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A New Way of Living for Senior Citizens

Can old people live congenially together in communes outside nursing homes and other institutions?

I went out to the Beverly-Fairfax area the other day to visit two homes operated by Alternative Living for the Aging, a private, nonprofit agency founded by Janet Witkin, executive director.

The first was a former duplex and home for wayward girls. In 1985 it was converted into a dozen or so separate bedrooms and baths, with two kitchens and various communal rooms.

It is occupied now by seniors of low income who pay a moderate monthly rent, have private bedrooms and baths, eat a dinner prepared by a cook five days a week, and otherwise shift for themselves.

They seemed to be waiting for me when I arrived. There were several women and two or three men. They were gracious and amiable and eager to show me around. In one of the kitchens a woman opened a panel and showed me a chart that had the names and pertinent data about every resident: next of kin, doctors, medical problems.

"That's just in case," she said. "We take care of each other."

I was astounded at the neatness of the living quarters. They were quite impeccable. Not a newspaper, not a discarded wrapper, not a dirty spoon was in sight. Living as I do amid notorious clutter, I could hardly believe that old people could be so tidy.

The rooms were decorated with a combination of arty taste and homey memorabilia. Monet posters and family portraits. French Impressionist art was heavily represented. I noticed several posters from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibition of some years ago, "A Day in the Country."

An unworthy thought crossed my mind. Had these people been "programmed" to put on a front for visitors, as the Jews in "War and Remembrance" had been programmed for the visiting Red Cross

However, I was overcome by their obviously genuine high spirits, their humor, their pride and their respect for one another. Besides, I wasn't that important. Since the co-op had opened, its residents had become used to visitors from the media. They had often been in the press and on TV.

The second house I visited is known as the El Greco Apartments, a Spanish-style building surrounding a courtyard. Built in Westwood in 1929, it was to be torn down. But its owner deeded it to ALA, and with private and public funding, and the help of Councilman Zev Yaroslavsky, it was moved to the Beverly-Fairfax site.

Several residents were sitting at an umbrella table in the courtyard. The setting was idyllic. They introduced themselves. Their spirits were high. They told innocent jokes about one another. "Max is my buddy," one woman said, which meant more than it sounded like. The residents are paired as buddies. One buddy watches out for the other. "We call one another at least once a day," a woman explained. "Just to make sure everything is all right."

El Greco is different from the co-op. It has a dozen self-sufficient apartments (single or one-bedroom) with kitchens. The residents do their own cooking. I looked into several of these apartments, which, like the rooms in the co-op, were immaculate. I wondered that these people never let down and threw things about like the rest of us.

Maybe their neatness is a mark of their self-reliance. Alternative living is for those seniors who do not need institutionalized care, but who don't want to live alone. ALA screens every applicant for his or her compatibility degree. They must be clear-headed and without debilitating health problems. They must have their own doctors and be able to handle their own medication. It doesn't hurt to be good at Scrabble and Trivial Pursuit.

Back in the courtyard, I began to feel faint. I perspired. I asked if anyone had anything sweet. A woman resident invited me into her apartment, sat me in a comfortable chair at a coffee table, and soon served me a large ice-cold glass of papaya juice and a small plate of cookies. I do not eat sweets, except in emergencies, but I drank the papaya juice and ate every cookie. I felt better.

I wasn't ready yet for alternative living,