

HOME OF THE MONTH:

Champagne, Heated Pool, Jacuzzi, Gourmet Food and... Love-

Is this the way to treat your Grandmother ?

by Sigrid Radulovic

Behind the quiet, elegant facade of a brand new apartment complex in the town of Santa Cruz, CA., there is real revolution taking place.

This particular revolution is not fought with slogans, homemade bombs or barricades. It is fought with champagne and posh surroundings, with maid service, spa and gourmet meals. What is at stake here is an entirely new concept of retirement living, where private enterprise and state and federal government have combined to provide as comfortable, dignified and fulfilled a retirement as society can possibly afford, for rich and poor together.

The name of the place is La Posada, which translates as "a place of shelter, offering warmth, food and fellowship."

Unlike other apartment complexes built for the elderly, La Posada offers far more than just shelter and a meal—it may, in fact, offer a solution to one of our society's most devastating problems.

The secret of La Posada, which makes it different from all other, similar facilities is that this one is designed and run like the finest, four-star small resort

hotel.

When their ads refer to this place as "posh," people are not kidding! In addition to 150 unusually attractive apartment units, most with floor-to-ceiling glass doors opening out on private balconies or landscaped grounds, there are handsome lounge areas, an arts and crafts room, a game room, sewing center, woodworking shop, library, beauty salon, planned vegetable and flower gardens and twenty-four hour staffing. If this were run as a proper hotel, the tasteful decor alone would set you back at least eighty bucks a night and the quality of the food, in addition to being carefully nutritionally balanced, is far superior to that of most Hilton hotels. Yet, a person with nothing but Social Security and SSI can afford to live there.

Amazingly, this utopian blossom upon the great, grey wasteland of U.S. eldercare materialized with the



support of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, not previously known for spreading luxury among the old and poor. If HUD had never done anything else right, their helping to create La Posada alone, in this generous a fashion, should earn them whatever the equivalent is for an Oscar in the field of civic achievement.

La Posada was designed specifically in response to in-depth studies, which proved that anywhere from 50% to 90% of all the problems of older people in our society are caused by isolation and malnutrition. To avoid both, La Posada was set up as a "congregate facility," namely one where people congregate for meals and recreation and do things together, such as taking classes and trips and, in the near future, running a day care center on the premises.

By now the place has been open long enough—five and a half months to be exact—to prove that the concept works. Asked to express their feelings about La Posada recently, the residents came forth with quotes like these:

"... I feel as if I were on an extended vacation, living in a beautiful apartment hotel, but with the added feeling of a loving atmosphere that the average residence hotel does not have... We can be alone in our apartments when we wish and come to the comfortable lounge or recreation room for companionship and conversation when we desire. We never eat alone and, by the way, the food is excellent..."

"... I just love this place... it reminds me of a country club."

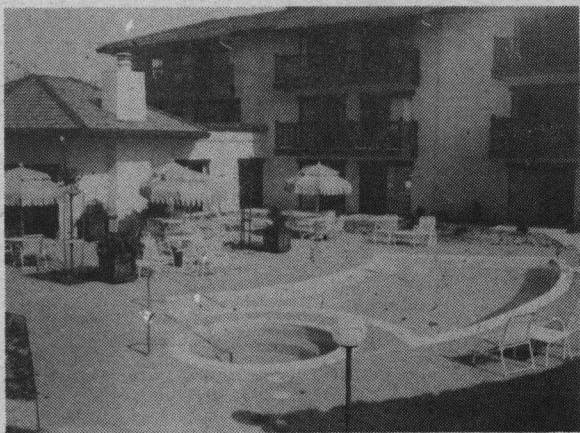
"I used to be terribly uptight and serious and worrying all the time about everything until three months ago, when I moved in here. Since then I haven't had a care in the world."

"Here we have help around the clock if we need someone. And all the people are so nice and friendly, it's like one big club where all the members meet in the dining room to visit..."

"For friendliness, feeling safe and pampered, there is no place like La Posada..."

A business contact, who services the retirement trade from a base in the Bay Area, states categorically that nothing similar to La Posada exists, at least not in the Bay area, perhaps not in all of California. He credits Ivan Netter, the man who put the whole thing together, here listed as the owner-builder, with the extraordinary good spirits and difference in attitude that prevails here.

"Most places, even the best, are absentee-owned," he says. "There's usually an administrator on the premises and you can gripe to the administrator, but if there's no follow-up, and there usually isn't, then you've got nowhere else to go. Somewhere there are owners, there



is a corporate entity, but they're as invisible as God and a lot less responsive, believe me. Here you just go to Netter who is always available and listens to you and follows up on the smallest detail . . ."

