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Mountain Shadows Support Group

MOUNTAIN SHADOWS
COMMUNITY HOMES

WINTER ♦ 2005

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Spotlight on Cedar, Ash and Willow Houses

Consider the cedar tree, the ash tree and the willow tree for a moment. Each is unique, beautiful and useful in its own way—much like the Mountain Shadows residents who live in the houses that bear their names.

The Cedar House Rules

The Cherokee call the cedar tree *a-tsi-na thlu-gv* (ah-see-na-loo-guh). They believe the Creator placed powerful protective spirits in the tree to watch over them. Even today, many Cherokee are said to carry a small piece of cedar wood with them to invoke the protection of the spirits of their ancestors. A piece of cedar wood is often placed above the entrance to their houses to ward off evil spirits.

While evil-minded specters are rarely sighted nearby, Mountain Shadows Cedar House is home to a group of six highly spirited young women.

“All of the girls in Cedar are really very special,” says Chereese Ferguson, QMRP of Cedar, Ash and Willow. “The Cedar House gals all share two favorite things. The first is that they all love music. There is always music playing somewhere in the background at Cedar. The girls like everything from oldies, to disco, to pop. The second thing is that they are crazy about Lisa Love’s home cooking. Lisa is the RC for Cedar, Ash and Willow. She makes delicious egg rolls. Everyone, including the staff, gets excited when Lisa cooks!”

According to James Arp, (previously QMRP pro tem of Cedar, Ash and Willow), “Cathy Arom is the mother of the house. She looks out for everyone and keeps both the QMRP’s and RC’s updated on everything that’s going on in the house. She has a job off campus and is very good at managing her money. She’s very social and loves to talk on the phone.”

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Residents and Staff of Cedar House

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“Sandra DeFelice has a strong motherly instinct and looks out for the others too,” says James. Chereese adds, “Sandy is a very popular girl. If you ask any of the guys in Ash House who their girlfriend is, they’ll tell you it’s Sandy. She enjoys singing, dancing and rap music.”

All of Cedar’s young ladies like to stay active. Jessie Concepcion is very social and loves to interact with the staff and other residents. Shavonda McDowell enjoys listening to music and rockin’ to the beat in her chair. Nancy Jennings likes to dance.

It was said among the Cherokee that when one smelled the distinctive aroma of the *a-tsi-na tlu-gv* tree or gazed upon its beauty, the spirits of the ancestors were near. We hope these loving spirits will continue to protect and safeguard the extraordinary group of young women in our own A-tsi-na tlu-gv House.

The Bonds of Friendship Take Root in Ash House

The ash tree is hard, tough, very strong and yet elastic. Many species of the tree exude a sugary substance, which the ancient Greeks called meli, or honey. In Norse Mythology, the Yggdrasil, or world ash tree, is said to be a giant tree that links and shelters all of the

world and its people. It was believed that honey rained down upon the world from the tree.

“Ash House works on the buddy system,” says Chereese. “The residents take care of each other. They’ve come to know each other well and have formed strong bonds of friendship.”

“Bill Merritt is the oldest resident and dad of the house,” says Lisa. “Bill is a regular at karaoke night at Acapulco’s restaurant. He has a very deep voice and likes to sing ‘Home on the Range’. The audience loves him and usually gives him a standing ovation. Sometimes they even buy him a meal.”

She adds, “Larry Gammon and Bill are best friends, roommates and confidants. They’ve become an almost permanent fixture on the lawn in front of Ash House and are the official ‘Mountain Shadows Welcoming Committee’ because they greet everyone who comes on campus. Larry will arm wrestle *anyone* and loves cats. He dressed as a cat for Halloween.”

“Gary Whitehair is the ‘ladies man’ of the house. He has a girlfriend in Maple House. He calls her ‘Mo Mo’. They go on dinner dates and watch TV together,” says Chereese. “Jeffrey Schwent loves puzzles. Mark Campbell enjoys dancing. Casey Fletke loves to go out to eat at

Home Town Buffet and play with puddy.”

The wood of the ash tree is known for its strength and resilience, as are the bonds of friendship that have grown among these men. As the Yggdrasil does for the world, Mountain Shadows Ash House binds them together and shelters them with love.

Willow House Inspires Residents to Grow

Willow trees grow rapidly and develop very deep, tough roots. If a branch breaks off, the twig can be planted in wet soil and before long will grow into a full, mature tree. According to ancient Greek lore, the willow was a sacred tree, for those who listened closely enough as the wind blew softly through its draping branches would be gifted with inspiration.

