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Senior Living: My Home Sweet NORC

I just moved to a Naturally Occuring Retirement Community — the ideal address for older residents

posted by John Stark, June 4, 2012 [More by this author](#)



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John Stark

If you drive down my shady, tree-lined street in Richfield, Minn., you might think you've been transported back in time. The houses look exactly the same as when they were built just after World War II. No one has added on to them, or replaced them with McMansions that take up entire lots. One of my neighbors has a 1952 Lincoln coupe with shiny chrome bumpers parked out front.

From what I can tell, the interior of the house that I'm renting hasn't changed much since the 1950s. There's even a small

bomb shelter in the basement. The wood molding on one of my bedroom doors has been notched at various intervals, as if by a penknife. I'm assuming this is where the heights of children who once lived here were recorded. The shortest mark is 30 inches above the floor; the tallest is 72 inches, an even 6 feet.

A few days after I moved in last year, one of my next-door neighbors, a woman who looks about 10 years older than me, dropped by to introduce herself. "I hope you'll be happy here," she said, handing me a welcoming gift: a basket of fresh strawberries and a can of Reddi-wip.

The following day I met a retired man who lives in the house behind mine, just across the back alley. He stopped by to see if I needed help putting stuff together. His hobby, he said, is fixing things. From my backyard, I see him every day tinkering in his garage. He always has the radio on, and the garage door is wide open so he can converse with passers-by.

It didn't take me long to realize that most of my neighbors are — well, old. I'm not complaining. At 63, I love it when they call me "young man."

Although my neighborhood may look like it's more suited to the past, it really isn't. After living here for more than a year, I've come to realize that it belongs to the future. It's a model for how we can improve the quality of our lives as we get older.

I had no idea there was a term that describes my neighborhood until I came across it the other day in a Next Avenue story headlined, "NORCs: Some of the Best Retirement Communities."

According to the article, a NORC denotes "any geographically defined community in which at least 40 percent of the population is 60 or older and live in their own homes." NORCs can take dramatically different forms. "They can be vibrant communities full of engaged seniors, or they can be sad places where the elderly live in isolation, fearful of dying alone," the story explains.

My NORC is definitely in the former category. Most of the residents have been living here for decades; some are the original owners of their houses. Parents raised families here, and when their kids grew up and moved out, they stayed. And when their spouses died, they still stayed.

And why wouldn't they?

For starters, the modest dwellings are an ideal size for a couple or a person living alone. Everything is within easy walking distance — just two blocks from groceries, restaurants, health clubs, banks, pet stores and medical and dental clinics. There's even a typewriter repair shop. "I don't know anything about computers," the owner told me when I brought my vintage Underwood in for servicing. He still sells spools of red and black ribbons.

My neighborhood is on several bus lines — it's just 30 minutes to downtown Minneapolis; 20 minutes to the airport; 15 to the Mall of America.

At the end of my block is a grassy playground where grandparents hang out with their grandkids. Once a year all my neighbors get together at the picnic tables for a potluck supper. My NORC is also famous for its garage sales, which are largely hosted by seniors cleaning out their attics and basements.

A few evenings ago I looked out my front window to check on my dog, an 11-year-old hound who likes to stretch out under a giant maple tree on the front lawn. She was being petted by my other next-door neighbor, Mary Jo, a widow who has been living in her house for more than 60 years. Now in her 90s, she has yet to retire — every morning she leaves her house at 7:30 to teach English at the Catholic high school just up the block.

Joining her was one of her daughters, visiting from Los Angeles. She has long, white hair that's streaked pink.

I went outside to say hello. Knowing that Mary Jo has lived in the neighborhood longer than anyone else, I began asking questions about the history of our block. Her daughter encouraged her to reminisce. "In the 1960s, we were always having themed dinner parties," Mary Jo said. I asked about crime. "We've never had a problem," she said, "but we all look out for anything suspicious."

There was, however, one incident. "Don't forget about the peeping Tom," said Mary Jo's daughter, who filled me in on details. "It happened when I was in high school. In order to catch the guy, my dad, who was in the military, stationed all the neighbors in various look-out posts, on roofs and behind bushes."

"I was the decoy," Mary Jo said. "When it got dark, I stood in the living room window in my negligée. The guy showed up and after we confronted him he ran off and never came back."

As the street lights were coming on, Mary Jo's daughter told me that she and her mom were going to the theater on Friday night. "We're seeing a middle-school production of 'Cinderella.' Mom directed it."

"It's my 38th year of doing it," said Mary Jo, who then invited me to come along.

"I'd really love to," I said, "but I have a prior commitment."

"Well," said my NORC neighbor, "then come next year."

I plan to. And the year after that. ...