

# The New York Times

—NEW YORK, THURSDAY, JULY 3, 1980—

C3

## Coast Center Finds Roommates for Aged

By SHARON JOHNSON

LOS ANGELES  
**F**OUR years ago, Benjamin Himel, a retired teacher, moved from Brooklyn to Santa Monica, Calif., where he rented a small room in a hotel near the ocean.

"The view was beautiful but I was miserable," said Mr. Himel, who is 75 years old. "Although there were many people my age, I could not relate to any of them. I dreaded getting up every morning because I was so lonely."

Then he went to a meeting sponsored by Housing Alternatives for Seniors, a nonprofit organization here that finds roommates for senior citizens. There he met Victor Arkin, an 84-year-old retired tool and die maker.

The two widowers got together for coffee several times and discovered that they enjoyed walking along the beach, read the same magazines and had similar ideas about housekeeping. About a month later, they moved into Mr. Arkin's two-bedroom apartment in Venice, Calif.

"Having a roommate has been great," said Mr. Himel. "It has given me a new lease on life."

Mr. Arkin agrees. "Even little things like cooking dinner and watching television are more pleasant when you have someone to share them," he said. "It also is cheaper and safer to have a roommate."

Housing Alternatives for Seniors is one of an increasing number of organizations across the nation that try to find housing for the elderly who cannot or do not want to live alone or in a nursing home or other institution. These nonprofit, grass-roots organizations pair roommates, search for suitable accommodations, and sometimes provide follow-up counseling, housekeeping and other services.

"The elderly are beginning to learn that two or three can live more cheaply and pleasantly than one," said Janet L. Witkin, founder and director of Housing Alternatives for Seniors. "Many of them have found that living with an elderly roommate is easier than moving in with their grown children. Others like the arrangement because they don't have to give up their possessions or abandon their hobbies and activities the way they often do when they move into an institution."

Miss Witkin, a 33-year-old former teacher, and a group of volunteers from various civic and religious organizations opened the center in a modest storefront on Los Angeles's West Side in April 1979. More than 100 persons have found roommates through the free service, which is supported by donations and a modest Federal grant.

Applicants complete a questionnaire with information ranging from attitudes toward smoking to hobbies and diets. They also meet with a volunteer social worker, who discusses the pros and cons of having a roommate and suggests ways that they might make the arrangement work. The applicant is given a name and telephone number of another person with similar requirements and they are encouraged to meet several times and spend a weekend together before moving.

"The ideal situation is for them to move into a place where neither one has lived before, so that they won't have any memories of what the house was like when their spouse was alive or

---

Applicants are from 65 to 90; most are widows in their 70's.

---

any feelings of possessiveness toward the furnishings," Miss Witkin said.

"Unfortunately most roommates have to move into a unit where one of them is living, because in many areas of Los Angeles the vacancy rate is 1 percent and nice inexpensive apartments are impossible to find."

The applicants have ranged from a 90-year-old man whose wife recently died to a 65-year-old single woman who was tired of living alone. Most applicants are widows in their 70's. The hardest applicants to place are those who recently suffered a serious illness.

The roommates usually split the rent and utilities and divide the household chores according to what they like to do. Only one set of roommates didn't get along and asked for other roommates, according to Miss Witkin.

"The problem was that one woman just wanted someone to share the rent while the other one wanted a friend," she said. "We found them other roommates with similar ideas and both of them have been very happy."

The combination of inflation and a shortage of apartments has led many elderly persons to seek the services of the center in recent months. "Other groups in Chicago, Washington, Philadelphia, Boston, Seattle and northern California have started similar services, and I think the idea will spread," said Miss Witkin.

Mr. Himel, the retired New Yorker, agreed. "Getting old isn't easy, but it can be a lot of fun if you have a nice roommate," he said.