

Retired writers find a haven Quest for knowledge continues at senior community in Plainsboro

By NEIL FELDMAN • Special To The Times

Chris Dwyer pokes her head into the fitness room at Princeton Windrows and waves to a man briskly walking on a treadmill.

"That's Rev. Samuel Moffet, a theology scholar who's written several books," says Dwyer, who is the community's marketing director.

Moffet, who is in his mid-80s, is certainly not alone. In the retirement community's library is a bookshelf reserved for works by the authors who reside there - and the shelf is nearly at capacity.

Situated in Plainsboro just a few miles from Princeton University, the Windrows is a sprawling, posh development of condos and villas that has established itself as a senior housing haven for intellectuals, many of whom are writers. Scholarly books on the history of science, bulky volumes on religion, a book about money and a collection of short stories are assembled on the coveted shelf.

Their authors were drawn to the Windrows because of an environment that keeps residents mentally on their toes.

"Living here is very stimulating," says A. James Meigs, who has written two economics books. "There are so many interesting bright people who are fascinating to talk and exchange ideas with."

The community has an organized forum that meets regularly for discussions on an array of topics researched by residents. Book club meetings are well-populated, and speakers are invited to give presentations nearly every other week.

Intellectual diversity at the Windrows is illustrated by the range of subjects the groups and clubs take up. It's also reflected in the variety of subjects addressed by the writers.

William Summerscales, 85, is a perfect example. After earning three graduate degrees - in history, philosophy and theology - Summerscales went on to become a Presbyterian minister and ended his career on the faculty of Columbia University's Teachers College. In the late 1960s, Summerscales developed an interest in the impact of World War I on higher education, particularly on Columbia University, and out of that came "Affirmation and Dissent," published in 1970. It consists of stories about students, professors and others in education who faced serious consequences for attending war protests or even advocating peace.

Four years later, Summerscales wrote "Jesus," which combined the four Gospels of the New Testament into a single narrative. After climbing the ranks to the best-seller list in Canada in 1974, "Jesus" was published in the United States.

A few years after that, Summerscales toured Western Europe and wrote a series of travel articles about his experiences.

All of these interests, he says, contribute to the intellectual discourse he often engages in with his fellow residents.

At age 88, Charles Gillispie, a retired Princeton University professor, still continues to work on deeply intellectual books. Gillispie, considered one of the foremost scholars in the discipline of science history, recently completed his 14th book. Gillispie, who began his career at Princeton University in 1947, still finds research so engaging that he makes the four-mile trek to Princeton's Firestone Library nearly every day.

While he doesn't teach courses anymore, Gillispie says his library office remains open for students on a consulting basis.

Fiction also has a place among the resident authors. Elizabeth Buttenheim, who published her first book - a collection of short stories - last year at the age of 80, is working on a second volume. It's a novel about race relations in the South as viewed through the eyes of two families - one black, the other white.

Buttenheim, who still speaks with a distant Southern accent, grew up in Richmond, Va. She says she feels at home writing about the South, where her family has lived by the James River for 14 generations. While she has written many stories over the years, Buttenheim notes that she frequently wouldn't finish them. Writing and editing fiction, she said, has become a more fluent process thanks to computers.

The changes in research and writing since they began their work is a story in itself. And, some would say, it does not have a happy ending.

Meigs wrote his second book while working as an economist in New York. "I would get up at 4 o'clock in the morning with a cup of coffee and some cereal and I'd write until 6," he says. Meigs would then proofread his work on the train commute to and from work.

Summerscales wrote "Affirmation and Dissent" with a pencil. Though he recognizes the obvious inefficiencies of writing books longhand, Summerscales thinks the research and education process has been somewhat adversely affected by the technology revolution.

"Students too often miss out on the adventure of finding articles and books in the stacks," he says. Reading books and doing research online, he cautions, "can hurt a paper because it is easy to overlook important information."

Early in Gillispie's career at Princeton, research was a task of individual ingenuity. Notes for entire monographs were taken with tools no fancier than a pad and pencil. There were no copying machines, no microfilm, no personal computers, and certainly no Nexus or Google to act as research assistants. All those digital advances, say Gillispie, are not necessarily positive for a scholar.

"I believe there are serious psychological disadvantages to all those modern conveniences," he says.

Gillispie points to the overabundance of information available electronically and says it can often cause considerable confusion when researching a narrowly focused topic. He used a recent example of a Google search he did that yielded thousands of results with no efficient way to sort through them. That wouldn't happen, he said, if a researcher were steered to the right sections of the stacks at Firestone Library.

Lamenting loss of letters

As a historian, Gillispie also expressed concern about the potential for losing communications among individuals that would later be chronicled in articles and books. With the common usage of e-mail nowadays for important correspondence, he said, chronicling history "becomes considerably more challenging."

There is the acknowledgment, however, that fighting technology is useless. While the authors may not welcome all the changes that have occurred, the changes are, as Gillispie notes, "here to stay whether we like it or not."

So, while laptop computers, iPods and Blackberrys may not be found in the library and meeting rooms at Princeton Windrows, traditional means of exchanging ideas, reading books and writing manuscripts thrive as an integral part of those living in this community.

"We never find it too late to learn," says Meigs, who enthusiastically described research he undertook for a past forum on the roots of democracy. "It is always

exciting to hear what others living here have to say at a forum or book club."

PHOTO CAPTION: 1. Elizabeth Buttenheim makes a point during a discussion among writers who reside at Princeton Windrows in Plainsboro. At far left, James Meigs talks about his work. At top right, a shelf in the senior housing center's library is crowded with titles by residents. **CREDIT:** 1. DAVID GARD/THE TIMES•Etc. **BOX:** The Windrows community has an organized forum that meets regularly for discussions on an array of topics researched by residents. Book club meetings are well-populated, and speakers are invited to give presentations nearly every other week.