

# The Making of Senior Cohousing: The Story of Wolf Creek Lodge

*By Suzanne Marriott*

In 1969, I was driving up Highway 1 just north of Santa Cruz on a warm California day. To my left I saw a farm house and barn. The area was jammed with Volkswagen bugs and buses displaying the usual bright colors, painted flowers, and bumper stickers of the time. I knew there were like-minded people there and that I would be welcome to join whatever party was going on. It turned out to be a hippy wedding, and I was not turned away.

A year later, in the winter of 1970, I was traveling by train through East Germany. We were stopped at a checkpoint when a uniformed conductor tore open the door to my second-class compartment and demanded “Passport!” in a tone that reminded me of Nazi officers from World War II movies. Out the window, I saw a young DDR guard standing beside the track, rifle in tote. On impulse, I flashed him the peace sign. He returned it, not raising his hand, but keeping it discretely by his side. His eyes met mine. The train pulled away.

What do these two stories have in common? They both hold an overarching sense of community—one that transcends place and time. Whether a guard in Russian-occupied East Germany or a California girl looking for fun, we were all connected, all part of one, huge generation—and we knew it. We were a generation that recognized itself, hung together, had fun, and was determined to change the world. And we did.

Theodore Roszak tells us—the boomer generation—that we did it once and now it’s time for us to do it again. Change the world, that is. In his new book, *The Making of an Elder Culture*, Roszak writes, “What boomers left undone in their youth, they will return to take up in their maturity, if for no other reason than because they will want to make old age *interesting*.” (p. 8) He’s talking about us. (Remember Roszak? In 1968 he coined the term “counter culture.”) We’re still here, and we are going to be here for quite some time. Roszak reminds us that we are still a power to be reckoned with, still active agents for positive change.

Cohousing is part of that change, and *senior* cohousing, in particular, is a social force whose time has come.

## **My Journey Begins**

In the past four years, through my involvement in senior cohousing, I’ve rediscovered that feeling of connection I had in the 1960s—that feeling of being a part of something larger and nobler than I could achieve on my own. I am once again part of a movement that offers a new way of living, a movement that addresses the social and ecological challenges of the 21st century through sustainable community.

My own journey in senior cohousing began early in the summer of 2006, six months after the death of my husband, who succumbed to complications of multiple sclerosis.



After Michael's death, I began looking for ways to bring new meaning and motivation to my life. Through an online search for "cohousing," a concept both my husband and I had been attracted to in the past, I discovered that a group formation workshop was scheduled that summer in Grass Valley, California. Immediately, I felt drawn to attend that meeting, despite the three-hour drive and the \$200 fee it would entail.

As I drove up Highway 80 from my home in the San Francisco East Bay Area, I wondered what I would find. As it turned out, I walked into a workshop with a group of strangers and left knowing



Photos courtesy of Suzanne Marriott

*Above: Some members of Wolf Creek Lodge gather at Nevada City Cohousing for a marketing photo session. This photo: Beautiful Wolf Creek flows through the Wolf Creek Lodge property.*



they would become my neighbors. That day, 16 households began the long process of building a new and vibrant community. As octogenarian Magdalene Jaeckel, our eldest member, reflects, "Although we are from different backgrounds and didn't know each other in the beginning, I have never found a group that was so spontaneously helpful and fun to be with. It seems to me that the idea of cohousing draws people who are genuinely interested in each other and therefore would make good neighbors."

### Starting Our Community

We learned that the cohousing concept was brought to this country from Denmark by Katherine McCamant and her architect husband, Charles (Chuck) Durrett, and these were the people who had called this meeting. One of the things that convinced me to join was their enthusiasm and expertise in creating cohousing communities.

Cohousing communities are small-scale neighborhoods that are planned, developed, and managed by members. With their fully-equipped private units and large common spaces, they provide a balance between privacy and community living. This balance was a major factor for all of us in our choice of cohousing.

