

## Dogs in retirement homes



My mother used to say, "No one I know is getting any younger", a hard truth for all of us. New Zealand's population is ageing rapidly, with Stats New Zealand projecting 1 million people over the age of 65 by 2028. We also know that people continue to work longer, with many still employed to some extent past age 70.

Regardless of your needs for income, having a place to live comfortably with your dog in older age is a concern for many. My initial research into aged care with your dog revealed a wide range of dog policies in retirement villages, a fact confirmed by contacting the Retirement Village Association which replied that policies run the gamut "from 'no pets' to 'full pet-friendly with replacement animal allowed' and everything in between".

To learn more about this subject, Elliott Duston of Archer Villages invited me to meet him and residents Cally, Tony and Miniature Schnauzer George at Archer's Thorrrington Village in Beckenham, Christchurch (pictured above).

"Dogs are accepted into the village on a case-by-case basis. Our policy is to require the Village Manager to visit with the prospective residents in their own home. We feel this is the best approach because dogs are most comfortable and their true selves in their home. The Village Manager gets to see the dog in its own environment," says Elliott.

As we walk past villa after villa in the complex, Elliott leads me to a cul-de-sac and a rear villa with fencing at the front. As it turns out, Cally, Tony and George are new residents of approximately three months; a requirement for them to move in with George was to install their own fencing around the villa.

As five-year old George was used to free ranging at home, the couple also paid for installation of a dog door. Says Cally, "We were happy to pay for these items because George was a priority. In fact, when we started talking about a move, our first thoughts were about making arrangements that suited George. He's an indoor dog, mostly."

The couple is still very active — Tony takes George for a 40-minute walk twice a day, for example. Cally, an active 67-year-old, goes out most days and still works on a casual basis as a guide in the travel industry.

"Shifting to a retirement village is a big move. I have a bad knee and living in a two-storey townhouse was inevitably going to cause problems. We decided to move while we were still physically able,

particularly as we have no family or children to assist us," says Cally. Tony adds, "We're not getting any younger, and with a mortgage to pay, downsizing made very good sense."

As luck would have it, the couple inspected Thorrrington early in their search and "as soon as we saw it, we wanted it" because the available villa at the rear of the village meant that George, who can be reactive to visitors, would not be triggered by people walking past their villa on a regular basis. Selling their own home took a bit longer, but this gave time for Archer to undertake their refurbishment of the villa, which is done every time a resident vacates.

Since moving in, the couple have been re-directing George every time he barks at someone coming to the gate. They recognise that he is using his guarding instincts, but are extra careful right now to ensure that he doesn't bother the neighbours. As spring arrives and more people are outside, they will encourage George to meet more of his human neighbours; he's already met a few and even one of the resident cats without issue.

What advice do Tony and Cally have for anyone considering a downsize and relocation with their dog?

"First, remember that it is a big move going into a retirement village when you are considering your dog's needs plus your own. There are retirement villages that say they are dog friendly and then you drill down to read that your dog must be confined to your villa and as soon as they step out the door, they must be on a leash. We couldn't do that to George; he needs to have agency. Next, we'd say that you shouldn't leave the decision too late."

Elliott agrees, adding, "Too often we meet people who can't make a decision, let alone face a move and the inevitable downsizing."

Tony goes on to say, "I'm 70 and I feel as right as rain but I know things may change. We've been able to make a clear choice to be here and there are options for higher levels of care if/when we need it."

Cally's only reservation is the clause that states that when George dies, they are not allowed to get another dog. "George is five so hopefully we have another 10 years together. But, I hope to be still going at age 77 and, in my opinion, a good owner is a good owner. You know how to train and raise a dog."

Elliott explains, "From Archer's point of view, if someone is coming into village living, they are getting older and could realistically be in declining health. If they can no longer live independently, what happens to their dog? The clause forbidding a new dog helps to mitigate that risk."

The Archer application asks prospective residents if they have a will, what property they own and also about their pets. Unlike some providers that set a size limit, Archer tends to focus on the dog's behaviour as the key to whether they will be admitted.

In summary, retirement village may not be for everyone who wants to bring their dog with them but there are options if you choose to look for them. Reading the fine print is essential, as with any move and property transaction.

As the aged care sector matures and dogs become more of a feature in the lives of residents, it's also possible that more providers will allow residents to get another dog after their dog passes away.

Whether you reside in a retirement village or not, dog parents should have plans in place for their dog's care if they become incapacitated or die before their beloved pet. 🐾