

Bloom where you're planted



One woman with MS embraces a difficult ‘new normal’ as she connects with fellow residents at an assisted living facility.

by Lorraine Wascher Woods

Breakfast at 8. Lunch at noon. Dinner at 5. No more extra-sharp cheddar with fresh spinach and tomatoes in my “everything-but-the-kitchen-sink” omelets. No more delectable fruit tarts cooked in my oven. I don’t have one anymore.

Assisted living became the most sensible answer for me after I was diagnosed with secondary-progressive multiple sclerosis in 2008 and was no longer able to care for myself independently. It would have been great if I had a friend or family member with whom I could comfortably live and not feel like a burden, but there is no such person.

Let me tell you, I had to prepare myself for communal living and all it implies. Now, people enter my space at any time to do my laundry, take my blood pressure and pitch my trash. In the evenings I hear my neighbor’s jet engine-level TV blaring through the walls. But believe it or not, there are pleasant aspects to my new living arrangement.

Along a new road

This journey began when I met a married couple who both had MS and who had just moved into an assisted living facility. So I piggybacked on their good research, did a little of my own and moved in, too. My friends are only in their 40s, and I am in my late 50s, which makes us the youngest residents by far. Nevertheless, we have made friends with everyone who can

communicate with us. People here have a variety of medical conditions, including dementia, stroke and Parkinson's disease. But everyone has a story, and opening myself to that has made it easier to accept my new reality.

A short time ago, I could not have imagined that my life would change so dramatically because of a progressive, incurable disease. I had never been seriously ill nor had so much as a broken bone. Now, I no longer drive, cook, work or even walk, and change and unpredictability are daily visitors. Try as I might to accept the changes and grieve the losses, there is still a deep dark place inside me where I fight my "new normal." After all, who wants to willingly and knowingly give up one's independent lifestyle for the unknown?

Starting to bloom

I've always liked the saying "Bloom where you're planted," so I decided to embrace where I live, despite my concerns. In that vein, I set out to make a book of the roughly 60 residents by interviewing them, snapping their photos and writing a paragraph about each of them. This is all part of nudging myself into accepting my new and somewhat threatening landscape. In doing so, I've been able to connect with fellow residents, hear their stories, and get to know them and the essences of their lives. For instance, though Laura (not her real name) is of a different generation, we have become friends. She grew up in Germany, and my heritage is German, so talking to her gave me the chance to use my limited German language skills. I enjoy her lively personality and had we known each other in our "prior" lives, I'm certain we would have become fast friends all the same.

Even before I moved here, I began to appreciate some of the other benefits of assisted living. Not only do staff members buy the groceries, but they also cook the meals and wash up afterward (a bonus for me, now that I can't seem to stand for longer than five seconds).



Courtesy of Lorraine
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Now, I eat daily with my married friends and some of my new friends. Lucky for us, we have

kept our senses of humor. One of our servers jokes with us that, if she were in charge of the kitchen, she would know that a dessert is not a dessert unless it is chocolate! Our three meals a day usually turn into laugh fests, and sometimes other diners insist we are having entirely too much fun.

Finding my role

Assisted living has cost me less than independent apartment living, with meals, cleaning, weekly linen exchange and other costs included in the rent. And the stress of living independently has been replaced with a healthier lifestyle. With restaurant-style meals, I'm happily eating more vegetables and fruits—usually with each meal. Before I lived here, the preparation time for making healthy foods was enough to wear me out.

The best gift I could give myself was to take care of myself. I'm learning to slowly journey back to my essence and discover the true nature of what I'm supposed to do in this new stage of life. Happily, I now have the time to research ways to give back and volunteer in meaningful, thoughtful and self-challenging ways, promoting lifelong learning. My goal is, once again, to be a contributing member of society.

Lorraine Wascher Woods was diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS in 1993 and secondary-progressive MS in 2008. A retired Los Angeles public school teacher and parent of two grown children, she now lives in Seattle.

Download the Society's brochure on [Assisted Living for Individuals with Multiple Sclerosis](#).