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Aaron's House to provide a haven

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When Aaron Meyer of Windsor was killed in a one-car crash on May 10, 2005, just days after his 18th birthday, his family's world collapsed.

The cruelty of fate snatching away a son and brother just as he was making real and substantial progress in a difficult battle against drug addiction is something that his parents, Tom and Cathy Meyer, still struggle with almost daily.

But the memory of something Aaron once said has helped the Meyers, in some small way, find their way out of the consuming darkness.

Recalling Aaron's interest in getting together with other friends in recovery to find a house where they could live, study and support each other, the family, through the Aaron J. Meyer Foundation, is establishing Aaron's House, a place where local students in recovery can fulfill Aaron's wish.

"I remember Aaron said, 'It'll work because nobody really knows what we go through like we do. We'll live together and take care of each other,'" Tom Meyer said.

That dream is now one step closer to reality.

On Jan. 12, the Meyers expect to sign closing papers for the residence at 850 E. Gorham St., between the UW-Madison and MATC campuses. If all goes according to plan, four male students in recovery plus a live-in counselor will call the place home when Aaron's House opens its doors in August.

"When you lose a child, it's not enough to just keep their memory," Tom said. "You want to keep them making



Submitted photo

Aaron Meyer, 18, shown in a 2004 family photograph, had struggled with addiction. The creation of Aaron's House fulfills a wish he had expressed to find a place to live with others facing similar recovery problems.

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vibes in the world. Because without that, pictures fade, memories fade. Doing this, I can feel him making a difference in the world because he lived, not because he died."

The foundation hopes to raise \$250,000 by the house's opening in August. While the foundation is currently less than halfway to that goal, it recently received a \$25,000 donation from a silent benefactor.

Aaron's House offers something different from typical halfway or recovery houses, according to Shelly Dutch, director of Connections Counseling, which is partnering with the Aaron's House project.

"College students need to have fun, they need to celebrate their status," Dutch said. "This is a safe environment where they can be wild and crazy in a healthy way. They will do everything normal college students do - except it will be drug- and alcohol-free and it will be a respectful environment."

Providing a substance-free environment is critical to recovery success, Dutch added, particularly when college life is notorious for its use and abuse of alcohol or other drugs.

"The recidivism and the relapse rate is incredibly high," Dutch said.

UW-Madison also has addressed this need, offering substance-free housing for 72 students on the second floor of Witte Hall.

In addition to peer and counseling support, Aaron's House also plans to provide young people with mentor connections. Tom Farley, for instance, who is partnering with Aaron's House through the Chris Farley Foundation, would like to expose students to Chicago's Second City theatre, where his late brother performed.

For the Meyers, the hope is that Aaron's House offers a blueprint for others to establish similar houses elsewhere, as well as a tangible haven to others who have shared the hell that their family has gone through.

Aaron's slide into addiction was unexpected and precipitously quick.

For 16 years, he was in every way a typical boy, his parents say. In his sophomore year at DeForest High School, he was on the football team, he had lettered in track and was on the honor roll.

Then, in the summer after his sophomore year, they discovered Aaron's marijuana use. It rapidly took over not just Aaron's life, but that of the whole family.

"There was so much tension. It just consumed us," said Aaron's mother, Cathy, recalling the suspicion, distrust, anger and panic that ruled their lives. They also worried about the effect on Patrick, Aaron's younger brother.

Dutch says this is common.

"It's imperative we dispel the myth that marijuana is not as dangerous" as other drugs, said Dutch, noting that today's marijuana is not the same drug it was 20 years ago. "The quality of the THC (the addictive component that gets people high) is much greater now.

"If someone was smoking a hit of pot once a week, like they have a couple of beers, we wouldn't be having this discussion," she added. "But these are kids that wake and bake, as they call it. They smoke pot six to 10 times a day. It causes amotivational syndrome, it really changes their perspective, their self-worth, their attitude, academic performance."



In the end, the Meyers did the only thing they could think of to save their son: They sent him away.

At 4:15 a.m. one cold December morning, two armed, off-duty members of the Waukesha County Sheriff's Department arrived at the Meyers' house to escort Aaron across the country to Mount Bachelor Academy, a boarding school for troubled teens outside Bend, Ore.

"It was the hardest decision I ever made," Cathy said. "It took me a long time to agree to it. It's your child, you know? But I was so afraid for his life. The fear of something happening to him was overwhelming, or of him harming someone else."

Aaron ended up spending 13 months at Mount Bachelor Academy and also at SUWS, a wilderness program in Idaho for at-risk youth.

When he returned home in January 2005, he was a changed man - and yet once again familiar.

"Man, was he something. He looked so healthy," Tom said. "When he left, he was an angry, mean guy listening to really nasty music. When he came home, he had curly long hair and a backpack with a peace symbol, tie-dyed T-shirts and Birkenstocks."

Aaron enrolled at Madison's new Horizon High School, an alternative school for students in rehab. He would have been part of its first graduating class.

Aaron's recovery wasn't perfect. The Meyers know that he slipped on at least a couple of occasions, but, as Tom put it, they also knew their boy was back. "He said one time, 'I understand what you guys were trying to do. You did it because you love me,'" Tom said.

Aaron was killed just two miles from his house, after losing control of his truck and going off the road. He was on his way to give a friend, someone who had himself run afoul with drugs, a ride to a job interview.

"It's still very, very painful," Cathy said. "He had done a lot, lot of work. We were so proud of him."

"He walked so tall," Tom added.

The hope now is that through Aaron's House, others also may walk as tall.

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