

KINDLING NEW COMMUNITY: Village Hearth Cohousing

By Pat McAulay

Listening to the steady drum of rain on the roof as I write, I'm reminded of our first big tabling event: North Carolina Pride. Thankfully, in anticipation of fall sunshine and high humidity, we'd reserved a spot under a big tent. That day, the rain was mostly gentle but persistent, making the grounds a soggy mess. But my optimistic side likes to say that we joined 10,000 of our closest friends that day to celebrate Pride. We had a good day, talking to a steady stream of interested folks who took this flyer, that card, this brochure, and did or didn't sign up for our email list. As importantly, two of our members joined us and turned out to be formidable marketers!

My wife, Margaret, and I are the "burning souls" behind Village Hearth Cohousing. We're gathering with LGBTs, friends, and allies to create a caring community in Durham, North Carolina, with the intention to age in place in a community of "good neighbors." Our vision has followed a long path originating 15 or more years ago with long weekends and, eventually, weeks at the beach. We fell in love with the sound of women laughing, the aroma of brewing coffee, the sight of souls braving the ocean currents in November. We thought we wanted to create the ODH (Old Dykes Home): what turned out to be a shared housing concept. When our gang started to retire, we faced the reality of *actually living together under one roof permanently*, as well as the standard reply, "I'm going to stay in my home until I can't." That forced us to seek out other solutions. Having the close-knit community with a balance of privacy in cohousing is where we landed.

We read the cohousing canon, *Coho/US, COMMUNITIES*, the cohousing listserv, and we knew that we were blessed with several existing communities in our area. Well, let's figure out which one we want to move to. Oh, wait! We're talking about this being the last home we move to. That means we need the community to be totally accessible and visitable. What good is an accessible home if one is kept prisoner there by not being able to visit neighbors or go to the Common House? Wait! We don't need a second story; we won't be able to do the stairs. Wait! We already live in an apartment building with an elevator that doesn't work when the power goes out. Wait! We don't want to be so far from downtown Durham that we'll choose to stay home because the drive is too far. Wait! I need some green space. Wait! What? Well, hell; we're going to have to build our own community.

We chewed on that concept for awhile. I spied the Boulder regional cohousing conference, *Cohousing: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* happening in September 2014. I convinced Margaret that we needed to hear these realities of cohousing and then could make a decision about moving forward to create community or give up the idea and figure out where else to build or buy in Durham. So, we drove to Boulder, where we were struck by the golden glow of the aspen. The conference was hosted by three communities, including a senior community, Silver Sage, and was well-attended with around 90 participants. Succinctly, the best thing about cohousing is the people, and the worst thing about cohousing is the people. We came away fired up and ready to start. On our way home, we toured three additional senior cohousing communities: Valverde Commons in Taos, Sand River in Santa Fe, and Oakcreek in Stillwater, Oklahoma. Cohousers are generous people and want to spread the good news, so we spent several hours among the three communities and learned a lot. But we fell in love with the McCamant & Durrett single-story attached cottage design of Oakcreek, and that community became our touchstone.

Next we had to figure out who we wanted in our community. We knew we wanted an adult-centered community—not that we wouldn't welcome the occasional visiting grandchild, but we don't have children and don't want to live among them. The complexities of ownership structure steered us away from saying women only or lesbian only, as the Old Dykes Home would have been. We decided we want to be around people who have had a

similar path. We know that just because one is gay or lesbian doesn't mean we'll be fast friends, but we want to be around people who can relate to our past: not having any role models and thinking there was something wrong with us; struggling to come out again and again and again to oneself, one's best friend, one's parents, one's co-workers, one's faith community; experiencing discrimination and being marginalized by society; maybe even being the victim of a hate crime. With this shared experience, we hope we'll have a basis for coming together in community. We're welcoming friends and allies to join us—anyone who has witnessed our paths and supported us throughout—and, frankly, we can't exactly check sexual preference IDs at the door.

At the Boulder conference, we heard from at least three different communities from the US and Canada that they strug-



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Margaret and Pat celebrate on the land after closing. Holding the boundary survey, Land Day 8/28/15!



Paul J. Stinson

gled to get going and keep going because members were sure they could save money by foregoing the “experts.” They related that as soon as they brought in a professional, the project began to move along and move in is slated for “_____.” With that level of sharing, we decided to bring in the experts as soon as we hit a snag. We want to do this as fast as possible and not have any expensive missteps along the way. The first bump in the road was the water department referring me to a 232-page document to figure out what size sewer pipe and water lines I might need for this 22-30 unit development. Luckily, the 2015 national cohousing conference was coming up right in our home town! There we connected with Katie McCamant of CoHousing Solutions and Chuck Durrett of McCamant & Durrett Architects, who worked with Oakcreek, and they agreed to provide consulting to our group.

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Fifty-five people attended Katie's public presentation—half of whom we'd never met before!