Over the ensuing months and years, we grew to become a close-knit community. We named our group Wolf Creek Lodge, after the free-flowing creek that borders our forested property, and embarked on a



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multi-year journey to learn about community building. We did not have to create our community from scratch. Katie gave us each a binder that contained recommended procedures, including how to form teams, develop proposals, run business meetings, and make decisions by consensus. Through our team efforts and our monthly business meetings, we adapted all of these tools to our own needs. We had a consultant who led us through the process of crafting our vision statement and learning intentional communication skills. Through a series of workshops with Chuck, we worked on our design for the common facilities and private units, identifying values and priorities and creating the spaces to foster them.

Living lightly on the planet became a primary focus. Our three-story lodge will be compact, the opposite of the urban sprawl many of us hoped to escape. By having a 4,000 sq. ft. Common House at the center of our design, we can reduce the size of our private units and still have everything we'll need. This shared space will include two guest rooms, laundry facilities, a craft area, library, sitting room, and a workshop where we can store and share all kinds of tools. A large kitchen and dining/social/meeting area will provide ample space for community meals and activities. By sharing resources, we will have many opportunities to come together as neighbors.

Our Lodge will be green-built and energy efficient, following ecological construction practices, such as the use of non- or low-toxic materials from sustainable sources, active and passive energy-saving measures, insulation exceeding state standards, low water usage, and responsible landscaping. Our site is walkable to shops and services, reducing our need for cars, and one third of our wooded property will remain open space.

As our dreams became our design, we couldn't wait to move in! We were truly creating a lifestyle revolution—one based on intelligent aging, sustainable living, and community.

### **Why Choose Senior Cohousing over Intergenerational Cohousing?**

Senior cohousing, as opposed to intergenerational cohousing, is our group's choice for many reasons. To begin with, senior cohousing is all about active aging-in-place within a supportive community. We accept the inevitability of aging, and we want to

be in control of our own aging process. Ours will not be our parents' aging. It will be different—vibrant, socially revolutionary, and fun. As one member enthusiastically puts it, "We are cutting-edge!" We are choosing senior cohousing in order to remain independent for as long as possible.

What better way to maintain our independence than through the collective support of our peers? As member Butch Thresh puts it, "We are choosing a place not because we have to, but because we want to. If you have to move because your kids are telling you it's time to move, you have to move somewhere where you don't want to move to. We're making a proactive choice about where



our life goes from here.” Many of our members, such as Butch, are planning to move from homes in remote areas, knowing they will not be able to maintain them and their surrounding acreage forever.

Another way to maintain independence is through what we call “co-care.” At some point, some of us may need more care than cohousing can provide, but co-care will greatly extend that time. Co-care means that neighbors look out for neighbors. This includes giving people rides to doctors’ offices, caring for each other through illnesses, checking up on each other, and, basically, just being good neighbors. As member Pat Elliott says, “I live alone with no nearby friends or relatives. I look forward to knowing that in Wolf Creek Lodge I will be surrounded by friends who will check on me if I don’t show up for our morning coffee or walk. And I look forward to doing the same for them. For me, that epitomizes a caring community.”

By incorporating “universal design,” senior cohousing can accommodate the physical changes that may occur as we age. For example, we will have larger doorways and wheelchair accessible bathrooms throughout. Although our lodge will have three stories, each unit and the Common House will be one-level construction. We will have elevator access to the upper floors.

