Now when we moved, we narrowed the search for a new home with those two magic words "storage space."

Not so many years ago, the books we read came from the public library. Then we began patronizing the used paperback store. Now we have shelves – packed with hardcover books – in every room.

As we are planning to move once again, I ponder "possession escalation," and ask myself if we really need all this stuff. The obvious answer is no, but what do we get rid of? That large antique tureen? It's true we never use it, but it would be perfect for the soup-and-homemade-bread supper I've been hoping to invite friends to the past three winters.

Surely we don't need all those books. I'm willing to give up the leather-bound "Morgan Horse Register," which weighs three pounds, but not "The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire" – at least until I've finally read past Volume 2.

Now, excuse me, but I'm going to go clean out *my husband's* closet.

■ *Write the Homefront, One Norway Street, Boston, MA 02115 or e-mail us at* **home@csps.com**

UNITED WE STAND

Cohousing creates neighborhoods built on consensus and cooperation – **and lots of patience.**



LISA HANEY

By David Holmstrom
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

ASHEVILLE, N.C.

At one of the dinner tables, Carolyn Wallace pauses between bites of strawberry shortcake to summarize a fact of life at the Westwood Cohousing Community here. "A lot of us are Type A personalities, people who care a great deal," she says as board president of the community's homeowners' association. "So we have a lot of intense discussions."

Her fellow cohousers around the table smile with instant recognition: We have met the cohouser and the cohouser is us.

Like others who have moved into dozens of cohousing communities springing up around the world (some 37 in the United States now), Westwood residents are part of a detailed and often exhausting experiment in living together.

See **COHOUSING** *page 14*

PRINCIPLES OF COHOUSING

Participatory process – residents decide on community's design, including private residences and common areas.

Neighborhood layout – walkways and courtyards are central; cars and garages are relegated to the periphery.

Common facilities – includes a common room for meetings; shared facilities for laundry, exercise, children's play.

Resident management – participants do most maintenance work, help prepare common meals, and meet regularly to develop policies.

Nonhierarchical structure – decisions are made by consensus.

Source: The Cohousing Network

A shared sense of community



PHOTOS BY MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN – STAFF

CLOSE-KNIT NEIGHBORHOOD: Westwood Cohousing Community in Asheville, N.C., features 23 architect-designed town homes on 4-1/2 acres of land. Its residents reach community decisions by consensus.

COHOUSING *from page 11*

They began by planning a community of 23 architect-designed single-family town houses clustered on 4-1/2 acres.

This is no suburban dream of the self-contained family house. Westwood's 43 participants are committed to creating a supportive, extended family environment that arrives at decisions through consensus. "You have to have a high tolerance for meetings," says Paula Robbins, a medical editor.

Cohousers say they tend to be self-selective, people already predisposed to welcome the interactive climate needed to make the community work even if things move a bit slowly on the details.

"We took months to decide on the colors for the town houses," says Ms. Wallace. In the end, "condo coral" was rejected, and "sage green," "desert sand" and "boulevard beige" won approval.

Where others might find tedium in arriving at decisions this way, most Westwood residents see it as necessary. The pluses, such as close friendships, community spirit, a sense of extended family, and security, outweigh the frustrations, they believe.

Cohousing is the antithesis of subdivision housing, which can feature a lifestyle that emphasizes consumption and provides neighborliness only if a homeowner wants it. The relative smallness of the Westwood town houses, says resident Vance Reese, "demands that we don't be too materialistic." And those who participate in committees and projects become part of the larger "family."

A few who moved into the two-year-old community disliked the demands and living style, and moved out. "A winnowing process," say some of the residents.

"I actually didn't want to come here," says Gary Boyer, a tool and die maker. "My wife wanted to come, so we joined. And when we started to know the people, and function here, I grew to love it. I wouldn't trade this for anything."

Ursula Scott has been renting, but will now buy a town house. "My husband died many years ago, and this is sort of not living alone, and yet living alone," she says. "That is one of its strengths, to have the solitude and yet it's easy to be with someone else."

When Jean Reese gave birth earlier this year, "People brought us food for about three weeks straight," she says. "They were wonderful to us." Now, at meetings and gatherings, little Jonathan is passed around to all his adoring "aunts and uncles."

The center of life at Westwood is the two-story Common House, a multipurpose building for meetings and community dining for those who choose to prepare and eat two evening meals a week together. It's situated on a knoll between the two clusters of housing linked by an architect-designed bridge over a small ravine.

The Common House offers a mini-library, two guest rooms, laundry facilities, an exercise room, and mailboxes. In the basement is the control center for Westwood's unique utility and energy system, which was specially designed for the community by engineer Bill Fleming, who is also a resident.

Before a home can be purchased, aspirants are required to attend a social gathering, a business meeting, and accept the major decisions already made by the community. They also must read "Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves" (**see sidebar**). So far, no one has been turned down when a unit has changed owners.

