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STORY

Author discusses alternative housing for seniors [printable version] text size: [-] [+]

Article published on Monday, October 2nd, 2006
By BRYAN MARTIN
Mirror Writer

Seniors in Kodiak are beginning to look at alternative ways of living as they think about how they can get the most out of their retirement years.

Many of Kodiak's seniors gathered at the Gerald C. Wilson Auditorium Saturday and Sunday brainstorming different ideas as they face the latter years of life.

Senior Citizens of Kodiak Inc. presented its fourth annual Aging Connection Conference, a Senior Housing Community Forum, where many of Kodiak's caregivers, state housing representatives and nationally recognized innovators are searching for ways to help baby boomers as the nation's largest generational population begins to cope with what is often called the "golden years."

One of the first steps toward facing the last phase of life is to get out of denial, said Charles Durrett, author and authority on independent living.

Durrett is called the father of the cohousing movement, a 30-year-old idea imported from Denmark.

There are now about 100 cohousing communities in the United States built since 1991 and more than one-third of the residents are retirees.

Cohousing is a community of usually fewer than two dozen homes that are self-planned, supportive and nurturing of elderhood, and include options for shared care. They are not nursing homes nor assisted living centers.

Durrett's ideas of cohousing are described by some as similar to the boomer's return to the commune, a way of living many chose during the 1960s.

However, Durrett sees cohousing as a way to enjoy retirement with friends and like-minded people.

"They are often started by older people who don't want to end up in an institution. It happens when you know your neighbors and everyone cares," he said.

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Durrett got the idea for cohousing while a student at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark.

He said every morning on his walk to the train station he noticed a neighborhood where residents participated in a lot of activities together, such as picking fruit, talking and playing with children.

He found out the people had designed their own neighborhood because they couldn't find anything that reflected their own beliefs about what neighborhoods should be like.

Durrett later learned there were many similar neighborhoods throughout Denmark.

He said Scandinavians have a different attitude about life and are more socially progressive than Americans who seem to focus upon diminishment and consumerism, with retirees making a continuous series of trips to the mall or golf course.

Durrett said Americans are centered on what he calls "outside distractions," such as the space program or war. Europeans focus more on the quality of life, making small issues like lightbulbs and energy efficiency into big ones.

Durrett, who lives in a cohousing neighborhood in California, grew up in a town of 300 people.

He said once he got his degree in architecture and moved to the big city in the San Francisco Bay Area, he found he was constantly seeking relationships that were more in keeping with the small-town way of life.

Ever since, Durrett has been establishing similar neighborhoods and recently completed work on one in Bellingham, Wash., that has some 150 units.

He said a key to development is to insist seniors play a role in the design of cohousing neighborhoods.

"These are places where people sit on the front porch, rather than the back porch.

"Quality of life is based upon the relationships one has with other people, sensing someone gives a damn after walking by a front door," Durrett said.

Durrett said residents share in cooking and find projects to do together, choosing their own amount of privacy or social interaction.

"They take care of each other," he said.

In some cases, Durrett said, the residents hire their own caregivers to help with something like Alzheimer's disease, with the caregiver moving on site.

But Durrett said for people to begin to develop a new attitude, "They have to get out of denial and grapple with the issues so they can deal with their own self-determination."

Many of those in the audience Saturday questioned Durrett about the cost of living in cohousing developments.

He said the homes are simple and affordable, generally about 1,200 to 1,250 square feet.

Durrett said people find creative ways to make the homes affordable.

He said some are able to put down their own money while others pool

resources and even borrow from one another. In one instance, Habitat for Humanity helped those who lacked resources.

Durrett said nonprofits also are helping with financing.

"Some of our residents are first-time homeowners.

"In one case in Sacramento, Calif., one-third of the residents in a cohousing development needed financial assistance and the city helped them out," he said.

"In America, people try to stay in their single-family homes, to die there. This is the 'holy grail,'" Durrett said. "But people can now have a choice, realizing they are on a journey together."

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