

# A comfortable, convenient single life

## Vancouver's West End is home to an unusually high number of unattached seniors

By Darah Hansen, Vancouver Sun June 1, 2013



**Rosemary Drefke holds a photograph of herself and her husband, Olof Boege, in a portrait from their church taken seven years ago. Drefke is living in Vancouver while her husband is in long-term care in Alberta.**

**Photograph by: Ward Perrin, PNG , Vancouver Sun**

There's a storm brewing in the distance, but from Rosemary Drefke's 20th-

floor West End apartment, the blue-grey surface of the Georgia Strait looks smooth and inviting.

It was for this, this breathtaking view, that Drefke packed up her comfortable life in rural Ontario nearly four years ago and drove west to Vancouver.

"I have always lived close to the water," she said, taking a seat on the edge of the couch under a long window offering a near-panoramic view of the city and seaside. Her feet, clad in candy-pink Crocs, are in sharp contrast to the dark, elegant furniture in the room.

There were other reasons behind the move - the most powerful of which was prompted by the handsome man in the framed photo carefully wrapped in her arms.

She hadn't expected to be single in the city. Not in Vancouver. Not at 75.

But, then, she hadn't counted on Alzheimer's robbing her of her beloved husband, Olof Boege.

The pair were married for 23 years, the last 10 spent travelling between Drefke's 10-acre lakeside property near Egan-ville, Ont., and sunny Puerto Vallarta.

They danced, and travelled, and laughed a lot.

Drefke thought only death could part them - before the ravages of his illness forced Olof into a long-term-care home near his daughter in Alberta.

Alone, Drefke sought a new life in a new city. She had lived in the West End briefly as a young woman in the 1960s, and its beauty and familiarity appealed to her.

The West End, she said, "is like a small town with all the advantages of a city. I decided this would be a great place to live."

## POPULAR COMMUNITY

It is not uncommon to hear stories like Drefke's in the West End. The community, with its leafy, green side streets and abundance of funky old apartments and '60s-style towers, is home to an unusually large number of seniors living on their own.

While affluent areas outside the city, namely White Rock and West Vancouver, continue to attract the highest concentrations of seniors in the Metro region overall, the West End is home to the most single seniors.

Indeed, a recent United Way Lower Mainland report found that more than two in three West End residents over the age of 65 years live on their own. Most are women, with many living on an income of less than \$25,000 a year.

The strong attraction to the area among that particular demographic is not surprising to local MLA Spencer Chandra Herbert.

Sure, affordability, as it is in most parts of Vancouver, is a challenge, with older residents among the many casualties of rising rents and so-called ren-ovictions (where landlords have used loopholes in provincial legislation to oust renters in a bid to boost rates beyond what they would otherwise be able to charge).

Others are put off by the sheer number of people in the area, the fourth most-densely populated neighbourhood in the city - with an average of 217 people per hectare, more than 80 per cent renters.

But Chandra Herbert, himself a longtime West End resident, maintains the community continues to be a strong draw for anyone in search of an urban neighbourhood where they can feel comfortable, connected, and easily access pretty much everything they might want or need - from health care and grocery stores, to the beach, parks and the public library - on foot, bike or public transit. The West End is convenient.

"I'm just surprised there aren't more seniors here," he said.

## FIGHTING FOR THE CAUSE

Anne Gregory has lived in other Vancouver neighbourhoods in the 50-plus years she has been in the city, but it is the West End that she calls home.

For the last two decades, the Austrian-born senior, 90, has rented a one-bedroom suite on the top floor of a mid-rise tower near Stanley Park.

She first moved to the neighbourhood in 1958, when the Sylvia Hotel was the tallest building west of Denman, its top-floor restaurant promising an opportunity to dine in the sky.

An avid walker, Gregory has never owned a car - apart from a brief moment of folly about 40 years ago. (She was still learning to drive her newly purchased vehicle when she got into an accident. "So, I gave it up," she said.) Gregory, who retired in 1982 from a career in accounting, pioneered the notion of walking to work long before the city bothered to measure such things.

In the 1970s, she linked arms with her neighbours in the middle of Denman Street in a stand against commuters who had turned the quiet side streets nearest to Stanley Park into a shortcut to the North Shore. The protest spawned the community mini-parks that double as traffic-calming measures.

