



Photographs courtesy of Alternative Living for the Aging

ALTERNATIVE LIVING FOR THE AGING

*I*t was a chilly winter morning, a bit colder than usual. As he unpacked his belongings in a new apartment, John was worried. Was there enough sunlight? Would he get along with the neighbors? Would he be happy?

John liked his old place, where his son had helped to pay the rent. But times were getting tough, and that son now struggled to support his own young family. John, an artist, was suddenly on his own, his meager savings nearly obliterated by turmoil in the financial markets.

The new apartment seemed safe and clean, and it was affordable, after all. But it was part of a “project”, a subsidized complex run by a community group he didn’t know well. “El Greco” seemed nice enough, but John still couldn’t help but wonder if he’d made the right decision.

On a breezy and warmer weekday morning several months later, as he sat in the complex’s red brick courtyard, John recalled those concerns as if they were a bad dream from long ago. Birdsong filled the air, and a koi pond and geraniums brightened the landscape of the charming 1929 Spanish Colonial villa that John calls home. Joined by a group of fellow residents, he relaxed under a large market umbrella, clearly enjoying both the company and the setting.

“It’s the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me,” he said. “Every morning I wake up and say, ‘Thank God.’”

El Greco is one of five cooperative housing properties managed by Alternative Living for the Aging (ALA), which first began housing senior citizens in 1982. In exchange for low rent (the average ranges from \$400 to \$510 a month) and three meals a week, residents agree to stay engaged with one another, through programs offered by ALA and with the community at large.



Founder, Jane Witkin

For John, living at El Greco has been a life-changing experience. “I’m a Holocaust survivor,” he said. “My whole life I’ve traveled and wandered and I’ve never really settled in anywhere. This is the first place where I have the feeling that I can stop worrying about where I’m going next and just relax.”

The other residents applauded when they heard John’s remarks, and they were eager to share their stories as well. Muriel was one of the first residents when El Greco opened its doors 23 years ago. At the time she was working at a board and care facility. “Every day I saw what was going to happen to me,” she said, “and I thought, I really need to think about what I’m going to do for myself.”

Adrienne agreed. “We are all so grateful to be here,” she said. “We kibbitz, we laugh, we look out for each other.”

For this, the residents warmly remember recently deceased founder and executive director Janet Witkin, a brilliant and benevolent social entrepreneur whose own grandfather’s institutionalization inspired her to create a newer, more dignified model for senior living.

In 1979 Witkin established a free roommate matching service for seniors as a Model Project for the Aging in the United States. Within the next dozen years, she would go on to build or renovate five beautiful Cooperative Apartment Communities where older people could age with dignity in a safe, socially stimulating, affordable environment.

It was Witkin who saved the El Greco building from demolition in its original Westwood neighborhood, and had it moved to its current site in the Beverly-Fairfax area. Like the agency’s other cooperative residences, according to ALA lore, Witkin envisioned El Greco to be a cooperative, “where someone will be good at cooking and somebody will be funny and somebody will play the piano and someone will drive - and amongst them all, they’ll have everything they need.”

In addition to the residences, the agency continues to provide a free housemate matching service which, based on Janet Witkin’s original model, helps elders find compatible housemates to help with rent, chores and perhaps most importantly, companionship in their own homes. Since its formal inception 20 years ago, the Housemate Matching Program has successfully connected more than 7,800 seniors seeking quality shared living, and counseled over 26,000 others who were seeking alternatives to “typical” senior housing.

Those who wish to participate will undergo a rigorous screening process before a match is made, said Douglas S. Brown, past president of ALA's board. "We don't merely introduce people," he noted. "We get to know our applicants well, and we work hard to familiarize ourselves with their backgrounds. It's like a marriage — you want to learn what you can before you commit. It's our job to hold their hand through this process."

There are, of course, challenges. Alternative Living for the Aging fields many more requests for shared living opportunities than offers to share, said Brian Cortese, executive director of operations and finance. With the help of a grant from The Ahmanson Foundation however, ALA is expanding its outreach efforts to build upon this unique model, so that even more seniors might benefit. To build awareness and increase participation, the program sends out bulk mailings, hosts workshops at senior centers, staffs booths at senior health fairs, and encourages participants to spread the word among their friends and relations.

Just as in the El Greco model, ALA hopes that as more seniors open their homes to peers, those peers will become community, and those community members will become friends. As Janet Witkin's legacy proves, it's hard to argue with the simple joys of spending one's days out in the garden, with a cup of tea and a nice meal, a bit of piano and a whole lot of laughter.