

Fulfilling the Dream of Home Ownership

Imagine a neighborhood

where residents share ownership of all the common areas but privately own their residence. Imagine these residents are a diverse group of individuals of various income levels, abilities, ages, and ethnic backgrounds. Imagine that this unique group of people has planned activities and look out for each other like an extended family. Would you believe that this quality, affordable, universally designed (UD), and sustainable cohousing neighborhood is a place where your adult family member with a disability could own a home?

Inspiration (and plenty of determination) energized Niche Housing volunteers, a group of concerned family members in southeastern Virginia, to visualize alternatives to restrictive, isolated, and unpredictable living arrangements for our loved ones. After researching many options and visualizing the perfect neighborhood, a group of committed volunteers formed Niche Inc., a 501(c)(3) corporation.

In most Virginia cities, when a support services provider includes those services as part of a residential package, the clients don't get to choose where they live; the provider restricts those decisions. Too many of these dwellings are only for those with disabilities, which will isolate the residents from the richness of the larger community, and often the service providers need to move clients around as the client population changes, which can create an unpredictable disturbance in home life stability. Who doesn't want their loved one living in his or her own home, with or without a roommate by choice, and with the right to hire (and fire) support staff as needed without having to move?

Independent living does not mean doing everything alone, not needing anyone, or

Niche Inc. helps those with disabilities know the joy of neighborhood connection through cohousing communities.

By Gail Braswell and Mary Jane Sufficool

living in isolation; it's about having the same choices that everyone else has. Cohousing is an option that balances personal privacy and living side-by-side with others who desire to know and interact with their neighbors, giving the neighborhood a sense of kinship and friendliness. It's important to note that a Niche Housing community is not just for those with disabilities and that homeowners who are non-disabled will not be responsible for the daily care of other residents. Each homeowner in need of services will hire (or have hired) his or her own support staff as needed. Of course, neighborliness is welcome everywhere.

A typical community might include homeowners such as Joe, a bright young man with spina bifida. Joe lives on supplemental security income (SSI) and will probably need a roommate, a person with a disability or not, to help share expenses.

Rita, a widowed senior on a fixed income, should be able to pay for her own house and maintain a decent standard of living.

Martha, a single mother to Emma, age 8, is fully employed and is a first-time homeowner. She and Rita are especially interested in cohousing because as women on their own, they look forward to making friends with their compatriots.

Charles, a young man with Down syndrome, will live in a house owned by a cor-

poration formed by his family to safeguard his entitlements, and Charles will most likely have a roommate for companionship as well as for sharing expenses.

Each unit in a cohousing community is a fully functional, single family home or apartment, featuring a living area, kitchen, bedroom(s), and bath(s). A common house is a regular feature of a cohousing community where meals are shared a couple of times a week; there is space for community meetings, parties, and other large gatherings. There might be an arts and crafts area, a woodworking shop, a computer station or two, and a library. The common house might also include a guest room (or rooms) available for visiting family and friends. Sharing at the common house is an option, never a requirement.

Universal design is where "function meets form," and attractiveness need not be sacrificed for accessibility and adaptability. UD accommodates people with disabilities, older people, children, and others who are non-average in a way that is not stigmatizing and benefits all users. Niche Housing developments will be fully accessible and accommodate "aging in place" and "visitability" as well as using sustainability concepts to balance meeting human needs while preserving the environment. Sustainable or "green building" design and construction offer the opportunity to use

resources more efficiently, while creating healthier and more energy-efficient homes.

Niche Housing is committed to providing living spaces that promote good health and are environmentally friendly. Green development is a holistic approach that uses non-toxic and sustainable material and finishes. Niche Housing will strive to make housing developments as “green” as financially feasible, providing integrated solutions to housing, health, and environmental challenges. Developments will have dedicated green space, secured and well-lit walking paths in pedestrian friendly areas, a common house, and accessibility to public transportation. Residents will enjoy the opportunities in both the development and the surrounding city.

The project is called Niche Housing because it serves a niche market of low-to-moderate income seniors, young families just starting out, veterans and active military, and people with disabilities. Niche is a new, fresh, and innovative concept, and organizers hope it will be the first of many such communities. Others are already taking

Glossary of Terms

Universal Design (UD): UD is an approach to the design of all products and environments to be as usable as possible by as many people as possible regardless of age, ability, or situation. For more information about Universal Design, visit www.udeducation.org.

Cohousing: Cohousing is a form of intentional housing where residents actively participate in the design and operation of their own neighborhoods. Each person is consciously committed to living as a community and agrees to the basic guidelines of cohousing. For more information about cohousing, visit www.cohousing.org.

Sustainable Housing: Sustainability is “a form of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” For more information about sustainability and green development, visit www.greenbuildingsolutions.org.

notice as Niche was selected in 2007 as one of the Top 100 from 4,600+ entries in the Make It Your Own Awards contest sponsored by The Case Foundation in Washington, DC.

The Niche Housing Web site will be under construction in the early part of 2009 (www.nichehousing.org), and Niche is beginning strategic planning this year. Niche has a “cause” and a “group” defined on Facebook, where the organization will post the URL when the site is ready for visitors. Niche is based in Virginia Beach, VA

and can be reached by email at nichehousing@gmail.com or by postal mail at PO Box 68663, Virginia Beach, VA 23471. •

Gail Braswell and Mary Jane Sufficool are parents of young men who have disabilities. They are active advocates for independence. Gail's son, Neal Pergerson (17), has Down syndrome and Mary Jane's son, Bart Sufficool (29), has succinic semialdehyde dehydrogenase deficiency and lives in his own apartment supported by 24-hour caregivers. Gail and Mary Jane are officers on the Niche Inc. Board of Directors. Both have served on and continue to serve with other disability advocacy groups.