

A group solution to growing older

By Nick Galvin

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When Heather Bolstler imagined what life might be like living in a conventional retirement home, she didn't like what she saw. Not one bit.

It's not an unusual sentiment - most people don't relish the idea of being forced into institutional retirement living. It is, at best, a compromise - a halfway house on the way to inevitable decline.



Friendly ties: Heather Bolstler (left), Daniel Weinstein, Judy Hollingworth, Rick Bolstler, Michael Hollingworth and Eve Weinstein.

Photo: Scott Calvin

However, what is unusual is that Bolstler, her husband Rick, and four friends, decided to do something about it while they could, taking fate into their own hands to design a unique retirement living situation - together.

"The six of us have been friends for 15 or 20 years and we got into the habit of holidaying at Christmas and spending a couple of weeks together," Bolstler, 66, says. "It was great. We found we provided support for each other for what we were up to. At some point we said, 'wouldn't it be good if we could take this kind of atmosphere into retirement' - we were all in our 50s at that time - rather than the thing we were dreading, which was withdrawing from the current real and exciting life.

"We looked at our parents, and other people in retirement, and there was a lot of that that we wouldn't want to happen to us. So we thought what could we do to keep community around us and keep ourselves engaged and active into retirement and into our older years. We recognised it wouldn't necessarily be an easy run. But we reckon it keeps you alive and engaged to have to deal with those problems."

The solution for this group was a long time coming, but eight years later they have built their dream communal-living home in the Manning Valley on the NSW mid north coast.

It was a long, often fraught and complex road to reach this point, which is related in Bolstler's extensive blog, *Shedders*: "The story of how six urban revolutionaries rewrote the manual on retirement". But all six of the "shedders" are convinced they have made the right decision and one that has left them all mentally and physically much healthier than would otherwise have been the case.

"We support each other in eating well and keeping the weight under control," Bolstler says. "For instance, we'll encourage each other out for a walk. It is a really strong and positive way to keep mentally healthy. We have to deal with stuff and support each other. There is always someone you can take a problem to, or a shoulder to cry on."

While the *Shedders'* solution may not suit everyone, it's clear the baby boomer generation is pushing back against spending the autumn of their lives in a setting that can often be socially isolated, regimented and bleakly institutional.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that by 2030, 20 per cent of the Australian population will be aged 65 or over. And many of those will be of the baby boomer generation (born between 1946 and 1964), the first of whom hit 65 two years ago.

This new crop of retirees are healthier, technologically more savvy, better off and more used to asserting their rights as consumers. It's a safe bet that as they age, like Bolstler and her friends, they will demand a different type of retirement from the one their parents experienced.

For instance, in a 2007 survey by consultants Fujitsu of people between 58 and 61, more than a quarter said they would keep working to the age of 70, while 12 per cent said they would work "until they drop".

Another theme out of the survey was a fierce determination to remain independent for as long as possible.

"[I'd rather live] at home regardless ... rather battle it out and enjoy rather than become part of the medical 'take this now, dear, it will settle you down' model," said one anonymous respondent. "In another 15 years, the sign on the front gate will say 'beware of the dog' and the tattoo on my chest will say Do Not Resuscitate. It's a good life - enjoy!"

Other surveys have repeatedly shown that two-thirds of those over 50 intend to stay at home as they get older. However, for some this may be wishful thinking as only 38 per cent have made concrete plans to prepare for their inevitable decline by, for instance, adapting their homes.

Denial, it seems, is also a key part of many boomers' approach to retirement.

Environmental consultant Michael Mobbs, best known for his self-sufficient house in Chippendale, which he opens to the public, is someone who has been grappling with the question of 21st-century retirement living.

"I've been trying to deal with my own ageing, prompted by the ageing of my own parents and friends," he says. "It's uncommon for ageing to be a pleasant experience."

Now Mobbs is formulating plans for a project that would provide group housing in the inner city for a mix of people, from young families to elderly people.

"So much of what is provided is not natural. It's isolated, segregated and removed from everyday life. I think it's unhealthy for old people to be surrounded only by older people," Mobbs says.

In survey after survey, being forced to live exclusively with other old people is one of the baby boomers' most often cited fears.

In the US, Californian architect Charles Durrett is championing the concept of "intergenerational co-housing" as one way around this. Typically, the developments consist of self-contained individual homes or units with common facilities such as a shared dining room, lounge, library or workshop.

He has designed more than 50 communities that bring together people of all ages, from young families to baby boomers, who, Durrett said in a recent interview, are "not interested in what their parents had in terms of assisted care, wasting away in a private house or nursing home".

Bolstler and her friends are under no illusions about getting older and the support they will need down the track. They may require live-in care but, for now, they support each other through health problems.

"We haven't got deeply into what happens when we get very old," she says. "There'll be walkers and Zimmer frames and things like that. I have scheduled a conversation with everyone on the subject," Bolstler says.

But so far, there are no regrets for the Manning Valley pioneers.

"I see [other] older people without the stimulation of having to deal with stuff often get bored," Bolstler says. "I don't even want to end up with just six hours in front of the television every day. There seem to be more and more people really serious about doing what we have done."

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