Mountain Shadows Willow House is home to six highly communicative and active residents who are inspired to constantly take on new challenges. “Willow houses our residents who can communicate their needs and definitely let you know what they want,” says Chereese.

“The residents of Willow are very independent,” says Stacy Kendall. “They are always busy. Always going somewhere and doing something new. They really take the lead in all Mountain Shadows activities and events, helping and nurturing the other residents. If something is happening on campus or off, Willow is there. They all have a good time together, enjoy each others company and really take care of each other.”

“Willow is a very unique house. Karen Trogdon is the spokesperson for the house. She keeps the staff posted on what’s going on. She has a job working for UCP Networks in a warehouse,” says Stacy. Karen also works in the Office sorting and distributing the mail.

“Debbie Rawlings loves to sing and do karaoke. Bob Curcio is extremely funny and quick witted—and he loves the ladies. Kristen Weller loves Scooby-Doo. Her favorite TV show is Cops. She watches it every night at 7:00 pm. Sally Whynot likes music and always has the radio on. She has a boyfriend that she talks to every night. Brian Stafford is very active and is always on the go: he likes to gamble (and has been to

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Residents and Staff of Ash House

Bill and Gretchen Merritt's Prayers are Answered in Ash House

In Greek mythology, it is said the Meliai are nymphs of the ash tree. The nymphs are believed to have supernatural and curative powers that nourish and protect all living things sheltered beneath the tree's gracefully arcing canopy of branches. According to legend, the Meliai safeguarded the baby Zeus from his murderous father Cronos, and nourished him with the honey that dripped from the branches of the ash tree. Zeus later became the Supreme Ruler of Mount Olympus, Lord of the Sky, and Guardian of Social Order and Peace among mortals and immortals alike.

If you visit the Mountain Shadows campus on any given day, you will most likely find two of our star mortals, Bill Merritt and Larry Gammon, on duty in front of Ash House. Sitting side-by-side under "their" ash tree, they smile and wave and shout heartfelt greetings to all who pass by. We like to think of them as our very own Guardians of Social Order and the Supreme Official Greeters of Mountain Shadows. "They know everything that is happening on campus," says Gretchen Merritt, Bill's mother. "They are both quite talkative and outgoing. They know everyone's names and they thrive on all the social interaction and activity that goes on in the community."

Bill came to Mountain Shadows nine years ago. Stacy Kendall, MSCH Director of Residential Services, remembers the day she met Bill. "Before he came to Mountain Shadows, Bill lived in a large facility. It was one of those buildings with the long, white hallways and nurses' stations. I went to visit the facility, to meet Bill, and when I got to his room, I noticed he had the same bedspread that I'd seen in every other room. The walls in the room were practically empty. There was nothing in the room that said who Bill was."

"Billy was on the waiting list to

move into Mountain Shadows for over a year," says Gretchen. "When I got the call saying it was time, well, that's when my prayers were answered and Billy's second life began."

"I feel so fortunate to have Billy at Mountain Shadows," Gretchen continues. "It provides a real family atmosphere that I never thought possible. Ash is home to six young men. They all eat together at the dining table and chatter with each other. They each have their favorite foods and their not so favorite foods. They sometimes have squabbles. Some have become good friends. They all have minds of their own. They are like a true family. Billy has finally taken root."

Billy lived with his family until he was 10 years old. "Billy was badly delivered," says Gretchen. He



Billy Merritt



Gretchen Merritt was honored at last year's Mountain Shadows Golf Tournament by Doug Cook, Executive Director of the Mountain Shadows Foundation.

was given too much anesthesia during the delivery and was paralyzed on his left side. We found a very fine surgeon who was able to operate on Billy's legs. He was able to walk, almost run, after that."

Gretchen adds, "Billy stayed at a boy's ranch in Victorville for some time when he was young. He lived with six other boys. One of the things they did there was woodworking. They made redwood tables and benches. Billy only had the use of one of his arms, but he was still able to do his part. The tables and benches that he helped build were sold to the Sears Roebuck store in Victorville. With the profits, which were divided between the six boys, they all went out to dinner and the movies on Saturday night. Then Billy fell."

Following the fall, Billy was taken to a hospital for observation. He was there for three weeks and, at first, the doctors found nothing. Then, unrelated to the fall, they found a tumor in his brain. During surgery, the surgeon's knife slipped, hitting the section of his brain that controlled his motor functions. And, on

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that day, Billy lost the use of his legs. He has been in a wheelchair ever since.

"If only I could be as courageous as Billy," says Gretchen. "He accepts and adjusts to the things he can't change. He's faced defeat all his life and he doesn't complain."

