

Aging Differently

AFTER EXPERIENCING THE DAILY LIFE in The Villages firsthand for two months, interviewing forty residents, interacting with dozens more, and participating in many formal and informal activities, I feel that I have a good sense of the “truth behind the folklore” and various media portrayals of the place and its people. Naturally, the study presented here was limited. There were many more people, communities, and activities I did not get to know and aspects I did not cover. Yet, I feel comfortable arguing that the reality of life in The Villages is very different from the city’s depiction as populated by swingers and hardcore Republicans only. Moreover, after analyzing the vast data I collected during my visit, I can confidently conclude that the city’s unique characteristics support the well-being of its residents. By that, I do not refer solely to the brilliant master planning, the leisure around the clock, the population’s homogeneity, and the relative affordability that make The Villages a commercial success, but also to all the other qualities revealed in the present study.

On the macro level, the size of the city, which renders an endless variety of accessible activities, and the resulting self-perception of the residents, according to which they are active, fun-oriented, friendly, casual, and “young,” create a collective place identity that promotes a sense of belonging and pride. On the micro level, the formation of smaller place-, leisure-, and faith-based communities within the massive community enhances residents’ PSOC, reflected in feeling membership, influence, shared emotional connection, integration, and fulfillment of needs (including in times of frailty and grief). The PSOC is also promoted by the residents’ high involvement in formal and informal

volunteering within the small communities and in the greater community of The Villages, where they take roles as activity organizers and club operators, offer help to others via Helping Hands and support groups, and the like.

The innovation culture in The Villages encourages residents to diversify and enrich their leisure repertoire, both upon moving there and over time. Accordingly, they have more opportunities for meaningful engagement that may also develop into serious leisure associated with many individual and social rewards. In addition, leisure innovation may facilitate adjusting to changes and losses. Along with other adaptations in recreational and social activities, it is also part of negotiating leisure constraints processes. Lastly, the local media at The Villages support residents' activities, promote their PSOC, and, for those interested, create and maintain a sense of life in a bubble away from the world's troubles.

Readers may notice that all those advantages refer solely to the residents' psychological and social well-being. They may rightfully ask, "But what about the residents' physical well-being, namely, their health?" The answer to that, unfortunately, is beyond the scope of social science research. Still, as noted earlier (Chapter 10), I could not find any formal statistics supporting the local media argument that The Villages is "America's Healthiest Hometown."

Based on my observations, I can say that people interested in maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle can easily do so in The Villages, as they have access to many facilities and physical activities that promote physical health. Simultaneously, however, The Villages poses three significant challenges to a healthy lifestyle: food, alcohol, and sun. Eating healthily in The Villages is possible mainly for those who eat at home. Rather than healthy food with limited added sugar, sodium, and saturated fat, most restaurants serve typical American food (e.g., burgers, French fries, pizza, fried chicken, mac and cheese, BBQ ribs, chili, tacos, and grilled cheese). In addition, most social events involve massive potluck-based buffets, where the food is not necessarily healthy, and its quantity and diversity encourage excessive eating. The same may be said about alcohol, which is generously offered at social events and in public spaces, like the town squares, where it is sold for a pretty low price. The

sun, too, is a risk to one's health, as avoiding it in Florida is difficult. Many recreational and social activities are held outdoors, from pickleball and golf to parties and dances. Not everybody uses sunscreen because they believe "the sun is good for us, of course" (Sandra). Moreover, even loads of sunscreen cannot protect one's skin from extended exposure to the sun at midday when the radiation is at its peak.

Some of the people I saw at The Villages live like there is no tomorrow. They eat and drink without counting calories and lie in the sun near the swimming pool for hours. Overweight and tanned, they seem to live according to The Villages' old "year-round vacation" slogan. Others seem active and fit and try to avoid health-endangering habits as much as possible. Therefore, the answer to the health question is more individual than general. Like older adults aging in place, villagers who take good care of themselves are probably healthier than those who do not.