A one-bedroom town house at Westwood sells for around $105,000, and a three-bedroom

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Life as a parent in cohousing

Parenting
A MOTHER'S VIEW

Neshama Abraham Paiss lives with her family in the Nomad Cohousing Community in Boulder, Colo.

AS A BUSINESS EXECUTIVE who had spent very little time with children before having two of my own, I was not prepared for the ongoing demands and selfless role of parenting. While I longed to spend more time with my children than my parents did with me, I had no model for my ideals.

The solution came in an unexpected way. I married a man who is committed to the creation of cohousing communities around the country, as executive director of the Cohousing Network. These are resident-developed and -managed neighborhoods.

I agreed to try cohousing for two years – with the understanding that we would move to a "regular" home if things didn't work out. That was nearly three years ago, and I have come to appreciate the benefits of living in a cohousing neighborhood, and to recognize the challenges.

Our community, Nomad Cohousing, is located on a one-acre site about two miles from downtown Boulder, Colo.

There are 11 households here, including 18 adults and seven children. Our girls, Zipporah, 1, and Halonah, 2, are the youngest.

As is typical in cohousing, our kitchen window faces a central courtyard where parents can watch their kids playing. The families all contributed to buying a playground set, and we have also jointly purchased other children's items.

The courtyard has become a focal point for the children. Usually if one child is outside playing, others soon follow. I've appreciated the spontaneity and the children's growing closeness. The courtyard is also a place where other residents spend time with the children.

Being able to walk outside and have people to hang out with has been great for me, especially when I've needed to talk with adults for a change. And, there have been several times when I've needed a break or a few minutes to get something done, and have been able to ask another resident to watch one of our children.

Like most cohousing neighborhoods, we have a Common House, similar to a clubhouse in a condominium complex, where we share community meals twice a week. There I host a weekly Mom's Support Group, a children's play group, and music classes for young kids. I appreciate the convenience of not having to drive the children to activities.

Halonah loves community meals. It's also been a welcome relief when a neighbor sees that my husband or I need a break and volunteers to hold one of our babies while we eat.

On the downside, mealtime has sometimes been tough: I have had to contend with our two-year-old not eating much and wanting to play before the other children were done. Sometimes, she has been so stimulated from a community meal that it's been an effort calming her down before bed.

However, what has posed the greatest challenge for me as a parent has been needing to agree with others who have different parenting styles.

Since we operate by consensus, everyone needs to be comfortable with decisions. This has been difficult when, for example, some people wanted to let the children jump off the furniture in the common house and I had safety concerns.

Ultimately, we come to an agreement and, although sometimes it's uncomfortable, working through our conflicts has made us closer.

Through our conversations, I've learned useful ideas from the more experienced parents.

Knowing your neighbors, which is a hallmark of cohousing, is both the best and most challenging aspect of living in an intentional community.

Overall, my life has been enriched by cohousing, though it hasn't always been easy.

I have been offered social contact and support from other adults when I needed it. And I have seen how well socialized our children are, which I attribute partly to living in such a community.

I look forward to the next 10 years, watching how close the adults and children become, as we continue to shape each others' lives.

– Neshama Abraham Paiss

Parents: To submit a first-person essay on your own parenting solutions, send an e-mail to **home@csps.com**, or write to Parenting, The Christian Science Monitor, One Norway Street, Boston, MA 02115.

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unit is $150,000. Both prices are slightly higher than a comparable non-cohousing unit might be nearby.

Westwood got off to a rocky start, as has been the case for a number of cohousing efforts. A group struggled for two years to launch a community, but eventually the effort failed because of disorganization and lack of financial resources.

A second effort succeeded, despite procedural misunderstandings over the roles of residents and the development company that built the community. "It turned into an us-and-them situation," says Ms. Robbins.

Yet, true to the spirit of cohousing, most residents have concluded that "Westwood has turned out very well." High praise goes to the engineering design of the project, which includes a central heating and hot-water system that uses large-scale solar collectors. Utility lines are underground. The houses have radiant heating, high-bandwidth cable systems, ductless cooling systems, energy-efficient lighting and appliances, and acoustical materials in the walls.

Robbins says her average cost last year for hot water and heat was around $21 a month. This is itemized in monthly assessments – similar to a condo fee – that average around $140 each month. To build the Common House, a construction loan pool was formed with funds provided by initial residents and friends.

Cars are parked on the periphery of the two housing clusters, which face gardens or a small lawn with newly planted shade trees.

Residents tend to be middle class, environmentalists, and come from social-activist backgrounds. They join teams that work on aspects of community life: landscape, children's issues, woods and wildlife, architectural review, communications, technical maintenance, etc.

Westwood continues to evolve and grapple with issues that all cohousing communities face, such as defining exactly what a community is, and what to do when some residents don't pull their weight.

