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Abbeyfield  
Homes  
Care, community and  
companionship

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# Abbeyfield Homes

## *Care, community and companionship*

by Matt Collison

**In 1956, Major Richard Carr-Gomm left his position in the British army to become Bermondsey, England's first male home helper. He would be sent to the homes of seniors to help them in any way he could and discovered that he was quite often their only visitor.**

The elderly always seemed eager to talk and appreciated his company as though he were the monarch himself, so he made a decision to try to develop a home where they could live together and have a sense of companionship. Using his 250-pound army gratuity to purchase a small house he began providing residents with a more personal service. It garnered such a great response that he soon bought other small houses and in 1955 the first Abbeyfield Society was founded and registered as a charity.

52 years later Abbeyfield is one of the biggest and most well known organizations in the world with over 800 houses and 13,000 volunteers supporting the more than 9,000 residents.

From the outside, Abbeyfield houses look like single family dwellings and operate on flexible guidelines, not the rigid rules, policies and schedules of a private nursing home. They house anywhere between 10 to 12 seniors with the only requirement being that they be over the age of 60 and no longer interested in living alone.

There were over 600 houses in the UK before the trend made its way across the pond to North America where the first Abbeyfield House in Canada was established in Sidney, BC, in 1987. Today there are 39 societies, 29 houses and about 10 in development, but the need is much greater, much greater by far.

Bob McMullan, Executive Director of the Abbeyfield Houses Society of Canada, believes Abbeyfield is the best way for seniors to spend retirement.

"Most of them are isolated and lonely, they don't want to admit that they're lonely but they are," he says. "Maybe their siblings have died. Maybe their close friends have passed. Maybe their motorcars died, in other words they haven't got a license. So they lose not only their close circle of people but also the second tier, their independence."

"We are taking people from isolation to socialization, but only limitedly. They have their own suite and they meet for two meals a day," McMullan says.

Breakfast is self-serve allowing each resident to get up and eat when they like, instead of adhering to a two-hour window as in most senior care facilities. The housemother cooks and serves a hot lunch and dinner, and snacks and drinks are available between meals and before bedtime.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Abbeyfield houses is the amount of volunteer work that goes in to just getting the project off the ground.

McMullan says the members who form a new society are able to use the Abbeyfield name for fundraising purposes but because of the organization's non-profit status, there is only so much help the Canadian National office can provide.

"They have to really MAKE it happen," he says. "When they go to the accountant and to the lawyer they're usually told, 'It can't happen, it won't happen, don't try,' but they are stubborn and they do try and they do succeed."

"The way they start is they have to be grassroots," McMullan explains. "We can't say 'Hey, we want to have a house in Niagara Falls.' It's got to be a group, particularly with one person inspiring them to make it happen. We call that person the sparkplug."

In Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, that sparkplug was Sylvia Gent, who has been President of the Abbeyfield Society of Prince Albert since its inception in 1995.

"I was director of assessment with Homecare at the time and I read a bulletin that talked about Abbeyfield and I thought that would be a very good option for Prince Albert because we didn't have any supportive housing for seniors other than all for profit seniors' homes and advanced care nursing homes," Gent explains. "The seniors' council and the Health Region and Prince Albert Housing put on a Housing Options for Seniors Conference and we invited Bob McMullan, among others, to come and talk."

"After the conference a group of us got together and decided that this would be perfect," she recounts. "So we formed a society affiliated with Abbeyfield Canada and we had to incorporate and get our charity status."

Abbeyfield's affiliated charity status and global recognition lends fundraisers credibility. However, fundraising in Saskatchewan had an added challenge.

"Since we were in a part of the country where Abbeyfield was not known at all we had to do a lot of public awareness work letting people know what Abbeyfield was because we had to raise about \$250,000," she says.

As is often the case, charitable material donations were the key to raising enough money. Auctions were set up by the society and groups from every corner of the community donated items to be sold.

"We got donations of furniture, paintings and hand crafts and one year we raised \$46,000 and the next year we raised \$42,000," she says. "There was a lot of time, a lot of money and a lot of work donated by various groups in the community."

All the members of the society are volunteers who donated

countless hours canvassing and raising public awareness.

"The difficult part in building an Abbeyfield house is getting together a group of volunteers who are willing and able to put that much time and effort and expertise into forming an incorporated society," says Gent. "When we did the public awareness work we really stressed some of the things that made Abbeyfield different from other forms of housing, like the flexibility to meet local needs."

