

The Wellesley College Class of 1956 presents

SCARLET LETTERS

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Ladies In Retirement

Many of us have chosen to live in retirement homes, so we asked for some comments and critiques. The responses, reprinted here, were almost immediate and overwhelmingly positive. There was, however, shock over the fact that everyone else in the home was--old! Take heart! This certainly won't happen to us, the eternally young and beautiful Class of 56!

1. Jane Kentnor Dean

I am frequently asked why I moved to a retirement community. So here goes:

First, let me say that I have been blessed with good health and a reasonably good mind. I'd planned for several years to make a move to a senior residence "some day." I'd visited friends and classmates in their new homes and been encouraged to move early when the community might want to make friends with me. I had planned to move to be near Susan, my only child, who lives year-round on Martha's Vineyard, but there was no place there yet for someone like me. We explored places on the Cape, or nearer Boston or Wellesley for a future move. In the meantime, I loved my life in my Southport condo, walking distance to everything I needed--church, library, pharmacy, restaurants, club, FRIENDS of all ages, many of them alumnae of Wellesley.

Then Covid hit me--not too hard. A few weeks later I began having scary symptoms diagnosed as Long Covid--about which no one knew anything. Friends took me to emergency rooms. Susan came to take care of me. Finally, she and I started talking about where to move. Fortunately, she and a dear friend helped me realize that I should stay in Southport where I'd spent my adult life, pointing out that if I moved to say, Westwood, we'd never see each other again. I realized that the lovely spontaneous life here that included cups of tea or

last-minute glasses of wine would not be continued when a three hour drive each way was involved.

There was little choice right here. The larger places with different levels of care in separate large spaces were too far for my driving abilities. So, we chose Maplewood Senior Living in Southport, walking distance from my home. It is small--100 people total, with memory care on one floor and the rest of us together on the other two floors. But the architecture is elegant and welcoming, on a lovely large piece of land adjacent to a conservation area with a big pond. My apartment is large enough to hang the art that George and I had collected. I feel at home when I open my door. And I am meeting some interesting people.

Lessons learned: moving here with people all my age made me realize that I was no longer young, a serious reality check. It was far harder to find my way socially than I, an uber-extrovert, would have expected. I was the first to move to Maplewood from my community. Most others had moved to be near children in other adjacent towns. I learned not to judge ability by equipment (walkers, wheelchairs, etc.). Often the smartest looking are well into dementia and vice versa.

And after 8 months here, I am now feeling content and, most importantly, I am secure, knowing that should I need help, it will come at the push of a button. My friends will not be burdened. The fearfulness, brain fog, and episodes of high blood pressure of Long Covid have mostly disappeared. And I know I made the right choice when deciding where to live. I am medically protected for the rest of my life whatever that brings. I do not own my apartment, so I have the freedom to move closer to Susan if that becomes the right thing to do.

I finally feel adjusted to life “on the other side” of the metaphoric wall I call AGE.

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2. Anne Moore

If I had to describe my reaction to retirement community living in one word, it would be “gratitude.”

That I can afford it; that my community has a great location; and that it has attracted a group of residents who are interesting people, including many Wellesley alums. But mostly I am grateful that, having made this decision, my children will not have to take on responsibility for me if and when I require assistance with living and/or nursing care. Included in the cost of living here is an in-house wellness clinic, staffed by an RN and LPNs, and in-house nursing facilities.

Riverwoods in Exeter NH is a large community separated into three campuses, including an arboretum with walking trails. Life here is like living in a big dorm. It offers the privacy of one's own apartment, plus a shared community life to take or leave. My own choices include classes within the fitness program especially my favorite, a golf fitness class with an instructor who treats us 80-somethings as if we were his former golf pro clients. Lots of laughs! I work in the plant room, where residents park their houseplants when they are absent, and I write for the in-house newsletter enabling me to continue to use and share lifelong interests. The many committees bring residents into direct contact with all aspects of living here. I have become involved in welcoming new residents, raising awareness about inclusivity and diversity, and fund raising for in-house and local charities.

This time in our lives is a time to be a little selfish, and this is where the location of Riverwoods comes in. Exeter is in the New Hampshire Seacoast region, and we are only about fifteen minutes from the coast. As I am lucky and still can drive, I love to go over there where I can walk on a coastal path and on the beach. And we are only about an hour's drive north of Boston, a city I love, with all that it offers. Being a neighbor of Phillips Exeter Academy is an advantage. We are invited free of charge to their student concerts and theater productions.

Is there a downside? Yes, everyone is old and there are frequent funerals. There can be frustrations with services, especially since COVID has left us short of staff. And extra patience is sometimes required when dealing with a few crotchety residents. But hey, I may be there some day—and Riverwoods will be kind to me!