Research shows that subjective evaluations of well-being in later life are strongly correlated with objective measures (Oswald & Wu, 2010). In other words, individuals' perspectives on their well-being and quality of life offer a pretty reliable indication of their actual condition. Accordingly, to support my conclusions on how The Villages' unique characteristics support the well-being of its residents, the first part of this concluding chapter describes the study participants' perspectives on aging in The Villages. Next, the chapter addresses two of the questions I was repeatedly asked upon returning from The Villages: "Is it really that perfect?" and "Is it really different?"

"WHERE OLD PEOPLE COME TO GET YOUNG"

When Pamela and her partner first visited The Villages, they went to a car show at one of the town squares and started chatting with a man whose car license was from the same state they came from. At some point, the man's daughter and grandson, who were visiting, joined them, and "this eight-year-old boy, who has been visiting his grandfather for only a few days, said, 'Grandpa, is this where old people come to get young?'" Pamela was amazed: "It was pure out of babies' mouths. It wasn't planned. His heartfelt vision was that The Villages is where old people come to get young, and it's absolutely true."

Most people interviewed for this study agreed that The Villages keeps its residents young. When I asked them if, by living in The Villages, people age differently than older Americans who age in place or in other retirement communities, the majority argued that the villagers do much better. The study participants also offered many explanations for the villagers' better old age and discussed the factors that, in their opinion, help them age well. These factors could generally be classified into better health, greater social involvement, and decreased stress. All three categories were closely related to the unique characteristics of The Villages described earlier.

BETTER HEALTH

To prove their claims that villagers are healthier than other Americans at their age, some study participants compared themselves to the neighbors and friends they had in their previous places of residence. Jane said, "I'm still in great shape physically. I could do most things. My other sixty-seven-year-old women friends, they're old and decrepit." She added, "It blows my mind that I will be seventy soon. I still feel like I'm in the body of somebody way younger. This place keeps us in the mindset to constantly do." Similarly, Anna, who is twenty years older than Jane and has several limiting health conditions, thought she did much better than her old non-village friends:

One friend that used to be my pal, she's so crippled up. She's barely able to function. And the other woman that I hung out with is losing her eyesight, and she's had about four strokes. She's in assisted living. And my roommate from nursing school is in terrible shape. When I saw her on FaceTime, I just about fell over.

Other interviewees reflected on how their lives would have been significantly less active if they had stayed in their previous places of residence. Sam commented, "If I still lived in [his previous state], I'd be at the gym, and I'd be at the racket club, but I wouldn't be as active as I am here," and Alice added, "He's out doing sports all day long, every day . . . And we ride our bikes, so we're much more active than we would if we still lived up north."

Nevertheless, some of the study participants noted that maintaining a healthy lifestyle in The Villages depends on the individuals, as Linda put

it: "A lot of people are here for their health. They want to stay active. They want to be able to live healthier and live longer . . . [but] some of them are not healthy. They come here because of the weather, and they have these big stomachs." Sarah argued that "people here are not so aware of what they put in their mouth," and Stacey admitted gaining "twenty pounds the first year or so we were here from all the eating and drinking down at the square." Paul blamed the American consumer ethics for harming the residents' health: "Too many people here judge a restaurant by the quantity of the servings, and they feel like they have to consume it all rather than taking the leftovers home." On that, Stacey commented, "It's not only here. People eat too much all over America. Look at the people. They're obese everywhere."

GREATER SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT

Arguments regarding the villagers' greater social involvement were often accompanied by the statement, "It is easy to make friends at The Villages." Rose explained that making friends is easy because "You meet so many and then from one you meet their friends and then they have friends, and you're having a whole group of friends, new friends." As a result, wherever she goes, "There's always someone I know that I could be with, talking with, having fun with." Judith exemplified the fast speed of friends making: A year after moving to The Villages, her son got married. The wedding was held elsewhere, but Judith, who had already made many friends in The Villages, organized an additional reception: "At Saddlebrook [a recreation center], I had 100 people from table tennis and pickleball for dinner and music and dancing, and that's what we had for them."

