A Home Away From Home

Senior living center offers residents safe, residential setting with all the comforts of home – and beautifully decorated furnishings and inviting common spaces to go with it

By Sarah Bestul

Arlene Freeman, 82, relaxed in a comfy patterned chair in a front sitting room, book in her lap, snowy hair perfectly in place. Her choice of room was strategic: the sitting room, casual yet stylishly decorated, was just across from the dining room, where lunch was about to be served.

Across the foyer, a friendly receptionist chatted with a steady stream of residents who were going outside for a walk on the grounds or to catch the shuttle to the local shops, and welcomed the visitors who were staying for lunch with the residents. It's autumn in Minnesota, with anyone coming or going wearing coats. Inside, however, it was warm and smelled like the freshly brewed coffee that's always available on the nearby refreshment bar, as well as the cookies that are an every-Wednesday treat. Freeman leaned forward, and her brown eyes sparkled as she spoke about moving to Red Rock Senior Living.

"Oh, I'm so happy here, very happy," she said of the Woodbury, Minnesota, community. "I didn't think I would ever come to a place like this because I loved my house, but it is wonderful here. I just adore this place."

She waved at a friend coming through the door and explained that she came to Red Rock, located about 15 minutes east of St. Paul, in May. A fall prompted her and her niece to decide that she'd be better off in an assisted living environment. Freeman said she feels lucky to be settled at Red Rock.

"My niece thought the other place she looked at for me was too large. She was really surprised that I was happy with a change," she laughed. "You know, when someone is older, they sometimes fight change. But I thought it was just great when I came here. I found my niche here."

Jackie Juan, the executive director of Red Rock, said the cozy atmosphere has contributed to the community's success.

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"We have a really home-like setting here, very warm and inviting – and energetically fun," she said. "Since we opened we've been ahead of our projected numbers, which has been great. The building is large but not too large – everyone is going to know your name. You're not just a number."

Location, Location, Location

So how did this all come together? Matt Frisbie, the project's lead architect who was involved from the very beginning, said it took a lot of cooperation and teamwork. Frisbie, a vice president at Ayres Associates, began by contacting Ebenezer Management, the management company of Red Rock.

"They had done a market study that showed there was a definite need in that area for a senior housing development in Woodbury, but the trouble was finding a good site," Frisbie said. "That area's real estate was very tight at the time, and an available site in a good location at a reasonable price was not going to fall into our laps."

But one day, while driving around the city, Frisbie noticed a patch of land right off the interstate that was open. There were no for-sale signs, but the idea took root, and he asked around to find its owner. It was a scrap left over from a right-of-way from the highway, forgotten and ignored. However, when combined with the purchase of three adjacent residential lots, it provided just enough space for Red Rock and its grounds. It was a win-win-win: Ebenezer had a new home for its community, the Ayres Associates team could begin design, and the City was pleased to have a formerly empty lot back on the tax rolls.

The process of acquiring all the pieces, permits, and financing took nearly two years, but the team's patience and persistence have been amply rewarded. Juan said the building is more than 80 percent filled. The site has played a large role in the success of Red Rock. Convenient to several medical facilities, grocery and retail stores, and churches, Red Rock's residential location makes it a peaceful and pretty setting – and its location near the interstate makes it easy for visitors to find.

Options for Care

Red Rock's living options include independent living, assisted living, memory care, and care suites. Ebenezer's model is to not have these segregated from each other, and so the whole community was designed to flow together. Resident Arlene Freeman said she's enjoyed going to the sing-alongs that have been held in the memory care wing, and executive director Jackie Juan recalled that at the one-year anniversary party, approximately 150 people attended and used the entire building.

"We can host great parties, but families can still have their private areas for smaller parties if they need it. The commons spaces are very universal for residents and families, so that's awesome," Juan said.

Independent: Just like renting an apartment, except that residents also have the ability to add on housekeeping, meal, and laundry packages.

Assisted living: Residents have a pendant to call for assistance if needed, and can decide on how many hours of care per week they'll need. Includes housekeeping, meals, and laundry services.

Memory care: A secure environment for those with dementia. Includes 24-hour assistance, housekeeping, meals, and laundry service.

Care suites: Offers privacy and a home-like environment for patients outside the community who are recovering from surgery. Less expensive than a hospital room and more comfortable than a shared room at a nursing home, these have been extremely popular at Red Rock. This part of the building has its own dining room, but Juan says just about everyone comes down to eat together in the main dining room.

Turning a Facility into a Home

The building's wide, short hallways lead to cozy common rooms stocked with puzzles, games, and other activities, and plenty of comfortable chairs and convenient tables let residents relax and chat. There are often birthday parties or even baby showers being held in the several side rooms. Natural light streams in everywhere, and there's a large bank of windows on the second floor overlooking the grounds and the bustling city beyond. Juan says this is her favorite part of the building.

"That broad line of windows makes it very bright, and the theater is right there, along with the puzzle room. It's so open, and there are tons of sitting areas and little tables. And the pub is beautiful," she said.

