



Chuck Johnson shows a quilt with hand prints from members of the New Brighton Cohousing project in Aptos Wednesday as Randa Johnson looks on.

Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Forging an old-fashioned sense of community

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New Brighton Cohousing is a great place to live, feel 'connectedness,' residents say

By ERIC ANDERSON

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

APTOS — Howie Schneider used to live on Glen Canyon Road in a house on a nice spot amongst the redwoods, but felt something was missing: community.

"The only time I got to see a neighbor was when I got the mail and waved," Schneider said.

Holly Stires, coming off splitting up with her husband, was also looking for community, as well as a safe, welcoming place where she could raise her two young boys.

Schneider, Stires and others say they have found what they were looking for in New Brighton Cohousing, a cluster of 11 townhouse units oriented around a main house and a grassy central courtyard. Fourteen adults and six children live on the site — located on Soquel Drive just north of Cabrillo College.

Residents live amongst each other, holding shared meals weekly, conducting community workdays in which everyone chips in on projects and making decisions about their

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neighborhood collectively, but also have their own units to go to if they want some privacy.

"Neighborhoods are kind of something of the past, and here we create our own neighborhood," Schneider said.

Several residents wore ear-to-ear smiles and chatted eagerly Wednesday when asked about what it's like living at New Brighton Cohousing. Schneider said he couldn't think of any drawbacks to the situation.

The community brings a "sense of instant neighborhood, friends, family," resident Roanne Wilson said. "I love the fact that there is a community. It's not like you're in an apartment. There's a sense of connectedness, and it's safe here."

Residents share ownership of their intimate neighborhood through a tenancy-in-common agreement, with each also owning a share of the central, three-bedroom house. They have committees for various issues, including a conflict-resolution committee that deals with any interpersonal issues that arise.

New Brighton Cohousing is one of hundreds of cohousing communities around the world, according to the Cohousing Association of the United States. It became the second cohousing community in Santa Cruz County when it opened last August; the other, Coyote Crossing in Santa Cruz, opened almost a decade ago.

The basic concept, which originated in Denmark in the late 1960s, is to promote an old-fashioned sense of neighborhood in this time of growing isolation by designing residences around a central courtyard, with a common house as the center of the community. Most cohousing communities, including New

Brighton, make decisions by consensus, meaning that everyone must agree before a decision is made.

Cohousing communities range in size from seven to 67 residences. New Brighton is on the small side, as most cohousing communities have 20 to 40 residences, according to the Cohousing Association.

There is a diversity of ages at New Brighton, ranging from young children to retirees. Residents have jobs ranging from teacher to doctor to psychotherapist to social worker to furniture salesman.

Residents say there are tangible benefits to being a tight-knit community. They take care of each other's children, they play games with each other and they hold community events. Those with certain skills, such as Schneider, who is good with computers, offer assistance to those in need.

Wilson saw how far her ties to her neighbors went when she suffered a broken right ankle at the beach in February. A neighbor picked her up at the beach, and while Wilson was unable to drive, different neighbors pitched in to drive her 12-year-old daughter 4.6 miles to school each weekday.

"It's a lot different than having a home in a regular community because we're more connected," Stires said.

"I call this a family," Randa Johnson said.

Residents said perhaps the biggest problem with cohousing is finding it. Developers rarely build properties with cohousing in mind, and few existing properties can be converted successfully into cohousing. That often leaves those interested in pursuing cohousing either having to go through the extensive and expensive process of developing a property themselves, or trying to find that rare property that can be converted.

Some New Brighton Cohousing residents spent several years looking together for a suitable property to convert, until they stumbled upon their

current site, which had been used for rentals.

"The hardest thing is finding the right spot," Schneider said. "I think we were really lucky."

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New Brighton Cohousing does have one unit available, and residents present the community as an affordable option. The unit is priced at \$335,000. For information on the property, call Randa Johnson at 475-1013, or visit one of New Brighton's orientation meetings, held each Sunday at 3:30 p.m. at the community's main house, 6020 Soquel Drive.

For information on cohousing, visit www.cohousing.org.



Howie Schneider and Roanne Wilson confer in the center courtyard of New Brighton Cohousing.

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