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Introduction

The shuttle from Orlando's airport to The Villages, the largest retirement community in the world, traveled through what seemed like an endless construction work area. Looking at the bulldozers digging the ground and the enormous piles of cement pipes, the passengers wondered how far this development would go. One of them, a resident since 2009, said that when she moved to The Villages, the place was half the size it is now, and that the joke around the locals is that "they will only stop when they make it to the back gate of Disney World."

When we arrived at the already-built areas, which were very green, superbly maintained, and surrounded by golf courses and lakes (Figure 1.1), the lady who drove the van went into some of the "villages" to drop the passengers at their destinations. The various villages and the houses seemed almost identical. Yet, no one had a problem pointing at their exact address and asking her to stop there. Eventually, only one other passenger and I, who had to make it to the northern part of the city, were left. We started chatting, and she told me she was there for her mother's memorial. She was sad and seemed exhausted, but when she heard that I would stay in The Villages for two months, she looked at me with a hint of jealousy and said, "Wow, you're gonna have so much fun you'll never wanna leave!"

Forty minutes later, lying on my back in the room I rented for the first month, I wondered if I would indeed have fun. I was alone in a city of almost 150,000 older people. I did not know even one person and had no idea how to start my exploration. Aware that there is no place like that in the world, I was confident that my visit would be fascinating, but I had no expectations regarding having fun.

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Figure 1.1 Typical view. The Villages is home to more than 50 golf courses and more than 450 lakes and ponds.

A month later, I spoke on the phone with my partner, who told me that my parents had come over for a visit. He reported that my mother said I seemed to have great fun in Florida. Surprised by this statement, he told her I worked hard and got zero rest. When I responded, hesitantly, "But I do have fun," he said it was just because I am a workaholic, but this was inaccurate, and he knew it. After twenty years of an intensive academic career (and another ten years of a different career before that), I was ready to slow down. I still enjoyed researching and writing but had already started thinking about when, where, and how to retire.

Visiting The Villages at this point in my career provoked many thoughts about my own future. Although I was too young at that time to move into a fifty-five-plus community, many of the people I met were not much older than me, and their joyful lifestyle stood in sharp contrast to the career-oriented life I had lived in the past decades. Moreover, the time I spent with much older residents and my conversations with them suggested that The Villages offers a new, unique, and rather appealing way to age.

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Everything described earlier and the many activities I participated in (as described in the following) may explain why, upon returning to my home in Tel Aviv, I assertively stated I had great fun in The Villages and wished I could move there. My family and friends, who (rightfully) took this statement with a grain of salt, challenged me with questions such as: Would you really like to spend the rest of your life surrounded by older people only? How could you stand socializing with all those Republicans? Why would anyone want to live in such a bubble? Is it really that perfect? Most of these questions had short answers: You also meet young people. About a third of the residents are Democrats, and their share is growing, yet Republicans are nice too. Living in a bubble is not a bad idea considering the state of the world today. It is as close to perfect as possible.

The questions that required extended responses were: Why study The Villages? Does it justify a significant academic exploration? Is it really different from smaller retirement communities? Why would a community of older people having fun in Florida interest anyone? These were the exact questions I asked myself a year earlier after reading about The Villages in an article published in an Israeli daily newspaper. My first response to that article was a surprise. As a significant part of my research dealt with leisure and well-being in later life, I was amazed that I had never read a scientific paper about the place, nor had I heard about it from my American colleagues.

Wondering why this unusual social phenomenon did not attract much scholarly attention, I had no interest in being the one who would thoroughly explore it. At that time, I had completed a book about aging hippies (*The Aging of Aquarius: The Hippies of the 60s in Their 60s and Beyond* [Cambridge University Press, 2023]). Most people I wrote about were in their seventies and, despite their advancing age, were still trying to make the world a better place. Admiring their modest lives led by ideology and vision, I could not think favorably about a community of older people that, as I understood from the article, were self-centered and focused on hedonic pleasures.