Freeman said she especially enjoys the common areas.

"You know, you don't want to be in your room all the time. So I like to sit in the room where they rehabilitate people. Or I can go sit outside and read. And every day before lunch I come and sit in this room with this book," she said.

"Obviously, lots of things are working," noted Jill Nokleby Kaiser, the housing development director of Ebenezer. "People like that it's comfortable and open in the common areas; they like the decks outside."

She echoed what Freeman and her niece thought of it: "It's not so large that it looks imposing; there's a lot that's cozy in the building."

Though the layout and furnishings look as though they were the natural choice, quite a bit of thought and care went into everything from deciding the width of the hallways right down to choosing the items in an activity center in the Memory Care wing. Frisbie, designer Dan Burnam, and interior designer Anne Peterson brought their experience and research to the table, while still keeping Ebenezer management involved.

"The big role that architects play is translating what an operator needs the building to be," Nokleby Kaiser explained. "I look to the architect to say, 'I hear what you're saying, and this is what we can do to get you

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Interior Design: More than Just Paint

While the warm colors and inviting furniture draw people in, so much more than just color goes into putting the puzzle pieces of interior design together.

Interior designer Anne Peterson says the first step is to sit down with her client to talk about the desired look – and what can be done within the given budget.

"Often senior living managers are looking for a warm, inviting environment, so we'll go through the palettes to choose what style they'd like, such as modern, traditional, etc., that fits with the location or community where the building will be located," Peterson said.

She said safety is one of the biggest considerations when designing for senior living communities. For example, as people age, eyesight weakens, and the lens of the eye tends to yellow. This can cause an unsteadiness among seniors at floor transitions because they are unable to read depth properly. This is especially true in memory care wings, where a strong contrast in color could also be difficult for dementia patients, who might mistake light-to-dark transitions of materials as a step or a hole in the floor.

Peterson said long-term durability and cost is also something she takes into consideration. "Due to all of the traffic from residents and staff, the flooring wears quickly. We select durable luxury vinyl tile and low-level pile carpet and work at minimizing transitions between different flooring types," she said. "Not only do I want to save my clients money in the long run by choosing materials that won't have to be replaced in a year or two, but I also want to make sure that nothing creates a trip hazard."

She said that while there are plenty of trendy products out there that are fun to look at, they don't actually wear well in a senior living environment. "Senior living managers want the building to look home-like and stylish to attract residents and their families, but we need to walk the line between what draws people in and what is going to last," Peterson said, noting that in addition to being attractive and durable, fabrics need to be anti-microbial, moisture and stain-resistant, in budget, and meet flammability code for the building type. "This can really narrow the list of possibilities," she said, "but so far I've always been able to find something that will complement the design."

"Anne did a miracle there," said Jill Nokleby Kaiser, the housing development director of Ebenezer Management, Red Rock Senior Living's management company. "She got the goal of what was needed, she was easy to work with and didn't bog us down with the details, which helped move us forward."

Peterson said that while she enjoys putting all these pieces together, at the end of day, her favorite part is seeing the residents use the spaces she and the team have created. "It's satisfying to see residents take the big step of leaving their home and making this their new home," she said. "It's fun to see how they use the spaces – even if it's differently than we originally envisioned!"

> "I look to the architect to say, 'I hear what you're saying, and this is what we can do to get you there.' And then to be creative along the way, and if there's something that's a challenge, help us to fix it. Matt (Frisbie) did a very good job at that. He just gets it."
>
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Teaming up again

A new collaboration between Ebenezer and Ayres Associates broke ground just a few months ago and is expected to open next summer. The Lake Elmo Senior Living building will be larger but similar to Red Rock Senior Living in many ways. Jill Nokleby Kaiser says the project has gotten off to a smooth start. “Matt (Frisbie) incorporated all our feedback [from Red Rock],” she said. “We got done in the first two meetings what would normally have taken six or seven meetings to work out, because he listened.”

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“We looked at all the recent research on senior housing to see what was new and most helpful for seniors and the staff who work with them,” Frisbie said. “We knew we wanted it to be convenient and have it really open and full of natural light. You’ve got residents that you hope you can make their lives better and their families’ lives better, and then there are the staff and how do you improve their lives.”

Communication was vital during the design process, and Frisbie and Burnam worked hand-in-hand with Ebenezer to ensure that the focused design time resulted in better health care services for Ebenezer’s residents and staff.

“In the end what we ended up doing was using the site’s problems – the size and the grade – to our advantage,” Burnam said. “It took a lot of design concepts, but we finally got to the point where we had a compact yet open layout. We built an underground garage into the hillside – which is great for Minnesota winters – and took advantage of the height to get that great vantage point on the second floor.”

The end result has been a success for both Ebenezer and the residents.

“It’s all about the residents,” Juan said. “Ultimately if they’re happy and their families are happy, then we’re happy. And the residents and staff seem to love it.”

“I would say it was the best thing I ever did to come,” Freeman beamed. “It’s a wonderful place.” ■