"Billy's father, Bill, loved him devotedly. They were two of a kind. Bill had a wonderful sense of humor. He kidded Billy a lot. Many people don't realize that disabled people have a sense of humor," says Gretchen.

Gretchen and Bill met while attending the University of Iowa. "My father was on the faculty at the University," says Gretchen. "When I told him that Bill and I wanted to marry, he said, 'Bill is a fine young man, but you have to finish your teaching degree before you get married.' I think he wanted me to have something to fall back on if it didn't work out. We were married 5 weeks after graduation. Mom and dad were very pleased."

Gretchen continues, "Bill and I were friends with three couples who had developmentally disabled children. All three couples ended up divorced. It wasn't that way with Bill and I. We worked together as a team to give Billy the best life possible. Bill was diagnosed with leukemia when he was 66 years old. He died six months later."

Gretchen is 89 years old now. She continues to visit Bill regularly. "Bill and Gret, that's what Bill calls her, have a very close bond," says James Arp, QMRP Oak, Elm and Spruce. "He's so fond of her. Gretchen is an amazing woman. I saw her with Bill just before Christmas. She wasn't feeling well. She was on oxygen. But nothing could stop her from seeing him. She wants what's best for him."

Gretchen and Bill have one other son, Bruce. "Billy loves his brother," says Gretchen. "He thinks Bruce is the last word."

Gretchen says of her childhood, "I grew up in the midst of the corn

belt. I'm just an Iowa girl from Iowa City." Up until two years ago, at age 87, she was an avid golfer. "I was the son my father never had," says Gretchen. "Dad taught me to golf when I was eleven years old. It was something we always enjoyed doing together."

As an English major in college, Gretchen loved to write. Over the years, Bruce encouraged her to write down some of her family's stories. "It's a collection of simple stories," says Gretchen. "Some of the stories are sweet, some are sad, some are funny. They are all about my family. About growing up."

In ancient times, the Meliai, the nymphs of the ash tree, used their special powers to protect and nourish the Greek God Zeus. As they sit beneath *their* ash tree on campus, we hope that today and far into the future, the Meliai will watch just as closely over Bill and Larry and all of the mortals of Mountain Shadows Ash House.

Editor's Note: There are some people you can talk to for an hour and feel like you have known a lifetime. Gretchen Merritt was one of those people. I came away from our brief interview knowing that this "Iowa girl from Iowa City" was exceptionally strong, down-to-earth, genuine, funny, hard-working, and very humble. "Don't focus on me in the article," she said. "I really haven't done anything special. Your article should be about Billy and how Mountain Shadows has given him a 2nd chance at life." She paused for a moment. "You know, once a mother learns that her child is disabled, she begins to worry about what will happen to that child if she dies first. Well, I'm 89 years old now..." Her voice trailed off and there was a long pause after she said that. When she continued, I heard a tiny break in her voice. "Mountain Shadows provides the very kind of home that I've always wanted for Billy. Mountain Shadows is the answer to my prayers." Gretchen Merritt passed away on January 20th, 2005. We will deeply miss her. ■

HOUSES *(continued from page 2)*

Las Vegas), plays Challenger baseball and sit skis. He's also the designated paper shredder in the Office, faithfully every weekday afternoon. All of the residents are on the move and going in different directions," adds Stacy.

The residents of Willow, like the tree that inspired their houses name, have taken root, and with the support of the staff and friends of Mountain Shadows, they will continue to grow and flourish. ■



Residents of Willow House

Lisa Love: Just a Regular Person

Without thinking, Lisa reached up, took off her hat, and scratched her head. Then she heard Kristen Weller, Willow resident, burst out laughing. At first Lisa was confused and didn't know what Kristen was laughing about. She scratched her head again and then she *knew*—and she started laughing too. “We both busted up laughing so hard that we ended up with tears streaming down our faces,” said Lisa. Many people don't share Kristen's reaction when they see Lisa's bald head for the first time. Most become uncomfortable. Some are shocked. Some show pity. Some just ignore it. Lisa just wants everyone to be like Kristen.

“I have breast cancer,” says Lisa. “When people first hear that, they think I'm going to die. But the prognosis for breast cancer patients is very good now. I don't want anyone to feel sorry for me. This is just something I have to go through and deal with. I just want people to treat me like a regular person.”

