

# Home at last: Innovative assisted living center allows Haines seniors to 'age in place'

BY KATIE SPIELBERGER  
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**HAINES** — Where do you want to spend the last years of your life? For 86-year-old Haines resident Lucy Harrell, the answer to that question is easy: Haines, Alaska, her home for the past 24 years.

With the completion of the Haines Assisted Living Center last fall, Harrell's wish to age in place in her community has become reality.

Before Harrell started working with other Haines residents on what would become Haines Assisted Living (HAL), it was often difficult for local elders to spend their final years in their home town. Harrell watched as many Haines residents left the community once they could no longer live independently. Many moved to the Pioneer Home in Juneau or someplace near their children. But the transition was always difficult.

"Most of them die after a few months," Harrell said. "You take people away from their communities and their familiar surroundings and support groups and they don't last very long."

Harrell, meanwhile, had done something she says a lot of people are reluctant to do: she figured out a reasonable expectancy for her life and thought about how she wanted to spend her final years. Her family history suggested she would live into her 90s with advanced senile dementia or Alzheimer's disease. Harrell did not want to be a burden on her only daughter; she remembers how difficult it was caring for her own father in his final years before she and her sister ran out of steam and had to move him into a nursing home in California. Her sister has now moved into a senior facility in California herself, but it's the last place Harrell would want to end up.

"I would die rather than go there after living in Haines," Harrell said. "I thought, 'If I want to stay in Haines, we've got to build an assisted living facility.'"

So about nine years ago, Harrell began talking to other community members about the need for an assisted living center in Haines. Local realtor James Studley, now



photo courtesy of Vince Hansen/Haines Assisted Living

Local musicians stop by to play for Haines Assisted Living residents (on couches, from left) Lucy Harrell, Vivian Meneker and Ray Meneker in the Haines Assisted Living Center. The center, which opened last October, is located in the heart of downtown Haines.

the president of Haines Assisted Living, Inc., was enthusiastic from the beginning, Harrell said, and the entire community came to support the project strongly.

Harrell and Studley bought the last four available commercial lots in downtown Haines, which are located just two blocks from the center of town with beautiful mountain views. The next step was to find an umbrella organization that was a recognized 501(c)(3) charity to apply for grants for the project. After a false start with one organization, St. Vincent de Paul in Juneau agreed to act as an umbrella, and then Hospice of Haines stepped in, until finally Haines Assisted Living itself received 501(c)(3) status from the IRS in 2007.

The project received funding from a variety of sources, including eight individual grants, in-kind donations, and hundreds of thousands of dollars from Haines residents — all to create a \$4.3 million facility built following Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) criteria. It took seven years to

fund the project, but it is funded entirely by grants. There is no mortgage to pay off, which will keep costs to residents down.

"We hope that this is a model," Harrell said. "We built the whole thing without borrowing a nickel, so the residents only need to pay for the care. We've also tried to build a facility to show communities that a small facility will work."

Right now the center has eight units for assisted living and five for independent living. Two of the units are reserved for residents on Medicaid.

The biggest challenge for assisted living projects in rural Alaska isn't the cost of building but the cost of operating, said Dan Austin, who is the general manager of St. Vincent de Paul. Austin has stayed involved with the HAL board even after St. Vincent de Paul was no longer needed as an umbrella organization.

HAL is the first LEED certified building in rural Alaska, according to Austin. All of its energy is supplied by hydroelectric power.

HAL administrator Vince Hansen said it required a bit of a

"leap of faith" to rely completely on hydropower, but this past winter utility costs were lower than they would have been with oil heating.

The building is also designed to take advantage of as much sunlight as possible, with four large skylights and triple-pane glass windows, which both ensure energy efficiency and make the space bright and cheerful.

The staff members are referred to as "personal assistants," Hansen said. Including himself there are three full-time employees and nine part-time employees, and he is still looking for a co-administrator. He said there are a high number of highly skilled people working at HAL because they really believe in the project.

The economic effects of building and staffing HAL are not negligible, Harrell said. Local residents were employed in the construction of the process, and the facility is staffed entirely by Haines residents.

"We've injected a huge shot in the arm in a community as small as Haines," Harrell said.

## LIFE AT HAL

Harrell needs little assistance with daily tasks right now — when I talked to her, she was getting ready to pilot her boat down to Seattle — but she moved into HAL as soon as it opened so the facility had money coming in right away. There are currently four residents living at HAL, with a growing list of people who are planning to move in some time in the future.

Hansen cautions that HAL is not a nursing home. Yet the hope is that residents will be able to "age in place" and not have to move at all.