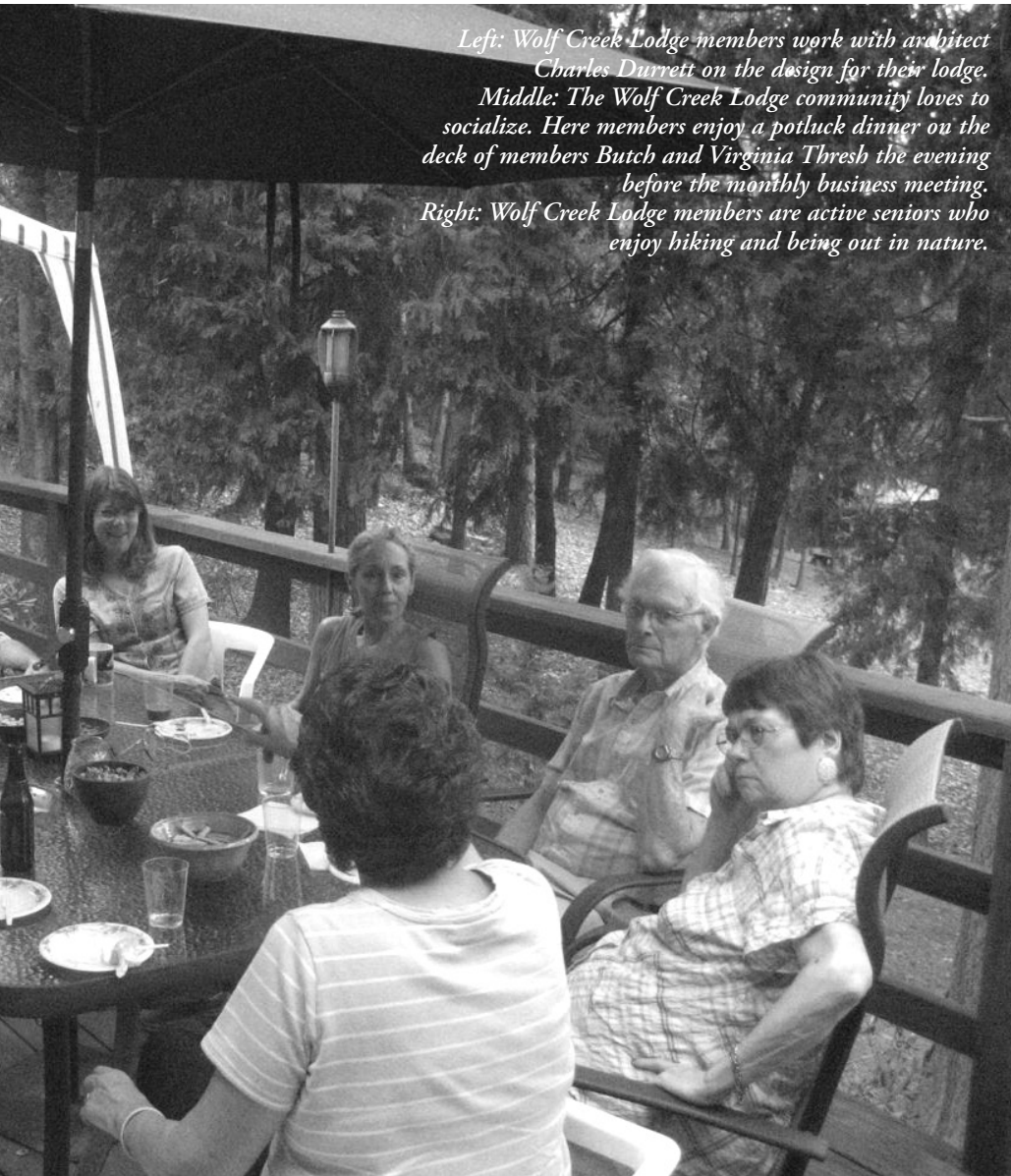
In intergenerational cohousing, special accommodations are made for children. In

senior cohousing, special accommodations are made for adults. For example, we chose to include a crafts area and an espresso bar in our Common House rather than a children’s playroom and pool table for teens. Mindful of the realities of aging, our group decided to include designated space for a live-in caregiver. If one or more members should require such a service, they could hire someone to live on site. Remembering the years of caring for my husband when he suffered from MS, I find this provision especially comforting.

Our planning didn’t proceed without its opposing viewpoints and difficult discussions, but through these we refined our goals and got to know each other better. A cohousing group doesn’t become a neighborhood until members actually move in and start living together, but before that, they do become a community. What holds the community together is the dedication to making decisions based upon what is best for the community as a whole, rather than personal preference. What’s best for the community becomes the determining factor.

