



Rockhill Manor Assisted Living (photo from Rockhill Manor's website)

In November 2013, I visited [Rockhill Manor Assisted Living](#) located in the historic Southmoreland District of Kansas City. Rockhill is a 190-resident home that serves individuals with chronic mental illness, including a 10-resident respite unit that provides a 30-day program under contract with Truman Medical Center Behavioral Health. They are licensed by both the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services and the Department of Mental Health.



Lobby (photo from Rockhill Manor's website)

Rockhill was originally an upscale hotel, built in 1916. Under the leadership of Rockhill Manor co-founder and owner Owen Gahagan, Jr., the building and grounds have been meticulously maintained to retain the historic and luxurious atmosphere. Unfortunately, Mr. Gahagan passed away in 2012. His wife Judy now serves as President and has continued the legacy.

[Rockhill Academy for Independent Living](#) is a not-for-profit organization that operates within Rockhill Manor and provides support, education, transitional living, and community involvement for Rockhill residents. There are daily peer led recovery classes dealing with issues such as schizophrenia, anxiety, depression, and coping skills. There are educational classes including math, history, reading, art, foreign languages and more. There are also courses geared toward helping residents who wish to transition to independent living, including job skills, computer skills, budgeting, medication management, food and cooking, personal hygiene, and more. They even have two private homes and a five-plex across the street where residents can live and receive assistance before going out on their own.



View of Rockhill Academy transitional homes from Rockhill Manor



Rockhill Academy computer lab

Rockhill is very involved in the local community. They are members of the Southmoreland Neighborhood Association and Neighborhood Watch. Many residents take regular walks to the nearby Casey's convenience store and also spend a lot of time at Gillham Park, which is just across the street. They have a 14-passenger van and another smaller van, which they use to take residents on outings to museums, festivals, fairs, shopping, baseball games, theaters, concerts, etc.



View of Gillham Park from Rockhill

I found the environment at Rockhill to be very relaxed and everyone was friendly. As I toured the home, everywhere I turned I was greeted with smiling faces. I overheard several conversations about recent sporting events and activities. I was there several hours and never saw anyone who appeared to be unhappy or heard anyone complain about anything.

Administrator Jenifer McGowan and I discussed many aspects of life at Rockhill that contribute to the overall positive environment. Of course they include the beautiful building and grounds and all of the classes and activities offered through the Academy. Another key factor is competent and dedicated staff. I met several staff members who had worked there for many years. Each member of the Rockhill management team maintains a caseload of residents who they are responsible to assist with resolving any issues that arise.

In addition to outdoor smoking areas, they have a large indoor smokers' lounge with an incredible air exchange system. I'm not a smoker and am very sensitive to smoke. While it is probably not a place I would spend much time, I was able to visit comfortably in the lounge without being overwhelmed by smoke.

Ms. McGowan said good medication management is also important. I learned that Mr. Gahagan founded Rockhill Pharmacy in 2001. "It was Owen's belief that pharmaceutical care shouldn't be created for a care facility, but rather that pharmaceutical care should be created by a care facility."

Since I was visiting during lunchtime, Ms. McGowan invited me to eat with them. Individuals who require staff assistance were served first. Then Ms. McGowan and I went through the cafeteria style serving line along with the rest of the residents, where we were able to view the food and make our choices. I can't remember all of the choices offered, but the baked chicken, yams, and apple cobbler that I chose were delicious. Along with the main menu choices, there is also a salad bar, sandwiches, and other items that are always available. All of their food is homemade. I have a feeling that the quality of the food served is also a big contributor to the positive environment. I know I certainly was satisfied.



Dining Room

Ms. McGowan told me about the big Christmas party they have each year. Residents fill out wish lists, which they accommodate the best they can. Staff members support the party through donations by payroll deductions throughout the year. A resident dresses up as Santa Claus and Ms. McGowan dresses up as Mrs. Claus for the party.



Fountain in the courtyard (photo from Rockhill Manor's website)

Residents can enjoy the courtyard 24 hours per day. The centerpiece of the courtyard is the 80-year-old Magnolia tree, which has been dedicated to the memory of a former employee who saved it from a plan to cut it down. There is also a beautiful fountain. Other activities that are popular include volunteer and paid work, such as managing the library or working in the dining room.



80-year-old Magnolia Tree in the courtyard

Rockhill has been through some tough times over the years. There was the 2002 ice storm that required them to bring in nine generators to heat the building. The next summer, they purchased a large on-site generator that will heat the whole building. One summer, a tree fell on a power line and they were without power for 18 hours. Because they had the large generator, they were able to keep the common areas cool and continue to operate. Six or seven years ago, they had a large fire that resulted in \$1 million damage and required total evacuation during renovations.



