

News
letter
Spring
2013



Spring Lake Ranch

Therapeutic Community

Working Toward Wellness

Cuttingsville & Rutland, Vermont

Founded in 1932 by Wayne & Elizabeth Sarcka

Dear Friends,

I am approaching the end of my first year as Executive Director, and I am as fascinated by the philosophy, program, and people of Spring Lake Ranch as I was on the day I first learned of the place. I have now experienced haying, ice cutting, and, most recently, maple sugaring from the view of a community member; I have observed caring people reaching out with acceptance and respect to help each other engage in shared work; I have watched as the entire spectrum of SLR stakeholders prepares to gather in an August summit to plan for our future; and I have seen the result of the coordinated effort of a full continuum of care in transforming lives.

Today, as I write this article in the offices of our Rutland Program, a resident approaches me wearing a beaming smile and says, "Hey, Ed. Guess what? I got a job." I congratulate her as she tells of her duties as an administrative assistant at a local arts program. She is pleased and the sense of accomplishment and pride in how far she's come since arriving in Cuttingsville is apparent. I remember her from my arrival last year and I smile too at the achievement. We share a moment of satisfaction and move on to our respective days.

In this Spring newsletter, we explore some of the facets that make up this healing continuum: the history and

beginnings of the Ranch philosophy are brought to light in the reminiscences of the founders' daughter, Anne Sarcka; House Advisor, Anna Gouznova, tells of her experiences in the work program; a former resident, Jon Levine, reflects on the touchstones of his SLR experience; Case Manager, Matt Whitcomb, describes the benefits of the Rutland Program boxing group; and throughout all, and from many perspectives, the shining hope offered by our Ranch is evident.

I invite you to enjoy this issue, learn about our program, and see how this model of shared work and community living is healing for those with mental and emotional distress or substance and process addictions. Please get involved with the planning of our future by providing input into our Strategic Planning process. If you received a mailer alerting you of an upcoming phone interview, please make sure you confirm and schedule it, or visit the Spring Lake Ranch website and participate in our

online survey. Support us if you can, tell others of the good work we do, and, most importantly, make sure you order maple syrup on our website: www.springlakeranch.org

Have a great Spring,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ed Oechslie".

Ed Oechslie, Executive Director

Life at the Ranch

Strategic Planning in Progress

By building on identified strengths and successes, all supporters of Spring Lake Ranch Therapeutic Community are working together to design a dynamic plan for our sustainable future.

Please participate in our planning process. Go to www.springlakeranch.org and click on Please Take Our SURVEY at the bottom right.



A series of luncheons were held in February to gather ideas for our Strategic Planning Summit in August.

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Still Strong After 80 Years

A Few Thoughts From Anne Sarcka on How Spring Lake Ranch Has Endured

Editor's Note: At our 80th Anniversary event last year we had a panel of past Directors of SLR speak to the community about the years they were involved. Anne Sarcka, the daughter of founders Wayne and Elizabeth Sarcka, spoke passionately about growing up at Spring Lake Ranch and watching it evolve.

For the twenty-seven years after they founded Spring Lake Ranch, Wayne and Elizabeth Sarcka demonstrated the healing power of shared family and community life for those experiencing mental distress in its many manifestations. Their joy in life, steadfastness, loyalty to their cause, and optimism provided the glue that held the Ranch together through many rough times and kept the Ranch viable.

Wayne, my father, was the son of a Finnish immigrant family in Proctor, Vermont at the end of the nineteenth century. They had the tough, adventurous, 'can do' qualities of so many



families at that time. Wayne, after a period of organizing recreation for street boys at a Massachusetts boys' club, served in the British army in Mesopotamia during the First World War, where he worked with traumatized soldiers. As time went on, he became convinced that shared effort—especially shared work—was indispensable to creating and maintaining a sound mind. With unbounded enthusiasm and originality he made this idea the cornerstone of Spring Lake Ranch's therapy.

