

Features



A well-kept secret:

Timberline Residential Treatment Center

by Emily Hartl
Head Editor

Whether you've walked near, driven past, or sled down the hill leading to Timberline Knolls, you've undoubtedly wondered what type of facility was hiding behind the "Personal Property/No Trespassing" signs.

Try as you might to peek through the forest of foliage surrounding the property, it's nearly impossible to distinguish what lies inside the clearing that has been a part of Lemont for years.

All it took was an email to Carrie Finazzo, the Timberline Knolls Academy principal, and suddenly I found myself meeting with the CEO of the facility, James Gresham, to investigate one of Lemont's best-kept secrets.

The beauty of healing

Upon my arrival at Timberline Knolls (TK), I immediately noticed the incredible beauty and vastness of the property—43 acres of vastness, to be exact. Charming pale-yellow buildings and snow-covered trees embellished the intimacy of the woodland area.

Upon my entrance into the Administrative Building, I took note of the warm-and-cozy aura of the lobby. It resembled the waiting room of a spa: comfortable furniture, soft lighting, beautiful pictures decorating the walls, earthy tones and a smiling secretary.

I first met with Finazzo, who led me to the upper level of the building. She introduced me to multiple staff members and explained the reason for my visit; everyone was friendly and excited to meet me. All the staff members expressed what a passion they have for their work and their purpose.

Also, they couldn't say enough positive things about Gresham, their boss. They said they loved working for him and that he was great at what he does. Naturally I was very excited to meet such an admired man.

What's it all about?

TK treats women ages 12 and older with many types of disorders, including eating disorders, substance abuse and addiction, mood disorders, and trauma/anxiety, specializing in co-occurring disorders. The staff takes care to treat each resident personally and on an individual basis.

"We serve people from all over the country," Gresham says. The facility is "convenient for families to get to"

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Way back when: Rock Creek Center

Rock Creek Center, the clinic previously inhabiting what is now Timberline Knolls, shut down in 2002 due to financial scandal. Prior to its closing, however, the RCC was a hospital for patients with chronic mental illness.

According to the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), the 133-bed facility was operating at approximately 63% occupancy. The patients residing there were sent to various area hospitals after the closing.

Post-close, the center was investigated for “overcharging the federal health insurance program for people 65 and older or for people with chronic disabilities,” according to a Chicago Tribune article from Oct. 2, 2002.

At the time, employees of RCC refrained from divulging any details regarding the circumstances of the center’s demise. Suspicions arose when a patient at RCC died in 2001; the IDPH attributed the death to a lack of adequate patient monitoring.

The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services later conducted a survey of four deaths occurring at RCC, the details of which were not publically issued. An owner of the facility claimed that their operations were flawed due to Medicare’s failure to properly reimburse their costs.

Meanwhile, RCC was losing nearly \$10,000 per day, and still investing about \$1 million to expand the facility.

Needless to say, after the discovery of kickback payoffs to area doctors for referring their patients to RCC, the facility shut down.

Rock Creek Center is an entirely separate and unrelated entity to Timberline Knolls. They have no connection aside from occupying similar property.

with its proximity to the Chicago airports. TK staff places great importance on family therapy.

“We try to meet the patients where they’re at,” he says. “We are in this incredibly serene place to facilitate healing for women.”

The reason for having a facility for women only is to provide a safe environment, free from distraction or intimidation. “A lot of our residents have trauma,” Gresham explains. In fact, 90% of residents have experienced some type of trauma. The privacy is, according to Gresham, one of the key factors to successful treatment.

Therapy is initiated either by patients’ families, other medical professionals, or prospective residents themselves. Gresham says it isn’t rare for women to seek their own help and treatment.

“They have nowhere else to turn,” he says. “[Healing] requires their own initiative.”

Residents follow the 12-Step principles throughout their stay at TK, and long after they leave. The facility is not a Christian treatment center, but does offer spiritual guidance as an extension of the 12-Step Program.

In addition, TK offers many “Core Groups” or alternate therapies, including Art Therapy, Dance/Movement Therapy, Equine Therapy, and Recreational/Activity Therapy.

