

Finding new life and the right fit in retirement home

By LUISE VOLTA
Special to the NEWS

The house was roomy. The view across Port Susan Bay was breathtaking. Yet in 1990, a thought kept surfacing, one that I'd discussed at length with my new husband: "Was this really the perfect retirement home?"

I was 62. Val was a youthful, dapper 78. Just months earlier, we'd married and settled comfortably into a beautiful three-bedroom home which Val and his first wife, Caroline, had built near Camano County Club. The many windows afforded spectacular views. Sunrises were a taste of heaven. Val, a man ahead of his time, had custom-designed the home to be totally wheelchair accessible. There was even a mother-in-law apartment for caregivers, should health needs arise.

This seemed to be the perfect retirement hideaway. Something inside me said otherwise, though. Later that year, we flew the coup, spending the next four years wandering all over the country. We basked in the sunshine in Hawaii. We drank in the beauty of the

Grand Canyon. We lived out this joyful period of abandon, while keeping temporary residence at Port Susan Camping Club.

As glorious as that time was, my homing instincts kept surfacing. The question, "What is a perfect retirement home?" nipped at the edges of my mind. So in 1994, while winding down our travels, Val and I started in earnest to find that special place.

Here are the steps we took—steps which others can follow.

1. Look around. Stanwood and Stillaguamish Senior Centers gave us lots of help. We mastered the nuances of senior housing lingo: HUD affordable housing (for people with limited incomes), assisted living (for those needing personal care), adult family homes (for frail elderly), and continuing care retirement communities (many levels of care and services on one campus).

What an education! What an adventure! We found a Catholic retirement community in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Lovely concept, lousy location. We toured a gated community near Issaquah. Beautiful loca-

tion, too pricey for us. Each visit expanded our horizons, broadened our knowledge base and honed our wish list.

We wanted fellowship, activities and volunteer opportunities. Since our Catholic faith is such a part of us, we sought a place where people openly spoke about God and desired to follow Him.

The availability of assisted living and nursing care was essential.

If possible, we wanted to see cedars and Douglas firs, and maybe a view of the water?

Were we asking for too much? I wondered. We weren't into wine tasting, or square dancing, so that didn't matter. Our list was our own, as unique as our individual lives.

2. Test the waters. Like many seniors, we talked to our peers. We visited a friend who lived in a Seattle retirement community and grilled her with questions: Why did you choose this retirement community? What are the best things about living here? The less desirable things? What might you change if you could?

Some of our friends spent a weekend in an empty apartment or guest house, sampling retirement living. Others attended special events, or joined a waiting list. We did. And we did something I don't necessarily recommend to everyone



The writer Luise Volta and her husband Val.

— or maybe not to hardly anyone. We moved into two retirement communities.

We spent a year at the first community. Located in a small town, the brand-new facility offered meals and housekeeping, and assisted living. Val served as Resident Council President. I put out the weekly newsletter and assisted the activities director.

Unfortunately, few others helped. We ran ourselves ragged.

At the second retirement community we relaxed. After awhile, though, the days dragged. Without the normal tasks of housekeeping and meal preparation, we waited. We didn't know what for, but that's how it felt, like we were waiting.

We were entertained, when we were still capable of entertaining. We were served, when we wanted to serve. Back to the drawing board for a better fit.

3. Jump right in. Just

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Seventeen months later, the novelty has worn off, but the comfort and peace in our decision grows. We find joy and happiness in the incredible people here. Val, now 90, takes our Chihuahua with him to the nursing home to visit "the old people." He's met by smiles and hugs. I, too, get the joy of giving of myself as I volunteer. Sometimes I answer phones. Other times I help plan parties. Whatever I do, I aim to have fun.

From the living room of our apartment, I look across at Camano Island, where our married life began. Instead of glorious sunrises, I now see rich sunsets. Gold and orange splashing the sky. This is home.