

## UTAH STORIES

## Park City Woman Rewrites the American Dream

Is the American Dream only for those who follow the rules? In Park City, one woman proved there's another way.



by Richard Trombetta | May 14, 2025



*A 61-year-old's unconventional path to living the American Dream.*

For a good number of people in the United States, the American dream follows a familiar path: go to school (possibly college), get a good job, get married, buy a house, have kids, put them through school, work until you're in your 60s, and then retire. Many Americans spend much of their week commuting and working to achieve this dream, leaving fun activities and hobbies for nights and weekends.

But what if everything was reversed? What if every day was spent playing, skiing, and living life to the fullest, and you could achieve the American dream described above by waiting tables in Park City, Utah, in the evening for 40 years?

That's what Chele Rockwood did, and at 61 (or sixty-fun as she calls it), she has never looked back.

### Prioritizing happiness

Rockwood's appearance mirrors that of many people in their 60s. Blonde hair turning slightly gray, some expected wrinkles due to age, and a tan that suggests living in a condo in Del Boca Vista on the Florida coast. Her smile radiates happiness, her words exemplify gratitude, and, above all, her enthusiasm for life is visible and infectious.

After graduating from Michigan State with a business degree in 1985 (she started at the University of Wisconsin because the drinking age was 18), Rockwood moved to Park City and has never left. Her brother came to the area in 1978, and after several visits she knew this was where she wanted to live. She met her husband, Rick (a golf pro, ski tech, and manager of a ski shop), bought a house, and had a daughter, Hailey. While it may sound very much like the American dream most imagine, their choices took them on an unconventional path.

"Happiness was the foremost thing. The lifestyle here is great and it's so much fun," Rockwood said. "We had multiple jobs and worked hard and we lived very simply and were responsible with money. We made it work."

### Putting her daughter first

In addition to designing a life that enabled them to enjoy Utah's beauty and adventure, they also had very clear priorities.

"I had one job in my life: work with my husband to raise a responsible, fun-loving kid," Rockwood said. "The fact that I got to spend so much time with Hailey and Rick skiing and playing made us all very close, and we are still close."

She and Rick were able to send Hailey to the University of Utah for undergraduate studies and then to the University of Kentucky for graduate school. Now 30 years old, Hailey lives in Hawaii and works as an athletic trainer. Although she has

what might be considered a 'day job,' she still manages to sneak out and play (surfing instead of skiing), a trait that seems to have been inherited from her parents.



## Always go, go, go

Rockwood's days usually begin with an activity — hiking, skiing, backcountry exploring — with Rick or their golden retriever, Wilbur. While you might think she prioritizes a good breakfast and a well-balanced diet, she usually skips food in the morning to 'get going.' Lunch, which is usually eaten after hiking or skiing, often includes enjoying a beer and an oatmeal cookie while sitting and gazing at the majestic beauty of the outdoors.

She continues to waitress four or five nights per week, working at least 30 weeks a year. She and Rick have paid off their house, have no debt, and continue to live modestly, now using the advice of a financial planner. Her 2018 Ford Flex is the "nicest car they have owned," better than the Honda Element she nicknamed 'The Toaster' due to its shape, or the 2004 pickup truck she affectionately called 'The Turd' because of its brown color.

"I'm not a sit-still person," Rockwood said. "Something in motion stays in motion, and I really believe this. I do something every day. Bike. Ski. Hike. We're always doing something. It's kept us young."

She watches almost no television, spends little time on her phone, and doesn't watch the news. She takes her job seriously, ensuring the people she serves have a 'fantastic experience.' In terms of what advice she gives to the waitstaff that is often 30 or 40 years younger than her, it's simple.

"It doesn't matter what you do," Rockwood tells them. "Just do what you love, whatever that is."

Her advice to people in their 50s and 60s who might be unhappy in their jobs but can afford to switch or make some changes to pursue something different is more direct.

"Quit," she said with a laugh.

While many people start to slow down as they age, Rockwood is accelerating. Hoping to be skiing until she is "80 or 90," she constantly looks for her next adventure. Although her approach to life and living the American dream may have been different than most, she is financially secure, has a great family, is healthy, and has lived a life most would envy.

"I don't have one single regret," Rockwood said. "I feel so at peace. I wake up every day, and I am happy. Wilbur brings me his collar and says, Let's go."

Sounds like a dream.

*Feature Image of Chele Rockwood in Park City by Hailey Rockwood.*