



## Evansville State Hospital designed to rebuild derailed lives

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I am not a native of Evansville. Rather, one might call me a "transplant," as I moved here more than 15 years ago for college and never left.

Where I grew up, there were no state hospitals and my only thoughts of these facilities were ones that I formed through watching television shows or movies that depicted state hospital settings and their environment.

After working in the mental health field and serving on various mental health committees, I was excited when the opportunity arose to tour the Evansville State Hospital. I am so glad that I went and allowed myself to have a completely new understanding of what this facility not only means to the patients it serves but what it does for the betterment of our community to have this type of treatment model in place.

I won't deny that it is very unfortunate that this hospital is needed. My heart hurts for the people who reside in this facility. I wish that everyone could live prosperous, joyful and filling lives without having a mental illness.

Fortunately, there are facilities such as this hospital to help individuals with the most severe forms of mental illness learn skills and confidence that may allow them one day to return to more of a community-based treatment setting.

I am writing this column for one reason: understanding. It is my hope that after reading this article, you will no longer drive by the hospital with a jagged view (similar to mine as a child/young adult), but with a new perspective of what really goes on inside the doors. Even more, that you may want to get involved in making sure that facilities such as this stay in place for many years to come for our community.

Upon entering the hospital, which was

newly built in 2003, I was received with smiling faces, lots of fresh open lighting and windows in the hallways and a very well organized and clean facility. I could instantly tell that staff members take pride in their work and make sure that the patients have a clean, safe place to reside.

I was astonished to see the number of classrooms available for individuals to have group meetings, schedules that reflected numerous educational seminars being offered by various community partners and activity rooms that offered patients the ability to enhance their skills in pottery, painting, sewing, quilting and other crafts.

The facility also offers patients a banking center, clothing store, exercise room, gymnasium, chapel, bowling alley and lush spaces to enjoy the outside. Patients also have access to an in-house library where they can check out materials and also participate in a book discussion group, thanks to a partnership with the Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library.

At one point during the tour we stopped by a newly renovated space referred to as the diner. Murals painted by patients under the direction of University of Evansville art students and hospital staff depicted classic cars on the walls; a jukebox in the corner was ready to play classic oldies music.

On Fridays, patients are given the opportunity to eat their lunch in the diner instead of the main cafeteria. These patients are greeted by patients in vocational rehabilitation programs who work behind the counter, taking orders and helping serve the food.

The thing that struck me the most is that my tour guide said, "A patient once told me that he loved working in this

diner. He stated that when he gets better and can live in the community again, his dream is to work in a restaurant like this."

Simple. That is what I thought about that patient's message. His dream is simple, he just wants to live a fulfilling life and work in a restaurant; he just wants to be happy and to overcome his illness.

While I was at the hospital, I learned about a few programs offered for the patients and our community. Each month, it has a birthday club that allows individuals to send a birthday card to one of the patients to let them know they care.

Also offered is a friend-to-friend program: once a month community members can come and visit an individual who does not have family members who visit and they can participate in a group activity with this person to show that someone cares. I instantly signed up for both of these programs as they are simple things I can do to make a small difference in a person's life.

I encourage you to learn more about mental health and the services and programs offered in our community. We are a community that cares about others.

It is my hope that when you drive by the Evansville State Hospital you, too, will know that if you ever have a friend or loved one in need of more intense treatment, that our community works hard to ensure that facilities such as this exist.

It also is comforting to know that your loved one would be in the hands of a devoted and passionate staff that puts the patient first.