So, what made me change my mind? It was probably my wish to find out the "truth" about The Villages, whatever this means. Months after reading the newspaper article, I wondered how people of the same

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generation who went through the turmoil of the 1960s in the US ended up so far away from each other. I, therefore, started reading about The Villages, visiting related websites, watching films about it, and so on.

The place's portrayals were extreme, sensational, and often seemed biased and misleading. An example was the depiction of the place as a city of hard-core Republicans, which completely ignored one-third of the population. An even more prominent example was the description of The Villages as heaven for swingers and public-sex fans, who made it "the STD (sexually transmitted disease) capital of America." However, checking official reports (e.g., Rodriguez & Barclay, 2023) showed that The Villages is not even among the top 100 American cities with the highest STD rates. Curious about the truth behind the folklore and various media portrayals, I gradually became interested in visiting the place and experiencing its daily life firsthand. Eventually, I found myself in that van, being promised that I would have so much fun I would never want to leave.

THE STUDY

The study reported in this book explored the daily life and aging experience in The Villages, the largest retirement community in the world and the only one that may be described as a "city for older adults" (see Chapter 3). By examining issues related to identity, daily activities, constraints, faith, death, community, and communication, the project sought to discover to what extent the city's unique characteristics support the well-being of its residents.

The study had two primary sources of information. The first was in-depth interviews with forty residents (twenty women, twenty men), of which eleven were new residents (zero–ten years), nine were long-term residents (eleven–twenty years), ten were "veterans" (over twenty years), and ten were "snowbirds" (i.e., only stayed there during the winters). While the veterans were the most significant informants about aging in The Villages, the split into four groups enabled comparing the viewpoints of residents with varying residency durations and ages. In addition, including the snowbirds allowed for contrasting them with the permanent residents ("frogs," as they call themselves).

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Study participants' ages at the time of the interviews ranged between sixty-one and 100 (mean = 76.4), and the majority (thirty-four out of forty) were retired or semi-retired. Thirty were married, cohabiting, or in steady relationships, and thirty-one had children (mean number of children = 1.82). The majority (thirty-four out of forty) had at least some higher education; thirteen had an MA degree, and two had a PhD degree. A comparison among the groups suggested several differences: The new residents were younger (mean = 71.37), had higher education, and included more people who still worked to some extent than other groups. The long-term residents were older (mean = 75.22), and the veterans were the oldest (mean = 81.6) and included more people with high-school education only and widowers than all other groups. The snowbirds were closer in age to the veterans (mean = 79.0) but like the new residents regarding education levels. For more details about the study participants, data collection, and analysis, see the Appendix.

The second primary source of information was participant observations. These observations occurred throughout my stay, during formal and informal activities including (in descending order) thirteen evenings of live music and dancing in the town squares; eleven socials (of which seven were at people's homes, including mine); eleven meetings and eleven solo visits at restaurants, cafés, and bars; ten stays at swimming pools; eight special events (Figure 1.2); seven cards and table games nights; listening to six lectures and giving two; six yoga classes; six Zumba classes; four exercise classes; three meditation sessions; three music sessions; three films; three church services; two day trips; two performances; two trivia nights; and two pickleball games. The rest were one-time activities and included a tai chi class, a line dancing class, golf, basketball, kickball, bocce, billiards, karaoke, table tennis, table shuffleboard, bingo, a polo tournament, a community Seder, and range shooting. Observations also occurred while walking, driving, shopping, and so on. I recorded myself several times a day to document what I saw, the conversations I had, and my impression of various phenomena and events. I tried to do so as close to the event as possible to avoid data loss.

