



GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS/ESSDRAS SUAREZ

Aaron Rice, Jaz and Kaya Salem, Maddie Freeman, and twins Ali and Jenna Rice sharing a group meal at the cohousing neighborhood of New View in Acton.

Community spirit

In Mass., cohousing concept finds a place to grow

By Marcella Bombardieri
GLOBE STAFF

ACTON — In some neighborhoods, people wave to the family across the street. In others, they cat-sit for one another and throw a block party every summer.

On Half Moon Hill in Acton, residents eat neighborhood dinners up to four nights a week. As many as 20 e-mails fly back and forth in a single day, arranging the summer mowing schedule or community yoga classes, discussing whether to chip in for a knife sharpening service or arguing over conflict in the Middle East.

Children tend to practice piano together or play on the same soccer team. They stage puppet shows after dinner and are often found sprinting and squealing through bouts of the neighborhood's homegrown "onion



Cohousing in Massachusetts

Cohousing settlements range from highly urban — two in Cambridge — to rural settings on Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard, and in Amherst and Northampton.

game," no longer played with an actual onion for safety reasons.

This is New View, a six-year-old community of 24 households at the vanguard of the American movement for "cohousing." In cohousing, residents own their own houses or condos but share common space, divide up chores, and regularly cook group meals, all in pursuit of that shaky pillar of the American dream: the vibrant, close-knit neighborhood.

Although cohousing is still working toward name recognition, it is a hot concept in the United States, especially in Massachusetts. Seven cohousing communities are already well established in the Bay State, two in Amherst and others on Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard, Cambridge, Northampton, and Acton.

More are on the way. Families moved from New York and Maryland

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The six-year-old cohousing neighborhood at Half Moon Hill.



Cohousing concept grows in Mass.

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to join the recently opened Cornerstone Cohousing, the second settlement in Cambridge. Jamaica Plain Cohousing owns land. Another group is searching for property in Stow, Maynard, and Acton. And a new condo complex in Medford is being called a "cohousing cousin" because it shares many features of cohousing, except that the group will be assembled by the developer, not by would-be residents.

Individuals who want a peek into what their commingled lives might be like, can look to New View. Members of the Acton neighborhood have nursed one another through many births and illnesses, through a serious house fire, and a recent marital separation. They constantly watch one another's children, borrow cars in a pinch, and swap soccer cleats and gardening tools.

They also confront the inevitable frictions. Some are concerned that not everyone pulls his or her weight with chores. At least a couple of adolescents consider their neighbors nosy, and one older resident finds the community too child-focused. Yet only one family has moved away, deciding it wasn't a good fit. A second family is leaving for other reasons.

The cohousing movement originated in Denmark in the 1970s, but the idea didn't make it to the United States until two architects wrote a book about it in 1988. As its popularity snowballs, proponents see confirmation that in these hurried and individualistic times, many Americans long for more workable, fulfilling and, in some ways, old-fashioned lives.

"There continues to be a real yearning for community in this country, especially among middle-class people who are fortunate enough to have the house, the cars, the lawn, the good jobs, everything they thought they wanted," said Stella Tarnay, the Cambridge-based editor of the Cohousing Journal. "Then they find they are increasingly hassled, stressed, and isolated from their fellow human beings."

Isolated is exactly how New View resident Yvonne Bauer, 41, felt at her last home in Reading.

"Everyone is king of their own anthill," said Bauer, a divorced mother of two. "It makes so much sense to share resources. Why should everyone have their own lawn mower? And part of it is liking people and wanting to be around them, but not all the time."

It was Bauer who first read an article about cohousing in 1989. Loving the idea, she slowly gathered a group of friends and strangers who wanted to make it a reality. They include high-tech workers, nurses, a doctor, a contractor, a recording studio owner, and a deli worker, as well as retired people and a few full-time moms. They have no leader, no common ideology.

New View was incorporated in 1991, and after years of work involving lawyers, developers, and sweat equity, they bought a 19.5 acre site in Acton. Between 1995 and 1996, they moved into their new houses, which ranged in price from \$190,000 to \$420,000 depending on size and customization.