Comparing themselves to older Americans outside The Villages, residents felt they were at a lower risk for loneliness and social isolation. They also emphasized the sense of safety ("The one thing everybody agrees on when they're here is the safety of the area. Everybody feels safe here because people look out for each other" – Daniel) and the social support residents provide each other. Sarah, a resident who has only been living in The Villages for two years, could already testify about such support. Healing from knee surgery, she was pleased to be "surrounded by neighbors that would help me any minute I ask them." Jane, who

worked part-time helping several older villagers, stressed that even her oldest homebound clients could not be happier living in a different place:

The first woman, they'd been here about ten years before she started to decline. They had neighborhood friends, so that was very good for her. It was better for her to be in this environment. And then the other woman, she got the diagnosis about four years ago. Her husband passed away, but she wanted to stay here because they had such a close-knit group of friends and neighbors that they'd known for twenty years. She eventually moved to assisted living, but all her friends were still coming to see her. And there's another guy – he's ninety-two. He doesn't do anything anymore. No activity. But, on his street, those people he'd been living with for twenty years became his family, and he would not go live with his kids.

DECREASED STRESS

Many residents considered The Villages a universe separated from the outside world. Describing it as a “bubble,” “dream life,” “heaven,” and “utopia,” they contrasted levels of stress at The Villages with the rest of the world: Whereas The Villages was portrayed as a “relaxed haven,” the world was depicted as “scary reality” that any sensible person would want to escape. In addition, the separation from the “real world” was perceived as enabling distancing oneself from issues that would typically be more upsetting, including those associated with loved ones. Linda explained:

You've got the ups and downs of everyday life. I was worried about my kids. Now it's my grandkids. I feel better because I'm here, and I'm able to deal with this stuff because of the weather, you know, because it's not depressing, and because I can be a little bit further apart from them. Not so involved in their daily lives. Not hear and see everything.

Life in The Villages was often compared to vacation, a similarity that decreased some residents' interest in traveling. Yet, the many residents who were still traveling enjoyed describing how when their trip or cruise is over, they are “bubbly happy, ready to get home, and people tell us, ‘Hello, your vacation is over,’ and I say, ‘If you lived where I live, you'd be happy to go home’” (Sam).

While the decreased stress resulting from detachment from the world was usually described with enthusiasm, several study participants implied it may get boring. Jerry said, “To do the same thing day after day, after day, after day, without a variation in that, that’s hard for me. Sometimes, I need to get out of the bubble.” Sam agreed: “Living in paradise gets old after a while. You want to go away to appreciate coming back to it.” Michael even went as far as describing The Villages as a gilded cage:

MICHAEL: The name of the game is that we’re in this prison, and we must accommodate each other.

KAREN: How can you say it is a prison?

MICHAEL: It’s not a prison because . . .

KAREN: It’s not a prison. Is it a prison?

MICHAEL: When you’re in the same place all the time, and you don’t do something with your time, then you’re in prison. So, the answer is to accommodate each other. And that’s what I do, what we can do to make the other one easier. And that’s the important part.

KAREN: But you have to be happy with other things.

MICHAEL: Yeah. Well, I have my stamps to keep me warm.

Such reservations regarding the bubble quality of The Villages may explain why the snowbirds felt they enjoyed the best of all worlds. During the winter, they lived in the sunny bubble of The Villages, but for the rest of the year, they were back in the real world, living their “real” lives with their families and old friends and activities. Accordingly, despite the disadvantages of being a snowbird (e.g., lower PSOC, constraints to developing serious leisure pursuits), they still managed to balance life between what Harold called “our real home and our camping home.”

IS IT REALLY THAT PERFECT?

When Sarah and Daniel first visited The Villages, they went to eat at a burger joint and started chatting with a retired colonel who walked with his dog outside that place. When Sarah asked him if he liked living in The Villages, his response was: “Well, let’s just put it this way. When I die and go to heaven, and God greets me, ‘Welcome to heaven!’ I’m going to

say, ‘I’ve already been living in heaven, in paradise. I just left paradise. What you got?’”

