

# FACES OF HOME

## Living Independently Again

Caring for an aging family member is one of the most complex, and yet important, roles a person can play. The responsibility may arise suddenly because of an accident or illness, or it may start with simply driving a loved one to get groceries.

Fortunately, supportive housing options that allow older adults to age in place can provide caregivers with some peace of mind that their family members are safe and active while they are at work or taking care of their children.

Kathleen Donahue's face lights up when she talks about serving in the U.S. Coast Guard. She was only 20 years old when she convinced her father to let her join. Her younger brother, Bill, was already in the Air Corp, and she was eager to be part of the action of World War II as well.

Kathleen was stationed in New York City and lived with female military personnel in an old hotel on Broadway and 70th, only a couple blocks from Central Park. To get to her job as a yeoman, an office worker, she took the Staten Island ferry across New York harbor. On her daily commute, Kathleen saw ships gathering to form convoys to cross the Atlantic.



Kathleen Donahue, seated, who is originally from Ohio, lived with her daughter, also named Kathleen, after a serious fall resulted in five broken ribs and a fractured tailbone. Once she was able to live independently again, Kathleen chose to make North Dakota her new home.

When they were off duty, Kathleen and her friends would go to Broadway shows, often hustled up to the front of the line as a gesture of thanks for their service.

When the war ended and the troops returned, Kathleen went back to Cincinnati, OH. Her parents encouraged her to live with them in the charming craftsman-style home that they had purchased when she was 8 years old. She did so while she pursued a nursing degree and worked for the Veterans Administration before marrying her

husband, Jim, and having two children.

After her parents passed away, Kathleen and Jim moved into the two-bedroom house that had become her family's home in 1932. Kathleen stayed in the house after Jim died. Later Mike, her son, moved in to help her take care of the property.

In 2017, at the home that was central to her life, Kathleen fell getting into the shower. She got up and managed to bathe, but a couple days later, when she was feeling worse, Mike took her in and they learned that Kathleen had broken five ribs and had fractured her tailbone. The recovery process would be months long and the doctors suggested that Kathleen consider moving into assisted living rather than returning to her home.

Kathleen's daughter, also named Kathleen, flew in from North Dakota to lend a hand and ultimately suggested that her mother stay with her while she recovered. "I wasn't comfortable asking my son to provide the level of care I needed," said Kathleen, and so a decision was made. Kathleen would stay with her daughter and her son-in-law, Ryan Thompson, who was recently retired. Her daughter would be able to assist her with bathing and personal care, and Ryan would be his mother-in-law's companion during the day and could take her to therapy and other appointments.

Four months after her arrival in North Dakota, Kathleen was considerably better, but her daughter wasn't ready to let her go and broached her with a question that she never thought her mother would agree to, would she consider staying in North Dakota? Much to her daughter's delight, Kathleen said yes.



Kathleen's apartment at Library Square is filled with books, photographs and family heirlooms, including a floor lamp that once belonged to her grandmother.

some financial resources that would help her afford her new home.

The move of more than 1,110 miles meant Kathleen would give up seeing not just her son, but a sister-in-law and niece who lived nearby; she'd lose daily connections with friends and neighbors, and miss out on gatherings of WAVES and SPARS, female veterans groups she'd enjoyed; and she'd lose familiarity with her surroundings too. So it was important to find an apartment that offered some social activities, and because Kathleen, like most adults her age, has some mobility issues, her new home also needed to be accessible.

Fortunately, the minute that Kathleen walked into

Library Square in Mandan, ND, she felt at home. The apartment complex is

affordable because of the development assistance the property received from North Dakota Housing Finance Agency. It's geared toward active seniors, offering congregate meals and a rosary service on Thursdays that is helping Kathleen get to know her neighbors. And, the open concept apartment makes it easy for Kathleen to navigate her apartment independently with her walker.

Kathleen's daughter and son-in-law visit regularly. "Distance is no longer an issue for us, and we are able to actually spend quality time instead of a rushed week during the Thanksgiving holiday and the two weeks when she would visit us here," says Kathleen's daughter. They help her get groceries and do some chores around her home, and she's been embraced by their circle of friends as well.

While Kathleen's move to Mandan, ND, may not be as exciting as her time in New York City, she is proof that it's never too late for an adventure.

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"Ryan and I were pleased, but a little surprised mom would leave her home that has been part of her life for 85 years and make the big move from Ohio to North Dakota at the age of 94," said Kathleen, the daughter.

Contrary to the notion that older households move to different homes when they retire, mobility rates actually decline as we age according to "Housing America's Older Adults," a 2014 study from The Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University. Older adults who do move tend to stay within the same area. If they move to another state, being closer to family is generally the reason why.

With only one extra bedroom in the Thompsons' home in North Dakota and Kathleen now capable of living independently, it was decided that she would get an apartment. She wanted to pay her own way too, so the difficult decision was made to sell the family home in Cincinnati to provide her with

### Supportive Housing Allows Older Adults to Continue Living Independently

By 2029, the number of North Dakota residents ages 65 and older is projected to grow by 52 percent to comprise a total of 18 percent of the state's population, up from 14 percent in 2014.<sup>1</sup>

The majority of older adults prefer to "Age in Place," living independently as long as possible. Doing so generally leads to better health outcomes, life satisfaction and self-esteem, and it's typically more affordable too.<sup>2</sup>

The ability to age in place is determined by the physical design and accessibility of a home, as well affordability and the availability of services.

Offering supportive services, from help with meals to medications, allows older adults to live more safely in their own home.

Supporting the development of housing that is accessible and the modification of existing homes to make them accessible, allows older adults to continue to live independently.

Public policies that support the development or preservation of housing that is affordable, reduces cost burdens on older adults as well.

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Hodur, Dean Bangsund, Karen Olson, Elvia Ndembe and Tia Simanovic, 2016 Statewide Housing Needs Assessment: Component 1 – Population and Housing Forecast (Fargo, ND: Center for Social Research and the Department of Agribusiness and Applied Economics at North Dakota State University, August 2016, [https://www.ndhfa.org/Publications/NDSHNA\\_2016\\_Component1\\_Final\\_November.pdf](https://www.ndhfa.org/Publications/NDSHNA_2016_Component1_Final_November.pdf))

<sup>2</sup> Shannon Guzman, Janet Viveiros and Emily Salomon, Housing Policy Solutions to Support Aging with Options (Washington, DC: AARP Public Policy Institute, July 2017, <https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/ppi/2017/06/housing-policy-solutions-to-support-aging-with-options.pdf>)