

A Village of Their Own

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[Note: *Prairie Sky Cohousing* was known as *WholeLife Cohousing* during its development period]



You'd expect crystals, tie-dyed clothes and long hair. But the amiable people gathered in the living room of a southwest home to sip tea, eat homemade muffins and discuss communal living are breathtakingly normal, middle-class professionals.

Sprinkled in the group are a landscape architect, an occupational therapist, an accountant, an English professor, a high-school math teacher and several computer consultants. These citizens don't appear radical, but together they are building WholeLife Cohousing, an innovative housing development in the city's northeast.

It's part of a fledgling movement in which people of all ages are creating their own "villages." A form of collaborative housing that originated in Denmark in the 1960s, cohousing's advocates say it offers residents an old-fashioned sense of community.

There are seven cohousing communities operating in Canada, five in British Columbia and two in Ontario. The WholeLife project is the first of its kind in Alberta. According to the *Journal of the CoHousing Network*, there were 51 established cohousing communities across North America in the summer of 2000.

Slated to begin construction in April, the WholeLife project is an 18-unit multi-family complex located on one-third of a hectare at 402 30th Ave. N.E. in the inner-city community of Winston Heights/Mount View. It consists of self-contained two- and three-bedroom townhouses and apartments, each with full kitchen, laundry rough-in and a private outdoor seating space.

So far, so ordinary.

What makes WholeLife different is the 3,200-square-foot common house, central courtyard, community gardens and children's play area. The common house has a full kitchen and dining room, lounge, a children's play room, a teen room, laundry facility, guest room, multi-purpose rooms and workshop. The common areas are designed to foster interaction and build a strong sense of community through shared, optional meals several times a week and shared chores such as gardening.

Dennis Swenson fully expected to encounter long-haired vegetarian hippies when his wife, Kathi Swenson, first floated the idea of cohousing four years ago.

He changed his mind when he actually met the WholeLife members.

"It's a great group of people with extremely diverse interests," said the full-time gymnastics coach who runs the Mount Royal Gymnastic Club. The common denominator, he said, are people "who want to work together, share, take care of themselves and take care of each other."

There are 12 "households" involved thus far, with people ranging in age from the Swensons' two-year-old daughter, Annie, to widower Verna Blanchard, 77.

Dennis, 42, grew up on a farm near the small town of Bindloss, north of Medicine Hat. Moving to the city was a "big shock" and he always expected he would return to farming. That hasn't panned out and he sees cohousing as a reasonable substitute.

"(Bindloss) was a very close-knit community. People used to help each other out all the time. You'd be at the neighbour's all the time. To me that was the norm," he said. "The (cohousing) concept of knowing your neighbour and being involved with other people's lives grew on me."

Kathi, 42, was the driving force behind joining WholeLife. A former schoolteacher who stays home to care for their four-year-old son and two-year-old daughter and run a part-time business, she'd travelled extensively in the Third World. She once lived in a village in Fiji where it took her "two weeks to figure out whose child belonged to whom. Everybody took care of everybody else. Everyone shared, without thinking about it."

Back in Canada, she said she "was really, really disappointed to find how alienating, isolating, crazy and difficult it was," following the birth of her first child and feeling marooned in a single-family house in the suburb of Fairview.

"I just knew there had to be a better way."

She hunted around on the Internet and hit on the Canadian Cohousing Network, which directed her to WholeLife cohousing group (www.wholelife.ab.ca). She went to her first information meeting.

"I immediately felt at home. This is where I wanted to be."

Dennis is often away, working nights or travelling to meetings on weekends and Kathi finds life lonely with two small kids, especially doing the dinner/bath-time/story-time/bedtime ritual every night. She looks forward to sharing cooking and parenting.

"Whenever I think of cohousing, my shoulders drop, I take a deep breath and feel at peace. I feel ease because I know I won't have to do this all by myself."

The Swensons will move into an 850-square-foot, two-bedroom apartment with a 950-square-foot undeveloped basement. Their unit costs \$190,000, which includes their portion of the common area.

At press time, the project was going through the development permit process and 12 of the 18 units had been spoken for. The group is looking for six more households to join.

The remaining units range from an 851-square-foot, two-bedroom apartment for \$168,000 to a three-bedroom, 1,358-square-foot townhouse with basement for \$232,263. These prices include a share of communal space. Monthly "condo" fees range from \$159 to \$222, depending on unit size.

From the City of Calgary's point of view, WholeLife isn't that much different from a typical multi-family development.

"Their design will integrate well into the community but there's still some [design] details that need to be further explored," says planner Trevor Sholdice, with development and building approvals.

The only stumbling block is the west facade of the main building.

"It's not well-articulated, architecturally speaking," said Sholdice.

In layman's terms, that means "it presents a a blank and uninteresting appearance and facade on to Edmonton Trail."

That's not "a big issue" in the development process and Sholdice expects the project will be given the green light as soon as the requested changes are made.

The surrounding neighbourhood of Winston Heights/Mount View fully supports the project.

"The community feels very positive about WholeLife," said Kathy Orlesky, area resident and community hall director.

Orlesky said the WholeLife group held a public town meeting and several coffee parties to introduce themselves.

"They seem like a great group of people with great ideas."

Ward 4 Ald. Bob Hawkesworth described it as "an innovative housing solution and another model for housing in our city."

"It's a group of very community-minded people that will be moving into a community-minded neighbourhood," he added.

"It should be a good fit."

Nothing Bad to Say: WholeLife members on cohousing:

- Rick Sept, high-school math teacher; single, no children: "My natural inclination is to be very introverted. I don't know how good of a communitarian I will be, but it's something I'll have to grow into. It will be good for me."

- Lydia Ducharme, financial administrator; married, no children: "It was a meeting at Windsong (an established cohousing project in Langley, B.C., where Lydia's sister lives) that convinced (my husband) Ray to join. A big group of people were talking about a delicate subject and people were angry but they listened to each other. He was so touched that people would try to hear each other out."

- John Michell, teaches computer networking courses; married with a teenaged daughter: "We've had a nice house in a nice neighbourhood for 23 years, but it's more than we need and we want to simplify our lives. I have a friend who lives down the street. He had a heart attack a week and a half ago. I didn't hear about it until two days ago, no one had . . . That won't happen at (WholeLife)."

- Verna Blanchard, widow with two grown children; French instructor, children's book author: "I live alone. I don't like living alone. My family care about me, but I don't want to be dependent on them."

- Kathleen Ryan, single, occupational therapist. "I find life gets really tiring having to do everything on my own . . . I look forward to late-night Scrabble games."

- Donna Rutherford, homemaker with three children; married to Tom Rutherford, a computer consultant: "I like that we're making a smaller footprint on the Earth, instead of contributing to urban sprawl."

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