Despite such depictions, each of this book’s chapters suggests that The Villages is not perfect. If we compare it to smaller LORCs, we may say that some of The Villages’ flaws are similar to theirs. Specifically, tensions and conflicts between individual residents, within groups of residents, and among groups – based on age, residency duration, type of residency (permanent or snowbirding), and political views – seem to exist in all retirement communities (Bernard et al., 2012; Gray, 2015; Nielson et al., 2019). The same thing may be argued about tensions between The Villages’ residents and the developing company recently described by Podoshen et al. (2024), which were also reported in studies of other retirement communities (Malta et al., 2018; Streib & Metsch, 2002), and about the social isolation of particular groups, especially the immobile and very old residents (Shippee, 2012; Williams & Guendouzi, 2000). Even the most visible flaw, the “whiteness” of The Villages, is not unique and was reported with regard to other communities as well (Gray, 2015).

Still, the main aspect differentiating The Villages from other retirement communities, namely, its size, holds not only numerous advantages but also some concerns, the first being the harm that The Villages’ rapid growth causes to the neighboring communities due to its water use. Second, for some of the residents, especially the veterans, the traffic issues and the crowdedness at big events are very upsetting, as well as the sense that the community is not as intimate as it used to be. Third, the size of The Villages, which often facilitates leisure constraint negotiation, is a constraint in itself when activities are offered too far from one’s home and when the availability of other activities decreases the motivation to negotiate leisure constraints and denies benefits such as a sense of achievement and deepened commitment.

It may be said, though, that more relevant than comparing The Villages to smaller LORCs would be comparing it to other cities or, more specifically, to the ultimate age-friendly city as defined by the World Health Organization (2007). The features of such a city are classified according to eight interconnected domains that can help to identify and address barriers to well-being in later life: (1) housing, (2) social

participation, (3) respect and social inclusion, (4) civic participation and employment, (5) communication and information, (6) outdoor spaces and buildings, (7) transportation, and (8) community and healthcare.

Examining The Villages via these lenses suggests that the city shines in many features, especially those related to the first five domains. The Villages offers affordable, well-designed, safe housing options and an unimaginable range of accessible activities that enable social participation. Relatively secluded from the ageist society, villagers do not experience a lack of respect. Still, they can enjoy intergenerational interactions with young people working at The Villages and those living in the nearby communities whom they meet in public spaces such as the city squares and shops, in their churches, or via volunteering. There are also numerous opportunities for civic participation in The Villages, and residents can find many ways to contribute to the community. Moreover, although the city is designed for retirees, people can still work part-time or full time remotely or in the local businesses and services. Lastly, the local media inform the residents about events, news, and activities and provide them with timely, practical information through accessible channels.

The last three domains, however, are not perfect. Outdoor spaces and buildings are pleasant, safe, and clean. Still, the residents' access to public parks is limited (Wang, 2019), and walking, especially in the northern part of the city, can be dangerous due to the lack of sidewalks and safe pedestrian crossings. In addition, despite the fabulous network of paths for golf carts that offer age-friendly driving conditions, the lack of a public transportation system is a significant weakness. Lastly, although the city has a wide range of health services, there is a shortage of adult daycare, dementia care, and senior housing. Moreover, the high costs of staying in assisted-living and long-term care facilities force some of the older and frailer villagers to leave the city and move elsewhere. Accordingly, they are denied the opportunity to end their lives in familiar surroundings, where many have spent a considerable part of their later years.

Overall, it does not matter if we compare The Villages to other LORCs or age-friendly cities. In both cases, we find that it is not perfect. Yet, as I told people upon my return from The Villages, it is as close to perfect as possible. If the developing company studies the problems and provides

solutions, residents' well-being and satisfaction will surely increase. In addition, by being aware of The Villages' weak spots, companies that manage other new town LORCs may plan their future development to avoid some of the problems and offer an improved alternative.

IS IT REALLY DIFFERENT?

