

Creative Living

Mario McGee editor/591-2300

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At the time these residents gathered in the living room of the American House in Farmington Hills, the decorations for a Valentine's Day party had just been put up. From left, they are

George Nestor, Margaret Wood, Ludwig Geyer, Lucille Duchene and Louis Ragayil.

RANDY BORST/staff photographer



St. Patrick's Day celebration at American House Stone, Auburn Hills, included revelers from other residences as well. Above, student volunteer Fran Berg dances with Domenico Pando who lives at the Farmington Hills American House. Below, Mary Zellar is about to sample some of the dessert delights at the St. Patrick's Day party.

CAMILLE MCCOY/staff photographer

Congregate living Accommodating growing age group

By Corinne Abatt
staff writer

IN 1978 BOB Gillette was looking for a retirement residence for his mother near his own home in Bloomfield Township. But there was nothing suitable. He decided to start his own and call it American House.

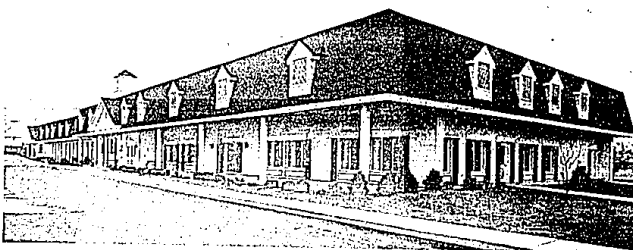
Now there are eight American Houses — in Royal Oak (2), Westland, Farmington Hills, Auburn Hills (2), Dearborn and Lincoln Park. Another, in Sterling Heights, will open in May and projects are under way in Livonia, Brighton, Toledo Sarosota, Fla., and Birmingham. So far, Bloomfield Township has eluded him, but he doesn't give up easily.

"I'm the dreamer and I'm the creator," he said, adding that the idea is to strategically place the houses about five miles from each other and to keep them modest in size, even though "other people are building large."

With the exception of the Livonia American House, which will be larger, the average number of residents in these attractive congregate living centers is about 60. Each person or couple has a private room and bath, with all meals served in the common dining room.

IN THE FARMINGTON HILLS American House, for example, the private rooms are about 450 square feet and residents bring their own furniture and accessories and have a small refrigerator for snacks and refreshments in their private bathroom.

Actually, these rooms are the size of a grade school classroom because the building, one of four school conversions, was Middlebelt Ele-



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

The former Middlebelt Elementary School in Farmington Hills underwent a substantial and pleasing face lift when Bob Gillette converted it to a senior residence.

mentary School before it was completely remodeled. A crisp white Georgian Colonial facade replaced the former angular, nondescript appearance of the one-story brick building.

Inside, there's a cheery fire in the fireplace in the large living room on cool days. The furnishings are mostly Chippendale and Queen Anne. Fresh fruit, cookies and beverages are on the buffet in the dining room for between-meal snacks and lots of smaller areas are ready for visiting, entertaining or playing cards.

One resident still goes to work everyday, others keep their cars in the parking lot, several have cats and one brought her dog with her.

Barbara Lipkowitz, manager of the Farmington Hills American House, said, "I've had some real positive response from people in the community."

A vivacious blond with a ready smile, she treats residents and their families who visit as close friends. Her office near the front door is always open and the traffic in and out is steady. She is like the favorite cousin or daughter who keeps the energy flow going.

"I get a big kick out of the residents," she said, "they become real special. I never have a day when I don't want to come to work."

Diane Gillette, company director of operations, said, "Most developers can't conceive that they could effectively operate a building of this size."

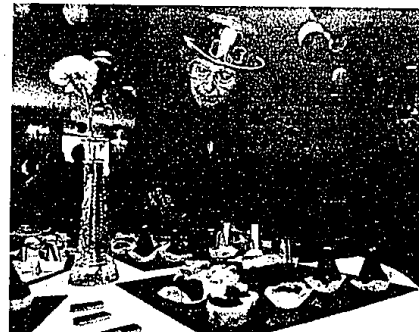
It is the small size, she said, that allows the managers and staff to be totally aware of the individuality of each resident, to create an atmosphere for them that is pleasing and satisfying.

BOB GILLETTE SAID, "We thoroughly enjoy what we're doing. My background is in nursing homes. I've made it my personal project in life to provide a service to the community in which I live."

It hasn't been easy, even when he wants to take over problem pieces of property such as vacant schools. One of the stumbling blocks is that there is seldom an ordinance covering this special use of congregate housing. Often, he said, "the issue is political and therein lies the key to all these things."

He is converting a former convent in Grosse Pointe to a retirement residence. "The problem out there is there is no housing for people in Grosse Pointe, they have to export their people to Detroit."

The American House complex being built in Livonia, with its more independent living style, is a combi-



nation of 115 efficiency and one-bedroom units with kitchen and private bathroom. There will be two floors with elevators in each of the two wings with a large courtyard in the middle. The complex will include barber and beauty shop, card, craft and multi-purpose rooms, central dining and living rooms, patios and even a gazebo.

Gillette said he will be speaking about congregate housing for seniors at the U.S. Conference of Mayors in May.

"There is no more (government) money for this stuff. There just isn't going to be any more. It's private entrepreneurship now."

He should know, that's his style.

Tailoring interior design to senior needs

Diane Gillette, director of operations for American House Retirement Residences, listed some of the things to be considered when choosing furnishings for a senior or senior residence.

"We look for something (style) most can relate to, but still not be so elegant that they don't feel comfortable," she said, mentioning styles such as Chippendale and Queen Anne and wing chairs which work well and colors such as blues and tans.

"Our average age is around 80. That's the whole point of this thing, to consider the physiological changes at that age and our furnishings reflect a lot of that. For instance, there should be contrast between the color of the walls and the carpet. The light should be bright enough so they can distinguish chairs and walls."

THIS BRIGHTER lights and sharp contrasts in color of rugs and furniture helps those whose eyesight may not be as sharp as it once was. She said the attractively framed, brightly colored prints on the walls in all the public rooms are popular and provide a lot visual stimulation.

"The carpet is a low level loop,



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Herman Marasus, resident at Farmington Hills American House, welcomes a visitor who wants to see his spacious studio-type living space. In addition to the couch by the big window, he has a desk, chairs, double bed, radio and many

very easy to walk on. A longer loop catches and thick plush has a little movement when you walk on it. We have a lot of wing-type chairs, they're the best support for an older person. A high, straight chair is easy

to get out of. We decorate for them (the residents), not for us and not for the public."

She walked into the dining room at the Farmington Hills American House with its mahogany tables and

matching Queen Anne style chairs for four diners. "We always have chairs with arms and never chairs with castors."

Tables for four only were chosen to encourage people to make at least a few friends something some seniors may find difficult.

As she walked down the halls where the residents live, she said 13 feet wide halls are one of the built-in advantages of a school conversion. They are wide enough to permit groupings of furniture for resting and socialization areas.

In addition to the careful contrast in colors, there is a concerted effort to provide contrasts in textures, from velvet to polished cotton for tactile stimulation.

Gillette said most of choices came about naturally.

Occasionally she has to make a change such as the attractive, but slightly lower than normal chairs around an octagon game table, handsome, but too difficult to negotiate. They had to go.

She said that while all residents rent by the month, it's their home and it should reflect their tastes and preferences.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Farmington Hills, to chat with activities director, Barbara Lipkowitz. This room with couches, chairs and book cases is in one of the wide hall areas on the way to the main living room and dining room.