

PHOTO BY SHANNON LINDEN/CURRENTS

Sue Elliott in front of the sign for the Armstrong Abbeyfield House.

BUILDING A DREAM

As the population ages, solutions are sought to house seniors in rural communities. The Abbeyfield Salmon River House Society aims to do just that.

BY SHANNON LINDEN

We may never be as old as the hills that encircle our valleys, but we're getting there. According to a current Interior Health Authority (IHA) Population

Profile, by 2025, people 65 years and older will grow in population by about 50 per cent in Armstrong-Spallumcheen alone.

The projections are in keeping with provincewide statistics, which indicates the elderly are expected to comprise an increasingly larger proportion of the overall population.

That's why a group of forward-thinking folks from Westwold are getting a jump on the situation before it skips out of control in their tiny town. They're not waiting 15 years; they've spent the past three planning a unique alternative for affordable accommodation in a supportive care setting for the people of Falkland and its surrounding hamlets.

Their plan? Build a house, but not just any house.

By 2012, the Abbeyfield Salmon River House Society hopes to join the ranks of more than 20 centers in B.C. that have already constructed Abbeyfield houses in their communities.



PHOTO BY MAGGIE LEPOIDVIN

"WHATEVER GOOD THINGS WE BUILD END UP BUILDING US." ~ Jim Rohn

The Abbeyfield House model grew from modest means. The year was 1956; the country, England; the man, Richard Carr-Gomm, a retired army major who made it his mission to care for a group of lonely, elderly people in South London. With the purchase of a run-down, six-room house with only an outdoor biffy, the major moved his tenants in, thus putting out the prototype for a different kind of care. Today, more than 1,100 Abbeyfield Houses are home to more than 9,000 residents in 17 countries around the world. Canada boasts 40, more than half of them in B.C.

Nestled in neighborhoods, Abbeyfield houses look like single family dwellings, although each is unique, their style and décor reflect the community in which they are built. Most accommodate 10 or more seniors, offering a balance between private and public space with individual bedrooms and ensuites, along with shared kitchen, laundry, living room, library and quiet areas.

Houses include an apartment or suite where the full-time house co-ordinator — affectionately known as the "house mother" — lives. She oversees the running of the household, helps residents with various tasks, and fills the fridge because, first and foremost, she cooks for a crowd.

"When you get older, good food is one of your remaining pleasures!" says Sue Elliott, secretary-treasurer of the Salmon River project.

For seniors still behind the wheels of their own vehicles, there's plenty of parking. Love to grow flowers or vegetables? Creativity blossoms in the communal garden. What about having the grandchildren over to bake cookies? The more the merrier in the kitchen.

"We are not a nursing home," Elliott explains. "We will offer supportive care but we honor independence."

While Abbeyfields cater to the independent senior, Patti Ferguson, chair of the board for Abbeyfield Armstrong (a model for the Falkland project) says her society has noted a change in the kind of retiree their home attracts.

"When we built this house we went on the premise that healthy 65-year-olds would move in and be off to Bermuda for the winter," she laughs.

But healthier seniors are waiting to downsize, fight-



PHOTO BY SHANNON LINDEN/CURRENTS

Top: All ages showed up to support the Abbeyfield Salmon River House Society last summer. Above: Betty Menzies, a happy resident of Armstrong Abbeyfield.

ing aging with everything from boxing to Botox.

"People are coming to us in their 80s, so they have more health issues," Ferguson says.

While Abbeyfields are not staffed with medical personnel, residents or their sponsors sometimes hire nurses for additional help.

"Coming here should not be an emergency. It should be planned ahead," Ferguson emphasizes.

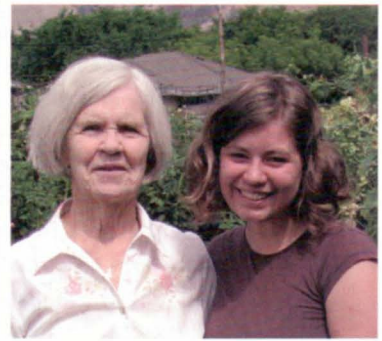
"We have a list of applicants who are interested and if a room becomes available, we call the first person on the list."

Turnover occurs when residents' health concerns require movement to another level of care or, sadly, when they pass away.

"THERE IS NOTHING LIKE STAYING AT HOME FOR REAL COMFORT." ~ Jane Austen

"We have a lot of elderly folks in Falkland who are extraordinarily independent," Sue Elliott says.

Many have lived in the village or surrounding area for years, if not their entire lives. Without local, alternative housing, they may be forced to leave family, friends and community behind, moving where there is place for them within IHA's domain: a massive region stretching from the Thompson Cariboo to the Kootenays and Okanagan.



Submitted photos



Clockwise from top left: Emily Ferguson uses a bullhorn to lead chants on the 2009 Kamloops Walk for Peace, the Environment, and Social Justice, while her brother Will videotapes the event; Ferguson walks the walk with two children in Soma, a village in northern Gambia; Emily Ferguson and her grandmother, Charmian Ferguson, a longtime peace activist who was one of the founders of the Kamloops Walk for Peace, the Environment and Social Justice; A photo opportunity is a good excuse for children from Soma to pile onto Ferguson's lap. She spent time in the village in 2007 and returned in 2009; Peace walk photos appear at regular intervals in the Ferguson family albums. At 12, Emily moved to the forefront and helped to carry the banner.

Her pale blue eyes twinkling, she admits, "According to my research, the walk officially began in 1980. But the founding members and other community people have been unofficially walking for a lot longer."

Propelled by her politically active family (maternal grandfather was North Kamloops mayor Don Ellsay) Ferguson was always keen to do the walk, but at 12 years of age, something clicked.

"I remember that time in my life, when it became more than 'this is what I do.' It became this is what I want to do."

"That was a big year for me," she laughs. She joined Amnesty International, became a vegetarian, and actually led a fight — of the non-violent kind.

A nostalgic smile sweeps across her face as she

recalls the campaign that changed her life — and preserved a downtown landmark.

Royal Inland Hospital's numbers were up but the parking space was down. In a bid to buy more room, a development proposal was put forth calling for the demolition of the heritage trees gracing the hospital's front lawn.

"It was literally a 'pave paradise and put up a parking lot' situation," Ferguson explains. An elementary school student, she took up the cause to save the giant trees that lend such beauty and character — not to mention shade — to the hospital's landscape.

"My family and I snuck down there in the middle of the night and put 'save our trees' signs on the trunks." Media were baffled by the unknown identity of the perpetrators but Ferguson's mom, Pamela