Although no retirement community comes close to the size of The Villages, several American retirement communities may be regarded as new town LORCs according to Glass and Skinner's (2013) cutoff point of 5,000 residents. These include, among others, Sun City in Arizona (about 40,000 residents), Green Valley in Arizona (about 21,000), On Top of the World in Florida (about 21,000), Kings Point in Florida (about 12,000), and Leisure World in Maryland (about 8,000). Similar new town LORCs may also be found outside of the US, for example, Forum Mare Nostrum in Spain (about 20,000 residents), Kursana in Germany (about 13,000), Shanghai Renshoutang Eldercare in China (about 11,000), and Summerset Retirement Villages in New Zealand (about 7,000) (Rehman, 2023; Wood, 2024).

It is hard to predict if any of these new towns will grow to become a city for older adults, that is, will cross the cutoff point of 50,000 inhabitants (Dijkstra et al., 2020), and what the future holds for The Villages, too. Yet, considering the world population's rapid aging and the commercial success of the retirement communities sector, it is quite probable that this market in general, and the new town format specifically, will continue to grow, and many more older adults will live in them in the coming decades (IBISWorld, 2023). This forecast suggests that more research and scholarly discourse on new town LORCs are needed to enhance our understanding of this growing economic, social, and cultural phenomenon.

One of the first questions to consider is whether new towns and cities for older adults can still be regarded as retirement communities. Whereas Glass and Skinner's (2013) definition of retirement communities (see Chapter 2) indeed includes them, it may be argued that towns and cities for older adults also combine elements of aging in place (Callahan Jr, 2019). People who move into new town LORCs in their

late fifties or early sixties may spend a good share of their lives – even a couple of decades – living there. During this time, the new residence becomes their home, and other residents become their community. Hence, they may be viewed as growing older independently, comfortably, and safely in their home and community, potentially benefiting from the many emotional, social, and health advantages associated with aging in place (Pani-Harreman et al., 2021).

Based on this study of The Villages, new town LORCs also exhibit elements of aging in community models (Hou & Cao, 2021). Given that residents form place-, leisure-, and faith-related communities within the larger community, we may regard them as naturally occurring communities – one of the most dominant models of aging in community, which provides members with mutual support that maximizes their ability to remain, as they age, in their homes and locales.

Overall, it may be concluded that aging in a city for older adults, such as The Villages, or smaller retirement towns, like the ones mentioned earlier, represents a new aging model that combines elements of all existing models. When such towns also offer assisted-living and long-term care facilities, continuous involvement in some previous activities and interaction with friends may be possible and preserve residents' PSOC and subjective well-being. However, we should be cautious about calling the new model “ultimate,” as continuous involvement is not guaranteed. Moreover, as seen in The Villages, the fourth age tends to be less visible in the retirement metropolis, either because the older and frailer adults are home/facility-bound or because they cannot afford the costs of the local facilities and must find an alternative for the very last phase of their lives.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE VILLAGES' AND OTHER LORCS' SUCCESS AS A SOCIAL FAILURE

When I was close to completing this book's writing, I realized that using “seniors” to describe older adults was no longer politically correct. Although I interpret this term as respectful of older people, new additions to academic style guides and gerontological associations argue against using it because it evokes stereotypes and leads to othering older

adults and biases against them. After giving much thought to this issue and contemplating a title change, I decided to leave the planned book's title – *Seniorland* – unchanged. The reason for that was that The Villages, like any other intentionally age-segregated housing for older adults, represents the societal othering of older adults. Moreover, its unprecedented size and future development plans make it the premier symbol of this phenomenon. Keeping the “senior” in the title is thus an intentional choice that aims to remind us of this simple truth.

Relocating to a retirement community is an outcome of a conscious decision that older adults make independently or with loved ones to better their quality of life and enjoy their later years. However, this sort of self-quarantine in “utopian heterotopia” (Bartling, 2008, p. 177), “grey ghettos” (McHugh, 2003, p. 181), and “retirement enclaves” (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005, p. 344) should not be perceived as a lifestyle choice only. Considering some of the push factors that led people to move to The Villages (e.g., a dull variety of available activities, activities that better fit younger people, and a lack of activity companions in their previous places of residence), there is no doubt that at least part of the decision to move results from society's failure to answer the needs of older people.

