

Parent Care: Retirement homes come in all flavors

by *Marsha_Kay_Seff*

Three caregivers contacted me in a single week singing the praises of their parents' board-and-care homes. How refreshing, but not surprising.

Despite the horror stories that make news and scare older folks and their children away from retirement homes, I frequently bump into places where I wouldn't mind living someday. In fact, my own mom loved her assisted-living apartment and later her skilled-nursing facility.

Susan Zagorsky is thrilled with her mother's board-and-care in Del Mar, Calif. So is 93-year-old Sylvia.

"I love it," enthuses the older woman, showing off her room and pointing out the furniture she took from her own home. "I'm very comfortable. We even go swimming."

She continues, "There's nothing here that I can be angry about. I meet very nice people because they all come here to have fun. I've been coming here a couple of years."

Actually, Sylvia, who suffers from dementia, is slightly mistaken. The truth is that though she did get respite care at the home once before, she's been living there for two years.

Susan, a real estate agent who lives just a mile away, says the arrangement is almost perfect.

The two years before Sylvia moved to the six-resident home, she was living in a duplex in Oceanside, Calif., with a caregiver in the adjoining unit. Susan says her mother used to phone "a hundred times a day." And the daughter was constantly driving to Oceanside to check things out.

Sylvia was angry and lonely, Susan says. "I didn't realize she was so unhappy, and she couldn't tell me."

Sylvia is a very private person, Susan says, "And I never thought it would have been possible for her to be happy in a place like this ... Unless you take a chance, like everything in life, you never know what the outcome is going to be."

The board-and-care home, just a few blocks from the beach, is two stories, with the owner living on the second floor and residents on the first.

When Sylvia moved in, Susan stayed away for two weeks to give her mom time to adjust. But the transition wasn't easy for either woman.

"I felt guilty," Susan says. "I cried every day and night about taking away her independence. Moving her was the hardest thing I ever did in my life."

Like many older folks who have trouble with such a move, Sylvia got sick right away and ended up in the emergency room three times.

It took the older woman about six months to adjust to her new environment.

Sure, sometimes she gets angry and phones her daughter asking to go home; however, she soon forgets her discontent and settles back in. Because Sylvia wants to feel useful, she's in charge of folding the laundry.

While Susan and I are talking, Sylvia wanders back into the room and gives her daughter a big hug.

"I feel so much better knowing she's happy," Susan says with a sigh.

Marsha Kay Seff is editor of The San Diego Union-Tribune's www.sandiegoeldercare.com, a Web site for older folks and their caregivers. She can be contacted by email.

Parent Care: Retirement homes come in all flavors by Marsha_Kay_Seff