Elizabeth, my mother, was the daughter of a family of New York lawyers, growing up in what was then rural Long Island. Her father's work for the good of the community influenced who she became—an adventurous and independent-minded woman with a social



*Anne's parents, Spring Lake Ranch founders
Wayne & Elizabeth Sarcka.*

conscience. After graduating from Barnard College, Elizabeth worked for the League of Nations and settlement houses in New York. When one of her brothers developed a serious mental illness, Elizabeth gained insight about treatment options available at the time, which were dismal and few.

My parents met in 1925 while my father was working for The Girl Scouts of America in New York City. He was interviewing candidates for a new liaison officer and my mother was the only candidate he

“He became convinced that shared effort—especially shared work—was indispensable to creating and maintaining a sound mind.”

could reach. They met for a luncheon interview and the rest is history.

They came to believe that being part of a small, supportive community with a program of work and outdoor recreation was in itself healing; that they could provide an alternative to

the treatments available in mental hospitals and psychiatry; and that lay people could offer something unique to the field.

With the encouragement of a psychiatrist friend, Bernard Glueck, we moved from New York City to rural Vermont when I was an infant and settled into an abandoned hillside farm near Spring Lake. Beginning in 1932, we began to get referrals from psychiatrists and started taking young men and, later, women into our home who were coping with mental illness and sometimes alcoholism.

The first fifteen years were exceedingly tough. During the Great Depression of the early 1930’s psy-

chiatrists could not afford to refer their patients and some who could believed that lay people were not equipped to make a contribution in the psychiatric field. Furthermore,

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Thank you to all our friends and families who have supported Spring Lake Ranch in the past and to those who have responded to this year’s Annual Appeal! Your generosity has allowed us to provide Sarcka Scholarship assistance to many families.

You Are Not Alone

You Are Not Alone,
we will gladly walk this road with you
though difficult seems the way,
we will shoulder the burden
’til it lightens each day.

We will search with you
for landmarks
As you make the truth your quest,
And tend your fearful heart
’Till the questions find their rest.

As you travel down this
lonely path
There’s Another who comes alongside
To give you strength and courage
Be your ever faithful guide.

You are not alone, nor left behind
To wander in the dark,
You’ll find you have companions
As you take a step to embark

Upon a journey to untold riches
The heart alone knows the way,
Through twists and turns,
ups and downs
To an unimaginable,
glorious day!

-Robin



The early days of Spring Lake Ranch circa 1940.

Transformation in the Heart of Winter

Ice Moves

From the moment the block finally breaks free and floats momentarily, it bobs in celebration of its newfound freedom.

It's heaved from the murky depths and its glassy sides taste sunlight again after the long winter.

As it travels, the movement has the ice recall its liquid, unbound state.

How fortunate for it to receive this pass Into the liberation of movement once again where its brethren sit locked in their seasonal solidity.

But by what twist of fate does this fortuitous block find itself packed in sawdust in June while its relations part ways for the fish, the turtles, and the children.

-Doug

In the heart of the winter, while most of the natural world is at rest, transformation is happening all around us here at Spring Lake Ranch. The seasons are always changing and so are we. The sun illuminates the present, making it easier to let go of the past. In a supportive environment, residents can unravel and discard ties that bind them to harmful habits. At a place like this, it's hard to stay the same.

In February, ice-cutting and maple sugaring bring the whole community together. In the depth of winter, Spring Lake is frozen more than three feet deep, thick enough to drive over with one of our forty year-old navy trucks, bright blue and painted with flowers. With five-foot long saws we take turns cutting into the frozen surface, harvesting ice and dragging the crystal clear cubes to be loaded in the truck and stored in the ice house. Nearby, sugaring begins as maple trees are tapped with hand drills. Metal buckets hang on the taps to collect sap that we'll boil down for maple syrup. For residents, what was once too heavy, too deep, and too high soon becomes within reach.

While we're working in the woods felling trees and making firewood, we take our morning break in the warming hut, huddling and drinking tea. The fire in the wood stove seems to do more than warm our hands—it thaws our thoughts, too. Kyle looks up, *"This has been such a dark week for me and I feel like nobody understands, everyone says I'm doing so well but it's not like that on the inside."* I ask him after a brief pause, *"What is it like for you on the inside?"* The combination of nature and community here create a unique and safe space to talk about

one's innermost thoughts and troubles.