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3. Anne McAdams

My mother (Wellesley '29) lived with us happily for three years at the end of her life. She died at home in the midst of family. When I asked her if it was hard to leave her old house, she replied that it was just the next chapter in her life and that she was going to put it to good use. I, on the other hand, knowing my children lived in miniscule apartments, not wanting to burden them, and with a firm belief that I would be aging gracefully and healthily in my own home, had blinkers on regarding retirement homes. I was NOT going to leave our house! If I went, I would go kicking, screaming, and comatose. Of course, reality set in. My husband passed away, and after a few years, I could no longer drive. That last was the deciding factor. I accepted the fact that I needed help with living.

Six years ago, the children and I gathered around the Christmas dinner table. They readily accepted my decision that it was time. I assured them I was not leaving a home, but a house. Wherever we were we would always be a family and have a home.

I chose a continuing care residential community (CCRC), a bit more expensive, but one that would see me into the beyond rather than later spending an unknown period of time in whatever nursing home was then available. Within 3 months, I was resettled in a small cottage with grass, trees, and neighbors. The first night at dinner as I looked over the communal dining room, my heart sank. Everyone had white hair and a walker. I had the uncharitable thought they were indistinguishable from each other, a huge mass of old infirm people. What had I done? Within a week, I had a complete change of heart. These were interesting individuals with diverse backgrounds who still had something to contribute to society.

It did not hurt that I no longer had to cook or make my bed. With everyone masked, I was fully protected from Covid. Meals were delivered, the staff frequently tested, I did not need to expose myself off campus. I felt safe. Leaving the expenses of a house and car, having the office here handle the hassle of coping with health insurance, having transportation to appointments in town, and enjoying the broad array of residents and activities more than compensate for leaving a treasured house.

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4. Maya Pearcy Life in a Life Care Facility

After I lost my husband, I knew that I could not stay alone on the farm and that I needed to be closer to my daughters. I began to search for a Continuing Care Facility near them so that I would not be a burden as I aged. Unfortunately, I had two cats and two dogs (one rather large as he was half wolf) that I wanted to keep, and most Life Care or Continuing Care facilities only allow one small pet. Lake Forest Place was located midway between my daughters' residences and must have been hard up for new residents as the Marketing Manager allowed me to move into a cottage with all four of my critters despite the written "one small pet" rule.

I thought I would vegetate as a widow, but I found, quite to the contrary, a very active life at Lake Forest Place. Since I moved in, I have met and merged forces with a widower, been elected chair of the Resident Advisory Council, and made many friends with whom we dine. We have scheduled programs in our meeting hall, personal trainers in the Fitness Center, group excursions to interesting places or concerts, and health care facilities. Our campus has a 'nature preserve' with paths for walks to view the three ponds occupied by ducks and a pair of swans who produce cygnets each spring.

On the negative side, although we live in “independent living,” we have lost some control of our lives. Management controls our living circumstances which sometimes becomes a burden rather than a benefit.

Marian McGrath Percy

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5. Sheila Owen Monks, My Life in Retirement

I live in a non-traditional retirement community called “H.O.M.E., Inc.” (“Housing Opportunities for Milton Elderly”). Instead of being in apartments with units, our living quarters look like small houses connected to each other, four or five to a group. We put down an initial deposit and pay rent every month. There are no nursing facilities available, and we fix our own meals and pay for our own utilities. But all maintenance, landscaping, snow removal and the use of a clubhouse are free.

We also share the services of a director and two handymen who can fix anything! If an appliance stops working, a new one is brought in for free, and that includes the heating and air-conditioning systems. We have the use of a library and are invited to regular social events at the clubhouse.

I have two bedrooms, a dining room, a living room, a kitchen, two bathrooms, a garage, and a very large storage area. Of course, if I come to the point of needing full-time nursing care, I will have to move out. But for now, it’s a very comfortable and easy way of life!

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6. Merle

To me, life in a retirement home is a decision due to many different parts of our lives at the applicable timing. It truly has nothing to do with education at Wellesley College. Since I decided on this change in life, I can only express how this decision came to me and what is my satisfaction.

My life for 42 years has been in Manhattan. My second husband, Wallace Berger, lived with me after our marriage in 2005 until he died in 2019. Then, after living alone during the Covid period for two sad and difficult years in deserted Manhattan NY, I decided to move to a retirement residence, The Meadows, in Napa, California. Two of my three children live very near Napa and I decided on that change in my life.

In order to choose, I visited several residences. When I came to the Meadows, I looked at several apartments, saw F320, and immediately decided to buy it and move there. Truthfully, that was my immediate reaction: exactly what I have always had where/what I would purchase to live.

Anyone of my classmates who would like more information should be comfortable in contacting me. Sending hugs,

Merle Golden Bogin Merlebogin@gmail.com

7. Mimi My life in a Senior Community

For me it's all about the people.

In 2017, although I owned and lived in a lovely condo overlooking the Hudson River, I decided something was missing in my life. Where I lived, I did not feel part of a community! That was one of the main reasons I investigated moving into a Senior Community.