Retirement community residents' self-othering is an outcome of the societal othering of older adults routed in the ageism characterizing modern cultures that denigrate and stigmatize old age. When younger adults and families are seen and treated by society as more important than older individuals, and when old age is perceived as a “problem,” we should not be surprised by the mass of individuals who choose alternative housing where everybody else is older, and age is just a number. Even though this choice accords them many benefits, as described in detail in this book and previous research (e.g., Omoto & Aldrich, 2006; Osei-Kyei et al., 2020; Sandhu et al., 2013; Schuster, 2016), the residents and even more so their previous communities lose.

Retirement community residents lose the benefits of aging in place, such as the preservation of their identity and a sense of control, the continuous connection with family, friends, and neighbors, and the financial advantage. In addition, they miss the daily interaction with younger cohorts, which allows them to have meaningful connections and opportunities for guiding and mentoring roles that may be very

satisfying. As studies show that frequent interactions with children give older adults many health benefits (Peters et al., 2021), they also lose this advantage. Moreover, moving into an age-segregated community can be challenging and accompanied by various risks associated, among others, with difficulties in social integration and frequent encounters with death (Chandler & Robinson, 2014).

The loss of the older adults' previous communities is even more significant. By having older people move into age-segregated communities, society loses the opportunity to nurture intergenerational relationships that would benefit everybody involved. Children and young adults engaging with older people learn to see them and old age beyond ageist stereotypes (Teater, 2018). Without or with minimal interaction with older adults, the younger cohorts do not see all perspectives of the life course. They also lack models for aging that may help them in the future when they become the older generation. In addition, younger persons lose the opportunity for significant daily relationships with experienced people who may support them through their life journeys.

Moreover, society loses a tremendous volunteering force by pushing older adults into retirement communities (or pulling them there, if you wish). As found in this study of The Villages, people moving into a retirement community are willing to devote much of their time, energy, knowledge, skills, and money to benefit others. Some of them even make volunteering a retirement career. However, most of these valuable resources – whether expressed via volunteering in leisure or as leisure – are used to benefit other residents. Only a small part of these resources is directed to people outside the retirement community. In the case of The Villages, if all these tens of thousands of residents had stayed and volunteered in their previous places of residence, the value to society could have been beyond measure.

To some extent, older adults exhibit “resistance” to societal failures by having their own towns and self-serving systems that satisfy their social and recreational needs. Intentionally or not, they send a message to society, which may be bluntly phrased as “your loss!” Instead of benefiting society, they focus their attention on their bubbles. Instead of being mentors and models, they emotionally and instrumentally support each other. Instead of sharing their wisdom with younger cohorts, they direct their efforts to personal growth and hedonic pleasures.

Is it good for the older people? Based on The Villages' case, it seems so. As summarized in this chapter's introduction, living in The Villages offers its residents a new, unique, and appealing way to age. Although exceptions naturally exist, moving and aging there accords residents with enhanced psychological and social well-being and a convenient environment for maintaining a healthy lifestyle that many take advantage of. Similar findings regarding residents' enhanced well-being were also reported in studies of much smaller retirement communities (Chandler & Robinson, 2014; Omoto & Aldrich, 2006; Osei-Kyei et al., 2020).

Is it good for the younger cohorts? Probably not. Children growing up without contact with older people will not know how to age in place and remain part of their communities when they retire. The lack of models may exacerbate the tendency for age-segregation housing and create a vicious circle wherein the othering of older adults will only expand. Although the future residents of new town LORCs and cities for older adults may have an outstanding quality of life and be as happy as one can be, and the developing companies may be highly profitable, this increasing trend should be perceived with reservations and thoroughly discussed, as at the end of the day, it signifies a loss to society at large.