Ivan Netter is a soft-spoken, rather elegant man in his early fifties in whom two usually irreconcilable ambitions—that of making a lot of money and that of being of perfect service to his fellow beings—seem to have found a way to co-exist harmoniously. Though he sails through life under the—nowadays—much-maligned label of real estate developer, his attitude toward his customers rather resembles that of a Berkeley radical during the summer of love.

Where else do you find a landlord who sits down to dinner with his tenants to make sure the service is perfect and the food both fresh (La Posada buys *fresh* meat, fish and vegetables—even their apple pies are made from scratch) in quality and gourmet in taste level at a time when, because of a delayed opening and early, low occupancy, he was losing money every day on the kitchen operation. Among employees and tenants alike Netter seems to be regarded with what can only be described as enthusiastic affection.

Netter's specific revolutionary contribution to society consists not only in the aesthetic and material comforts he provides (at less than what it costs to maintain one bed in a semi-skilled nursing home), but in the radical shift of attitude towards his charges, a drastic, 180 degree swing away from the customary apprehensive corporate-institutional "What do we have to provide?" to an enthusiastic "What *else* can we

do for them?"

In fact, if anything negative can be said about La Posada it's that the tone is so affectionate, the ties between staff and residents so warm and personal, at moments the atmosphere borders on the cloying and one gets the feeling of being imprisoned in some corny, stationary love boat.

Actually, life aboard a cruise ship is what life at La Posada is frequently compared to. And between the healthful food, the beauty parlor on the premises, the pool, the spa and the good companionship, many of the residents have begun to shape up and fill out, looking rosier and healthier and sometimes acting a lot more together than when they first arrived.

"The theory is that if you avoided isolation and malnutrition you'd have no old age problems," says Jennifer Davis, the administrator. "So far that theory checks out!"

Next to Netter, Jennifer Davis is the person most singularly responsible for the prevailing sanity and upbeat spirits. She is a striking young woman with that larger-than-life energy timid East Coasters like this reporter often associate with native Californians. Davis, who came to her job from a heavy decade's background in anti-poverty work, is a fourth generation Santa Cruzan, a genuine Monterey Bay aristocrat, who actually lives in the retirement cottage her great-grandparents built for themselves. She describes herself as a socialist but hers is an amiable, Central California type socialism, such as manifested not long ago in her fierce fight for the right of the older folks to have free champagne with their Sunday brunch.

"Most of these people have led fairly dignified lives early in their lives. By now the dignity has gone out of their lives," Ms. Davis told the S.C. City Council. "The ten cents a week it costs to provide champagne at Sunday brunch and put a little sparkle back in their lives is not a luxury. It's one of those little niceties that makes them feel good about being here—about being alive."

If much of what can be said about La Posada sounds too good to be true, too utopian, it's because, according to Netter, that is the intention.

"The concept of La Posada is the cumulative input

Continued on Page 51

HOME OF THE MONTH, from Page 37

from many, many people, including administrators, managers and tenants of existing senior facilities, plus suggestions from doctors, gerontologists and social workers. We were determined that a facility was needed to demonstrate that near-utopia could be created for the poor as well as the wealthy. We hope La Posada will be considered a prototype . . ."

On Netter's desk is a haunting photograph of an old apartment sink crowded up against a dirty city window.

"I spent years worrying about how I'd spend my old age," says one resident. "Then I came here. I've been here for four months and I still can't believe it. This is like going to heaven before you go to heaven." Using a walker, she slowly works her way towards the dining room.

"You wouldn't believe how self-sufficient they are," says the night security person, a cheerful, middle-aged woman who (wo)mans the switchboard all night, where residents can call on the intercom, or by pulling an emergency cord, if they need help of any kind.

"When you first see them, with walkers and crutches and artificial limbs, you wouldn't think that they can do anything for themselves, but you'd be suprised! I make the rounds at night outside and I see the lights go off and on in their apartments, they're plenty of traffic and insomnia, but they never bother me, I rarely get called, they handle their stuff by themselves. When you see how frail and feeble many of them look, you're really overwhelmed by their self-sufficiency. And plus," she says, "they're all such uppers—they are so cheerful, very sharp and humorous, and they are dignified and wonderfully mannered and they really feel secure and happy here. And you can see the friendships forming and a community growing—in fact, there's a real sense of family, with all the bitching and the caring that goes with family. I'll tell you, if all our tax dollars went into building places like this, there would be dancing in the streets every April 15th!"