

Home is where the hearth is

Gay & Gray: LGBTQ Seniors Commentary: Senior living option available in the Triangle

BY VERY REV. CHRISTOPHER ROSS ON FEBRUARY 22, 2019



For LGBTQ seniors, finding a safe, caring and supportive place to live among friends and family is important to an individual's sense of self-reliance and comfort. (Photo Credit: Jakub Krechowicz via Adobe Stock)

"I'm from New York," I say, when anyone inquires, because that is where my heart is, having fled to The Big Apple from the midwest at age 22. Thirty-seven years later, I drove through the outbound Lincoln Tunnel in tears, wondering what on earth I was doing, leaving the only place that ever felt like home.

My unrealistic fantasy is that I would go back in a New York minute. (That's 50 seconds, for small town and country folk.) However, I am not only priced out of Manhattan, but I have made a life for myself here in Durham, and I have a partner who is not the least bit interested in going back. A visit two or three times a year, therefore, must suffice.

So here I am in Durham, where I ... what? Belong? Well, I have found the planet's best therapist here, and the best dentist, and many other wonderful professionals, colleagues and friends who are my support system.

In addition, there are great bookstores, a restaurant or two where we vegans feel safe, serious high-quality museums and all kinds of excellent classical music performances for a fraction of what they would cost in New York, including many freebies. There is even a Pride march every September and a sizeable and visible LGBTQ community. And my ministry as a wedding officiant is firmly rooted here.

For its size, Durham is surprisingly sophisticated and progressive, in large part due to Duke University, the University of North Carolina just down the road in Chapel Hill, and all the other colleges and universities throughout the Triangle. Centrally located between the beach to the east and the mountains to the west, the city is also served by a major international airport and an Amtrak station.

Why Cohousing in General, and Why Village Hearth in Particular?

When I first heard the term cohousing, my only frame of reference was the hippie communes that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s. Believing that living in community was better than living in isolation, groups of people found land in the middle of nowhere, formed what they believed to be communities, lived off the grid, raised their own food, home-schooled the children, and, in general, lived out the counterculture phrase popularized by Timothy Leary: “Turn on, tune in, drop out.”

That is not what we are talking about here. For some, that may be the bad news. For me, it is the good news. I love electricity and running water and living in a city. Let me share with you, therefore, the official definition of cohousing, courtesy of the Cohousing Association of the United States:

“Cohousing is an intentional community of private homes clustered around shared space.” That means that we all have our own homes with traditional amenities, including a private kitchen. Shared spaces typically include a common house with a large kitchen, a laundry area and space for community meetings and all kinds of recreation. Outdoors, we share the parking area, walkways, the open space, the dog run and the community garden, including tools and lawnmowers and such.

We live independently, but we plan and manage the community collaboratively. We are our own management company, creating our own by-laws, typically as a Homeowners Association. Hard work, no doubt, but it means that there is no “outside” company deciding how we live. Moreover, self-management empowers residents, builds community and saves money.

The fun part is the shared meals, community workdays, parties, games, movies or other events. Need a Scrabble partner? Chances are, s/he is waiting for you in the Common House. Need a ride to the market? Sure thing! In addition, there is always someone around to look in on you, if needed. Nor are there any worries about leaving your house empty if you are traveling.

Cohousing communities vary widely in their architecture, in their legal structure, and in their membership. Village Hearth Cohousing is 55-and over and the first LGBTQ and friends cohousing community in the country, but there are characteristics common to all of them. When I described the bygone hippie communes, I said that they formed what they believed to be

communities. Many communes failed because they created a physical community — a space — and thought that was all there was to it.

Cohousing neighborhoods differ in that they are designed for privacy, as well as community. We choose our own level of engagement. At the same time, the neighborhood is designed to promote frequent interaction and close relationships. Members commit to being part of a community for everyone's mutual benefit.

Why Village Hearth? Well, even though here in 2019 LGBTQ folks are getting married, living wherever we please and climbing the corporate ladder, the pushback under and by the current administration is ugly and likely to get uglier.

In short, in today's political climate, we are not safe. We are not safe in the streets, nor are we warmly welcomed in retirement communities, assisted living facilities or nursing homes. I want to live in a neighborhood where a public same-sex kiss hello or goodbye is neutral, not cause for calling the morality police. I want to feel free to be myself not just in my living room but also when I walk out the door, and VHC certainly offers that.

Specifically, our vision is to live in a caring community with the infrastructure to age in place with grace and dignity, balancing the privacy of a smaller sustainable dwelling with opportunities for social engagement and the support of the larger community.

Most importantly, VHC will embrace us as we age in the unique way that a cohousing community is designed to do. My heart may be in New York, but my home is in the Hearth.

Now under construction, four of the 28 units are still available. For more information, visit villagehearthcohousing.com, email villagehearthcohousing@gmail.com or call 561-714-8009.

(Very Rev.) Christopher Ross is an ordained priest, spiritual director, meditation teacher and wedding officiant in the Triangle. Visit celestialceremonies.org to learn more.

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