



Retired British diplomat Michael Gathercole is leading plans for Kinship Village at Fairhill Partners in Cleveland

By Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer

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Steven Litt/The Plain Dealer Michael Gathercole served 37 years as a British diplomat before taking a position with Fairhill Partners in Cleveland. Michael Gathercole had no idea growing up in King's Lynn, Norfolk, England, that after a long career as a British diplomat, he'd wind up at age 71 leading a project to create a new kind of nonprofit housing at a center for social-service organizations in Cleveland.

But there he is at **Fairhill Partners** at 12200 Fairhill Road, spearheading "**Kinship Village**." He couldn't be happier.

"This has been a true revelation and a new experience to me," he said Wednesday during a tour of the 10-acre, 10-building Fairhill complex, where he has acted as associate director for 10 years, longer than he served in any single diplomatic posting.

"Naturally, I've seen social services at work in a lot of places, but never close up, and I've found this a fascinating experience," he said.

Kinship Village will comprise 22 apartments in two renovated residential buildings, plus seven more in existing townhouses on the Fairhill campus, located at the corner of Fairhill Road and East 124th Street.

The beige brick buildings, which date to the late 1920s, will house a mix of "grand families" -- in which grandparents are raising their grandchildren -- as well as social service volunteers and employees of Fairhill member agencies.

Social worker Stephanie FallCreek, the president and chief executive officer of Fairhill Partners, conceived the Kinship Village concept and assigned Gathercole to carry it out.

The project will include installing geothermal fields adjacent to the buildings to reduce energy costs. Gathercole said Forum Architects of Cleveland, the firm that won the job of designing Kinship Village, is aiming for a LEED Silver rating under the U.S. Green Building Council's program for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

So far, Fairhill has raised \$750,000 toward a \$3.5 million goal for the project, or roughly half the cost of renovating the first of the two buildings.

"We're getting quite excited about this," Gathercole said. "I can almost smell it and touch it."

Fairhill sits on part of what once was an estate owned by Cleveland brewer Otto Leisy.

It was built in 1930 as a U.S. Marine Hospital, designed primarily to serve sailors in the U.S. Merchant Marine. The hospital closed in 1953 and reopened three years later as a state psychiatric hospital. The Fairhill Mental Health Center, as it was renamed, closed in 1983.

Six years after that, the property became the Fairhill Center for Aging, a joint project with the Benjamin Rose Institute at University Hospitals.



The founding partners separated from the institution in 2005.

Fairhill has continued to expand on its original mission of encouraging successful aging. It now provides affordable space and shared services for an array of 35 tenant organizations, including the Intergenerational School, a charter school; Golden Age Centers of Greater Cleveland; and five local churches with congregations too small to afford their own buildings.

Fairhill also continues its own programs, including its School for Caregivers, which trains adult caregivers of loved ones; the Computer Learning Center, which trains students over age 40; and Kinship Care, which serves older adults raising children.

Gathercole joined Fairhill in 2000 after serving in the British diplomatic service in posts ranging from Trinidad, Nigeria and Kenya to Finland, Saudi Arabia, Cleveland, India and New York.

Of all his assignments, Kenya, where he learned some Swahili, was his favorite.

"Magic," he called it. "The best place I ever went. I'd go back there in a minute if I could see a sensible way of doing it."

It was in Saudi Arabia that Gathercole was assigned to coordinate the construction of a new British Embassy compound, a job that required him to "sit around a table with architects and surveyors and keep everyone from going at each other's throats."

That experience led to a subsequent assignment in Britain in which he oversaw management of 4,500 embassy properties in 200 countries around the world "with as many different currencies and languages," as he puts it.

Following that job, the diplomatic service assigned Gathercole to Cleveland, where he served four years as British consul.

Gathercole's interest in architecture and construction helped spark a friendship with leading architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable, whom he and his wife, Gayle, met in New York while he serving as deputy British consul general.

After reaching the mandatory retirement age of 60, Gathercole and his wife made a deal: The first one to get a new job would determine where the couple would move next.

Gayle decided the issue by taking a position in internal communications at Medical Mutual of Ohio in Cleveland, and Gathercole happily followed.

While at Fairhill, Gathercole helped establish a new national organization, the **Nonprofit Centers Network**, to aid multi-tenant nonprofit centers similar to Fairhill around the country.

His career has led him to a position of stewardship over a piece of Cleveland, a city that wasn't remotely on his radar as a young man decades ago.

Despite the bad press the city sometimes receives, Gathercole said, "I have an optimism about the place. I see it as a vibrant place where people are working hard to reposition Cleveland."

He added that, as a British citizen, he continues to be amazed by American philanthropy and volunteerism.

He said he's seen such generosity in other countries, "but never to the extent that I see it now. I think that's a huge strength of the United States."