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[Back to content page](#)

Social seniors

Senior living facilities are now where people over 60 go to live a full life



You can do almost anything at La Conner Retirement Inn, including have your hair styled.

By Amanda Baltazar

A typical week involves an art class, an exercise group, a movie night, a walk around a park and lunch at a local restaurant – you’d think this was someone’s list of vacation plans rather than the schedule of a resident in a senior living facility.

BGone is the era of sitting in an armchair and waiting for the years to pass, of grey, institutionalized food and strange medical odors. Today’s seniors move into independent and assisted living facilities to make their lives easier and fuller.

Not a death sentence

“The perception still exists that you go to a senior living facility to die, so the challenge is to convince people that what we provide goes a long way to enhancing their lives,” said Duane Clark, owner of Cap Sante Court Retirement Community in Anacortes.



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"In fact," he added, "it's not unusual to hear people say that they should have moved here years ago."

Cap Sante is an independent living facility, with 35 to 40 residents between approximately 82 and 86 years old. Many come here once their spouses have died, looking for a social life, safety and good, nutritious food. Some residents move to Anacortes to live in a senior center close to their children, bringing the flavor of different parts of the country with them, Clark said.

More than 75 percent of the residents are female, partly because women tend to live longer. However, the social aspect of this type of living appeals more to women, Clark said. Men tend to appreciate different things, such as the food. "If a spouse passes away, a man tends to fare worse than a woman in terms of taking care of himself," he added.

Some younger residents are in their sixties, but they are rare, said Clark. Having residents from an entirely different generation means the center's staff has to make sure any social activities are suitable for different age groups. The average stay at Cap Sante is two to four years.

This type of environment isn't to everyone's liking, Clark said. "They may be used to having a larger space or they hate losing their independence," he said. "Some are loners and the social side doesn't matter to them."

The social activities can often be more important to residents' families than to the residents themselves. "We find the typical resident wants to sit in their room, put their feet up and read a book," he said.

The center also holds big events throughout the year, such as a summer barbecue and a dessert supper in early December, to which residents can each invite two family members.

The center does not offer any medical facilities, although the local hospital is only a few blocks away. Each room is equipped with emergency pull cords and intercoms, adding to the feeling of safety each resident needs. Residents are free to organize their own medical or caregiver help, said Clark.

"If someone has that extra layer of protection, it's a good thing," Clark said.

"Nothing offers 100 percent security, but we've increased the likelihood of someone being near if something happens."

Cap Sante Court offers a variety of living options: studios, one-bedroom and two-bedroom apartments, all with cooking facilities. The latter are rarely used because rent includes two daily meals. "We think gathering twice a day is an important part of the social aspect and most people want it, so except for breakfasts, the kitchens are rarely used," Clark explained.

The 36 rooms are all on one floor. "We don't want to add a floor because then we would become an institution and we want to be a home," he said.

Independent living

There's an even greater level of independence at The Leopold in Bellingham, where residents are free to come and go, since this independent living facility is in the heart of downtown.

"A lot of our residents are fiercely independent and don't want to depend on anyone for anything," said Ginger Oppenheimer, marketing director. "A lot of people choose to live here because it's accessible to everything within minutes." But there are also events within The Leopold – exercise classes, coffee socials, bridge groups and crafts, to name a few. "Any retirement community worth its salt will have activities," Oppenheimer explained.

Although independence is paramount to its residents, The Leopold staff members keep a careful eye on the seniors and employees talk to residents or their family if they're concerned about something.

It also offers the lowest possible level of assisted living through licensed caregivers rather than nurses, helping residents who need help with showering, dressing and supervising their medications.

The Leopold was converted from an old hotel, dating back to 1889, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Many of the original architectural



Regular social events at Cap Sante Court gather the residents together.



Homes at Bryce Park are targeted at people who want to live there for decades.

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details are still visible, and each apartment is unique.

Approximately 84 residents live here, including four couples, and 35 percent of residents are men – a statistic that's 30 percentage points higher than the average United States retirement facility.

