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Column: Newest residents at Bardwell in Aurora are finding old friends as they transition to senior living

By Denise Crosby
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From left, Jim Plocher, Dave Roth, Barbara Peck and Margaret Hornback, who all moved to Bardwell Residences since the independent and assisted living facility opened earlier

this year in the renovated old Copley Hospital campus, are quickly finding out how much their lives have intersected over their many decades of living in the Aurora/Montgomery area. (Denise Crosby/The Beacon-News)

When Dave Roth heard the name of the new neighbor moving in across the hall of his senior living facility in Aurora, he couldn't help but smile.

Jim Plocher.

It was the surname that so quickly took the 82-year-old former English teacher back to his childhood, when he was 6 years old and first met 11-year-old Jimmy at an event hosted by Oswego Prairie Church.

The two boys lived just a few miles "as the crow flies" from one another on farms that had been established by their pioneer families in the 1840s, around the same time Kendall County was surveyed, he told me.

And their childhoods were spent not only in worship together but helping their fathers work this land around Wolf Crossing, which included threshing rings, crews that neighboring farmers would put together to help one another gather those many acres of oat fields.

Plocher remembers being the water boy. Roth recalls his job on the straw blower and also the delicious food served during those "labor-intensive" harvests as the women would enjoy friendly contests each year to see "who could cook the best meals" for the hungry workers.

Reconnecting some 70 years later was one of those pleasant small-world surprises for both of these long-ago farm boys as they transitioned over the last few months from their homes in Montgomery and Aurora to their third-floor independent living apartments at Bardwell Residences on the East Side of Aurora.

Roth and wife Elaine were on a waiting list and one of the first to move into this new senior facility after it opened in the spring as part of the renovated old Copley Hospital site.

Plocher, who was celebrating his 88th birthday on the day we met, lost his wife and daughter last year, and moved across the hall in July after completing rehab for a broken hip.

But even more than a surprise, they both insist, this unexpected reunion has been a blessing, as the two men now spend much of their time reminiscing about those good ole days that don't seem all that long ago.

“There are a lot of memories we can share,” says Roth, who after a stint in the Army taught for 36 years at Traugher Junior High School in Oswego.

And it sure beats talking politics because “these days if someone doesn't agree with you then you are the enemy,” said Plocher, who had a 36-year career with Nicor and like his neighbor served in the Army.

Turns out Roth and Plocher aren't the only two of Bardwell's nearly two dozen residents who recently discovered a shared history.

While sitting in the dining room a few weeks ago, Margaret Hornback, who moved to the senior housing center in June, saw new resident Barbara Peck walk in, and immediately recognized her as “someone who had been in and out” of her life since her early 20s.

Both had been longtime and active members of the University of Illinois Extension Homemakers Council, which brought them together frequently as they built their homes – figuratively and literally – in the Aurora/Montgomery area, raised their families and volunteered their time.

Hornback, who quit school at West Aurora High School at age 17 to get married, had three children and became an accomplished musician and roller skater – she still plays the piano and did not hang up her skates until age 68 – as well as a faithful election judge over many decades.

Peck, 91, raised 13 children and became a librarian and genealogist who co-authored “The History of Montgomery, Illinois in Worlds and Pictures,” an impressive hardcover book that includes a photo of the tiny home where she was raised that is one of the village's oldest houses and now, painted bright yellow, stands in front of Village Hall as a historic landmark and museum.

Mostly the two women, who are in assisted living apartments, like to “talk about homemaking stuff,” said Peck, who lives with Stanley, her husband of 71 incredible years.

“It's nice to see someone who knows your background,” added Hornback, who has been widowed for 17 years. “They know what you have done and where you have come from and you don't have to explain yourself over and over.”

Roth nods in agreement. And as he leafs through Peck's history book that Hornback has long had in her possession, he remarks on more landmarks, more names, which spark additional memories.

As we chatted, all four residents discovered other ways life has connected them. Three have had to bury at least one child; Roth and Peck were both born at the long defunct St. Joseph Hospital, while Plocher and Hornback got their start at old Copley. And the group was not only familiar with the history of Bloomhaven campus that Bardwell is part of, they watched closely as its transformation took place over the past few years.

The senior living facility that opened in May now has 21 residents in 18 apartments that consist of independent, assisted and combination apartments, and the memory care unit on the sixth floor will be ready for occupancy in the next month or so, according to Becki Drake, director of marketing and sales.

While some questioned her decision to move out of the 1920s Aurora house her father and grandfather built and where she lived for most of her life, Hornback was quite proud to report that visitors to her new home always come away impressed, not just with how spacious the apartment is – her piano easily fits – but also with the facility's many amenities.

“It's such a beautiful building. I'm so glad they revamped it,” said Hornback, who also gave birth to her children at the old Copley and was at her husband's side when he went through cancer there.

“Living here is like coming home.”

dcrosby@tribpub.com