



*NHC Healthcare, Maryland Heights*

In early August 2015, I attended the national culture change conference hosted by the [Pioneer Network](#) in Chicago, Illinois. During one of the training sessions, someone asked if nursing homes could keep live chickens. I couldn't think of any reason why not, but I also couldn't think of any that did. Shortly thereafter, I happened to sit next to NHC Maryland Heights (NHC) Administrator Susan Taylor at the state culture change coalition ([MC5](#)) regional meeting in St. Charles. Ms. Taylor shared with me that NHC had chickens and many other animals. I wasted no time scheduling a visit.

Later that month, SLCR Communications Representative Leslie Sebastian and I visited NHC. Administrator Taylor and Director of Nursing Jeff Loraine showed us around.

Ms. Taylor began her career at NHC many years ago as an intern and has been the administrator for the past 12. Mr. Loraine has worked there 12 years. Their average staff longevity is six years and they believe consistent stable staffing is a significant contributor to their success. They maintain 93 to 94% occupancy rate.

We barely got passed the front door when we noticed a true sign of home, a resident lying on a couch in one of the living areas taking a nap.

Over the years, NHC has made several physical changes to deinstitutionalize, including removing the old nurses' stations and adding small work areas. One area where there used to be a nurses' station is now a living area. Another is a kitchenette. They still have shared rooms but they have enhanced them to provide more privacy by replacing the "privacy curtains" with real walls. Besides providing more privacy, the walls have had the added benefit of reducing falls. If a resident becomes unbalanced, they can steady themselves by reaching out to the wall, rather than a curtain that provides no support.



*Privacy enhanced shared rooms*

They have added a new family dining room/theater. It has cable TV with surround sound. They also have a large library, dedicated in the memory of former long-term employee Burnice Taylor, who passed away. Residents' families enjoy donating books. It also has internet access. There is a bar for residents who enjoy alcoholic drinks. A former resident who was a professional bartender used to tend the bar.



*Courtyard fence painted by staff and family volunteers*





*Courtyard residents Spice (sheep), Gracie and Sheila (Alpacas)*

Resident animals include chickens, fish (indoors and outdoors), birds, a sheep, two alpacas, and Cocoa the horse. Cocoa has lived there 14 years. One resident is so fond of Cocoa that he has “Cocoa” tattooed on his shoulder. Another resident has a small aquarium with fish hanging from his ceiling so that he can see them while lying in bed. In the past, residents have also had personal dogs and cats. They used to have goats but had to get rid of them because they were climbing on the roofs. The chickens roamed free in the courtyard until they started being eaten by a hawk. Now they are confined in small coops.

Not everyone enjoys animals, so they also have outdoor areas without animals. They have a total of six outdoor areas that residents and visitors can enjoy. They also have a raised garden that some residents enjoy working in. One courtyard has a wooden fence that family and staff members painted to be more pleasing for the residents. They added taller chairs that are easier to get in and out of, which has increased the amount of time residents spend outdoors.



*Visitor Lydia VonJohn (left) and Resident Earl “Obie” Obermoeller (center) enjoying a visit with Cocoa (right)*

Not only do they serve the residents but they serve their family members as well. The home is an integral part of many of the family members' social lives. Susan said, "The business we are in is quality of life."

They put on a big fireworks show for the residents on Independence Day. Susan told me about one resident in particular whose favorite holiday was Independence Day. He passed away a short time after this year's celebration. They were thankful that he was able to participate and enjoy the special day before his passing.

They have a Chaplain on staff. He visits any residents who are in the hospital twice per week and attends all funerals and oftentimes delivers the eulogy.

Their Walking/Rolling Club visits each neighborhood twice daily for socialization and exercise. Residents from each neighborhood they pass through signs the participant's log sheet to document their progress.



*A neighborhood kitchenette*

They have an Executive Chef and restaurant style dining. They serve soup and salad at every meal. They also have an ice cream parlor in the dining room and ice cream is always available.

They do a lot of theme decorating. During our visit, the home was decorated with a Hawaiian theme. They put up 30 Christmas trees during the Christmas season.



In the Meadows, a special needs neighborhood that serves residents with latter stage dementia, there is no right or wrong. During my visit, they were planning a barbecue for the next day. They had recently gone on a trip to McDonalds. They also enjoy visiting Starbucks, Target, and Walmart. Another favorite activity is an art class led by a resident's family member.

A highlight of our visit was of course seeing all the animals. While in one of the courtyard to see Cocoa the horse, Spice the sheep, Gracie and Sheila the alpacas, and the chickens (I didn't catch their names), we met resident Earl "Obie" Obermoeller and his "lady friend" Lydia VonJohn, who were also enjoying the animals. Mr. Obermoeller and Ms. VonJohn invited us to stop by Mr. Obermoeller's room to visit with the two of them.



Left to right: Administrator Susan Taylor, Director of Nursing Jeff Loraine, and Dr. John Morley.