"From September through May we had meetings we called 'conversations on community,' " says resident Mary Ellen Brown, chairman of the communications department at Mars Hill College. "People volunteered to get together, to talk, and get things out in the open. And we also had workshops on consensus."

Ellen Frerotte attended one of the meetings and decided it wasn't for her. "I don't like what I consider orchestrated conversations," she says calmly, sitting across from Ms. Brown at a community dinner. "I didn't feel the necessity to be scheduled to have a conversation with my neighbors." The comment is not the start of an argument, but simply an opinion shared among friends with acknowledged differences.

The homeowners association, in order to rouse those members who may have become a little lazy in their obligation to the community, is considering an agreement, or pledge, to be signed as a reminder to get involved. "There's no cohousing SS operating here," says Jim Frerotte, at the dinner table, "but we're evolving, and unequal amounts of contribution are typical at cohousing."

Vance Reese thinks the bottom line is the closeness that develops despite the differences. "One member said that we behave with too much 'sweeping under the rug' of the differences," he says, "and another says we are just keeping a higher goal in mind. Both are probably right. We are available for each other. When a person has been estranged from the community, nearly every time there has been some other person in the community who steps forward and says, 'Hey, what's wrong?' "

A brief history of cohousing

Danish architect Jan Gudmand-Hoyer is the acknowledged founder of the cohousing movement, even though his first attempt in 1964 to join together with friends in a supportive living arrangement failed.

He continued writing publicly about the concept, and defined it as collaborative housing that embraces a strong sense of community, an antidote to less-than-friendly subdivisions. Was this just a recycled, time-honored village concept, or a bold, new way to live cooperatively?

Others joined in the public discussion, including Bodil Graae, who wrote an article, "Children Should Have 100 Parents." Two groups with overlapping values and ideals emerged from this discussion and managed to build several villages together by 1973.

Since then, with refinements and adjustments to accommodate differing cultures, cohousing has become an international phenomenon with perhaps a hundred communities built and operating in many countries. At last count, 37 cohousing communities are up and running in the United States. Dozens of others are in the planning stages.

In the US, cohousing dovetailed with the communes that sprang up in the "hippified" 1960s. Today it also fits under the umbrella of "intentional communities." This includes such groups as those sharing common spiritual values, rural homesteading, voluntary simplicity groups, and sustainable-living education centers.

Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant, Berkeley, Calif., architects, wrote "Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves" in 1988. The book is considered the "bible" of the cohousing world, and is required reading for anyone who wants to consider joining the Westwood Cohousing Community (**see main story**).

Finding close friendships and support and reaching consensus with your neighbors is the ideal of most members of cohousing communities, says Bill Fleming, who lives at Westwood and was the electrical-mechanical engineer for the project.

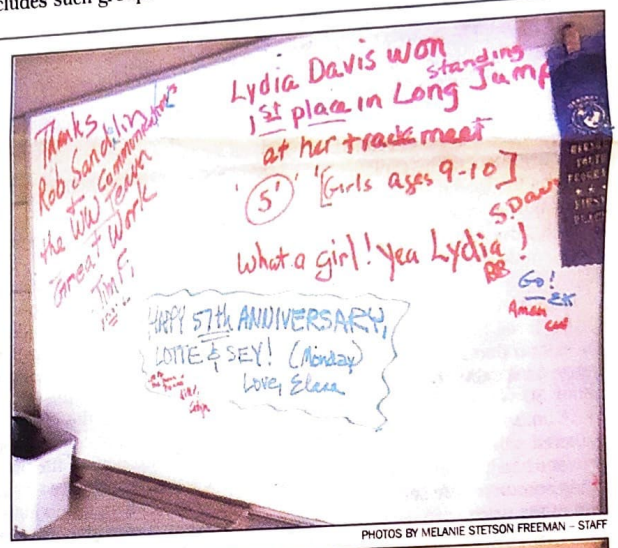
"You end up with modifications based on the dynamics of the group, but people who are attracted to this kind of collaborative living probably start with a more collaborative idea of how to do it. If they didn't, they wouldn't be here."

Find more information about cohousing at these Web sites:

- The Cohousing Network, **www.cohousing.org**
- Cohousing in Port Townsend, Wash., **www.olypen.com/sstowell/rosewind**
- Westwood Cohousing Community, **http://westwoodcoho.home.mindspring.com/westwood.html**

– David Holmstrom





PHOTOS BY MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN – STAFF



SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT: New parent Vance Reese, above, who plays with son Jonathan in front of their town house, enjoys the friendliness of the Westwood Cohousing Community. When the baby was born, neighbors brought the family meals each day for three weeks. A bulletin board outside the Common House lets residents share with each other news about what's happening in their families. The 43 residents can cook and eat dinner together at the Common House twice a week.