So, I moved into Cedar Crest, a large non-profit Senior Community built on over 100 acres on a mountainside with over 1,700 people living in independent-living apartments. Here I found many friends whom I would have liked to have as friends even if I had met them elsewhere. I've gotten involved in lots of groups that share many of my interests, including three book discussion groups, all small, each with a different focus. I am currently the President of the Resident Advisory Council, a group of ten elected to represent the interests of our residents.

Scheduled activities often fill my days, so it's unusual for me to wake up in the morning with nothing on my calendar. If that happens, I ask, "What am I going to do with myself today?"

If asked about negative aspects of living here, I'd have to say it's constantly being reminded of the diminishment we suffer as we age. When I thought about moving here, I wrestled with not being depressed by lots of people with walkers and wheelchairs. I convinced myself that they were the same people they always were—just having problems getting around. Now I am one of them.

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8. Sally

I have lived at North Hill, a Continuing Care Retirement Community in Needham MA, for seven years. Triggering the move from a beloved house about twenty minutes away was my 80th birthday, and I'm sure the decision was a wise one.

Certainly, North Hill's location, a little nearer to one of my daughters, was influential (my other daughter lives across the country), but the dominant factor was the realization that

my social network was fraying. Friends were moving away; some were leaving this earth; others were no longer driving.

Only one friend was already living at North Hill. We had similar likes and dislikes, and she was happy with her decision. The fact that all independent living quarters here are in one large building appealed. Also, the décor mattered, as did my impression that within the slice of humanity that could afford the place there was considerable diversity and lots of interest in the arts.

Making new friends was and is fun and easy. I've enjoyed folks at the fitness center, the pool, in Resident Organization activities, and in one or another of the dining venues. And, as an introvert, I appreciate that finding time to be alone isn't difficult. There are about 400 folks in the independent living building; about 100 are in assisted living and skilled nursing units elsewhere on campus. That critical mass of residents supports an array of engaging programs.

After moving in, there were no big surprises, though the quality of the food is even higher than I'd expected. Once admitted, we stay housed on campus. In other words, even if I spend all that I have, they can't throw me out. I was ready for this phase of life and am very grateful to be here.

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9. Maud It's Your Move

Nobody told me that when I first walked into the dining room of my retirement community that all I would see would be old people. Nobody talked about the fact that the only way I was going to leave my new dwelling was feet first. I had always thought of moving as an occasion for bringing out the champagne. It meant that we were about to have another baby, or we were looking for a good school system, a more spacious back yard. This move was a step into something new that was very old indeed—the end.

Coming into my apartment in which someone had forgotten to install the overhead lights, the water in the bathroom sink trickled listlessly, and the moving company had packed my coffee bean grinder into a box of books on ancient philosophy, I was suddenly gripped by overwhelming fatigue. I decided to go to bed. Things will look better in the morning, I told myself. The thin slats that were supposed to be blinds were fine for the nearly starless skies that city living provided but did nothing to block the piercing shaft of a security light that was aimed directly at my pillow. I felt as if I were in a Japanese prison camp. Deciding that it would not be wise to tell that to the marketing director, I moved onto the living room couch and counted boxes of books unpacking themselves and jumping onto shelves before I finally fell into an uneven sleep.

Five years later I regret not having made the move into a retirement community sooner. Everyone had warned me then that moving was stressful. Friends volunteered that it was worse than getting a divorce. Family members suggested that I just get a moving company who would pack everything up and then unpack everything, even the trash in the wastebaskets, in a more or less replica of my living arrangement then. But I brushed off all these helpful comments like so many green flies on my legs at the beach. After all, hadn't I moved every seven years since my marriage day? My husband used to think that moving was a cure for the seven-year itch, and he read the Real Estate pages with the same enthusiasm that others reserved for self-help books.

I was wrong about the moving, which was as painful as giving birth, but right about my new life. Moving into a retirement community is like turning the page of a novel, one that you have never read before. May it be a long one.

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10. Sara

I was 80 years old when my husband suggested that we move to a Continuing Care Retirement Community, I did not want to leave my home of 46 years in Newton, MA. However, it has turned out to be one of the best decisions we have made. We have lived independently for over 8 years at Lasell Village on the campus of Lasell University in Auburndale (a section of Newton). It has been very comforting for us to have a well trained staff readily available, offering support and a safety net, if needed.

There are many opportunities at Lasell to enrich our lives. Continuing education is of prime importance and we are required to choose a number of classes taught by local professors or by residents here. We exercise regularly at the Fitness Center and attend many of the afternoon or evening events offered each day. Since we have an excellent chef, the meals are very good and one meal per day is included in the contract. Transportation to entertainment such as symphony and theater is regularly provided as well as to supermarkets.

Happily, our 2 children live close by as well as 3 of our grandchildren. An added bonus for me is having classmates Maud Chaplin and Janet Isenberg also in residence here. I highly recommend a retirement community for people who are ready.

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