



THE COHOUSING COMPANY

*Winslow members have gained some proficiency and confidence in community living after the first years of feeling overwhelmed.*

# WINSLOW COHOUSING

## *The First 10 Years*

BY ROBERTA WILSON

**B**ACK IN 1988, WHEN *CoHOUSING* AUTHORS KATHRYN McCamant and Chuck Durrett were first explaining the Danish housing model on a speaking tour, one of their first stops was Seattle. Out of the audience stepped a small group of folks interested in developing cohousing on Bainbridge Island, a small town just a 35-minute ferry ride away from downtown.

As fate has it, we ended up being the first owner-developed cohousing community in the United States. We certainly didn't have much experience to go on. Only one of us had lived in an intentional community, and only a few had even visited any intentional communities. None of us had seen cohousing in Denmark, and of course there were no models of it close to home. What we had was the *CoHousing* book and an incredible amount of energy.

As with all communities, we made some wise choices and some poor ones. We met every weekend for over two years, with many of us meeting



## ***We set out to change our world; now community is changing us.***

in committees during the week. This vigorous schedule allowed us to buy land, get through the construction process, and move into our 30 duplexes and flats by Spring 1992, but it cost us potential members who couldn't devote such time to development. Finding loans for what looked to financial institutions like some kind of middle-income commune was difficult and may have cost one credit union representative his job. The stress resulting from engaging some of our own members to work for us hurt the group and hurt some of these members as well. Our original group was deeply bonded by the sheer effort of the project. Yet, after move-in we retreated to our individual homes to recuperate. While our idealism had carried us through the forming stages, we weren't quite prepared for the reality of living cooperatively—so many of us were used to having our own way in the world.

We also had the inevitable turnover. We had problems with new residents who either had their own heroic notions, or who soared and then dove as the honeymoon phase ended. We had kids who couldn't get along, a dog that bit, divorces and deaths, births and celebrations. For the most part, our surrounding neighbors were friendly. We figured out a work system, each serving on clusters—Administration, Process and Communication, Grounds, and Common Facilities. We figured out a meal system, with dinners five nights a week. We figured out how to work with consensus. We learned to keep good track of our finances, and we continued to work towards emotional literacy. We still struggle with issues such as member participation and how to make capital improvements, yet our meetings are now civil, efficient, and more emotionally honest. Folks have found their own level after the first years of feeling overwhelmed. Some have been disappointed with the lack of emotional intimacy, while others, especially teens, have felt uncomfortable living in a fishbowl.

At times, most of us have probably asked ourselves, "What am I *doing* here?"—a question, I believe, that arises from a complex calculation of time and energy spent and



*An outdoor dinner at the end of the path, 1995.*

one's tolerance for conflict. Sometimes I've asked myself, after a difficult confrontation, why I should put so much of my life energy into something that seems, at the time, to give back little. Yet I'm sure that at other times each of us has surely declared: "I can't *imagine* living anywhere else!"—a response to the very personal exchanges that make living in community so rewarding. I can call my neighbor and ask her to turn off the coffee pot that I forgot. Children come to visit and

play with my dog. A neighbor pauses from her chores a moment and tells me about her life. In the forest, we scatter the ashes of a member who died; in our orchard, we bury the family dog. A neighbor's sister comes to stay and offers massages. The children are delivered to school by adults who share the duty. Our community feels safe. Some members who've become more involved in the larger community around us are making suggestions gleaned from our consensus process that might benefit more people. My favorite story involves a lost family parakeet, retrieved from the ferry by a neighbor who recognized the bird and called home on a cell phone to let the family know.

The idealism, dreams, and devotion, while still here, have given ground to the practical and the real experience of living in community—the good, the bad, and the ugly. Community is seeping into our cells, I believe, so that even the challenges become just part of who we each are. Cooperative culture is gaining ground over our individual upbringing in competition; slowly, we are giving up the need for absolute control. We set out to change our world, and now community is changing us. Ω

*Roberta Wilson is a founding member of Winslow Cohousing. Along with walking across the United States for nuclear disarmament and helping to delay the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, cohousing is the effort of which she is most proud.*