All told it took between two to three years to raise the necessary \$250,000 and it was six years until the house opened in August, 2001.



Another key to a successful house is the House Manager or House Mother as they are affectionately referred to. In the case of the Prince Albert house mother, Judy West, Gent says that without her there would be far more bumps in the road.

"We're very fortunate to have a wonderful house mother and that makes all the difference in an Abbeyfield house," says Gent.

West's duties keep her quite busy, mostly due to the fact that they include almost anything that needs doing. She considers it a stroke of good luck that she came to work at an Abbeyfield house. She just responded to an ad in the paper and the rest, as they say, is history.

"I cook the meals, I help the residents with any problems. If someone needs a toilet plunged I do that, if we have some entertainment I usually make them a little lunch," says West. "Just sort of anything anyone needs in the house, I'm here for them. I don't know if that's what I'm here for but that's what I do."

Despite its challenges, and demanding schedule, West says there is nothing else she would rather have been doing for the past six years as the job has allowed her to make a difference in lives of others. She does have a few favourite aspects though.

"I like to sit at the table and listen to them tell their stories," says West. "What they did, what their life was years ago and what it was like then. Then once someone starts talking about that

they all get into it and it's really interesting to listen to."

"And of course when they compliment me on my cooking," she says with a grin.

Another Abbeyfield house, recently constructed in the town of Durham, Ontario, has changed the way funding for construction of the house is procured. The sparkplug in this case was Dick Stanton. Stanton has lived in Durham for many years and explained how he had come to the decision of moving into Abbeyfield.

"Several years ago I joined the Rotary Club of Durham and there was a retired school principal in that club who took me under his wing and became my mentor," he recounts. "As the years passed this man's wife passed away so club members took turns picking him up and taking him to our weekly meetings but after some time the doctor said he could not live alone any more and would have to go into a care facility."

Durham didn't have any retirement homes, so the man was shipped out of town to a facility far away from his friends and the community in which he had spent his entire life.

"Here we had this situation of a pillar of the town who had freely given his time and talents to his community for seventy or more years, and when he needed that community it let him down," Stanton says. "He died a lonely death in a strange town away from his friends and the community he loved so much."

"It was then I realized that the same fate awaited myself and my friends unless we did something about it, so we embarked on a program of finding seniors accommodation for single lonely seniors."

Their search eventually led to Abbeyfield but the group found they didn't have enough money or fundraising experience to have a house built the traditional Abbeyfield way.

"We liked what we saw in Abbeyfield but could not get the project off the ground until we devised the life occupancy program, where the building is partially funded by the residents themselves," Stanton explains.

So he and his wife and two other couples sold their homes and used the money from them to make up the difference between the cost of the house and the mortgage of \$500,000 being put up by the Credit Union.

"In the old Abbeyfield, they went out to raise money and kept beating their heads against a wall," says Stanton. "Fundraising is an art, not everyone can do it. With our system, you just find people who want to buy units and you can get up and running in a year."



The house in Durham is also Abbeyfield's first environmentally-friendly house as it was built to R2000 building standards for energy efficiency. The house has sound proofing equivalent to an eight-inch concrete wall between suites as well as every type of alarm and detector system.

The 12 residents, who share 6500 square feet, enjoy a monthly natural gas cost of only C\$350 to C\$400 even with 16 bathrooms, a commercial dishwasher, Jacuzzi room and all the other domestic hot water use. The rooms are independently heated with hot water so that each resident may control their own environment. Common areas are heated with hot air, but not a hot air furnace. The building is so well insulated that the heat created by lighting provides the hot air.

Moving forward Abbeyfield looks to expand on the number of houses and societies as more and more baby boomers will soon need retirement housing.

"The scope for more Abbeyfield Houses in Canada is terrific," says McMullan, "in England, let's just say there are 700 houses, here there are 30 houses yet the population of the UK is only double what it is here so we still have a long way to go."

Abbeyfield has plans to construct more houses, with a house in Markdale, Ontario scheduled for construction in 2008 and further houses in Thorold and Kingston, Ontario, as well as Trail, Westwold and Bowen Island, British Columbia. There are also expansion plans into the US with houses in Illinois and Massachusetts.

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