

What is there to do in a retirement village?

In my last article, I promised to describe some aspects of our current experiences of retirement village life. The community here is qualitatively different from the wonderful KV community, but in our opinion just as wonderful in its own way. It is more homogeneous, in that we are all aged between 55 and 99, and all but a couple of us are fully retired. Among the roughly 100 residents, there is a wide range of interests and experiences, and time to express these in various ways. Many of our activities are initiated by individuals. We have the use of a large entertaining area, extending to a fine outdoor terrace. Adjoining it is a more intimate sitting room with an open fire in winter, a commercial kitchen, cinema, billiard room, gymnasium and indoor, salt water swimming pool. The 35 acres of grounds are maintained by three groundsmen, any of whom, if needed, cheerfully lend a hand with our own gardens.

Individual interests and needs

One couple initiated the vegetable enclosure (no rabbits!), with allotments for households to grow their own. I enjoy sharing news and tips with others of like mind when I go to pick vegies or herbs for dinner. There is a well-regulated series of compost bins, ruled by the self-described "compost nazi" – a tiny, silver haired lady who has a degree in horticulture, a communal sweet potato bed and herb garden, and supplies of mulch and manure. Adjoining the veggie garden is the Chook Palace containing eight very beautiful, indulged and self-satisfied girls. The Trinity Garden, boasting a wide range of perennials, bulbs and flowering shrubs and trees, is tended by working bees. Weekly movies are chosen by a film buff, who previews, advertises and shows films in the cinema - \$2 admission. One resident who has Parkinsons disease organises regular bush walks for his own health and any residents who wish to join him. A tradition initiated by a caffeine aficionado is a weekly, early morning walk to the Sourdough Bakery.

Joint activities

There is a mens' shed, which boasts more women users than men. They have produced some beautifully designed garden benches, a lectern for the cinema and a box for suggestions. The choir sings on Mondays, Majong is played on Tuesday mornings and a craft group gathers in the afternoon, Bridge on Wednesdays and Saturdays, movies on Thursday evenings and aqua-erobics in the morning. On Fridays Happy Hour is popular – overseen by a resident who was a principal in a wine appreciation group in her working life. In a few weeks, the new petanque court will be opened, but tennis is played in Berry to encourage interaction in the wider community. Once a month there is a minimally structured "book chat", where attendees discuss the books they are reading at the time. A monthly Ethics Group is held in Berry with a discussion topic chosen and researched by a different volunteer each time. Oh, and a Sketch and Chat group gathers fortnightly.

Activities officer

Everything I have described so far is initiated and organised by various residents. However, we do have an Activities Officer who organises weekly morning teas, and speakers on a wide variety of topics. She writes a monthly newsletter and helps new-comers to settle in to their new homes. She liaises between the manager and residents on all health and safety issues. She also assists the Social Committee which organises lunches or dinners at the drop of a hat on any pretext, such as Melbourne Cup, Australia and St Patricks Days, Easter, Christmas and many others.

Privacy

I am often asked whether there is a lack of privacy, or feelings of obligation to join in so many activities. While it would be very difficult to feel alone or neglected in this community, privacy is strongly respected. People tend to meet in the common areas rather than knock on each other's doors. There is an unspoken rule never to remark on whether someone was present or absent at any event, and the fact that at any one time around one third of the residents are away - cruises and caravans are popular - means that attendance is always variable. It is possible to be quite reclusive, or to join with the community on as many or as few times as one would wish. In this vibrant community, relationships vary from close friendships to nodding acquaintance, but to us it feels more like an extended family than a suburban or village community. This is based on our common stage of life and the familiarity that stems from living in a relaxed, resort-style atmosphere with like-minded people.

In my next article, I will explore some of the issues resulting from living in an ageing community.

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