We ran into Dr. John Morley while in the courtyard. Dr. Morley has been with NHC since 1990 and is very proud of the work they have done there. He said it has been a lot of fun over the years. "You have to keep finding new ideas and changing to make people happy." When he started, they were "half-full and falling apart."

They began having animals living at the home in 1995. Early on, they had a llama nicknamed "Dr. Morley" that spit at the residents and a donkey that killed the chickens. They were so unique that the Lieutenant Governor even came to visit to see what they were doing.

Dr. Morley works for St. Louis University and brings students and researchers to work in the home. He has travelled to Singapore to share their programs and Doctors from Hong Kong and China have visited to learn from them.

They brought in a Psychologist and a PhD from Saint Louis University for a research project that coupled Cognitive Stimulation Therapy with exercise. As a result of the program, participants achieved improved memory, decreased negative behaviors, and a reduction in antipsychotic medication usage.

The results were dramatic and were published in the [Journal of the American Medical Directors Association](#). Feb2014, Vol. 15 Issue 2, p140-141. 2p. They received a Quality Improvement Award from the American Medical Director's Association for the program.

NHC has the largest dementia special needs neighborhood in St. Louis. Dr. Morely is especially proud of the Snoezelen room and said they plan to add to it. He is also proud of the fact that they have a "Five Star" rating from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' [Nursing Home Compare](#).

In addition to meeting Dr. Morley, we ran into two other physicians and a nurse practitioner during our visit. Susan said the nurse practitioner works with residents and their families with end-of-life planning.



*Lydia VonJohn and Earl "Obie" Obermoeller*

We visited with 88-years-old resident Earl "Obie" Obermoeller. Mr. Obermoeller has lived in St. Louis all of his life. His Father worked for a packing company and his Mother was a housewife. He had one full-brother who passed away and he had two half-brothers.

Mr. Obermoeller joined the Navy when he was only 17-years-old to serve during World War II. His mother had to give consent for him to join. His fellow sailors gave him the nickname "Obie." He served on two ships; a Seagoing Tug the USS Quapaw, which went on missions to rescue other ships, and a Destroyer the USS Dempsey.

After the war he attended business school and then worked for Laclede Steel until he retired at the age of 59. He said, "Retirement is great. If you can do it, take it." He and his wife had three daughters and one son. His son passed away when he was just 17-years-old. He showed us a small wooden ship that is on display in his room. Building it was a form of therapy for him to help him cope with his son's passing.





*Model ship that Mr. Obermoeller built while mourning his son's death*

Mr. Obermoeller said he let himself go and ended up getting type-two-diabetes. He was even on hospice for a while. He has lived at NHC eight months. He said, "I doubt very much you can find a better place to live." "When you need anything, they are there."

He introduced us to his "lady friend" Lydia VonJohn. He and Lydia have been friends for over 50 years. He said, "She is a lovely lady, even though she is from England." She married an American Serviceman serving in England during World War II. She was only 16-years-old. They have become close since both of their spouses passed away. She lives nearby and visits often. He said staff are welcoming to her and ask about her when she isn't there. "She greets them and slaps me."

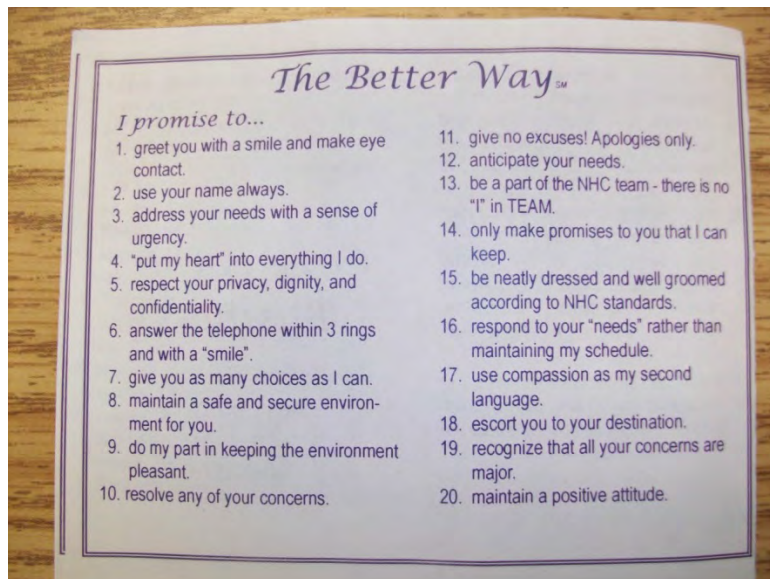
Even though he is very happy at NHC and had nothing but compliments, he is struggling with the fact that his personal home is up for sale. He said, "My memories are going."



*Restorative Coordinator Holly Hamilton, LPN*

Nurse Holly Hamilton serves as Restorative Coordinator. She is a mother of two and described her husband, who is a chef and caterer, as “wonderful.” She enjoys spending time with him, helping him with catering events and fishing. She also loves playing the piano.

