

# On the Ropes at Harbourside Cohousing

By Margaret Critchlow

Starting a new cohousing community can feel like walking a tightrope, but how many founding members expect to walk the real thing? At age 66, I had some anxiety about doing a ropes course, including tightrope walking, as a community-building exercise for Harbourside Cohousing, where the focus is on active aging.

I climbed onto the tightrope and set out, wobbling and resting my hands on the shoulders of fellow community members. OK, the tightrope was about two feet off the ground, but it felt very shaky.

I already knew that Harbourside Cohousing members love to get outside and try new activities. It is not your average retirement community in many ways. Under development on a spectacular waterfront site in the center of the town of Sooke, near Victoria, British Columbia, Harbourside is scheduled for completion in 2015. Members are planning to move into compact, environmentally designed private units with full kitchens and to share a large common house for gatherings including common dinners. The group purchased a property with a resort building that works beautifully as a cohousing common house. The seller, Captain Ralph Hull, became a founding member of Harbourside. Being able to hold meetings and potlucks in the common house from the beginning encouraged early community-building. (See "When Do We Begin to Flourish in Senior Cohousing?" in COMMUNITIES #157, Winter 2012.)

Harbourside is attracting active, energetic people who get out of denial about aging and commit to flourishing in their elder years. They have a certificate to prove it on completion of the Canadian Senior Cohousing Society's weekend course, *Aging Well in Community*, required for equity membership in the cohousing. By November 2013, 17 of the potential 31 equity member households had their certificates,

had made the required shareholder investment of \$20,000, and committed to purchasing cohousing units. But how many of them had done a ropes course?

Doug Dalquist, an equity member of Harbourside, assured me that the ropes course he had created for us was well within the abilities of all our cohousing members. Really? Our ages ranged from 47 to late 70s. At our monthly information meeting, new people in the same age range showed up, curious to learn more and get involved in our development process. Doug invited anyone interested in doing the ropes course to gather after the information session in a grassy area overlooking the harbour outside the common house. Eight people, a mix of members and visitors, took Doug up on his invitation.

Doug has participated in several major climbing expeditions including the 1983 Men and Women's expedition to Everest, and a 1990 expedition to K2. He has also done many climbs on Denali. Since 1968, Doug has worked for the National Outdoor Leadership School. He knows how to create a course aimed at building community. But would we create community "glue," I wondered, through the hospital visits we might be making to visit members injured in the exercise?

There was no need to worry. The course began with eight of us divided into two teams, standing at opposite ends of a checkerboard-like grid of rope laid out on the lawn. Doug told us to imagine that this was a steep mountain slope with only one safe route across. As team members took turns tentatively stepping into a square, Doug would calmly say "yep" or "nope." Players learned the safe squares not only from their own experience but also from watching their teammates. One player started to give advice to a member of the opposite team. "No," shouted her teammate, "he is on the other side!" But was he? In an "ah ha" moment, we realized that for all of us to cross "safely" we had to learn from the other team's experience as well as our own. We were no longer two competing teams but



one community working together toward a solution.

The second element in the course was a spiderweb, a network of ropes strung between a rock wall and a small outbuilding (later moved to become a feature at the end of our dock). The trick was for each player to cross through the spider web without touching the ropes, and for each opening to be used only once. Strategies developed. People helped each other to be sure they did not touch the ropes. The less agile were assisted through the larger openings nearest the ground. Stronger players lifted lighter players through the higher openings. Planning was crucial or the light people could find they had no one left to lift them and the larger folks could be stranded on the wrong side of the web with no holes left through which they could fit. With a few hints from Doug and some lithe athleticism, teamwork developed that ensured everyone's success and safety.

Finally, there was the tightrope, taut between a low rock wall and a tree. It was reassuringly close to the ground, but tricky because it was stretchy and bouncy. As soon became apparent, the only way across was with a little help from others. The metaphor was clear: aging well in community means flourishing through mutual support. From the top of the little wall, I put my hands on two nearby shoulders and stepped out as several participants prepared to steady the tightrope. As I took a few tentative steps, I could feel that a couple of other members literally had my back. In that moment, long before we would ever move into Harbourside, I tasted the joy of community.

Many hands not only make light work; on a ropes course they make the impossible achievable. Cooperation and especially all those helping hands made the ropes course a success, turning risk into safety, anxiety into trust. We had a lot of laughter and no disasters! Now Harboursiders are looking forward to doing it again. Doug is putting his mind to designing a course that will use the natural slope of our property for some more adventuresome aging and I'm ready for whatever he offers us next. 🐦

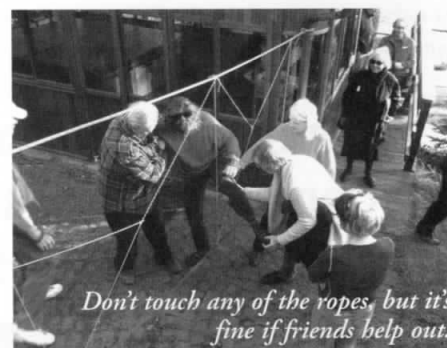
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*After years of studying what makes communities work as an anthropologist, Margaret Critchlow is grateful for the opportunity to walk the talk as a founding member of Harbourside Cohousing and as president of the Canadian Senior Cohousing Society. For more information please visit [www.harbourside.ca](http://www.harbourside.ca) and [www.canadianseniorcohousing.com](http://www.canadianseniorcohousing.com). A video of the ropes course is available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xpVZbQFWIc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xpVZbQFWIc).*

*Doug Dalquist (left) tells players the rules; "Whose side are you on?" turns out not to be a simple question!*



Photos courtesy of Margaret Critchlow



## Senior Cohousing in Canada

Senior cohousing is an adventuresome approach that takes the tried and true model of cohousing and introduces a focus on aging well in community. Unhappy with the choices facing their parents and not "ready for the Home," aging baby boomers can embrace the opportunities in senior cohousing for positive change and growth. As longevity increases and more seniors are staying lively longer, a sense of possibility arises similar to what baby boomers experienced in the 1960s. It is not too late for this demographic to "be the change."

The Canadian Senior Cohousing Society ([www.canadianseniorcohousing.com](http://www.canadianseniorcohousing.com)), a nonprofit registered in BC, works to raise awareness of cohousing as a set of principles offering vibrant options for aging in place that have community at heart. Through educational outreach, research, and assistance with funding applications, CSCS supports groups to develop senior cohousing initiatives such as Harbourside, the second senior cohousing community in Canada.

—M.C.