

What's in the water at Kildahl?

JACI SMITH, Managing Editor – Northfield News

A few weeks before Christmas, I got a phone call from Carol V. Johnson, a former dean at St. Olaf and a longtime Northfielder.

She wanted me to help spread the word about an event celebrating the first anniversary of the opening of Kildahl Park Pointe, where she lives. Kildahl is on the north end of town, by the Northfield Retirement Center.

Not exactly scintillating news.

At first I'll admit I was prepared to tell Carol to just submit a press release so that we could write a brief and get the information in the paper. I didn't think it was worth more than that.

But there was something about her tone, how enthusiastic she was, that kept me from doing that.

"There's really a story here, you have to come out and see us," she kept saying.

In the back of my mind as Carol kept repeating her pitch, I remembered an interview I'd done several months earlier for our Mind&Body page with a 95-year-old woman who still worked out nearly every day, despite just months earlier having broken her hip. The woman, Marguerite Hauberg, was energetic, upbeat and a great conversationalist.

She also lived at Kildahl.

Hmmm. What was in the water over there?

So, 42 and already looking for ways to grow old gracefully, I decided to take Carol up on her offer to drop by. While there this week I met several other enchanting 60-, 70- and 80-somethings.

They came from all different work backgrounds, a variety of places, some with connections to Northfield, some without.

But they shared one thing: an avid interest in life.

The short answer to what's in the water at Kildahl is nothing. It's not the bricks and mortar, as one resident told me.

Admittedly, Kildahl Park Pointe is a beautiful place, with plenty of amenities for those 55 and older who live there. They've got everything you'd expect: senior ed classes, communal pot lucks and gatherings, road trips.

(cont. on back)

Nothing new or different there.

The fact that it is a cooperative is interesting. There is one mortgage for the entire property and a "share" purchased of that mortgage entitles the buyer to live there and have membership in the co-op's association. Shares are a fraction of the cost of purchasing a comparably sized condo or townhome. Residents also pay a monthly fee.

Co-ops usually draw to mind communal living — the purview of the young and adventurous. But the first senior living co-op was actually started in Minnesota 30 years ago and the idea has gained such popularity that it is spreading to both coasts. There are about 90 now in the Midwest.

But none of that explains the youthful nirvana I tapped into for a magical hour and a half this week.

I've spoken to many, many senior citizens in my life. While most are happy, content and serene (and a few were as ornery as they were funny), none have embraced the possibilities of the remaining years of their lives like this crew.

They talked about knocking on someone's door — whether they knew them or not — when the smell of yummy cooking wafts down the hallway. They talked about being involved not just in the association but in the community as well. They were grateful for the neighbor who got up at 5 a.m. or earlier to deliver the newspaper to their door and good-naturedly ribbed another who slept in. They talked about "surviving" another presidential election, and joked about how a bit like college dorm life their existence had become. They acknowledged how constantly challenged they felt to commit to listen and engage each other. They quietly pondered what would happen the first time someone from the collective dies.

"One of the terrors of growing old is isolation," said Richard Beckman, one of the first to move into Kildahl. "This is one of the antidotes to that."

Carol acknowledged that to live in such an environment is not for everyone. It's a very different lifestyle, one that requires an open mind and lots of flexibility. But Carol and the others firmly believe the payoff is a long and lovely ride into the sunset.

If you go see them, you can't help but wonder what their secret is.

Join those wild and crazy Kildahl residents at their anniversary open house from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Jan. 18 and you'll see what I mean.

Kildahl Park Pointe Cooperative is located in Northfield MN

This editorial was published in the January 10-11, 2009 edition of the Northfield News