Lisa Love, Residential Coordinator for Cedar, Ash and Willow houses, understood what it meant to want to be treated like a regular person long before her cancer diagnosis. She's worked at Mountain Shadows for nine years. Many times people with disabilities receive the same reactions as Lisa does when people learn of her cancer. But it has never been that way with Lisa. “Lisa is amazing with the residents,” says Donna Ponomarenko, Mountain Shadows Activity Director. “She has fun with the residents. She jokes with them. Laughs with them. Sometimes she cries with them. She treats them... well, she treats them like regular people!”

As the RC, Lisa is responsible for the overall daily care of the residents and staff of the three houses. There are 6 residents and 7 staff members per house. “The residents really make my day,” says Lisa. “Cathy Arom of Cedar house sometimes leaves a flower on my desk.

Another Cedar housemate, Nancy Jennings, is always asking me for ‘moochies’ (kisses). But many times, it's the lowest functioning residents that give the most. Sometimes they can't express their feelings in other ways, so they hold my hand or just put their head on my shoulder. They really know how to get next to me.”

Lisa remembers one particular resident who really made an impact on her. “Michael Bickler used to live in Olive house,” says Lisa. “He was so lovable and always had a smile on his face. He used to like to sit outside, or take walks around campus and watch the birds. There were always several jaybirds that seemed to hang around wherever he went. He considered them to be his friends and he loved trying to imitate the bird sounds. Michael died in 1999, but his jaybirds have stayed. I hear them chirping across campus all the time. I like to think it's Michael and his friends singing to me.”

“Lisa is my right hand,” says Chereese Ferguson, QMRP of Cedar, Ash and Willow. “She knows everything about everyone at Mountain Shadows. I always know that if I need information, I can go to her. She's compassionate with the residents, down-to-earth and very approachable. No matter how bad a situation is, Lisa will always find something good about it. Whenever I'm having a bad day, I just need a little ‘Lisa Talk’ and then I know that everything will be okay.”

Donna adds, “Lisa has never been a nine-to-fiver. She's always here. Even now as she's battling breast cancer.” Stacy Kendall, MSCH Director of Residential Services, agrees, “I just can't seem to keep her away from the place! She has a chemotherapy treatment every three weeks and she schedules the treatments on Friday, so that she can be back to work on Monday.” James Arp, QMRP of Oak and Elm says, “Even when Lisa takes time off, she's thinking about the residents and what she



Lisa Love

can do to make their lives better. The residents are so entwined in her life. They're like her family.”

“Lisa is absolutely committed to helping people with developmental disabilities,” says Stacy Kendall. “She genuinely wants them to have the best in life. And she doesn't hesitate to put the residents first.” Adds Donna, “Lisa is a true blessing to Mountain Shadows.”

“Mountain Shadows is the best place I've ever worked. I've often said that if I was developmentally disabled, I would want to live here. The residents are given more opportunities and do more fun things than I have done in my whole life,” adds Lisa.

“When I found out I had breast cancer, my whole perspective changed,” says Lisa. “It made me much stronger and more determined to do the things I really want to do. I don't feel sorry for myself and don't want others to either. I have a wonderful family. I love working at Mountain Shadows. The residents need me and I need them. I have nothing else better to do than be happy!”

So, if you see Lisa walking across campus without her hat, just remember Kristen Weller and smile or even laugh. After all she's just a regular person. Just like the rest of us. ■

Knights of Columbus Tootsie Roll Drive is a Sweet Success

The first Tootsie Roll was produced in 1896. Today, 109 years later, more than 60 million Tootsie Rolls are produced each day. They are sold worldwide. Since World War II, Tootsie Rolls have been included in the military rations of all the armed forces because of their ability to withstand severe weather conditions and give troops a quick energy boost. That's quite a history for a small, chewy, chocolate piece of candy.

Thanks to the Knights of Columbus, St. Mary's Parish in Escondido, Mountain Shadows is able to share in a small part of this rich, chocolatey history. Each year, the Knights of Columbus holds a Tootsie Roll drive to benefit people with mental retardation. Says Mary Lou Swarner, Vice President of The Friends of Mountain Shadows (FOMS) support group, "The Knights of Columbus asked us

if we'd like to participate in the Tootsie Roll drive many years ago. We've been doing it ever since. The donations generated from this event are a big help to us."

This year's Tootsie Roll drive was held at Food-4-Less. Mary Lou headed a team of residents, parents, and staff during the 3-day event. Residents Karen Trogdon, Debbie Rawlings, Travis Groff, Kenny Lewis, and Harry Thompson handed out candy to all. "The residents just love doing it!" says Mary Lou. FOMS helpers included Virginia Kappler, Carol Haskin, Doug Cook, and Donna Ponomarenko.