Because the facility is so beautiful, The Leopold also rents out its ballroom to the local community. Regular events such as weddings are held here, which Oppenheimer said makes residents feel less isolated.

Community living

One of the newest local senior living communities in Northwestern Washington, Bryce Park in Lynden, opened at the beginning of 2009. So far, four of the 64 units have been sold to its target demographic of people aged 60 and older. Bryce Park is an independent living community where residents live in apartments built around a park with a clubhouse, which functions as the main gathering and social place.

"We've targeted the adult who wants to live in a place for decades rather than years," said Jeff Fransen, president of Fransen Development Partners, the group responsible for the project.

Residents at Bryce Park can choose to have as much or as little assistance as they wish. The community offers transportation, meals, wellness programs, home maintenance and repair, yard work and landscaping and even help with technology.

Some of these services are included in the rent and others, including nursing, are provided on a contract basis. Bryce Park has group arrangements with local contractors, which makes their services cheaper for residents.

Fransen is also working on building a relationship with the local community college to give residents access to classes and lectures there.

"With all the baby boomers, there's a lot more choice coming up for these people," Fransen said. "The real focus of our project has been a universal design for people to age in one place. This will be a vibrant and active community, because most people don't even consider themselves old until they reach the age of 78."

People are looking to downsize or shed their maintenance responsibilities, Fransen said. "We've studied trends in senior housing and people don't want to worry about their homes and the upkeep of them in their last decades.

"We've also found that these people want choice. They don't necessarily want to move to Arizona but want to be near their kids and grandkids – but not too close – and they don't want to live next door to a family with little kids. They also want to be active and be able to travel. They're looking for a lifestyle."

Primarily, he said, people are looking for a retirement life with great recreational activities, so the community sees many people coming from either Seattle or out of state.

For those looking for outdoor activities, walking and biking trails are nearby.

They connect with the city of Lynden and run directly next to the community.

Assisted living

La Conner Retirement Inn offers a greater level of care than the previous facilities. It features independent and assisted living.

This small town along the Swinomish Channel is an attractive place to retire.

Most residents come to the Inn because they have fallen in love with the town or because their children live here, said marketing director Sue Shellenberger. They also like the Inn's central location.

And there's a constant round of activities in the retirement inn itself – talks, theatrical nights, crafts and movies.

But moving here is often difficult for new arrivals, Shellenberger said. "It's very hard for people to leave their home because people wonder if they are coming here to die," she said.

"We try to make it as easy as possible. Our staff always has a smile, a kind word,

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and know people by name. They make sure our residents are always comfortable. And coming here can really be a boon to people's lives. I think all of us need love and our culture has a hard time valuing old people – we treat them as if they're not there."

Attracting residents

Just like hotels and any other kind of accommodations, these senior living facilities also need to get the word out to increase their visibility and make sure they are fully occupied.

Advertising and marketing are a real challenge, said Clark, so he takes a two-fold approach: He focuses on traditional print media, including the Yellow Pages, newspapers and magazines, as well as on maintaining the facilities' good reputation.

"The most important marketing tool we have is our reputation in our community for the nest that we have provided for 23 years," he said.

Oppenheimer makes sure that The Leopold is well-marketed and advertised. "I don't think there's ever a time when you stop marketing because you're well known," she said. She uses local radio, magazines, theater advertising and the downtown maps, as well as the Internet to get the word out.

Marketing for Bryce Park is being done mostly through Realtors rather than traditional advertising, Fransen said, although he did advertise his May grand opening in local newspapers and on radio stations. Open houses and social events are also hosted to welcome the community and attract new residents.

La Conner Retirement Inn offers tours anytime anyone would like to see the facility, making it extremely accessible. Shellenberger also markets the Inn online and in local magazines, and occasionally further afield in Snohomish and Whatcom counties. Membership in the La Conner Chamber of Commerce also helps with visibility, she said.

[Back to content page](#)

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