It wasn't her only cause. Gregory was among those who fought for tenants' rights in support of seniors who, in the late 1960s, were being kicked out of their rooming homes on the whim of ruthless landlords. It is a battle she continues to be actively involved in today.

The average rent in the West End is \$1,151 per month for a one-bedroom apartment (a rate considered unaffordable by city measurements because it would take more than 30 per cent of a median household income to cover it).

But Gregory, who lives on a pension, pays less than the average because of the many years she has lived in the building. She has been able to afford to stay in her home, she said, because of provincial legislation that caps the amount that landlords can raise rents for existing tenants each year. (In B.C., it is the percentage equal to the inflation rate plus two per cent).

"I am benefiting from what I was involved in many years ago," she said.

Her longevity also means she knows a lot of her neighbours, although she has seen a shift in demographics in her building more recently as older residents leave.

"There are only a handful now that I have known for a number of years. When the rents go up, it is mostly young people and couples who are moving in. They are charged much more than I pay," she said.

But apart from a few evenings in the summer when the annual Celebration of Lights fireworks competition brings tens of thousands of people into the neighbourhood, Gregory said she is happy in the West End. "For a single person, I think that it is the best place," she said.

## LIFE HAS CHANGED

Hugh Bacon, 80, has moved in and out of the West End twice in the past eight years.

He first came to the city in 2006, nearly a decade after retiring from a medical practice in Victoria and then years spent at sea on his yacht.

He wasn't alone at the time. He and his girlfriend, Florence Watt, shared a fun and active life together, renting a place first on scenic Beach Avenue, then out in Port Moody so he could be closer to his son and grandchildren.

Watt's death last May from cancer hit him like a ton of bricks.

"I miss her something terrible," he said.

Bacon moved back to the West End, this time on Haro Street, in December.

Life had changed, he said of his decision to return to the urban neighbourhood.

The grandkids had grown up and went off to university and, although he had developed strong relationships with other seniors in Port Moody, Bacon found it increasingly stressful to get around in the sprawling suburbs where he needed a car for almost every errand or activity.

"I thought it would be easier in Port Moody ... but it was so hectic getting to church and to the seniors' activities out

Although it is home now, Bacon said the West End was never on his radar of places where he thought he would end up.

After 35 years in Victoria, where he worked and raised his family, Bacon said he resisted moving to the mainland at all, believing he preferred a smaller

He remembered thinking: " 'I don't know if I'm going to like this. It is so big and so much.' But I came to like it. I made

That many of those familiar faces are still in the

neighbourhood has been a comfort to him as he looks to rebuild his life on his own.

He walks everywhere now - to Barclay Manor where he plays crib, the library, aerobics classes, lunch twice a week with friends. He belongs to a local choir and is an active member of St. Paul's Anglican Church on Jervis.

He has even found himself dating again.

He needs to stay busy, Bacon said, if for no other reason than to keep the dark moods he sometimes feels from overwhelming him. Life in the West End makes that easier.

"I have my ups and downs. I get depressed. I feel like a teenager again. But I am gradually getting so that I feel comfortable here," he said.

## BATTLING LONELINESS

Drefke, too, is grateful for all that is available to her in the community.

A relative newcomer to the area, she acknowledged life can be lonely with no close friends nearby.

"It's just not easy to meet people when you are not in the workforce," she said.

She hasn't stopped trying, though. She goes to the neighbourhood Anglican church regularly and volunteers with various organizations, including Our House West Coast, a centre for recovering addicts, and Kay's Place, a busy seniors' drop-in run by the West End Seniors Network.

Sometimes, when she's out for a walk on the seawall, Drefke said, "I speak to all the dogs, and then the owners speak to me."

She is lucky compared to many seniors, she said. She owns her apartment on a long-term lease and is responsible only for monthly maintenance fees, cable and Internet.

She loves to travel and drives when needed, although she prefers to keep her car at home as much as possible, as much for convenience as unnecessary expense. "I was having an affair with Busters (Towing) when I first got here," she joked, noting she has had her vehicle towed three times.

It's true, she never would have made this move had she and Olof still been together. But she's learned life doesn't always go as planned.

Out the big window, the dark clouds that earlier had appeared so threatening are now broken by streaks of blue sky.

Drefke looks resolved. "I know there isn't another neighbourhood like this," she said.

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