We've been holding Outreach meetings since April 2015, and we had a small group bonding over the concept. We cajoled Katie into providing a preliminary home price, and half our group had to drop out because of anticipated cost. This was a very difficult blow for Margaret and me: we'd spent months developing and deepening relationships, and we really *liked* the people we'd gathered. The hard facts are that we can't build what we want where we want it and come in at a comparable market price. The common amenities and land, the higher grade sustainable materials and better than standard fixtures, the things that are really important to us just cannot be produced at a price comparable to a development of 300 homes. We expect energy savings with our attached homes built well with proven materials. We must learn to communicate the value of community—the people—to ameliorate the shock of the initial investment. We need more than just our vision and a few pictures of Oakcreek.



NC Pride. Margaret's ready for the 10,000+ who braved the rain.



Long winding road leads back to a secluded area where we'll build.

Terri Murphy

“More” means land. We looked for land for months. Dozens of MLS listings daily, trying to figure out the zoning, the watershed, the buffer, the “this,” the “that” from the GIS maps. Printing maps, enlarging maps and printing them and taping them together. Killing trees right and left to get the right view to decipher the alphabet soup that would add up to the right piece of land. With a house; without a house? Finally a word from Chuck at the conference, “It doesn't matter if there's a house on the

property or not. We'll figure out the best way to use the land either way." Generous Ann Arbor folks told us on a visit there to look for commercial, office, or industrial land with a land broker. We tried that on our own, and finally were just about to get hooked up with a land broker...then the MLS listing came through. Fifteen-plus acres, relatively flat (tough to find in Durham), next to a subdivision with city water and sewer, less than 20 minutes to downtown, zoned at two dwellings/acre, but with future land use at four dwellings/acre. City water guy said, "Yeah." City planning guy said, "Yeah, with x, y, and z, it's doable." Price well under \$200,000. After a few days of going back and forth with the owners and getting nervous about a builder sniffing around, we jumped with a full price offer to close in 10 days. Since the land appears to have been underpriced, we're pretty sure we could turn around and sell it if it isn't right for the project. Now we had the motivation to move forward and something to "sell."

Must gather more people. We'll talk to anyone, anywhere, about cohousing and what we're doing. More Outreach meetings, individual meetings, a "friend" sponsorship for the big arts festival, materials to pass out at the Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, an ad in the Pride guide, tabling at Pride. Then, a connection to a couple we used to know casually, an invitation to join them for a common meal in their cohousing community, a couple we don't know at the table who had heard about us from "so-and-so": you know "so-and-so," don't you? No, we don't. Finally, evidence that the word has spread beyond friends and friends of friends. We have a member in Athens, Georgia; a couple in Virginia. We're just thinking about dipping our toes into national advertising. This week we've had inquiries from Asheville, North Carolina, and Golden, Colorado. Coho/US, Katie, and Chuck have all promoted us to their mailing lists. One sweet man from Tennessee mailed us a box of cohousing books since he'll never be able to talk his partner into it. A lot of people are interested in the concept, but we find that most people think they don't need to do it now.

When Katie and Chuck brought cohousing from Denmark in the 1980s, they also brought along a class for elders about successful aging known here as "Study Group I." Chuck says we need to get people out of denial. It's tough. The Department on Aging person who worked with me to set up the class at the senior center

said, "Oh, don't call it Senior Cohousing: Successful Aging [which is what the book is called]. Successful aging has the connotation of climbing mountains and zip lining. We need another term to describe what most people do. Something with 'thriving' maybe." While I appreciate that she's trying to find terminology that works, I find it very frustrating that we can't use the words "senior," "elder," "aging," "aging in place," etc. We don't "die," we "pass" or are "not here anymore." Walking this terminology minefield is an impossible task. We can't wait until someone invents a new word to call one who is older. At any rate, the 10-week class was wildly successful, precisely because no one feels safe to talk about aging in any other setting. The course led us right up to this last weekend when Katie came to town.

All the while the course was going on, we marketed Katie's visit. She came to do our first weekend workshop with us, but also planned a public presentation on senior cohousing. (Back to, "What do we call it??") We did paid ads and press releases, resulting in a lengthy article in the real estate section of the newspaper. Fifty-five people attended, and we had never seen at least

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half of them! None decided to join us for the weekend workshop, but the seed is planted. This is a slow-growth forest, and yet, look how far we've come. Katie led us in an informative weekend explaining the timeline, the budget, what impacts both, best practices of other communities, walked us through our shared values, and sent us on our way with committee assignments. We come together again tomorrow, and we're waiting with bated breath to see who's in and who's leaving us this time. It will be hard if it's the latter, but we believe in our project, we're riding some good momentum, and, after hearing Katie talk about living in cohousing, we understand even better now just why we want to live in community. 🍷

Pat McAulay loves her adopted home of Durham, North Carolina, and can't wait to get settled into Village Hearth Cohousing with her wife, Margaret. They are both looking forward to fun and new experiences while living in community, as well as being and having good neighbors. Pat can be reached at naturepat@aol.com, and you can follow Village Hearth Cohousing on Facebook, Meetup, and on their website, www.VillageHearthCohousing.com.

Looking back from the rise.



Terri Murphy