

Reinventing STORIES FROM THE WALKWAYS OF COHOUSING Community

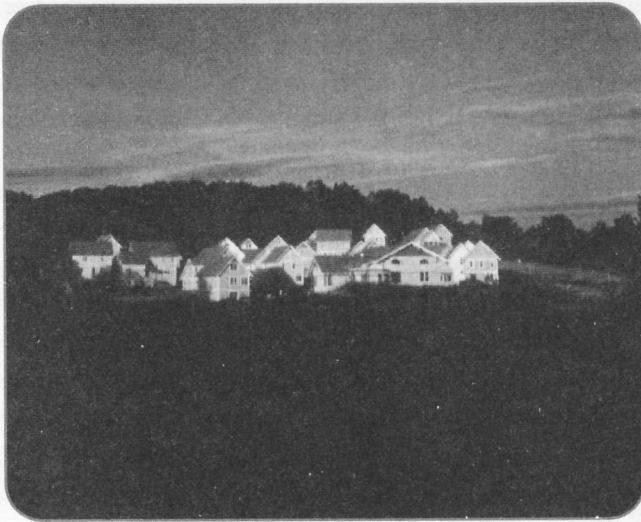
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The Annual Retreat Is Here!

Laura Fitch, Pioneer Valley, Amherst, Massachusetts

It's Friday evening of our annual retreat and the anticipation mounts. We've dusted off our candle lanterns and we wait by the door, listening for the drum. The steady rhythmic beat penetrates the night, originating in the common house and working its way up the path. Someone lights the candles of the small group huddled in front of the first house. Then they move along, stopping at each cluster of neighbors to light more candles.



*Dawn over
Pioneer
Valley*

PHOTOGRAPH
COURTESY OF
MIKE APRIL

The procession grows in size and we join it midway around the loop back to the common house. Other than the drum, this is supposed to be a silent ritual, but the children whisper and run excitedly to the front of the "parade." By the time we reach the courtyard, close to 100 candles flicker in the darkness. We enter the common house and form a circle in the great room. So begins another Fall Retreat Weekend, *the* community event of the year.

After a few words and songs, the opening ritual ends and the slide show begins. We quickly line up the chairs, and the children race for the floor pillows and couches; everyone is eager to see their own faces on the big screen.

The retreat celebrates each year we live together in cohousing, and the slide show competes with the Saturday night talent show as the high point of the weekend. We've seen Janice and Mike and Rebecca scouring the community for last-minute shots. We've spent the year imploring them to run and get their cameras at each community event that we knew warranted documentation. To be honest, we've each worried that we would be the only one left out of the show. The adults wax nostalgic about the first slide show that launched this tradition.

It all started with Janice early in our cohousing history. With thirty-two households, it was a daunting prospect for a shy woman to try to get to know everyone. Janice had the idea that if she took a picture of each and every one of us, she could make the connections she wanted. Her vision included sharing her pictures in a slide show for our second annual retreat. She certainly didn't expect a standing ovation, and I can still see her covering her face in embarrassment when we applauded her—but it wasn't just her we were applauding, it was also ourselves. She'd given us a view of ourselves and we looked great!

There were pictures of us playing, working, and eating together. There were pictures of children of all ages taking care of each other. We were young and old, smiling into the camera, looking for all the world like we loved each other, took care of our community, and even had time to goof around. And there was Tommy—my Tommy—four months old, sitting in the grass with a big straw hat. We could all see that our village was doing its job in raising him to be what he would ultimately be: a happy child, now seven years of age. Each subsequent slide show has documented his and everyone's growth.

Over the years, the slide show has grown from a single carousel put to the music of one song ("Give Yourself to Love") to a digitally enhanced show with many songs—funny, sad, and thoughtful—created by a team of photographers. It has truly become something to look forward to all year long as a celebration of our love of each other, our beautiful land, our growing children, and our accomplishments.

The No Talent Show usually includes a range of talent from none to professional, with highlights such as The Cohettes, who sang "Additions" last year to the tune of Fiddler on the Roof's "Tradition"—a spoof on the many changes and additions that have happened over the years and our somewhat controversial "design-review process." Cross-dressing is a festivity that's growing in number of participants every year—both men

and women. It's always good for a laugh. Dancing is part of the No Talent Show every year too. The audience dances along with eleven-year-old Jara Nachbar and her friends performing the "Macarena," and this year, we saw some fancy moves by the women and teen girls taking Latin dancing classes.

Our retreat has grown, not diminished, in importance over the years. Typically, almost every household participates for most of the weekend, unlike our monthly meetings that rarely attract more than about thirty participants. Like a holiday, the retreat happens at the same time each year—the first weekend in November—and we are reminded of this enough in advance to keep the weekend open. The retreat is how we celebrate ourselves and our accomplishments and how we continue to define our community and our vision in a renewing way. Nothing short of a funeral or a wedding would be important enough to keep me away.