



The First Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility in Western North Carolina: Eliada Homes in Asheville

By Sarah Nuñez

*“Every child needs one adult to be wildly, irrationally crazy
about them and love them unconditionally.”*

– Marie Jensen, Vice President, Eliada Homes

Ask most people in Asheville about Eliada Homes, and they have heard of it. Eliada is 107 years old and attracts 20,000 people to its campus every year for the annual corn maze—a local community event that is not to be missed.

On a snowy day in February 2014, I met with four senior staff at Eliada to learn how they help children and adolescents with the most intense mental health needs move back to their own communities. As a former employee of Eliada, I was excited to be back on campus after more than a decade and curious to see what had changed over the years.

Students at Eliada have experienced mental health issues, addictions, trauma, abuse,

neglect, and broken families. That’s the sad story, but my visit to campus was not sad.

The story of Eliada is the story of a journey—the journey of each child treated there. Eliada’s logo is a picture of a kid reaching for a star. The mission is “Helping Children Succeed.” Often what they need, says Marie Jensen, Eliada’s Vice President of Performance Improvement, is “one adult to be wildly, irrationally crazy about them and love them unconditionally.”

The youth at Eliada are referred to intentionally as *students*, and the goal is to create a space where they can feel normal and accepted. Mark Upright, the President/CEO of Eliada, does not want to isolate his students

from the community. He says, “These kids are going to return to the community, so we can do a lot just by observing how they interact with people.”

Eliada’s services include the Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF), Foster Care, Day Treatment, Transitional Living/Supported Vocational Education, and Child Development. Upright says, “Students spend on average five months at Eliada. We have to be intense in the programs to get the results. Twelve years ago, students would stay up to one year. So it’s a lot of work to do in

a short period of time. There have been tremendous changes in the system, and Eliada has remained adaptable over time.”

Stories of Success

When I asked Upright what he was most proud of, he jumped up from his chair to grab pictures of students as he told me their stories. Before I could finish asking questions, he looked at me and said, “Are you ready to go and meet the kids?” Upright believes that “adversity can do two

Editor’s Note: Background on Eliada Homes

Eliada Homes, Inc., opened the first Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF) in Western North Carolina in 2006, beginning with one nine-bed cottage for adolescent females. But Eliada’s story starts more than a century ago.

Eliada grew out of Faith Cottage, a ministry founded in 1903 by Reverend Lucius B. Compton as a home for unwed mothers. In 1906, he expanded Eliada to include an orphanage. As time went on and the needs of the community grew, so did Eliada. It didn’t take long for the number of children not kept by their mothers to exceed the capacity of Faith Cottage.

Dr. Compton dreamed of finding a permanent home with land for these babies and toddlers. By 1906, he found a small cabin with a few acres of land about five miles west of Asheville. His daughter Mary Elizabeth writes, “I don’t know what he paid for the house. I think he paid \$1.00 an acre for the land—complete with beautiful pine and hardwood trees, and probably more weeds and blackberry bushes than he wanted.” It was at this time that Dr. Compton named the home Eliada. Eliada was one of King David’s sons; the Hebrew word means “one for whom God cares.” More land was bought and donated, including a farm, until the campus swelled to more than 320 acres.

Mark Upright became the President/CEO in 2002. His multiple degrees in accounting, law, and human services have equipped him to guide this agency into its second hundred years of operation. Upright also oversaw the conversion of Eliada’s campus to serve children and adolescents as a PRTF. Eliada is now able to treat the most vulnerable young people in the mental health system.

Eliada’s PRTF program has 42 beds in five unique cottage programs, serving children and adolescents in a residential campus setting. Each program is supervised by a leadership team consisting of a licensed clinician, program manager, and a case manager. All students receive individual, group, and family therapy. PRTF students receive education by teaching specialists within the programs. Psychiatric and medical oversight is under the direction of a medical director/psychiatrist. A nursing team provides nursing oversight for the students 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Eliada provides crisis management on campus during evening and weekend hours to ensure that crisis situations are managed safely and effectively. PRTF students have access to therapeutic recreation services including team and individual sports, physical fitness activities, a therapeutic horse/animal program, a mini-bike program, and outdoor experiential activities.

things—it can either victimize you or create tremendous character. If you look at leadership throughout history you will find that greatness was achieved through some kind of adversity.” He sees this potential in each of Eliada’s students.

