

## Surviving As a Senior in the High Country

Gray hair is nowhere near as prevalent in the High Country as it is in many other North Carolina counties. In fact, it's so relatively rare here that elder gentry tend to nod in mutual acknowledgement when they see one another around town. Some towns like Hendersonville, south of Asheville, have made tourism and retirement a growth industry. The Boone area, by contrast, seems to be largely dedicated to the energetic lifestyles of youth. In a recent non-scientific study by this reporter, seniors living in the High Country find it to be a mixture of blessings and challenges specific to their age group.

THE WORKING WORLD: A number of senior citizens in the Boone-Blowing Rock area enjoy its beauty as a seasonal base for their second home. Others in the 65+ age bracket are not blessed with a secure, sizeable income required to live here and must work at least part time. Finding a job here, even one at minimum wage, is a sizable challenge.

As one "freshman senior citizen" (being only in her 60's) was overheard recently,

"As soon as I turned 50 in this town, I became invisible." Is ageism alive and well in Boone? (Ageism: Discrimination based on age, especially prejudice against the elderly.)

Those seniors who seek employment in this area find themselves competing in a game with the deck stacked against them. As one "sophomore senior citizen" (being in his 70's) remarked,

"I have developed a strong, yet diversified resume over the course of my career. I have managed companies, traveled the world, taught, and even worked as a store clerk – I've proven time and again that I can contribute at almost any level of a business. But do you think I can even get an interview in this town? I've applied for more than a dozen positions in the past two months, any of which I would fit like a glove. I haven't gotten so much as an email in response, let alone a chance to talk with someone in person. I'm

beginning to think that including the year of my college graduation on it is working against me.”

While ageism in the workplace may or may not be a major factor in this area, certainly the size and diversity of the workforce are. Anita Davie, Director of the High Country Council of Governments Area Agency on Aging, noted recently,

“If the number of jobs in this area (*approximately 22,000*) were a whole pie, the number of people vying for those jobs at any given time, especially in the fall, might be nearly a quarter of that pie. (*Watauga County’s unemployment rate was 8.5 percent, or 6,000 in December 2012.*)

The number of positions experiencing turnover at any given time, however, would be just a small wedge of that pie (*perhaps 1,000*). Seniors experience that contradiction very directly, and many settle for being ‘underemployed’, taking part time, jobs far below their abilities and experience, just to be able to live here.”

A GREAT PLACE TO LIVE: Of the approximately 51,000 residents of [Watauga County](#), some 6,400 are aged 65 or over according to the latest US Census. Of course, that number changes seasonally as some migrate to a warmer clime for the winter months. Some say they moved here to enjoy the natural beauty of the area in the early years of their retirement, others came to be close to family members who had attended or come to ASU to work, then settled in the area long term. One “junior senior citizen” (you guessed it, in her 80’s) remarked:

“When we moved here from Charlotte a couple years ago, I was frankly surprised at how much art, music and culture were available here. And the healthcare and fitness resources are much better than I had anticipated. I’m glad we’ve retired here.”

Three small groups of seniors were recently asked to describe what they consider to be both the positive and negative aspects of living in the High Country at this stage in their lives. Those topics most consistently mentioned in the positive related to community and social connections (church, family, friends, volunteering). They also gave largely high

marks to the area's infrastructure, including its parks, bus system, sidewalks, library and Greenway path. Negatives mentioned included the presence of lingering eyesore properties in the community, and the high density of traffic at times. The most consistently mentioned challenges related to factors of affordable living including the high cost of housing, fuel and utilities.

“We really need more affordable housing in this area that doesn't get snapped up by the university students,” commented one senior. “A 55+ cluster home development on the bus line would be ideal so we could connect with one another in our own neighborhood, and still get to town.”

Perhaps such developments will be part of the High Country of tomorrow.

THE NATIVES: Many others, however, were born and raised here – the current elder generation of families that have been in this area, sometimes on the same land, for hundreds of years. Another “freshman” commented,

“I am not as old as my parents were at my age, but even so there are changes in body and mind that I can't deny. The winters are a bit harder to take than they used to be when I was younger.”

Private cemeteries can be found throughout this area down unmarked roads winding to hilltop clearings. A handful of family names etched in weathering headstones declare the constancy of generations in these pocket communities. Some staunchly independent residents will not plug into the expanding array of resources available to High Country seniors that can make it possible for elders to stay in their own homes longer and live better than was possible for their parent's generation.

Watauga County and its neighbors provide far more resources for seniors than might be apparent, thanks to a Title III Block Grant of the Older Americans Act. More often than not, it's not the senior citizen who seeks out community resources for assistance, but their adult children who may live far from Boone.

While nearly invisible to all but those who need them, the High Country has an impressive array of services providing assistance with transportation, supervised living facilities and activities of daily living which enable seniors to live independently as long

as possible. In-home nursing care, telephone alert, and family caregiver support services and much more is available through the Watauga County Project on Aging. Contact (828) 265-8090 for more information about services or aging issues in this area. A guide to [Resources for Seniors in Watauga County](#) sponsored by SOS Printing and Appalachian Brian Estates is free and available for downloading.

**SOCIAL CENTERS:** So where will you find the freshmen, sophomores, juniors and senior seniors of Watauga County? Some frequent the Lois E. Harrill Senior Center on the west end of Boone at 132 Poplar Grove where they find food, fellowship, and educational experiences according to Tabitha Thomas, the center's director. A second senior center, the Western Watauga Senior and Community Center in Sugar Grove, has recently begun serving the rural residents between Boone and the Tennessee border. Both centers are part of the Watauga County Project on Aging.

While golden agers may be relatively infrequent in downtown Boone, they are far more concentrated in numbers at the Broyhill Wellness Center at 232 Boone Heights Drive, and the Watauga County Parks and Recreation Center on Complex Drive in Boone, as well as the Library. There you will find them staying young and enjoying life in the High Country. These living treasures have a rich trove of stories to share with those willing to stop by for a cup of coffee and a few minutes of conversation.

*Sandy McCune Westin, herself a "freshman senior citizen", recently move to the Boone area from Johnson City, Tennessee. She and her husband, Paul, will be moving to Hendersonville, North Carolina in May where they expect to find more opportunities for work and connection with their family.*