While we spend most of our time working outside, we're continuously working on what's on the inside. *"Splitting woods is like meditation, it helps me with the voices I hear. They*



tell me I'm wrong, but I can see that the work I'm doing is right," Sharon tells me while we walk back to the main house for lunch.

Most of the residents have never done this kind of work before, but that certainly won't stop them. With the support of the community, residents learn to care for farm animals,

split wood, make bed frames, cook delicious meals, and many other skills that teach them something about themselves.

There's something about the work program that just works. There is a sense of ownership that develops over one's work as well as a sense of confidence, purpose and belonging.

While learning new skills, residents develop trust, courage, and forgiveness—for others and for themselves. If this is all that's happening in the wintertime, I can't wait to find out what spring will bring! -Anna



Staying Connected

Editor's Note: Jon Levine, a former Ranch resident from New York, now lives in Rutland and continues his work in photography.

As a resident at Spring Lake Ranch in the mid-seventies, I had an awesome experience. I found the Ranch's program to be fair-minded and a unique, important alternative in the mental health field. The lessons I learned in the program are valuable assets that have translated very effectively in my life years afterwards.



Later on when I was living in New York City and out on Long Island, I found myself in a dilemma and questioning many things in my life. I felt that I was down to nothing—I had lost my direction and sense of purpose. One summer day, I was on my way home walking through a public park on Long Island when I saw Pam and Peter Grace, who worked at the

Ranch, playing on a baseball field with their grandchildren. Though we only exchanged a few friendly words, the chance meeting served as a strong reminder of my years at the Ranch. It was a re-awakening and a vivid reminder that I had a life to live and of the lessons I learned. The encounter moved me towards a much needed change of direction.

I had taken up photography and I realized that the high-end of the art world wasn't in my best interest. Life at the Ranch taught me that my work in life should be purposeful and that my talents as an artist should serve the public and the

community on all levels. Another lesson I learned at the Ranch is that I should take on challenges and prepare for both success and failure in life.

I corresponded through the mail and over the phone with Lynn McDermott, Pam Grace, and Michael

"I found the Ranch's program to be fair-minded and a unique, important alternative in the mental health field."

Wells—all former staff members of the Ranch. They stayed connected with my efforts and served as good friends and teachers. The staff members at the Ranch held a solid place in my life and have helped me with



the range of aspects in my life. They remind me that we possess both talent and strength that we carry inside of ourselves that isn't always evident. Life will take you as far as your efforts go and there is always the potential to live a full life.

Photos and article by Jon Levine



Still Strong *continued from page 3*

the Ranch setting was rough and challenging to people unused to basic country life.

But my parents were tenacious and soon realized that their ideas were working. Ranchers, or "guests" as they were called, were regaining their health and moving on with their lives. When my parents saw that, they were more determined than ever to continue.

Local people played a big part in the Ranch's early survival. Some staff came from surrounding communities to work here, taking a chance on what was then a novel idea—some

thought it mad. Merchants extended credit when bills could not be paid on time. The Vermont tradition of tolerance for oddball ideas and people prevailed and helped sustain the place while it got on its feet.

To make up for a shortage of funds, my parents found creative ways to raise cash and obtain needed supplies. We took down an unused barn, trucked it up the hill, hired a local Finnish carpenter to build a sugarhouse and began selling syrup. We raised turkeys, had them smoked, and sold them to hotels and restaurants in New York and Boston. Many Ranchers' families were willing to do anything to help their

sons and daughters recover; some built residences for them; some bought livestock to provide them with a vocation. Ranchers' labor contributed vegetables, meat, eggs, wood for heating, ice for refrigeration, and much of the work that was necessary for the Ranch to continue. The old adage "use it up, wear it out, make it do, do without" epitomized how early Ranchers created a healing community from scratch.

