

# Aging Gracefully at Home

Older New Englanders plan for the future • by Nell Porter Brown



**A**S BOARD PRESIDENT of Staying Put in New Canaan, Tom Towers, M.B.A. '64, believes in self-reliance. The Connecticut organization, modeled after Boston's Beacon Hill Village, provides practical services, classes, and community connections for town residents choosing to grow old in their own homes. "This is about helping ourselves," says Towers, a retired telecommunications executive. "It means 'Don't feel sorry for yourself getting old! Get off your duff and do something about it.'"

Such private, nonprofit groups are springing up in New England and else-

where in the country as part of the popular movement dubbed "aging in place." Staying Put opened for membership in October and offers transportation, help with errands, social gatherings and trips, a list of recommended tradespeople and home-healthcare agents, and a resource center for the elderly in a town where more than a third of the 16,000 residents are over the age of 50. Members pay an annual fee—\$360 for a single person and \$480 for a couple—for access to services. Staying Put will also take on a cadre of high-school volunteers (with their own extracurricular community-service requirements to fulfill) to do things like

shovel walkways in the winter or help clean out a basement. "If a member is suddenly in the hospital, for example, we can get someone to walk their dog," says Staying Put executive director Jane Nyce. "We're expecting to find a long list of surprising things that people will need."

The vast majority of seniors in America want to live at home as long as they can, according to AARP surveys. Group discounts on services, a collegial community of peers, and organized support through groups like Staying Put make that understandable desire more feasible than ever before.

The idea is so popular that within the last few years, groups have formed (or are in the planning stages) in Bronxville, New York (and other parts of Westchester County); Greenwich and

Darien, Connecticut; Nashua, New Hampshire; Falmouth, Massachusetts; Burlington,

**Above: Tom Towers at a gathering for Staying Put in New Canaan**

Vermont; and Cambridge. Towers and other "senior social entrepreneurs" (as he puts it) are not opposed to assisted-living or retirement communities. But, they say, those places can often feel isolated and homogenous. Cambridge at Home board member Jay Lorsch, Kirstein professor of human relations at Harvard Business School, says the new group "enables us to live in our homes a lot longer than we'd otherwise be able to do—without going into retirement homes, which have be-

come very institutional and, for a lot of people, unpleasant places to be. America being America, most of us have grown children and grandchildren all over the world,” Lorsch adds. “It’s probably true that this is a way of relieving the responsibility of that younger generation to take care of their parents, and of giving older people an option beyond just relying on their kids. This is an alternative to both those things.”

More than 250 people showed up at the Cambridge group’s launch party in October, and about 300 have joined. “We can provide referrals for everything from 24/7

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care with nurses to someone who comes by for three hours a week to check blood pressure, or helps put the groceries away,” says executive director Kathy Spierer. (There is a fee structure for services beyond those covered by the basic membership cost.)

Board president Steven J. Stadler ’48, who has lived in his Mount Auburn Street condominium with his wife, Ingrid

Stadler, Ph.D. ’59, for more than four decades, says about 40 people went on an October trip to Yale’s art museums. The social component of the program is critical to many seniors, he says: “We’re hoping to facilitate those bonds through exercise classes, walks, yoga, bridge groups, trips, and political luncheons.” So far, he notes, the membership includes a fair number of Harvard affiliates—a big draw



### Unique Senior Housing

**During** the last five years, MIT’s former director of planning, Robert Simha, MIT president emeritus Paul Gray, and a core group of other Harvard and MIT leaders, including Harvard Graduate School of Design professor Carl M. Sapers and professor emeritus Charles W. Harris, have devised an unprecedented, cooperative housing development in Cambridge. The project, University Residential Communities at 303 Third Street (URC), is now under construction and consists of two buildings—one with market-rate rental apartments, the other with units available for sale primarily to members of the Harvard, MIT, and Massachusetts General Hospital communities. (Visit [www.facultyrealestate.harvard.edu](http://www.facultyrealestate.harvard.edu) for details.) Those units are geared to seniors—and anyone else—desiring a cooperative community while maintaining ties to academia and to the cultural benefits of urban life.

Designed and being built by Extell Corporation of New York, the URC project (offered in partnership with the Beal Companies of Boston) also provides physical and programmatic features to enable its older residents to “age gracefully in place,” Simha says. These include 24-hour concierge service; a swimming pool, hot tubs, and a flexible fitness space; a common meeting room with a fireplace, overstuffed chairs, and bar ser-

vice; a large courtyard for events; and a 4,000-square-foot dining “club.” Home healthcare, housekeeping and shuttle services, and access to the nearby MIT medical department will also be available.

A cooperative board will govern the URC building, Simha explains, because “that is the only model in Massachusetts that ensures that members of the university community are not priced out of the housing market in the future.” Intergenerational and mixed-income use is planned. Twenty-one of the units have been set aside as part of the Cambridge Affordable Housing Program and will go to applicants through a lottery based on income guidelines. The remaining 147 units will go to people of any age, at prices ranging from \$465,000 to \$1.4 million. “The goal is to create a residential community of a diverse group of people with an affinity for university life,” according to Simha. “One of the main reasons people don’t like assisted living or continuing-care facilities is that there are too many old people there.” Such places, he adds, also tend to be built in isolated, suburban towns where people cannot walk or take public transportation to movies, concerts, lectures, or restaurants. URC, in contrast, is located one block from the Kendall Square subway station and across the street from a planned multi-stage performing arts venue called the Constellation Center.

About 40 units have already been reserved, including those belonging to Simha and Gray.

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for others retired from academia or professional lives who are keen on continuing to learn and be intellectually stimulated by their peers. “We’ve had a rapid ramp up,” he adds. “There seems to be a need for this organization in Cambridge, given the big response.”

