

THE CITIZEN
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EAST METRO



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five ways to shape up.
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Staff Photo: Lee Duffin
Above, practicing their grocery shopping skills at Our Place are, from left, Eric Sowers, Bobby Light, Donna Cronan, Instructor Demetris James and Peggy Wilburn. Right, Our Place music therapist Vicki Fair conducts a sing-along with client Robert McWilliams.



Getting life experience

Our Place renovations better equip clients

By KAREN J. ROHR,
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Aundrea Lamondo sports a hair net, apron and white latex gloves as she makes her way into the industrial-sized kitchen at Our Place where she'll work alongside other developmentally disabled adults making lunch for herself and her peers.

But, before she enters into the kitchen, she stops and delivers an excited message to her sign language teacher. Her teacher smiles and

reassures her that she will see her in class in a few hours. Satisfied, Aundrea continues on into the kitchen.

Aundrea, 26, is taking advantage of a revamped set of activities at Our Place, a day program for developmentally disabled adults operated by Rockdale Cares and its newest partner, Georgia Community Support and Solutions (GCSS). The program, which serves between 30 and 35 clients over the age of 22, instructs individuals in living and job skills, and offers enrichment classes ranging from music to assistive technology.

"One of the most impressive things about GCSS is the overall attitude of the staff, the amount of respect the staff has for the clients, because that to me is so incredibly important. They all seem to exert a caring spirit," said Aundrea's mother, Robin Lamondo.

Rockdale Cares, a local nonprofit organization designed to aid the developmentally disabled population and their families, partnered with GCSS in May after evaluating two other disability support service nonprofits.

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Our Place

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including United Cerebral Palsy, which had provided programming at Our Place since 2001. GCSS stood out because of its ability to provide an expanded menu of activities.

Using \$40,000 in corporate and community donations, Rockdale Cares and GCSS renovated the building at 875 Davis Drive in Conyers to include mock-ups of local businesses including a Kroger supermarket, a SunTrust bank, a LongHorn Steakhouse and a post office. Clients at Our Place practice daily living experiences like grocery shopping, making bank deposits and withdrawals, eating out and mailing letters at the various stations.

“Our goal in creating the new, improved Our Place was to provide individuals with disabilities the most vibrant, enriching range of learning and daily life experiences as possible. By creating true-to-life and community-based learning opportunities at Our Place, the people we serve can feel more confident when they go out in their own communities — where the restaurant, bank and grocery store feel more familiar,” said Whitney Fuchs, GCSS president and CEO.

Other new learning components within Our Place include an assistive technology lab equipped with several computers; a mock bedroom/living

ATAGLANCE

Our Place renovation sponsors:

- Rockdale Cares
 - Georgia Community Support Services
 - SunTrust Bank
 - Mark III Signs
 - Clean Cut Fabricators
 - Kroger Grocery Stores
 - PFI Construction
 - LongHorn Steakhouse
 - LongHorn Steakhouse managing partner Paul Smith
 - Ruby Tuesday
 - U.S. Postal Services
 - Purofirst
 - Reboot-Assistive Technology Center
 - Wi-Fi Magic Technology Solutions
 - Melanie Miller
 - Rich Giddens
 - Randy's Carpet
 - Raven Narine
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room where clients can learn how to maintain a home; a movie theater room complete with chairs, popcorn popper and a large flat-screen television mounted on the wall; a quiet, sensory room that contains low lighting, bean bag chairs, small water fountains and a stereo system for playing soothing, classical music; a thrift store; and a conference room that provides space for speech and sign language classes and discussions on topics such as the rights of the developmentally disabled. In the commons area of the building, clients eat their meals and snacks and take part in arts and music therapy classes.

“In terms of success and their vision for Our Place, they are making a tremendous effort to actually be able to provide the services that are our goals as parents and care providers,” said Lamondo, who added that her daughter is an active part of planning her activities at the center.

Established in 1978, Rockdale Cares not only provides the day program but also advocates for the rights of the developmentally disabled, organizes social activities for clients, operates a greenhouse run by the clients and provides respite care for families and caregivers of the mentally challenged.

Lamondo said the volunteer board of Rockdale Cares, along with director Barbara Kilpatrick, are to be commended for their efforts to improve the lives of the developmentally disabled in Rockdale County.

“There are so many parents who have children with special needs. They spend a tremendous amount of time thinking about what their future holds,” Robin Lamondo said. “What I would say to those parents is strongly consider evaluating Our Place. Under GCSS, they would be pleasantly surprised that there is such a wonderful program in our small community.”

For more information about Our Place, visit www.rockdalecares.org or www.gacomunity.com or call 770-922-7272.