Ms. Hamilton has worked at NHC 15 years. She shared how they have changed over the years. There was a set regimen when she first started working there. They put everyone to bed and put up the side rails, then got everyone up at a certain time. It wasn’t resident specific. Now, they start assessing individual needs even before the person moves in and provide what each person wants and needs. As an example, she said, “If you like to knit, we are going to have all kinds of knitting stuff for you.” She said they have accomplished meeting the residents’ schedules.



*The Better Way*

They live by NHCs “The Better Way”. During each morning “stand-up” meeting they focus on one of the promises. She shared an example; “escort you to your destination.” “We can’t point and say ‘that way.’ We escort you.” Each month, they have a meeting with everyone, including the residents. They ask themselves and the residents whether or not they are living up to each individual promise. The residents will say if they didn’t.

She really likes the new separate space for family dining/theater room that is used for special times with family members.

They didn’t use to have as many animals either. The residents “love, love, love” the alpacas and miniature horse and say it makes them feel like they are back on the farm. “When you see the residents get excited, you get excited.”

She said she wholeheartedly loves her job and takes pride in where she works. Everyone there is really into what they do and the staff longevity is “awesome.” They strive to make residents as comfortable as possible.

They are family oriented and promote a homelike environment. There is always something going on. They provide individualized music therapy. They are always decorating with different themes. The decorations serve as conversation starters. The residents have email addresses they use to communicate with family members.



The hardest part is when you can't come up with something that a resident really wants to do. She said, "You want so much for them." It is also hard when a resident doesn't want to eat.

They have ice-cream socials three or four times per week. Family members really enjoy them too. Residents with dementia get up when they want to and staff members immediately begin helping them when they are ready. They offer residents snacks before meals are served.

She told me about their recent Alzheimer's Association Penny Wars fund raiser. Pennies collected count for you. You can also put nickels, dimes, and quarters in your challengers' jars to count against them. Staff and family members get involved.

They also have competitions between neighborhoods for the least concerns and least falls. There are travelling awards. The neighborhood with the most concerns gets a dog in a dog house stuffed animal. The neighborhood with the least falls gets a trophy.

She said she has never seen an administrator as involved as Susan. Susan listens and is fair to everyone. She is not afraid to do anything. She passes trays and even does incontinence care. She said, "I honestly love her and Jeff."

One of her family members moved in for short-term rehabilitation and had a great experience. She felt comfortable and said it didn't feel like a nursing home.

In 2004, she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and was out of work for three months. During her absence, her coworkers paid all of her bills and the dietician sent food for her children every day.

Before coming to work at NHC, she had six W2s in one year. She said, "I have worked at places where people 'blow smoke.' That's not here." "I worked hard for my license as a single parent. My input is important here."



*CNA Cynthia Johnson*

CNA Cynthia Johnson was originally from Caruthersville. She has worked at NHC seven years. She described herself as “family oriented” and loves the residents like they are her family. As a matter of fact, her three daughters do volunteer work there. They do nails, pass refreshments, go for walks with the residents, and help with activities.

Ms. Johnson said, “The Meadows is the best neighborhood in the building. That’s because I’m back there.” Even though the residents are living with dementia, they are still in charge. They get up in the morning when they want. If you wake them up, they aren’t happy. Some residents like to sit and talk. Some like to fold laundry or sweep. Some like to have a basinet and dress and feed the baby dolls and put them to bed. One resident likes to pass juice. It’s their home and whatever they want she is there for them.

She said she likes to include them with what she does so they feel needed. Some might not say a word, but I can communicate with them. You have to communicate with them the way they communicate. You have to put yourself on their level.

Every day is a party. She said, “That’s our house. We will have a party back there and nobody will know anything about it.” “I want them to be able to have fun.” She just does what comes natural and the administration lets her do whatever she wants because they see how the residents react.

She loves to cook and named a long list of foods she makes for the residents, which included cookies, brownies, taquitos, quesadillas, fish, chili dogs, spaghetti, and tacos. The residents also enjoy barbecues. They eat more when I cook. Some eat two or three hamburgers, hotdogs, or pieces of chicken. She also makes her own rendition of an ice cream Blizzard. She never has a problem with them not eating. “The best way to keep them happy is with food.” The only complaint she receives is when she doesn’t make the coffee fast enough in the mornings.

The parties aren’t just for the residents. The families are very involved too. At times, she has cooked for all the residents and as many as 15 family members. She said, “Their family members know they don’t have any worries when I’m here.” Recently, the residents’ families showed their appreciation for her by throwing her a birthday party. Of course, they celebrated with the residents.

She also takes trips with the residents. She told us about a recent trip to Susan’s home. Susan’s children made hot chocolate for the residents.

The biggest improvement since she has been there is that they are more family oriented. While we were talking, she pointed to two staff members hugging and said, “See that?”

She said the snoezelen room works well for residents who are having a hard time.

She is protective of the residents and says she lets the administration know if someone comes to work there who is not a good fit. “We have to have the right people with the right mindset. If their heart is truly in the right place, things go well.”