At the end of our planning phase, Chuck Durrett said of our group: “I’m rather astonished by the level of consciousness the core group participating in the planning develops. When elders spend time talking about the issues of the day and about what it means to be an elder, they get honest and open. They get out of denial. They come to grips with

*Left: Wolf Creek Lodge members work with architect Charles Durrett on the design for their lodge.  
Middle: The Wolf Creek Lodge community loves to socialize. Here members enjoy a potluck dinner on the deck of members Butch and Virginia Thresh the evening before the monthly business meeting.  
Right: Wolf Creek Lodge members are active seniors who enjoy hiking and being out in nature.*





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reality.” (From an interview: [www.secondjourney.org/newsltr/08\\_Fall/Durrett\\_08Fall.htm](http://www.secondjourney.org/newsltr/08_Fall/Durrett_08Fall.htm).)

### **Avenues for Personal Growth**

Being a part of something larger than myself—something that calls me to contribute and move ahead toward shared goals—has given me new opportunities for personal growth, and I have been able to venture into new territory and take new risks. For example, as a member of the Process Team, I discovered that I enjoyed facilitating our monthly meetings. As time went on, I became involved with marketing, the last thing I imagined doing. Also, I love to write, and I soon found myself writing articles, ads, and website content, and editing newsletters.

As point persons for the Membership Team, Kirk and his partner, Barbara, have also experienced personal growth and challenges as they work to bring new members into our community. Their stories are unique to their own personalities, yet typical of the type of growth common to all of our members.

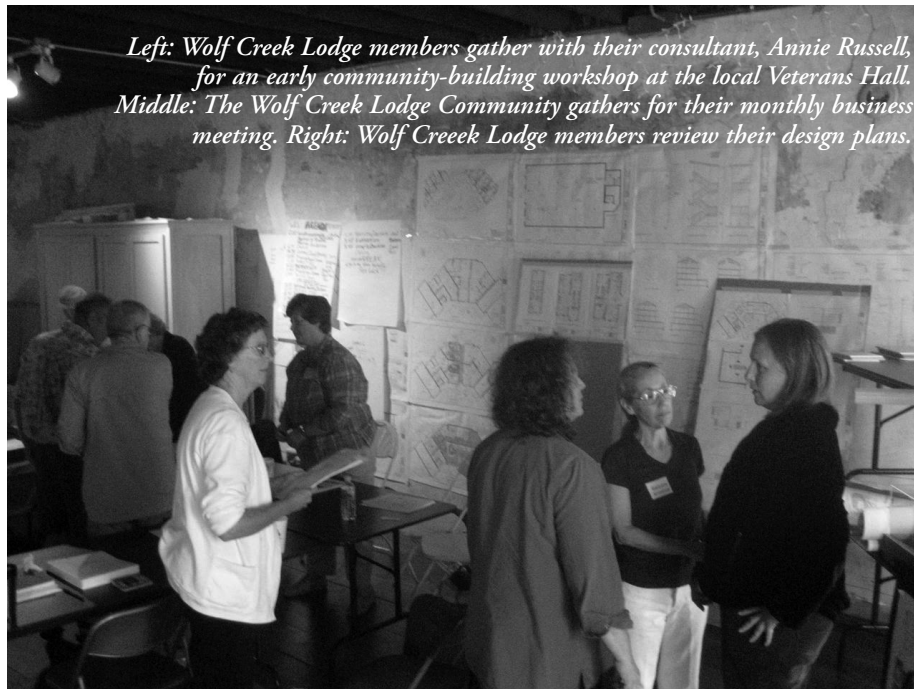
Kirk, who had built his own stone cabin far from town, values his solitude and connection with nature. Yet, he realized that isolation has its disadvantages when a neighbor died and was not discovered for days. When Barbara introduced him to cohousing, he was interested, and soon they both became members. He realized that Wolf Creek Lodge offered him a way to combine his need for independence and his love of nature with his growing desire for community. He has come to know our wooded property inch by inch, especially the beautiful creek that flows along its lower boundary. He enjoys showing people the site and inspiring them with his love of the land.

