

Communal Living Attracting More 60-Something Women

Written by Ginny Grimsley
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Author Says Women are Choosing to Age with the Support of Friends

Some say the '60s hippies are going back to the commune. Others call the growing number of female Baby Boomers rooming together "The Golden Girls' phenomenon."

Author Martha Nelson, who at 65 is on the leading edge of a tsunami of retiring Boomers, says it's really all about choosing the company of friends.

"As a group, we've been empowered more than past generations of women," says Nelson, whose debut novel, *Black Chokeberry* (www.BlackChokeberryTheBook.com), is the story of three disparate older women who unexpectedly end up sharing a home. "We're more worldly, stronger, financially savvy and healthier than our ancestors – through no fault of their own – and we know what we want."

Increasingly, what they want is to actively age with the camaraderie, laughter, understanding and support of other women who share their ideas of healthy lifestyles, good food from their own gardens, green living, and myriad activities on a moment's notice.

In 2010, 480,000 Baby Boom women lived with a least one unrelated female, according to an AARP analysis. The growing number of U.S. HomeShare programs, which help connect people interested in sharing a house, say their numbers have been steadily rising since the economy belly-flopped.

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"This concept is really trending on the East and West Coasts and is very big in Europe," says Ryan Cowmeadow, vice president of the National Shared Housing Resource Center, an all-volunteer clearinghouse of HomeShare programs.

"Our numbers are up about 15 percent since 2007, and about 75 percent of applicants are female," he says.

"We're hoping to see a real surge with the Boomers entering retirement age now. They're the ones who didn't take 'no' for an answer. Home-sharing just makes sense."

Nelson notes that there are several reasons why women more than men are gravitating to communal living as an alternative lifestyle.

"Women typically live longer than men, and men are more likely to remarry quickly after a divorce or the death of a spouse," she says.

"And fundamentally I think it's as much about the special bonds women share. We form these wonderful, supportive, 'tell the truth' friendships, which survive the demands of husbands, children and careers. Whether living alone or with a spouse or partner, women cling to their friendships. When a woman considers living alone as she ages, it's a natural progression to seek the company of her best friends."

That's what happened to Nelson, a former journalist and educator, whose long marriage ended in divorce when she was in her 50s. In regaining her balance as a single woman, she sought time alone to heal, then turned to her trusted friends as she stepped back into life. Her happiest moments came from long conversations over coffee, laughter over meals and movies, and, occasionally, indulgent tears she felt safe to shed.

"I came to fully understand the importance of women friends in my life," she says. "They are the gold standard and as we age, they are critical to happiness, regardless if one is married or in a

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committed relationship."

The movement for cohousing – where residents have private living spaces but share common areas, such as dining rooms, and tasks, such as cooking -- started in Denmark and is catching on in the United States. There are model programs in Boulder, Colo., and other communities, including three cohousing projects being planned in the greater Nashville area, where Nelson lives.

Practical considerations of creating close living communities include health and safety, care in times of an accident or medical emergency, and saving money, a concern for many women who find themselves single or widowed after long marriages, Nelson says.

But Boomers are renowned for demanding more than creature comforts from life, she adds.

"We want to be happy; we're healthy, active and we want to enjoy ourselves as we age. We want to travel, go to a movie with a neighbor or housemate, cook a meal, share a garden, and feel that we are contributing to our communities.

"What started with Rosie the Riveter has brought us to this," says Nelson who is happily married again, but fascinated by the new movement of cohousing.

"We're strong women and we can choose to live the way we want as we get older. Very often, that will mean with other women in close knit communities."

About Martha Nelson

Martha Nelson is an award-winning former investigative reporter, columnist and editor at two New York newspapers. She also is a former educational and nonprofit executive, consultant, and chef. She retired in 2010 and settled in to write *Black Chokeberry*, a coming-of-age novel about three women confronting crisis and change on the other side of 50.

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