Often the stories students tell show how Eliada helped them turn a corner in their lives. For example, students create marketing campaigns to sell candied apples at the annual corn maze fundraiser. A Wall of Fame with success stories of the students reminds the kids, the staff, and the community that miracles happen. He says, “It helps to destigmatize what people think about the kids at Eliada. The reality is that these kids don’t have the support network that most have had, and we’re trying to undo the damage and to change the way the students perceive the world.”

According to Residential Director Kim Moore, “Each student is unique and needs to learn more about their own medications, illness, strengths, and problems.”

Eliada uses a variety of techniques to keep students safe. Kim describes some of the de-escalation techniques, such as breathing and drinking a cup of hot tea, to help calm students. She explains how they teach students about crisis and crisis management. When I was visiting the cottages, she showed me the motivation system used to reward behavior, and the symbol that corresponds with each level. For example, the youth in Reuter Cottage strive to get to the Eagle/Executive level by the time they leave. Upright explains, “We’re not just controlling behavior, but helping the students understand behavior.”

Abigail has been at Eliada for six months. She says her experience at Eliada has been better than her treatment in other facilities in North Carolina. She likes the barn the most, saying “Once you get to level 2 [out of 5] you can get a paying job and earn \$4.00 an hour.” Abigail works in the barn and saves her money. She will be going to see her sisters and plans to buy them gifts for Valentine’s





Day. I asked Abigail if she will be ready to go back to school and her community after her experience at Eliada. She says, “Yes, I’ve been going back on home pass and that helps a lot.”

Michael and Jacob are great friends. They are both interested in attending college and plan to use the services provided by Eliada—including help with applications and applying for scholarships—to make that dream a reality. Michael says when he first got to Eliada he was nervous, scared, overwhelmed, and didn’t understand all the rules. As he adjusted, he discovered a loving and caring environment. He says, “What I enjoy the most is the Positive Peer Culture that we use here. I get feedback about how I behave with my peers.”

He graduates in March, and he will move to a group home. He says he will return home one day. “It’s where my heart is, and it’s been over six months since I have been home. I’ll be ready soon, and I am getting better.”

Jacob shares a story of another PRTF that he attended, which was much bigger than Eliada. He has been in five different placements, and he says that Eliada is “different

because of all the opportunities of things to do inside and outside of Eliada. We have work too. It’s nice to be responsible, since we’re reaching adulthood, and it gets us used to how to apply for jobs and working.”

Jacob has been at Eliada for three months and will move to therapeutic foster care after Eliada. He hopes to be placed closer to his hometown and eventually to return to his mother’s home.

Beyond Treatment

All of the facilities at Eliada have exercise space, including a gymnasium, workout facilities, classes such as Thai chi, yoga, and a climbing wall, a community wrestling program, tennis courts, and Girl Scouts.

A therapeutic animal stewardship program includes seven horses, three pigs, 20 chickens, a llama, a goat, a donkey, and an ever increasing population of cats. Upright says, “Sometimes we have students that go to the barn to work with the horses, and they seem really calm on the outside, but we can tell by the reaction of the horse what’s really going



on with the students. The horses' eyes will get wide, and they will be hesitant. So the kids work with the horses and will recognize that as they change what they feel on the inside, the horses also will become calmer."

Another program that receives rave reviews from the students is the National Youth

Project Using Minibikes (NYPUM) program. According to Upright, "We are the only PRTF that puts kids on minibikes and lets them ride across campus. It's a huge motivator because students have to earn the ability to participate in the program." Jacob said earlier in the day, "Here we are really active, unlike other places where you sit around all day just waiting to get out."

At Eliada, the emphasis is not only on the student and their time at Eliada but also on what will happen after they leave. The tools they are gaining through the PRTF services will help them to monitor their medications and illness, learn to function in society, get along with others, and manage their treatment and recovery. It's not just about the present but also about their future success.

Upright says that the "success that the students have is their own. They work hard at it." Jacob agrees, and says "It is hard. It's taken me two months to get to level three. But if you really invest in this program, you can achieve greatness."



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