Two additional sources of information were used to support and add to the insights from the in-depth interviews and observations, the

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Figure 1.2 World Tai Chi and Qigong Day event at one of the town squares.

first being The Villages' media. During my stay at The Villages, I read its daily newspaper, *The Villages Daily Sun*. I also followed *Talk of the Villages* (talkofthevillages.com, the official online forum) and visited many Facebook groups associated with various clubs and activities. The second was a review of materials shared with me by the study participants, such as books, articles, brochures, videos, links to multiple websites, and the like. In addition, during the interviews, some people mentioned events, books, films, and terms I had never heard before. To complete my understanding of their world, I read and watched everything they shared with me and searched every term they mentioned that I was unfamiliar with (e.g., "bachata"). Applying a triangulation approach (Polit & Beck, 2012), I integrated the findings yielded by the various secondary sources with the results stemming from the primary ones (i.e., the in-depth interviews and the observations). This integration enabled the creation of a consistent, reliable, rich, and, hopefully, clear and inspiring report of the study's insights.

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THE BOOK

The two post-Introduction chapters set the stage for the study presented in this book. Chapter 2 presents a definition and typology of retirement communities and a brief history of these communities in the US. It also summarizes the literature about the move and adjustment to life in a retirement community and residents' well-being. Chapter 3 offers a brief history of The Villages, discusses the factors explaining its success, and reviews the previous research on the place.

Chapter 4 deals with the size of The Village, which is one of the central research foci. By exploring the "push" and "pull" factors leading to the decision to move to The Villages and the residents' experiences and views of the community's rapid growth, this chapter reveals the pros and cons of living in a city for older adults. It also suggests that the community's size cultivates individual and collective place identity (Peng et al., 2020) and pride.

Chapter 5 focuses on the challenge of socially starting from scratch when moving into a community of about 150,000 people after retirement. Suggesting that most people find themselves part of place-, leisure-, and faith-based communities that often overlap, this chapter also points to varying levels of psychological sense of community (PSOC) (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In addition, it examines the multiple tensions between different communities based on age, type of residency, and political views.

The following two chapters discuss the daily activities at The Villages. Relying on the innovation theory of successful aging (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007), Chapter 6 explores continuity and change in residents' leisure activity upon moving to The Villages and over time. Describing what may be labeled as "innovation culture," the chapter also indicates that innovation tends to decline with age and points to a greater tendency towards self-preservation rather than self-reinvention innovation. Presenting the remarkable volunteering patterns among residents of The Villages and discussing them in light of the serious leisure perspective (Stebbins, 2004, 2020), Chapter 7 distinguishes between *volunteering in leisure* and *volunteering as leisure*, describes the population served by the volunteering villagers, and questions the extent to which residents' involvement in volunteering is optimal.

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Constraints to participation in various activities, such as declining health and lack of companionship, stand at the heart of Chapter 8. Based on the ecological model of leisure constraints (Stodolska et al., 2020), this chapter describes individual, interpersonal, context, and system constraints to leisure in The Villages, how residents negotiate such constraints, and in what ways the size of The Villages both supports and hinders successful negotiation. Next, Chapter 9 considers The Villages' traditional and digital media and describes their contents and use. By exploring three groups of villagers (heavy users, light users, and nonusers of the local press) and their attitudes, this chapter suggests that although most residents perceive these media as highly focused on "happy news," their use creates and maintains a sense of "bubble" contributing to one's well-being. As living in a city for older adults inevitably means experiencing and coping with neighbors, friends, and acquaintances' deaths, Chapter 10 explores the impact of frequent encounters with death. Providing a glance into the experience of dying, caregiving for the dying, and grieving in The Villages, it also examines the presence of death against the relatively invisible fourth age.

The final chapter discusses the qualities of The Villages vis-à-vis other retirement communities (Glass & Skinner, 2013), aging in place (Callahan Jr., 2019), and aging in community models (Hou & Cao, 2021). Based on the perceptions of the researched individuals and the author's viewpoint, it argues that The Villages' unique characteristics, including its size, innovation culture, self-serving volunteering, bubble communication, opportunities for meaningful involvement, social networks, and communal coping, generally contribute to the residents' well-being. Still, it also points to the risks to well-being and discusses the social implications of The Villages' success.

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