

Vivian D. Shepherd

Founder, Rehabilitation Institute
1905-1992

By David Conrads

"I treated Elmer as a friend," Vivian Davis Shepherd once remarked in tracing her philosophy back to a childhood pal. "The fact that he was deaf never entered into it." That her friend did not require or desire babying was a realization Shepherd carried into her career as the founding executive director of the Rehabilitation Institute, where for decades she empowered people to develop abilities instead of focusing on disabilities.

Vivian Davis was born December 30, 1905, and spent much of her childhood in Jefferson City, Missouri, where her father worked as a manager for the Singer Sewing Machine Company. After receiving her degree from Central Missouri State University, she taught for several years in elementary schools in the northern part of the state. She met and married a fellow teacher, James R. Shepherd, with whom she was soon raising a daughter.

In Kansas City, where the young family settled, Shepherd's husband began a long career teaching world history and physical education in district high schools. Vivian's characteristic assertiveness led to her activism with the "clean sweep" reform movement of the late 1930s in which a non-partisan coalition triumphed over the corrupt but crumbling Pendergast political machine in city elections. After several years working as an office manager for a telegraph company, she took a job in the Kansas City office of the Missouri Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

In response to a suggestion by Shepherd and others, a coalition of social service agencies conducted a study in 1946 analyzing services available to Kansas Citians with disabilities. World War II had just ended, and thousands of returning servicemen struggled to live with war wounds and lost limbs. Meanwhile, with a vaccine still years away, many polio survivors faced the challenges of physical paralysis. The study found an appallingly large population of these and other underserved individuals, the quality of whose lives held the promise of improvement with proper attention. The resulting plan created a new organization, among the first of its kind nationwide, known as the Rehabilitation Institute. To serve



as its first director, Vivian Shepherd took a year's leave of absence from her state job. It lasted over 25 years.

In its earliest days, the Institute relied on its parent organizations, strong leadership from a board of directors headed by Eleanor Jones Kemper and donations of money, supplies, and expertise from various Kansas City businesses. Largely with donated material and labor, the Institute moved into its first facility, the second floor above a tire shop at 2700 McGee. Here, a staff of Shepherd, a physical therapist, an occupational therapist, and a workshop foreman, employed the latest methods and equipment, some of their own creation, to teach people to live and work with physical challenges.

Shepherd's days at the Institute sometimes lasted from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. and her infectious energy created an environment where patients often were too busy to become discouraged. With the goal of developing self-sufficiency and independence, the Institute offered its visitors a non-hospital setting in which to recover, and an on-site workshop provided a venue for learning new skills. In its first year the Institute served 141 individuals with an annual budget of \$30,000; by the time of Shepherd's retirement in 1974, its budget had grown to nearly \$1.5 million, allowing for a staff of over 100 to serve about 3,000 patients in a state-of-the-art, \$3 million facility at 3011 Baltimore.

Shepherd, who received a master's degree in counseling from the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 1953, received distinguished alumni honors from the school in 1959 and 1982. Among her many other noteworthy awards was the 1973 recognition of her life's work by the National Rehabilitation Association. She died at age 87 on April 8, 1992, having filled the years since her retirement with volunteerism and service to a number of organizations, including the Shepherd's Center, the Metropolitan Council on Developmental Disabilities, and the Women's Chamber of Commerce of Kansas City, Missouri. The Rehabilitation Institute continues the mission she helped to identify and develop.

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