

# Cohousing Creates Community



By Alan VanEss

This is my expression of thanks to the gay community of the San Francisco Bay area. It's not a simple story to share, but here are some essentials of the tale. As a man shaped by Midwestern culture, I accepted the heterosexual imperative to fall in love with an amazing woman, to marry and to have children. In such a conservative society, I had seen these as my only viable choices in life and relationships. It was a satisfying life in many ways, with an incredible, lovely and soulful woman and with our two beautiful children. But in inevitably clearer ways, it was not the right match for her or for me.

Despite many deep commonalities, love and admiration, too many things led us to decide to end our marriage. Sadly, it is always painful to make such a change. But it was essential for her and for me to do so.

I finally began to mix in the gay community. I met lots of men who were intelligent, gentle, gifted and intuitive in a variety of ways. I discovered the wide spectrum of gay men and lesbians in our communities, and I formed strong connections and deep friendships with men and women because of their unique characters and personalities. Before, I'd felt like an ugly duckling. But through friendships and purposes in our community, I became myself, a swan among swans.

For the past year, this evolution has helped me to develop love with a man who I see as my soul mate. I consider this

one of the crowning achievements of actualizing my potential. I thank him every day for his humor, insight, intellect, patience, inspiration and passion.

Significantly, in 2005, a very dynamic friend introduced me to the California Men's Gathering. I'm still very actively involved with the CMG today. The organization brings me both social and personal growth options, and has been a very strong source of gratifying friendships. From the CMG has come a range of friends, including mentors, ex-boyfriends, a cherished roommate, confidantes — men with great humor, wisdom, curiosity, intelligence, nurturing and vulnerability.

I've been lucky in other LGBT community involvements. I've found a variety of activities and close friends at the Rainbow Community Center in Concord. Other satisfactions in seeking gay community have come from knowing people in Most Holy Redeemer parish and in environmentally-focused and . Because of all of these connections, I have no doubt that great relationships often develop when one is involved in worthwhile causes — or when seeking meaning in one's life. This brings me to my favorite example of building gay community.

I've long been deeply interested in intentional neighborhoods, specifically a movement called "cohousing". Architects Katie McCamant and Chuck Durrett successfully transplanted cohousing from Europe to America. For decades, cohousing has offered village-like neighborhoods

with private homes and shared amenities. It has been a compelling vision and an everyday reality for thousands of families, straight people and other individuals.

Cohousing is now a more visible development for our area's LGBT community. Initiated by CMG men (but not sponsored by the CMG), we are developing LGBT cohousing in a few locations around San Francisco. As we continue to attract LGBT residents, we recognize many facts of modern life. For a lot of us, life will be better in a "gay neighborhood." But it is only a complement to one's other connections in the mainstream of a full life.

This cohousing will consist of LGBT homes and neighborhoods but linked to all facets of life. We will have a range of homes, from very small to moderate sizes. Our home designs need not reflect egos, just our personalities and our budgets. We want our green-built, solar tech-equipped houses to be more affordable than other choices. We're finding building sites relevant to our groups' different commuting needs. Trying to be transit-oriented, we'll build in places close to San Francisco, close to San Jose, close to Oakland or close to Concord.

In an era of expensive gay retirement communities, our LGBT cohousing neighborhoods will be less expensive. And while some of our residents will be retired, most will continue to work in urban centers. Whether retired or immersed in one's career, our members bring a mix of ages, interests and diverse personalities. From all of these individuals, there is

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a desire for a sense of place and a sense of family. Cohousing offers a personal home plus the ease of LGBT socializing in a chosen or intentional neighborhood. LGBT cohousing offers some of us a richer, more connected, more balanced life.

We expect to begin construction late this year on two sites for our first two groups of residents. These neighborhoods will be open to gay-friendly straight persons, of course, but our residents will be predominantly LGBT.

Not everybody can live in the Castro, especially if you work in San Jose, Vallejo or Santa Rosa. LGBT cohousing is a new alternative in designing a gay community or neighborhood. Not to be confused with communes or subdivisions, our largely gay enclaves will offer a better balance in terms of personal needs and social life.

It certainly can be said that LGBT people have more opportunities now for acceptance and easier inclusion in the mainstream culture. This is especially true around large metropolitan areas such as Oakland, San Jose and San Francisco. Lots of us want a neighborhood where everybody knows our names, where we are practically family, where we have acquaintances and deep friendships too. LGBT cohousing is all this and more. It is an overdue option in our gay community.



Alan VanEss lives in a cohousing neighborhood in Pleasant Hill, CA. He is a cohousing planner and enthusiast and architectural illustrator. Alan is part of a team which coordinates village development for regional LGBT cohousing groups. For more information about LGBT cohousing in the Bay Area, contact Alan at or 925-969-7549.