

# Among Friends

Many retirees want to live in a close-knit community. With senior cohousing, neighbors take care of neighbors and focus on what's important in their later years.

**W**aldie and Evelyn Unger never thought of their "golden years" as a time to do nothing.

Healthy and active and well into their sixties, the two were eager to downsize from their 13-acre country spread to a smaller home closer to town. But they were not interested in what have become standard options for retirement living, including new varieties of assisted-living and resort-style active-adult communities.

"The idea of having everything done for you seems so boring," says Evelyn Unger, a former textiles/design teacher. "It takes some independence away, and we don't need to be taken care of, like the meals, the housekeeping, that sort of thing."

When they read in their local newspaper about ElderSpirit, the nation's first mixed-income cohousing community for people 55 and older, they knew they'd found what they were looking for. Nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian range in Abingdon, Virginia, ElderSpirit is the latest brand of retirement community, called senior cohousing, in which retirees intent on living actively and independently put down what are likely to be their last roots with the support of like-minded neighbors.

Conceived by former nun and nonprofit administrator Dene Peterson, the 29-unit ElderSpirit Community—a mix of houses and apartments—has a spiritual component as well. Residents are interested in exploring life's bigger questions—in a non-denominational fashion—and living ecologically and caring for one another and the community. Volunteering both at ElderSpirit and in the town of Abingdon and living healthily will be encouraged over regular rounds of cocktails, cards, and golf.

"The idea that in retirement you retreat to recreation, that you have nothing to give back, just doesn't resonate with me," says Peterson, now project manager for the complex, which opened this winter. "I want to grow spiritually and to contribute, and I knew that there were like-minded seniors out there. There's no reason to go into this journey alone."

*Kerry White is a writer in Bethesda. Her last story for The Washingtonian was about pet loss in February.*



**Evelyn and Waldie Unger moved into ElderSpirit in Abingdon, Virginia, to be among like-minded seniors who want to grow spiritually.**

Abingdon, a small town listed among the 100 best art towns in America, is home to the historic Barter Theater and a bevy of shops and galleries. And a stone's throw from ElderSpirit lies the Virginia Creeper Trail, a 17-mile trail for bikers, hikers, and horseback riders.

"This is the kind of place where we hope we can take care of ourselves and each other," says Unger, who plans on squeezing in hiking and rounds of golf with her husband between community potluck dinners, volunteer work, and visits with her children and grandchild.

**C**ohousing communities, imported to the United States from Denmark in the mid-1980s, should not, advocates assert, be confused with the communes of the 1960s. Residents own or rent their own homes, which may be a mix of small houses, townhouses, or condominiums; manage their own money; and cook in their own kitchens. But neighbors share many amenities—typically a common house (like a small community center), gardens, and recreational facilities—and are responsible for some community chores.

Neighborhoods are designed to be ecological and pedestrian

## We're here to help you make the right decision about assisted living.



If you or someone you love has difficulty with everyday tasks such as dressing, bathing, or managing medications, it's

time to learn more about assisted living. All you have to do is call us.



### SUMMERVILLE®

AT POTOMAC  
Senior residential and Assisted Living

11215 Seven Locks Road, Potomac  
www.sslusa.com



LIC. #15-075

**(301) 765-9198**

## VINSON HALL

### Great Location for Active Retirement Living

for Military Officers and their  
Immediate Families

Located minutes from Washington DC, **Vinson Hall** is nestled on 20 beautiful acres in McLean, Virginia. Our residents enjoy a variety of activities without the hassles of home ownership.

Assisted Living, Memory Impairment,  
and Skilled Nursing  
Accommodations Available



**Call us toll free  
at 800-541-5121.  
Visit us online at:**

**www.vinsonhall.org**

## AMONG FRIENDS

dents, senior cohousing is “the next big wave,” says Neshama Abraham, a cohousing consultant and planner with Abraham Paiss & Associates in Boulder. The senior population is expected to grow as baby boomers age over the next 25 years, and she says “baby boomers will want noninstitutional” options for their last homes.

