

New pub, part of a major expansion, gives Meadowlark residents a place to mingle

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In a large common room at Meadowlark Hills retirement community, several gray-haired women sit at a table playing cards, peering through thick spectacles at their queens and their jacks.

It's not surprising, perhaps, but it isn't the whole picture. At another table, a man surfs the Web on a laptop. Nearby, a woman finishes a game of Wii Golf from her wheelchair.

And across the hall, residents gather at the pub, where they can order a drink or two, enjoy live music and generally have a good time.

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The Kansas Room Pub & Lounge, which opened in July, operates from 4 to 7 p.m. Monday through Saturday. It functions like any other bar, serving wine and beer, liquor and cocktails.

Patrons can even order appetizers like buffalo wings or mini-cheeseburgers.

The pub has a nice atmosphere - cozy, with low lighting, comfy seats, a flat-screen television and an enormous wooden bar. A waitress dressed neatly in black bustles around, taking orders and occasionally stepping around a walker.

Things are starting to pick up. The pub occasionally features a guest bartender or live entertainment. On this day it has both, and by a quarter to five, all the seats are taken.

Mayor Tom Phillips and state Rep. **Sydney Carlin** have been among the guest bartenders who pour drinks and mingle with patrons, but Kent Sedlacek, senior director of gift planning for the KSU foundation, is on duty this time. Near the bar, Doug "Chappie" Chapman sets up to sing and play oldies on guitar.

Most of the Kansas Room customers said they come for the social setting. The bar has events like tailgate parties, which give Meadowlark residents a chance to meet one another.

"There's a bigger crowd when they play football games," said Bob Hawley, who was there with his wife, Evelyn. "I don't know if many more will show up for the basketball games, though."

"We just come to see some of our friends and to socialize," Evelyn Hawley said. "It's a nice area for people who live here to get to know each other."

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The Hawleys, who are in independent living at Meadowlark, fail to mention that they spearheaded the addition of a pub to the facility.

They approached Meadowlark officials with the idea of a pub and were instrumental in making it a reality, said Jeff Chapman, director of marketing and public relations and executive director of the Meadowlark Hills Foundation.

The Hawleys also purchased the huge bar itself. They found it at Mill Creek Antiques in Paxico. Before that, the piece was in a bar in St. Louis.

Its back piece reaches almost to the ceiling and has drawers and a large mirror that reflects the entire room. The front piece, where patrons sit to drink, bears a heavy-looking antique cash register, and the dark countertop is worn slightly with age. The Hawleys said they believe the bar may date back as far as the 1880s.

Though the couple makes no mention of their part in the creation of the Kansas Room Pub & Lounge, a metal plaque on the bar bearing their name gives them away.

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The pub is part of a \$25-million expansion at Meadowlark Hills that includes many new features that make Meadowlark even more like its own self-contained town. Prairie Star, the new gourmet restaurant Chapman said rivals any in town, adjoins the rooms that contain the bar.

Grosh Cinema, a small theater across the hall, advertises showtimes for "Grumpier Old Men" on a small marquee. Inside, the room is festooned with maroon curtains and vintage movie posters. Residents settle into rows of leather chairs in front of a big screen. The smell of butter wafts from a popcorn machine.

Around the corner, a craft room is equipped for activities like pottery, painting and stained glass, and a woodworking shop is filled with power tools.

Through the window of the Pizazz Salon, one woman sits under a dryer with rollers in her hair flips through a magazine while Oprah chats on the television. Chapman said the new salon, the second on the campus, offers not only hair services, but also manicures, pedicures and massage.

"No tanning and no tattoos - yet," he said, grinning.

That may have been a joke, but Meadowlark has long sought to redefine ideas about what retirement homes and old age should be. It is a model for similar institutions both nationally and internationally. It has been the subject of research and studies, and in October was featured on CBS's "Eye on America" for its approach. While most nursing homes are based on hospitals, Chapman has said, Meadowlark Hills looks to foster a more home-like atmosphere with small "households" and "neighborhoods."

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The pub idea was not entirely original - Chapman said a few facilities in big cities also have bars - but it is unusual, and not all residents supported it.

"There's always that type of environment anywhere," Chapman said, calling Meadowlark a microcosm of Manhattan. "There are always going to be individuals who aren't in favor of drinking alcoholic beverages."

Those who don't approve of alcohol can simply avoid that part of the building, though, since it is restricted to one area. Patrons are allowed to take their drinks into the adjoining Manhattan Room and Prairie Star Restaurant for dinner, or out into the common room when a crowd at the pub creates a need for overflow space, but signs down the hallway on either side show the bounds for drinks.

"Some people think it's awesome, and some people would rather we not have it," said Meadowlark resident Sandra Emley. She and her husband, Don, were meeting some non-resident friends for drinks. "But it's a fun

place to gather and have a glass of wine."

Residents often invite guests to the pub, but anyone can come, Chapman said. The public can even rent the spaces for a fee, just like they would a hotel conference room. Residents pay for drinks with their meal cards, so they don't have to carry cash.

Within the next few weeks several more spots will open within the redevelopment: a coffee shop called Verna Belle's Cafe, a convenience store and gift shop, a fitness center and a classroom where the K-State Center on Aging will conduct classes.

"You're going to see a lot of happy people today," Chapman said Thursday. "They just moved out of the trailers and into their new offices."

The city commission helped finance the expansion with \$21 million in bonds, and Meadowlark is responsible for the remainder. Chapman said they have raised \$3.7 million of the amount so far, and expect to have the rest by the end of the fiscal year in July.

Don and Beth Kesinger of Manhattan came to visit Beth's mother, Velma Day, who turned 98 on Wednesday. Day moved from her long-time home in Illinois and now has an independent-living apartment in the main building.

Don Kesinger said Day is particularly looking forward to the new store set to open next week.

"There's something for everyone," Day said. "If you have to sell your home, it's a wonderful place to live."

The Kesingers, who live at Colbert Hills, said someday they may decide to live at Meadowlark Hills. Already, they have taken bus trips with groups from Meadowlark to places like Chicago and Nashville.

"It's a really nice place," Beth Kesinger added.

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