



During a potluck dinner at The Oaks at Appling, activities director Kimberley Eppes (center) looks at pictures with Mary Holt and her husband, Leon.



Don and Laura Cook, joke with neighbor Jody Skelley (at left) while looking at old photos of themselves.

Connecting condo-style

Activities help create neighborhoods in condominium communities

By Linda A. Moore
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The tables were full in the clubhouse at The Oaks at Appling, where about 25 people, mostly couples, had convened for a Thursday night potluck dinner.

It was a smaller crowd than usual, the diners said, pointing to the empty extra table. Typically, they run out of space.

Most of the folks sharing the meal of fried chicken, casseroles, desserts and a game of "whose baby picture is it" were seniors, at or beyond retirement age.

They've downsized from large homes, trading them in for the low maintenance of smaller condominiums and the small yards they don't have to cut themselves.

But The Oaks, off Appling Road near Bellevue Baptist Church, isn't a retirement community and the regular gatherings aren't exclusively for its older residents.

It's just one of the many activities available through their homeowners association -- organizations generally more concerned with maintaining the common grounds and making sure everybody follows the rules.

The residents of the new 100-unit development were strangers when they moved in, but the activities organized through the homeowners association has made them into a community.

"There are a whole lot more people who haven't lived in condominium communities than have," said Ron Hickman, senior vice president of real estate with Kemmons Wilson Inc., developer of the The Oaks.

What they're trying to do is help ease the new homeowners into condo living.

"It is intended to create a sense of neighborhood," Hickman said.

The development is popular with empty-nesters, who in many cases leave behind homes they had for decades and neighbors they've known as long.

Starting over can be difficult.

Jody and Jim Skelley did exactly that when they moved from West Memphis to be near their daughter and grandchildren in Collierville. They left their neighborhood, old friends and their church behind.

"A lot of times when you move into a new setting with new neighbors, there are no activities and you really don't get to to know people," Jody Skelley said.

At The Oaks the Skelleys are regular participants in all of the activities, such as antiquing in Halls, Tenn.

"We'll have three activities this week," she said.

To help the new homeowners, Kemmons Wilson hired Kimberly Eppes as its activities director.

Remember Julie McCoy from the "Love Boat?" That's Eppes.

"Basically what I do is when I come into a community I find a common interest among our homeowners and promote activities," Eppes said.

They get together several times a week for dinners and lunches and to play board games, bunco or bridge. They've formed clubs, started scrapbooking and go on excursions. They have water aerobics, Girls' Night Out and movie night in the clubhouse.

Eppes helped set up a Red Hat Society at The Oaks at Schilling Farm in Collierville (called the Crimson Vixens), organized fashion shows for the folks at The Oaks at Appling and gone with them to Redbird games.

In addition to having fun, she's helping them set up a network to provide assistance for each other after illness, an injury or for whenever they're needed.

Eventually, like at Schilling Farms, when 75 percent of the condos have been bought, Kemmons Wilson will turn over the activities coordination to the homeowners association and Eppes will move on to the next development, such as the one being built in Olive Branch.

Although many residents of The Oaks have no experience with homeowners associations, others, like Floyd Scriber, know the value of their group.

Scriber and his wife, Carolyn Scriber, both 66, formerly lived in Cordova's Countrywood subdivision, which has 2,600 homes and about 1,100 paying members in its homeowners association.

Floyd Scriber was an active member at Countrywood. He helped oversee governance and traveled the community looking for covenant violations. They didn't plan potluck dinners.

"This is place is much different," Scriber said. "It's great."

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