Former nuns start retirement community for people to explore their spirit

07/17/2004
By CHRIS KAHN / Associated Press
When it came time to retire, Dene Peterson couldn't help but be dismayed.
The former nun once expected to grow old in the convent, free to contemplate the afterlife in the care of her sisters. But life was different on the outside — Peterson's silver-haired contemporaries seemed to spend their final years contemplating nothing more than shopping or golf.
"I saw 'Leisurevilles' everywhere," Peterson said. "You could be rich and have leisure and entertain yourself — if that's going to mean anything to you — or you could just plod along and then eventually someone will put you in a nursing home."
Peterson would have none of this. Instead, she reconnected with other former nuns — women who left the order, as she did, almost 40 years ago in a dust-up with church leaders. Together, they started planning a retirement community dedicated to communal living and a serious exploration of the human spirit — these were the best parts of convent life, she said.
They called it "ElderSpirit Community." And this time, the former nuns were determined to run the place their way.
The 29-unit retirement community will sit at the foot of a wooded hill at the outskirts of this Appalachian mountain town. When it is completed next year, ElderSpirit will be open to men and women of all religions. There will be rental homes available for people with small incomes, and everyone will be required to spend four hours a week helping their neighbors.
At the front of the neighborhood, residents will share a common house where Peterson hopes they'll hold some heavy discussions about the role of elders and their place in the world.
"One of the important things we'll do is get people to face that we are all going to die," she said. "And so what does that mean to you? And what do you want it to be like? And what do you hope to do before you die?"
Even before the foundation is laid, ElderSpirit is booming. All but a few of the 29 homes have been reserved — such an unexpected level of success that Peterson says she may build another ElderSpirit as soon as the first is completed.
"People should be able to have more choices than those anonymous

rest homes you see all over the place," Peterson said.
The process of building a community is clearly invigorating for the 74-year-old. Peterson spends much of her time in a converted home along Main Street, buzzing about an office cluttered with blueprints. She is the very picture of a freed spirit, stopping occasionally to make observations and punctuating them with a hearty chortle.
"I think we'll only have about one meal a day together," Peterson said of her unfinished community. "Maybe we'll have a little happy hour, at least some of the time. You may as well drink in public instead of alone!"
Most of the four former nuns who joined Peterson remain practicing Catholics, but nobody expects to proselytize or be converted to something else. The years out of the convent gave each a greater respect for different religions, said former nun Catherine Rumschlag, and including other viewpoints can only make a discussion about the afterlife more interesting.
"We have a really good group," said Rumschlag, 77, who has met many of the future tenants. "They are people who want to grow spiritually, who want to help their neighbors."
Those who are interested in ElderSpirit should be warned: Don't come if you're not ready for some deep conversations. These are women who have spent a lifetime refining their understanding of the afterlife.
The five women — Peterson, Rumschlag, Monica Appleby, Anne Leibig and Jean Marie Luce — were once known as "Glenmary Sisters," which was part of an order that dedicated itself to serving the poorest regions in Appalachia. In their formal gray habits, the nuns were an odd sight in a community where few people had ever known a Catholic.
"We were a scandal when we came down and, you know, the Catholic church had a different God than the Baptist church," Peterson said. "I can remember thinking 'oh, my gosh' what do these people think God is?"
Interacting with the locals, however, softened her position. When the Catholic Church started changing its theology in the 1960s, the Glenmary Sisters suggested altering rules that would allow them to fit in better in the community.
Church leaders, however, were unmoved. And so, in the 1960s, after a prolonged dispute about how nuns were supposed to dress and other church rules, about 100 Glenmary nuns left the order.
Some started families and others continued serving the region on their own. Forty-four former Glenmary Sisters created the Federation of Communities in Service (FOCIS) a group that continues to sponsor community programs in the region.
Peterson, who grew up in a large Catholic family in Loretto, Ky., said

she never regretted leaving. The community that had been her safety net, however, was gone.

"I gave up my social security — I don't mean Social Security like retirement money — but having people around you who love you and will take care of you," she said.

Ten years ago, Peterson approached FOCIS to see if anyone would be interested in retiring together. The former nuns formed a committee with a former Glenmary volunteer and other FOCIS members. They eventually raised $3 million to develop ElderSpirit.

The community was expected to open this summer, but constant rain has kept the soil too soft, said John Heffernan, president of the nonprofit Trailview Development Corporation that's building ElderSpirit.

"The weather's been great for me as a kayaker, but absolutely abysmal as far as getting a piece of property with a lot of clay on it to dry out," Heffernan said. "If we can get about two weeks of dry weather, we should be able to put in the foundations."

In a year, the former nuns expect to make their final move to a place that will hopefully be home to some lively debates, potluck dinners and quiet meditation hours in their small, vinyl-sided homes.

"I don't know if this is the last chapter of our lives or the beginning of a new phase," Peterson said with a laugh. "You never know."

On the Net:
http://elderspirit.net/