

Aging Happens: Ashland could use more options for 'aging in place'

By Ellen Waldman

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There is a lot of talk about the concept of aging in place. This generally refers to the ability to stay in your home or current abode for the duration of your life. Here's what's missing from that idea. It brings up the notion that we can remain "fiercely independent" as we age. It's a common phrase I hear applied to those who take a certain pride in thinking they are going through this whole process as an autonomous, independent agent, able to take care of all that life throws their way, on their own.

But in truth, who is really able to do this? I suggest we consider adjusting our belief paradigm from living alone independently or aging in place, to living interdependently or "aging in community." This is a lot closer to our actual situation anyway, no matter what our current age is.

Recently, Marsha and her adult daughter were considering her options for where best to live at this point. She has a large home in Ashland, with lots of outdoor landscaping needs. The house itself is three stories high. The daughter insisted that her mom, who has lived alone for decades, at 75 years old is NOT going to need to go anywhere else. After all, she can hire whatever help she might need down the road. Here's another way of looking at this scenario.

Marsha, and many like her, are "over-housed." They have way more interior and outdoor living space than they can manage at this point. If she remains there, a huge organizational plan needs to be put into place as she needs more help. It will have to include someone to oversee that all the moving parts are actually working well. There is also her socialization to take into account. In most cases, it's just not as simple as it might appear.

There is a great book which has a new view on this predicament many will encounter. Beth Baker has written, "With a Little Help from Our Friends: Creating Community as We Grow Older." It's available at the Ashland Public Library. She offers an array of options for creating community, rather than trying to continue to remain in housing choices that may no longer be appropriate. These dozen or so options range from co-housing and cooperatives, to affinity groups and house-sharing.

The one idea she supports is already in place here in Ashland following "The Village" model. Ashland at Home (ashlandathome.org; 541-613-6985), has been providing services utilizing these supports for some years now, to great benefit for many. Another project that has taken hold are age-friendly homes, using universal designs, being built in Central Point's Twin Creeks neighborhood. In fact, it's been so successful that the builder is putting in 40 more homes in the near future. Clearly this project has found a market here locally.

This idea of aging in community warrants a bigger and more thorough conversation. Looking at the wide array of already successful models out there as described in this book, one has to wonder what can happen here in Ashland. After all, our population is well-educated, interested in more successful modes of doing things, and are forward thinkers. Surprisingly, very few of the choices this book suggests are currently available here.

For instance, the big discussions regarding the Normal Street Neighborhood development might really want to include what it would mean to utilize the ideas of universal design when building out a new area. These life-long houses sound like a good plan, no matter where new building might occur in Ashland's future.

Here are some of the questions the book proposes to ask yourself when considering a choice. She then recommends the best options to meet that goal:

1. Would you like to grow old in your home?
2. Would you like to live in an intentional community?
3. Would you prefer to live among people your own age as you grow older?
4. Is being near your extended family important to you?

Aging in community does not mean the end of privacy or autonomy. This is a way to embrace the fact that we are all interdependent, to one degree or another. Aging might be the perfect time to finally fully acknowledge and enjoy this.