Many cohousing enthusiasts worry though that they are not more diverse in race, economics, and lifestyle. New View



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/ESSDRAS SUAREZ

Jenna Rice, 8, Roz Freeman, 12, and Jenna's twin sister Ali Rice (left to right) practice gymnastics at their cohousing neighborhood of New View in Acton.

is basically all-white, although it does include one adopted, Hispanic child. It also has a lesbian couple. The group subsidizes one "affordable" unit.

The houses look typically New England, except that some are duplexes and most are clustered closer together than the usual suburban subdivisions, in order to leave more open space. Cohousing design emphasizes neighbor-friendly features like front porches, kitchens at the front of the house, and pathways connecting the homes. Cars are kept on the periphery.

At the center of the community is the 2,000-square-foot common house, with a restaurant-style kitchen and a spacious, high-ceiling dining room. This is the setting for the common meals. Once or twice a week, two volunteers cook dinner, which tends to draw at least half the community. In addition, smaller potluck dinners are held on Sundays and Fridays.

A host of committees run New View, which is legally a condo association, with condo fees averaging \$320 a month for such things as snow plowing, exterior maintenance, and high-speed Internet connection.

New View has no required activities, but many neighbors are intensely involved in one another's lives, in ways they say inoculate them from the stresses of working, parenthood, and even old age.

Carpooling is de rigueur, and older people often get rides to the doctor. There's no need for playdates and little use for paid baby sitters.

Jane Saks is a management consultant with a long commute to Boston, and also the single mother of 9-year-old Brianna. When she goes out of town on business, Brianna stays at a neighbor's house. If Saks is stuck in traffic on Route 2, she

makes a call for someone to pick up Brianna.

"It's like having a wife," said Saks. "It really makes my life stress-free. I pull up in the driveway and my pulse slows down."

Not everything is idyllic, of course. Some want only vegetarian meals; others complain there isn't enough meat. The smallest issues, like where to locate a tool shed or whether someone can plant a peach tree, have turned into protracted arguments. Cohousing communities operate on consensus, which means that even one person can block a decision.

Young children adore New View, teenagers less so. Bauer's daughter, Maya Cookson, 12, just wants more space. "People stop in on a regular basis. It's annoying when they ask a lot of questions and act like they want to be my friend," she said.

It was partly the fact that their children were older that made Wendy and Larry Israelite decide to move to another neighborhood in Acton in 1998. "It was an interesting experience but it just wasn't right for us," said Wendy.

Ann Killough, 74, feels the same way, wishing there were more adult-oriented activities. But, she said, when she got sick recently she had no shortage of volunteers to do her laundry, her shopping, and her library run.

Indeed, New View prides itself on its response to crisis. A few days after the start of school last September, a fire tore through the basement of the Lewin-Berlin household. Two New View families housed Marcia and Stephen Lewin-Berlin and their three children for eight weeks combined. Just about everybody pitched in to do scores of laundry loads to banish the smell of smoke. Some wiped down every book in the house. Some washed Mar-

cia's jewelry, earring by earring. They took turns cooking the Lewin-Berlins' dinner every night.

So far, New View has also deftly handled a touchier situation, a recent split-up. The husband moved to an apartment nearby, but still attends meals and does his chores. One neighbor stepped in to take the wife's garbage to the dump every week, something her husband used to do. Their 6-year-old daughter's friends leave reassuring notes and gifts on the doorstep. The parents, too, feel they aren't isolated.

"It's been a thousand times easier," for both parents and child, said the mother, who asked that their names not be used. "My life is really full."

Most who live in cohousing caution, it's not for everyone. It's time-consuming. It requires giving up a significant amount of privacy. The journey from idea to completed community is long and trying.

"I have difficulty imagining that large numbers of people will want to give up that much of their privacy, to have it be a really major development in American society," said Harvard professor Robert D. Putnam, author of "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community."

Still, there are already 65 completed cohousing communities in the United States, according to Tarnay, many of them on the West Coast, in Colorado, North Carolina, or Massachusetts. Fifteen more are under construction and 100 are at earlier stages, she said.

Tarnay says Massachusetts is one of the biggest growth areas for cohousing. With its strong town meeting tradition and highly educated population, she said, "There's an intuitive understanding of the power of neighborhoods."