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Cohousing Residents Creating an 'Ideal Village' of Cooperation

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Central Kitsap

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After years of spending more time than she would like in the car to visit her best friend, Nancy Conrad dreamed of a day when she could walk a few hundred feet before ending up on her best friend's doorstep.

Today that dream has come true.

"Sometimes it makes me cry," Conrad said. "It's overwhelming, it's truly an act of God."

In addition to wishing that one day they would be neighbors, Conrad and her best friend Barbara Buckham, along with their husbands, spent many hours dreaming of what life would be like in a community where everyone works together to create a safe, affordable and welcoming place.

While it may sound like a neighborhood out of the movie "Pleasantville," the Conrads and Buckhams have spent the last four-plus years working to make the concept of a harmonious community a reality. The difference between their visioned community and others is the model they used to create the neighborhood.

The model is known as cohousing.

Deciding by Consensus

Their dream, to build a community where neighbors willingly interact and consensus vote is the only way a decision is made, is reflective of the cohousing way of life. Having read books about cohousing and having prior experience with cohousing communities, the foursome decided to bring that lifestyle to Central Kitsap.

Called the Bartimaeus Cohousing Community at Meadow Wood, the neighborhood consists of six buildings, each with four units. The difference between these condominium-like homes and any other planned neighborhood is that owners had an active part in designing the layout of the grounds as well as each unit. They also have committed themselves to being actively involved with each other as neighbors.

"I think people are afraid of the concept," Barbara Buckham said about cohousing and making decisions by consensus vote. "It sounds so un-American. There is nothing spooky about it; there's no one big leader here telling us what to do."

The premise behind cohousing is to offer collaborative housing where residents actively participate in

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the design and operation of their own neighborhoods, according to the Cohousing Association of the United States official Web site. Residents consciously commit to living as a community and abide by set requirements. Bartimaeus residents are asked to donate time each month to help maintain the community. Members also take turns leading group meetings.

"The thing about this is you have your privacy, you have your house if you don't want to see anyone," Buckham said about the intricacies of cohousing. "But you can also easily go out and interact with your neighbors."

At Bartimaeus, located off of Fairgrounds Road in Central Kitsap, the homes are clustered so their front doors face other units across a courtyard. They also have large porches where children can play, or people can sit while being protected from the weather.

Because of the courtyards, the homes do not have large front yards, but many have a backyard with more space, and a community garden has been planned for everyone to use. Because the homes are located on the front of the development's seven acres, the back part of the property features a large pond, which doubles as a stormwater retention pond, and trails that lead into the forested area of the property.

The community has a "common house," which includes a big kitchen, a library, a TV room and children's playroom. It's a gathering place for times when residents want to be together, but they're not required to do so. All the residents also have their own kitchens.

Danish Roots

While the cohousing concept is relatively new to the United States — communities began surfacing in the 1980s — it was pioneered in Denmark in the 1970s and has become common in many European countries, said John Parsons, a soon-to-be Bartimaeus resident. He is also the publisher of Cohousing Magazine.

"It's a self-selecting group of peers," Parsons said. "Cohousing is not a strange thing; it's becoming more and more common."

There are at least seven cohousing communities west of Seattle and most of the neighborhoods have around 20 to 30 homes. Bartimaeus has 24 homes, including an existing housing structure that was converted into a condominium. The group also has a guest house owned by Shepherd's Sanctuary, a nonprofit group that is working with Kitsap Community Resources to help families in need get back on their feet.

While they are still living on Bainbridge Island, Parsons, his wife and two teenage sons hope to move at the end of this month into the Bartimaeus community.

"What drew us to this was the consensus way of doing business," Parsons said. "We're going back to what an ideal village should be."

The Parsons family has not lived in a cohousing community before, but they have previously lived in Christian-centered communities with a similar way of life.

An Intentional Community

Conrad specified that the Bartimaeus Cohousing Community is not a Christian housing community; many of the residents are religious but are of different denominations. While residents do not shy away from talking about God and the role faith has played in their lives, having religious ties is not a requirement to live in the community, Conrad said. The only requirements are that residents have respect for each other and that they are willing to live by the rules created by the group.

Families making up the Bartimaeus community have joined for different reasons. Some previously lived in cohousing communities, while others like the idea of knowing they will be surrounded by people who care for them. For parents the appeal is raising children in a safe environment where they are exposed to positive social interactions.

After 14 years of living and working in Kazakhstan, it was time for the Adamson family to move back to the United States. Joel Adamson said he and wife Anne did not like the idea of "moving back into a subdivision where your neighbors don't even want to say hi to you."

While the neighborhoods they lived in overseas weren't classified as cohousing communities, Adamson said they were similar in operation and his family quickly saw the benefits of living in an intentional community.

"People aren't just buying into a house," he said. "They're buying into a community and the people."

The four-plus years of trying to get the community built have been stressful for Bartimaeus members, specifically the Conrads and Buckhams, but participating in the building's construction and now seeing

families from all over the world move in has made the wait worth it.

"You have moments where you wonder if you're insane," Buckham said. "But this thing was in our hearts."

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