They’ll want affordable options as well: Senior cohousing might not be cheaper than living in a conventional condominium, but it’s less than buying and maintaining a single-family home and a lot less than the average assisted-living community or nursing home. Two-bedroom homes at ElderSpirit sold in the low \$100,000 range; one-bedroom rentals start at \$300 a month. Additional savings will accrue over time: Units are designed to be energy efficient, and the most budget-conscious neighbors might cut spending further by sharing cars, tools, bicycles, and the like.

**W**e made this so that people don’t have to give up all the money they saved over their working lifetime,” says Peterson, who has spent ten years planning ElderSpirit. Around Washington, both seniors and developers are looking to break ground on senior cohousing communities. The problem is getting well-located but affordable land in the region’s hot real-estate market.

“It’s difficult to find the right land locally,” says Don Tucker, an architect with EDG Architects and Eco Housing Corporation in Bethesda, which designed and developed two multigenerational cohousing communities: Takoma Village in DC and Eastern Village in Silver Spring. “But there is certainly a market for it.”

Bob and Diana Corbett know the land quondry firsthand. They along with ten other seniors have spent several years searching for a cohousing site in the Annapolis area. The group meets about every other week and has weighed more than a dozen properties around the area.

“We don’t know what our housing should be because it’s so dependent on the land you locate and zoning,” says Bob Corbett, a former architect from Massachusetts who literally sailed into town with his wife a decade ago.

Made up mostly of retired professionals in their sixties and seventies, the group met a few years ago at a regional cohousing conference and has no interest in moving far from Annapolis amenities, even though the land close to town is “very dear, very competitive,” Corbett says.

Obstacles like those make Elizabeth Mathews happy she has already found her haven. Mathews, 83, who moved to Abing-

don from California’s central coast to help design ElderSpirit, is looking forward to the years ahead.

“It’s so healthy and vibrant and wonderful,” says Mathews, whose daughter is a couple of hours away in Tennessee. “I love the whole philosophy of aging together in our own homes and taking care of each other.

“I’ve found just what I’ve been looking for,” she says.

### SENIOR COHOUSING LOCALLY

**ElderSpirit Community**, PO Box 665, Abingdon, Virginia 24212; 276-628-8908; [www.elderspirit.net](http://www.elderspirit.net). This 29-unit cohousing community is sold out, although some rental units are available.

The **Chesapeake Cohousing Group** is looking for a 15- to 30-unit site. Contact Fran Levine, [levine@worldnet.att.net](mailto:levine@worldnet.att.net).

### SENIOR COHOUSING NATIONWIDE

**Elder Family in the Smoky Mountains**, Whittier, North Carolina (near Cherokee). This eight-acre community features two large, “group style” homes within a larger mixed-age neighborhood. Call Ann Thompson, 828-497-7102, or e-mail [annariel@dnet.net](mailto:annariel@dnet.net).

**Silver Sage Village**, Boulder, Colorado. This 16-unit mixed-income community near downtown Boulder is under construction and accepting new members. Contact Annie Russell at 303-449-3232 ext. 215; [www.silversagevillage.com](http://www.silversagevillage.com).

**Elder Cohousing at Prospect**, Colorado. At Prospect New Town, a “new urbanist” community a half hour from Denver, 25 to 30 attached homes are being planned. Contact Neshama Abraham or Zev Paiss at 303-684-9999; [www.prospectelders.com](http://www.prospectelders.com).

### RESOURCES

The **Cohousing Association of the United States** provides both general and regional cohousing news and information and posts classified ads of communities looking for new members; [www.cohousing.org](http://www.cohousing.org).

The **Elder Cohousing Network** provides information, networking and educational opportunities, and other resources for seniors; [www.abrahampaiss.com](http://www.abrahampaiss.com) (click on “elder cohousing”).

The **Cohousing Company**, 1250 Addison St., Suite 113, Berkeley, California 94702; 510-549-9980; [www.cohousingco.com](http://www.cohousingco.com). Architecture and development consulting firm features information on its Web site. Books such as *Senior Cohousing: A Community Approach to Living Independently* and *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves* are for sale, and several communities are featured. **W**