"This year's Tootsie Roll drive was very successful," says Wade Wilde, Mountain Shadows Executive Director. "\$1,679.81 was raised to benefit



Knights of Columbus members George, Chuck and Bill present a check from the tootsie roll drive to Mary Lou and residents.?

the residents of Mountain Shadows, which goes a long ways towards enriching the lives of our residents."

Many thanks to George Barraza, Chuck Ayash, Bill Vergeer and everyone at the Knights of Columbus, St. Mary's Parish for allowing us to benefit from this sweetly satisfying event.

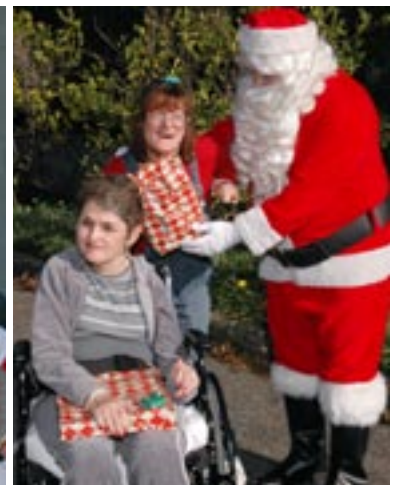
Santa Visits Mountain Shadows

Santa had made his list and checked it twice. He knew we'd all been good, for goodness sake! So on Christmas morning, Santa slid down the chimney with a bag full of presents for all residents who had been not naughty but nice.

"Santa's visit was a lot of fun," says Carol Haskin, Mountain Shadows Board Member and Support Group President. "Hope Restored Foundation and the Mountain Shadows Support Group provided gifts for all residents. Mary Lou Swarner organized cookie donations. Other volunteers on hand included Gina Kappler, Mary Blackburn, Kelly and Jeff Barnson."

"A group of seven carolers, residents Karen, Debbie, Travis, Brian, Chris, Kenny and Sheri, sang Christmas carols. It was a fantastic day and all of the residents had a wonderful Christmas!" adds Donna P.

Look for a detailed piece on Santa's Visit and the Hope Restored Foundation gifts in the Mountain Shadows Foundation Cornerstone Magazine.



Second Annual DCS Appreciation Week

Unsung Hero: An ordinary person who makes sacrifices or tries to make a positive difference in his or her community.

Leo Buscaglia once said of the world's unsung heroes, "The majority of us lead quiet, unheralded lives as we pass through this world. There will most likely be no ticker-tape parades for us, no monuments created in our honor. But that does not lessen our possible impact, for there are scores of people waiting for someone just like us to come along; people who will appreciate our compassion, our unique talents. People who will live a happier life merely because we took the time to share what we had to give. Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have a potential to turn a life around."

Monday, December 13th, marked the kick-off for the 2nd Annual Mountain Shadows Direct Care Staff Appreciation Week. The week was designed to honor our own community's unsung heroes and heroines—our Direct Care Staff. Day in and day out, they provide the small and large acts of caring that enhance the lives of our residents.

"It was a great week," says Stacy Kendall, MSCH Director of Residen-



tial Services. "We started the week off by serving a pancake breakfast on Monday. Later in the afternoon we delivered cakes to all of the houses."

"We held events each day of the week," continues Stacy. "We all dressed in 70's garb on Tuesday, sang Karaoke, and had a nacho bar. On Wednesday, we had Subway sandwiches delivered to all houses. Personalized gift baskets were given to all houses on Thursday, and on Friday we had a BBQ. On the weekend, we handed out goodie bags to all the staff."

She adds, "It was a jam-packed week of fun and camaraderie. Everyone really came together and made

the week successful. It was our way of showing our appreciation to our Direct Care Staff for their hard work, dedication, and commitment to our residents."

A Heartfelt Message to all Direct Care Staff:

You have been a special blessing in the lives of our residents. Your kindness, caring and friendship have truly made a difference in their lives. You are our Unsung Heroes. Thank you for all that you do.

Please visit www.MountainShadows.ws under "What's New" to view many more pictures of our DCS Appreciation Week activities...you'll really enjoy them!

More pictures on next page





Donations Accepted Here

Mountain Shadows Support Group, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation. We are authorized to accept donations of cash, boats, furniture, computers, cars—you name it. And you can write-off your gifts as an IRS tax deduction. We win. You win. Think about us and give what you can.

Note: Free publicity in the North County Times recently generated several donations of clothing and furniture to Mountain Shadows. These gifts help us out substantially. Keep us in mind when that apartment suddenly empties or the garage runs out of storage space.



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