The Ranch drew talented people who had a lot to offer. An example was a Harvard professor who, when he became ill, moved his wife and child to the Ranch, built a home from the

continued on back cover

Rutland Program — Boxing Group

Today's group is winding down as it is approaching four o'clock on a hot and humid July afternoon. The group members sit silently, drenched in sweat, in folding chairs along the wall in our makeshift boxing gym in the barn. For more than an hour, they have pushed themselves through the heat, pain, and exhaustion of a veritable boxing workout. No one here is required to attend, but everyone is fully aware of the limited space and the existing waiting list to join the group. Each member has requested that they be eligible to attend multiple boxing groups, but despite their dedication and exceptional work ethic, they will have to wait until there is available space.

Today's group is host to four attendees—the maximum number of clients able to attend a session. There are three men and one woman, and each bring their own unique story. I've just completed working on combination punching drills with one young man—he's demonstrated exceptional speed, power, and precision during the drill. This is a young man who, outside of this group, is typically associated with adjectives like slow, lethargic, and apathetic, but here he is none of those things. Here, he is the model fighter—driven, full of energy, and reluctant to grab a drink and take a break when advised.

Sitting and resting beside that young man is another gentleman who has also become too familiar with a description that does not suit him within these walls. This is a young man who first walked into boxing group timid and uncertain, afraid to commit to throwing a punch and even more afraid that something could hurt him. I watched today as his punches exploded on the heavy bag like the sound of a gun being fired and then gracefully slipped side

to side never allowing his eyes to vary from the target. Whatever uncertainty and timidity that followed him to the group was checked at the door, if not cast away permanently.

The only female member of the group gets up from her seat and begins lightly jabbing and moving around the heavy bag. Since first arriving at the group, she has dedicated herself to mastering technique and furthering her ability. She has learned not only to personally apply what she's learned, but has begun to help coach others. Through her

“[They] are not preparing to fight an opponent in the ring, but rather, learning what it takes to not beat themselves.”

work with others she's shown a sense of empowerment and has been able to step back and see that she can improve upon herself.

Legendary boxing trainer Cus D'Amato once said, “To see a man beaten, not by a better opponent, but by himself is a tragedy.” Those in this group are not preparing to fight an opponent in the ring, but rather, learning what it takes to not beat themselves. They will learn that there will always be a fight, an opponent, and that they will win some and lose some and they will have done so knowing that they did everything they could. Whether they win or lose, they will continue practicing, pursuing, and persevering.

It's ten to four and the heat and humidity has certainly taken its toll on the group today. I suggest the group cut the session short. “Don't we go until four?” is the response I get. “We do,” I respond.

The group members get up from their respective seats and go back to work, pushing themselves beyond what anyone has asked of them.

-Matt



❖ STAFF Notes ❖

- ❖ The team of House Advisors at the Ranch provide support to residents on work crews and in their houses. We welcome Cole Russell, Elaine Schenkel, and David Runge to the HA group.
- ❖ SLR has grown to meet the demand of an increasing number of residents who have moved on to the Rutland Program. We welcome Jacque Switzer and Heather Hurley our new Rutland Program case managers.
- ❖ Former House Advisor, Rebecca Shulman, who recently completed an MSW degree from Smith College School of Social Work, has returned to work in a new position as House Advisor Coordinator.

Spring Lake Ranch is a non-profit, therapeutic work community in the Green Mountains of Vermont, an alternative treatment center for people with mental and emotional illness.
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Spring Lake Ranch

Therapeutic Community

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Still Strong *continued from page 6*

boards of a nearby stable made of black ash wood that was to be demolished, and stayed until he was able to resume life in Cambridge. He and his wife remained fast friends of the Ranch, both serving on the board for a time.

By the 1950's, after twenty years of hard work, the place looked quite beautiful. By then a consulting psychiatrist was on board, allaying the worries of mental health professionals. But insurance companies still couldn't find the will to underwrite the Ranch's program, so a scholarship fund was created to assist people for whom the fee was steep.



At the end of my parents' tenure, they incorporated the Ranch as a not-for-profit organization and passed on the leadership to me, while we looked for a permanent director. For the next fifty-three years to the present, the basic principles they established have continued to prove their value. The next generations brought their own innovations to the model established by my parents, finding new ways to address the needs of changing populations and offering new choices for healing.

-Anne Sarcka