An area damaged by the fire

Continuous renovation is required to maintain Rockhill. Ms. McGowan showed me several areas that were under renovation. I was amazed that they were installing real oak hardwood flooring. In addition to three full-time maintenance employees, I spoke with a private contractor who was there doing some renovation. He said he spends about six months a year working at Rockhill Manor.



Resident Thomas Weir

I met Resident Thomas Weir. Mr. Weir was originally from Chicago, but moved to Kansas City with his family when he was a child. He attended Emporia State University, where he earned Masters' degrees in Public Administration and Political Science. He married after college and has one daughter and one son. His daughter is currently a student at Rockhurst University and his son is studying at the University of Missouri, Kansas City. He served as administrator for Jackson County for more than 20 years and was also an adjunct professor for William Jewell College; Longview Community College; and the University of Missouri, Kansas City, where he taught American Government.

Mr. Weir's parents only drank responsibly; however, his family history includes many individuals who have suffered from alcoholism. He had a bout of alcohol abuse early in his marriage. He ended up getting arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol, which prompted him to quit. He quit before his children were born and they didn't even know he had a history of alcoholism. After they both grew up and went to college, he started drinking again. He got into a cycle of depression and drinking. He said, "I drank because I was depressed and I was depressed because I drank."

Prior to ending up at Truman Medical Center Behavioral Health for three months, he had lived at six different rehab centers, seven or eight facilities, and the Salvation Army. "I was a mess." At Truman he got on a medication regimen and the "path to being functional." Administrator McGowan visited him at Truman and he chose to move to Rockhill. Within a few days, all of the staff knew him by his first name and "people weren't unhappy to see me," which had been his previous experience. An added bonus is that the food is really good and he enjoys visiting during meals.

He participates in the on-site Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. He has also received help with his financial affairs. In the past year, he has been through a divorce, his father passed away, he has had two knee surgeries and been through physical therapy, and has been diagnosed with prostate cancer (currently in remission), all without relapsing. He has been sober now for 3 ½ years and is getting better all the time. He is looking forward to volunteering somewhere in the spring.

He has never had any issues with his medications or medical appointments. Residents come and go as they please with no restrictions. "The staff asks that you sign in and out and the expectation is that you act responsibly." Several residents mow yards and rake leaves in the neighborhood. Others work in sheltered workshops.

He said, "I don't want to sound like a poster boy for Rockhill, but I know what I've experienced." There is very little staff turnover. He enjoys that they celebrate every holiday and there are a lot of organized activities and outings. "If you aren't active, it is because you don't want to be." He is proud to have visitors there. It is a beautiful place and the staff members are friendly. He couldn't think of anything that could be improved.



Resident Linda Carver

I also met resident Linda Carver. Ms. Carver was born and raised at Marion, Kansas. She has one brother and is the mother of two daughters. She also has two grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. She is a former elementary teacher. She retired after her youngest daughter was born with mental and physical challenges. Her daughter now lives in a long-term care home and Rockhill staff takes her for regular visits.

She suffers from depression and has lived at Rockhill for six years. She enjoys reading the Bible and the Daily Word, crocheting, shopping, visiting with friends and staff, and taking walks when the weather is good. She attends some of the Academy classes. She said, "If I feel unsure, all I have to do is come down and talk to the staff." Staff members are caring and competent, "If they aren't, they don't last long." "It's all about the clients here and what your needs are."

She said she has a beautiful room on the third floor and is free to come and go anytime she wants. "I can do pretty much what I want. They have classes and things to do. The food is good and there are plenty of choices. You can also order out if you want."

Administrator McGowan and I visited the nursing office where we spoke with Director of Nursing Wanda Gunn and other staff members who were in and out working. Nurse Gunn said

the owner is very supportive. If you need something they get it. She told me about the weight scale that is built into the floor outside the nursing office window. They can get the residents' weights when they come to the window. The results read out in the office so that others can't see.

Most of the employees have been there five or more years. "We're like a big family." She also said they are able to provide good care because she knows the residents well and the doctors respect her. She told me about a resident who used to live there who knew every employee's date of birth and license plate number.



A married couple's living room

They keep many hand sanitizer dispensers throughout the building. They made it through the last flu season without a single case of the flu. They have a free clothes closet where residents can shop for clothing. Some residents have refrigerators and microwave ovens. There is a community cat and a married couple have a personal cat.



Residents' personal cat