

izes in financial planning after divorce. Many of these single women also realize that they're less financially prepared for retirement than their married counterparts, and that they haven't been able to earn as much money during their working years as most men. Often these women are divorced or widowed and know firsthand how hard it is to maintain a one-income household. They are willing to consider any option, as long as it allows them to hold on to their freedom.

"After all, we're from the generation of women who lived in communes back in the 1960s," says Connie Skillingstad, who launched Golden Girls Housing in Minneapolis several years ago. The nonprofit service helps women look at nontraditional options for housing that meet their financial, social, and emotional needs. Skillingstad says it's tough for some women to think seriously about shared housing, and many don't know where to start. "In our culture, living communally with people who aren't related to us certainly isn't considered the

norm," says Jacqueline Grossmann, copresident of the National Shared Housing Resource Center and a housing specialist at the Interfaith Housing Center of the Northern Suburbs, outside Chicago. "So when women decide to do this, there's usually a pretty compelling financial need—a divorce, a job loss, an illness, or even the realization that they don't have enough of a nest egg."

And, of course, not every house-sharing experience is a positive one. There can be personality conflicts, says Grossmann. There can be minor squabbles about anything from too many out-of-town visitors to who should clean out the fridge. And there can be major disasters: a landlord who seemed shy and sweet turns out to be psycho, or a dear friend is revealed as a deadbeat. All that said, many women are releasing their cultural hangups and their fears of the roommate from hell and venturing down this new path. "This is the wave of the future," Skillingstad predicts. Here's why. *(continued on page 90)*

The Covington Chronicles

Joan Medicott holds the yellowed newspaper clipping as one would a treasured relic—which to her it is. The photo appearing with the article, saved from a 1978 issue of the *Boca Raton News*, shows a smiling Medicott hugging an older woman, a client of the South County Neighborhood Center where Medicott was the program coordinator. "This is when the seed for the Ladies of Covington books was planted, although I didn't know it yet," Medicott says. The center provided services to the local residents. "I saw firsthand the loneliness of these older ladies, living alone, no longer driving, isolated," adds Medicott. "I thought then how much happier they might be if they could know one another, if they could share a home."

Fast-forward 21 years. Medicott and her husband, Eben, are now living in Barnardsville, North Carolina, located just outside of Asheville. The couple fell in love with this area after several visits during the 1980s. It is a land of soft hills and curving roads, a land without hard edges or sharp angles. "It has a spiritual quality about it," says Medicott. "And this is where my idea to

write about three older women living together came to life. If I hadn't moved here, I don't think I could have written these books, since they are almost as much about place as they are about people."

The first book of the eight-volume series, *The Ladies of Covington Send Their Love* (St. Martin's Press, 2000), "almost wrote itself," she says. It follows the lives, adventures, and loves of Amelia, Hannah, and Grace, who were essentially warehoused by their families into a home for retired ladies. The three widows had resigned themselves to living out their days there until a fortuitous set of circumstances enabled them to leave, move in together, and start new lives in the tiny community of Covington, North Carolina, a fictitious location that resembles Medicott's Barnardsville. "Once I wrote that first book, I thought I was done. But the ladies wouldn't let me stop," says Medicott. "They would haunt my dreams, nag my subconscious. They seemed to be telling me 'We have so much more to say and do, Joan. You're the only one who can tell our story.' And so I told it. I'm still telling it."

The books became a word-of-mouth success over the next seven years, with three quarters of a million copies in print, and made Medicott a national bestselling author. They were discussed by book clubs all across the country. Fans looked forward to each new title with almost as much anticipation as readers awaited the next Harry Potter novel. (Medicott's latest book, *An Unexpected Family* [Pocket] just hit bookstores.) And the books sparked a fervor for the idea of sharing a home with supportive friends.

"I used to watch *The Golden Girls*," says Medicott. "That was a revolutionary idea then: women sharing a home. But times have changed." The huge amount of fan mail that Medicott receives and the many visits to her website (www.joanmedicott.com) are testimony to the impact she is making. "I am so thankful to read of older women living great lives," writes one fan. Another sends her thanks to Medicott for showing that "even as we age, there is enjoyment in whatever we do."

Because, says Medicott, "that is what my ladies do—enjoy their lives." Yes, each of them has dealt with loss and problems:



Golden Girl Joan Medicott, with Daisy, writes about sharing.

misunderstandings with their children, illness, depression, a fire that destroyed their farmhouse. But, much more important, they discovered a world of possibilities, and that includes romance. "Why not?" asks Medicott. "People don't lose their capacity to love just because they get older." She feels that society is too quick to relegate older folks "to the ash heap" when they reach their 60s, 70s, and beyond. "They make us think that our lives are over just because we reach a certain age," she says. "But the Ladies of Covington live every one of their days to the fullest."

—Karen Westerberg Reyes

 **Listen to a conversation with Joan Medicott on AARP's Prime Time Radio. Log on to www.radioprime.org, and click on "Radio From: AARP THE MAGAZINE."**