Barbara always saw herself as a support person, not a person in charge. Yet her enthusiasm for her new community drew her into leadership roles, and she became the lead for the Membership Team while also serving on the Process Team and the Financial Team. As one member recalls, “Working with Barbara and Kirk is a lot of fun because they have such enthusiasm for our project.”

Recently, Barbara and Kirk have stepped back, as have I, and new members are now in the lead. This is one of the remarkable benefits of cohousing: new people come forward as needs arise. The choice to participate in a cohousing community is an intentional choice, one that is not made lightly. Because of this, commitment runs high and participation follows accordingly.

### **Problems and Challenges**

In creating Wolf Creek Lodge, all was not smooth and easy. We faced our share of obstacles, including the challenges of navigating the city planning maze and the suspicions of future neighbors who feared we were all a bunch of hippies who would hang laundry on our roofs and lower their property values. We embarked on a long process of building a relationship with these neighbors that included going door-to-door for informal conversations, holding “tea and cookies” gatherings at the site, and attending meetings of their Homeowners’ Association, where we patiently tried to set their minds at ease. One unconvinced householder insisted that he really didn’t understand this cohousing thing and didn’t know why anyone would want to live “like that.” “But,” he added, “You’re a bunch of nice people.”



*Left: Wolf Creek Lodge members gather with their consultant, Annie Russell, for an early community-building workshop at the local Veterans Hall. Middle: The Wolf Creek Lodge Community gathers for their monthly business meeting. Right: Wolf Creek Lodge members review their design plans.*

As our group grew, we gained some members who were geographically distant from Grass Valley and able to attend only a few, if any, meetings and social gatherings. So we took steps to promote inclusion, such as setting up a teleconference line and a listserv where members can access messages and files. Volunteers keep the technologically-disconnected informed through phone calls or face-to-face meetings, and we have a buddy system for new members.

### Our Biggest Crisis

In the beginning, we were confident that our construction loan would be approved quickly. We had two-thirds of our units sold. Construction bids were in, and we were ready to build our lodge.

Then the economy collapsed, and banks began requiring much higher equity and collateral. In the fall of 2009, our local bank told us to reapply in the spring of 2010. Meanwhile, we continued to search for other lenders.

Meeting the interest payments on the property loan became another challenge. In September of 2009, we had a special workshop to see if we could come up with the money to cover these carrying costs. It was a long, difficult meeting with a series of discussions followed by secret pollings to determine the amount

each household could commit. In the end, we were able to raise sufficient new funds to meet the carrying costs. We left that meeting exhausted, but with a new sense of solidarity and commitment.

From that point on, marketing became our main focus. We had a workshop to identify new strategies, and we redesigned our website, fliers, and newsletters. Our efforts are paying off, and we are gaining new members. In September 2010, the bank finally approved our loan. We signed a new construction contract, then started working through the title and escrow process. In the middle of October, we broke ground!

### Creating the Future

We of Wolf Creek Lodge remain optimistic and enthusiastic about our community and the development of our project. We are one component of a larger movement—the growth of senior cohousing and the quest to find more viable and sustainable modes of living to meet the social and ecological challenges of the 21st century. Our vision is to live the rest of our lives as active members of a vibrant community of elders, dedicated to developing insight and wisdom in order to benefit ourselves as well as the larger community: from our lodge to our city to our state and nation, to the earth that we honor and depend upon. As active seniors, we are once again on the cutting edge of change, pioneering a sustainable and intelligent way to live and actively age in a manner that sustains community and meets the challenges of an endangered planet. We hope to be joined by many others in this venture. To quote again from Theodore Roszak's inspiring new book, "*Urban-industrial culture is aging beyond the values that created it.*" The revolution belongs to the old, not the young." (p. 40) 🐦



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