The art therapy “offers an opportunity to explore intense or painful thoughts and feelings in a supportive environment...using a wide variety of art materials...to create a visual representation of thought and feelings.”

The equine therapy at TK Ranch allows residents to work with and care for horses, so women can “regain their confidence by developing skills that can be applied to all aspects of life.”

Residents also have the opportunity to “participate in a wide-range of outings which includes

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museums, theaters, [and] horse back riding.”

Both adolescents and adults can take electives including nutrition, self-defense, cooking, fitness, and prayer groups.

“It’s a safe place to work on some things,” says Finazzo. “It’s very gently done.”

Melanie DeVries, the marketing coordinator at TK, emphasized the relationships among residents at the facility and how they “feed off each other in recovery.”

Finazzo added, “It’s amazing what friendship does.”

Both women were exceptionally enthusiastic about their jobs, constantly joking about how “there’s something in the water” there because they are always pleased with their jobs. They enjoy the satisfaction and rewarding feeling of helping women to heal and recover.

An inside look from the outside

I was fortunate enough to interview an alumna of TK, who is currently an LHS student. She stayed at TK for just over a month, during 2007. She was 14 years old at the time.

She was treated for depression, brought on by traumatic events in her life that led to drug usage. Her parents originally brought her to TK for treatment but she was skeptical about staying in a residential treatment facility.

The things that helped her to heal, however, were the expressive therapy—particularly art therapy—and her fellow residents, as well as the compassionate staff members at TK.

The art therapy “keeps you honest about things and tries to make you feel accepted so you’re not keeping secrets anymore,” she said.

During a typical day, she woke up at 7am and hung out in the common rooms with other residents.

During this free time, girls were not allowed to be in their rooms, but they could socialize with other girls, or individually work on their own projects. “I collaged,” my interviewee said.

Breakfast followed this quiet time, and then the school day began at Timberline Knolls Academy (TKA), where she studied all the typical teenage subjects but in a smaller classroom. The school-age residents were only divided into two classes.

TKA is an Illinois State Board of Education-approved school, with individual education plans for each girl.

The schoolgirls ate lunch together as well, and after lunch “you talk with the group that you’re with... [for example] girls with eating disorders talk about how the meal was,” she explained.

In her group, the girls discussed drugs and their effects, among other things, using packets and professionals to help them.

The girls ate dinner and then met with a therapist or visited with their parents.

As a resident, “[you] want your parents to better understand why you’re doing the things that you’re doing [and] try to gain some of their trust back,” she said.

Each resident designates her own goals for the week. She explained, “You have your own assigned person on the staff that you’re supposed to talk to.”

Throughout each day, each girl “has a little card that you have to get filled out... a scoring card, kind of.”

The card she referred to is actually called a Recovery Card. The Recovery Card is a tool in place for residents to pull on their strengths and offer incentives for their hard work on a daily basis. This card is used as a

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reflection tool for both residents and staff to track progress and challenges. Residents have the opportunity to earn incentives as an acknowledgement of their hard work.

The residents are encouraged to maintain the friendships from TK. “I still talk to a lot of the girls I was there with. You don’t expect to find someone who’s been through the same things,” my interviewee said.

She explained that friendships in a residential treatment facility are stronger because there’s no judgment among residents; they empathize with each other and can better understand difficult situations or traumatic events.

The staff, similarly, formed strong relationships with her. “I feel like every staff member tried to develop a personal relationship. There’s someone who’s gonna be proud of you and push you further along in your recovery,” she said.

“They legitimately care about you and want you to get better, they work really hard, they always try to get you to engage in groups, and they don’t give up. They’re so patient with you,” she further explained.

Right before my interviewee left TK, the art teacher gave her a small stone inscribed with the word “Focus” and the other staff gave her a bracelet.

“You feel safe there; it’s a structured environment ... you’re surrounded by people you connect with,” she said. “I stopped being bitter about my situation ... I saw how many people care about me. I decided it was time for me to grow up. Six months later, I had completely changed as a



person and realized everything I learned [at TK] was beneficial to me.”

For more information about Timberline Knolls, visit www.timberlineknolls.com or call (630) 257.9600