Beacon Hill Village, which opened six years ago, pioneered this approach to independent living and now counts 430 members. The group has produced a comprehensive founder’s manual and accompanying DVD for agencies and individuals interested in starting their own stay-at-home organizations, and in April hosted an inaugural conference on the subject that drew about 250 people from across New England, the nation, and as far away as Australia. “These villages are literally popping up all over the country,” says executive director Judy Willett. Hot spots include Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C. (including one in the planning stages for the Watergate apartments), and parts of California, New York, and New England (which claims a large chunk of the nation’s elderly population).

According to 2005 U.S. Census projections, by 2030 the six New England states will all be among the 21 states with the highest percentages of residents above the age of 65. The biggest projected jumps are for Maine (which, by 2030, would have the second-highest percentage of elderly people after Florida), New Hampshire (rising from thirty-seventh place to seventeenth place) and Vermont (which will move to eighth place). “By 2030, we expect that one in four people in Vermont will be 65 or older,” says Nancy Eldridge, executive director of Cathedral Square Corporation, a nonprofit senior-housing agency in Burlington. “We’re looking at how Beacon Hill Village might be applicable to Cathedral housing units in Burlington, and to the wider area around us.”

Eldridge is applying for grants to create a business model and gauge interest among local seniors in finding more innovative ways to meet their needs. It is not obvious that the Beacon Hill blueprint, set in a densely packed urban neighborhood with well-heeled clientele, is entirely transferable to Burlington, or to more rural settings, where se-

niors are more spread out geographically, she says. But there is no doubt the need for at-home services already exists, and that demand will only grow—partly, she explains, because of the 2005 Vermont Medicaid waiver that entitles every recipient to significant services at

profit Life Coping Inc., which provides case-management assistance to the elderly in their own homes, is planning to inaugurate a village network in March that would offer its clients nonmedical *and* medical services, such as the care Eldridge refers to, à la carte. “I think this is

Money and long-term care services are always an issue.”

Staying Put in New Canaan deliberately set membership rates at a relatively affordable level for its location, and is building an endowment to help subsidize costs for lower-income seniors. “This is not an exclusive, elitist organization,” says director Jane Nyce. “We want this to have as broad an appeal as possible.” Elsewhere, rates vary depending on location and services: Beacon Hill Village charges \$780 per household or \$580 per individual for basic membership; Greenwich asks \$650 per couple and \$500 for an individual; and Cambridge at Home costs \$1,200 per couple and \$900 per individual annually. (Membership fees cover varied services; each organization differs.)

Whatever the price, it is vastly less than the equivalent cost of moving into an assisted-living arrangement. Often local communities offer a range of government-funded elder-care services (so-

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home. But the infrastructure to deliver such services doesn't yet exist, and meanwhile the number of nursing-home beds is shrinking. “Home healthcare agencies are doing what they can,” Eldridge adds, “but they are stretched for resources, money, and labor, and the entitlement doesn't include the 24/7 care that nursing homes do, and which many people need.”

In Nashua, New Hampshire, the for-

exactly what the federal and state governments want: people who are organizing to care for themselves,” says Ellen Curelop, president of Life Coping. “For the people who can pay for these services, it could not be better.” Such private-pay systems represent the future “because the aging population is growing,” she reiterates, “and there will be increased demand for services and the possibility that there will not be enough services for everyone.

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cial events, senior centers, transportation services, meals) that are available to all, regardless of income. In the affluent suburb of Greenwich, for example, there is plenty of help for senior citizens, says Marilyn Chou, president of At Home in Greenwich. "But there is strong resistance to depending on town services," she adds. "People don't want to feel they

are on the dole or feel that they are needy. There is also a lot of denial of age. I spoke to a 93-year-old doctor who says he doesn't need any services yet. People don't want to acknowledge that there may be a problem down the road—or tomorrow."

For Tom Towers of Staying Put in New Canaan, these are questions of practicality.

He and his wife, who have lived in the town for 39 years, sold their big home to one of their sons three years ago and moved into a condominium to live more simply, with fewer worries over maintenance, and to be closer to the center of town. They will use Staying Put services when needed, but, for now, Towers says he has thoroughly enjoyed the stimulating and challenging start-up aspects of the project and contact with others involved with the mission. "I don't believe getting older need be 'overwhelming,' if you don't feel sorry for yourself and you keep looking for interesting things to do," he says. "We don't ask for pity, but rather simply a chance to continue to enjoy life in familiar settings and with friends, old and new. Our notion of 'Taking care of ourselves' is very powerful." ▽

### Resources for Staying At Home

At Home in Greenwich  
Greenwich, Connecticut  
203-863-9655  
(no website yet)  
Contact: Marilyn Chou

Cambridge at Home  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
617-864-1715  
[www.cambridgeathome.org](http://www.cambridgeathome.org)  
Contact: Kathy Spierer

Gramatan Village  
Bronxville, New York  
914-337-1338  
[www.myhometownbronxville.com](http://www.myhometownbronxville.com) (then click "Seniors")  
Contact: Julie A. Dalton  
(The board president is John Corry, J.D. '56.)

Beacon Hill Village  
Boston, Massachusetts  
617-723-9713  
[www.beaconhillvillage.org](http://www.beaconhillvillage.org)  
Contact: Judy Willett

Cathedral Square Corporation  
Burlington, Vermont  
802-863-2224  
[www.cathedralsquare.org](http://www.cathedralsquare.org)  
Contact: Nancy Eldridge

Staying Put in New Canaan  
New Canaan, Connecticut  
203-966-7917  
<http://stayingputnc.org>  
Contact: Jane Nyce