Thanks to support from Hospice of Haines and the SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC) Haines Health Center, additional medical care will be available to residents when they need it.

"It should be the last place you ever have to move," Austin said.

At the same time, HAL is built around the idea that by providing good care and a high quality of life for residents, they will stay healthier longer as well.

An important component in this process is being part of a community. HAL's environment is designed to encourage interaction among residents. All of the units in the main building look out on the "main street" hallway. Meals are served family style, and there are spacious common areas for residents to interact with each other and visitors.

"We didn't want to create a facility, we wanted to create a neighborhood, a community," Austin said. "That's really key to healthy aging."

"Our philosophy is if we keep the person engaged in the community, they'll be happier and healthier and more content," Hansen said. "People who are elderly often end up isolated and separated. Our goal is to keep them engaged with family, friends and the community."

The building is in the heart of Haines and has quickly become a community center for residents of all ages, Hansen said. It is easy for community members to stop by and visit, and they do on a regular basis. Many community members are eager to share their skills

# Assisted Living

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with residents, dropping by to sing, play music, or even lead yoga classes. There is an ice cream social the first Sunday of each month.

"The folks that we have here now are almost never in their rooms except to sleep," Hansen said, adding that he's watched people "go from isolated and alone to back involved and in the center of things."

Then there's the food. The cook is "convinced that diet is as good as any pill," Hansen said. Residents are encouraged to be involved in meal planning and preparation.

Harrell said the meals are wonderful, especially since they include as much local food as possible, from huge fresh eggs to moose. The freezer is stocked with "gobs of absolutely gorgeous sockeye."

"We're waited on, we're spoiled rotten," Harrell said. "We have linens at every meal. The cook is fascinated about what we like and what we don't. We are eating like tourists on a deluxe cruise."

## BEYOND HAINES

Haines Assisted Living is starting to attract interest from outside of Haines as well.

Although the recruiting efforts for residents have been focused on Haines, Hansen said he's received inquiries from Juneau, Sitka, and as far away as Virginia and Palm Springs, Calif.

Elderly Palm Springs residents are interested in moving to Alaska?

Hansen thinks this is because HAL offers something that is hard, if not impossible, to find elsewhere.

"We have something really unique here," Hansen said. "It's home, and it's small enough to feel like home. The people who are here really feel comfortable in calling it their home."

Those who have been involved in creating HAL think it could serve as a model for other assisted living centers in rural Alaska. Hansen said he's been contacted by people in Seward interested in seeing if HAL might be something they could replicate in their own community.

But he cautions that Haines is unique itself in many ways, and the strong community support for the project is something that would be hard to generate in other towns if it didn't exist already.

"That community piece is the part that's hard to replicate," he said.

And within the community of Haines, living comfortably in a place she knows she can call home for the rest of her life, is another model: Lucy Harrell.

Austin thinks Harrell's story offers an important reminder to all of us of the importance of deciding when it is time to ask for help with daily living as we age.

"She doesn't have a fear of these decisions in life," Austin said of Harrell. "We need to learn the lesson from Lucy to have the courage to plan for this."

More information about Haines Assisted Living is available at <http://hainesassistedliving.org/hal/> or by calling Vince Hansen at 907-766-3616.



photo courtesy of Vince Hansen/Haines Assisted Living

"The folks that we have here now are almost never in their rooms except to sleep," said Haines Assisted Living administrator Vince Hansen of the new center.

# PILLARS OF AMERICA

## Speaker Series



### April 21st Jeff Yalden

Motivational Youth Speaker and Coach on MTV's MADE. As a teenager, Jeff lost interest in high school academics and was afraid to attend college because of fears of inadequacy. When he decided to take charge of his own life, Jeff realized that his destiny was solely up to him. Today Jeff draws on the grace he experienced during his darkest times to help today's youth transform their own lives.



### April 28th Martin Buser

Four time winner of the Iditarod and holder of the record for the fastest finish, Martin has also won the coveted Leonhard Seppala award four times for the most humanitarian care of his dogs. Martin will speak to us just after completing his 27th Iditarod and will bring some of his very own dogs for us to meet at the end of his speech.



### May 5th Nikki Stone

At the 1998 Olympic Winter Games in Nagano, Japan, Nikki became America's first-ever Olympic Champion in the sport of inverted aerial skiing. Nikki will speak about her work as a motivational trainer for U.S. Olympians at the Vancouver winter games and for contestants on regional programs of NBC's hit show "The Biggest Loser"

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