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Spring Garden Girls Become “The Best Version of Themselves”

The girls at the Spring Garden Group Home have experienced almost unimaginable trauma in their young lives. Most have been the victims of sexual abuse; many have also suffered physical or emotional neglect.

With your help, Elk Hill gives these girls a chance to not just to survive, but to shine. How does Spring Garden empower these young women who face so many challenges?

Staff simply meet them where they are. They acknowledge that their experiences are part of their history, but reassure them that their past will not dictate their future. “We teach them how to face adversity and how to overcome it,” says counselor Tiana Wood. “We want them to be the best version of themselves.”

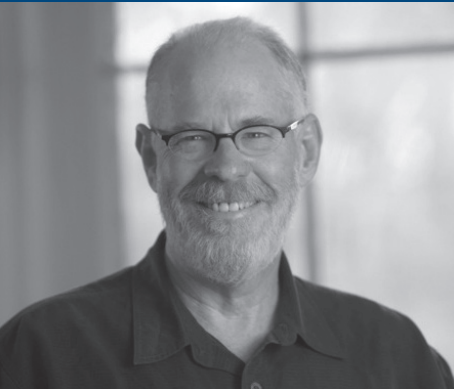
It’s never an easy process. Take the example of 14-year-old Anna. Unable to find stability in her mother’s house, Anna had cycled through custody with several different family members, but they couldn’t handle her physical aggression. No foster family was willing to take a chance on her. Anna, a victim of childhood sexual abuse, had even begun sending pictures of herself to older men online and engaging in inappropriate conversations with them.

Her transition to residential treatment at Elk Hill Spring Garden was a challenging one. Because of her past behavior, she wasn’t allowed to have a phone, a consequence she saw as terribly unfair. She resorted to manipulating the staff and her peers to try to get the things she wanted.

Through it all, Spring Garden’s staff believed she could change, and she did. Anna learned to take responsibility for her actions. She learned to accept the word “No.” She learned to forge respectful relationships with other girls. She maintained straight A’s in school. She diligently saved her money — and once she proved she was able to handle it responsibly, she was allowed once again to have a phone.

Most importantly, through joint family therapy, Anna and her mother repaired their bond. In January 2018, relying on her newfound coping skills to manage family conflicts, Anna was able to return home. ■

**A Note from
Michael Farley**
Chief Executive Officer • Elk Hill



Almost 50 years ago, on September 12th, 1970, the first young man arrived on the Elk Hill campus. That's right — in 2020 we'll be celebrating the half-century mark of helping children and families! During our first three and a half decades, we worked with just boys. In 2007, we opened the Spring Garden Group Home to serve adolescent females. At the same time, our decision to "go upstream" with early intervention programs enabled us to serve many more boys and girls, some as young as five years old.

An early intervention was exactly what eight-year-old Brianna needed. Brianna just could not handle her emotions; she would pick fights with her sister, attack students and teachers, and often burst into tears for no apparent reason. Then a school counselor referred Brianna to Elk Hill's community services program, and things slowly began to change for the better. After working with her Elk Hill counselor for over a year, Brianna learned to identify her emotions and the skills necessary for coping with them. Her mother learned how to interact with her in a supportive manner, and she developed strategies for parenting a challenging child.

Now Brianna is thriving! She is confident in her ability to handle the issues that would have set her off in the past. She still has her moments, although they are much less frequent and shorter in duration. Brianna and her family now have hope for a successful future. ■



**A Young
Musician
Finds Her
Voice**

Music has always been the language of Rebecca's heart.

"Whenever I would get upset, or when I was angry, or when I was sad, or even when I was happy, and I just couldn't express it at that time, I would listen to music and I would know I'm not alone — there are other people who feel those things," she says.

She never took voice lessons; instead she practiced singing on her own, teaching herself to hold each note. In eighth grade she began to play the piano, first by ear, then with the help of lessons on YouTube.

She kept her tremendous gift to herself, rarely performing for others — until she came to Elk Hill Charlottesville School in 11th grade.

It wasn't an easy transition. "I was a bit upset about it at first, because it was thrown on me by my parents," Rebecca says. Her teachers knew her as a quiet, academically gifted introvert, but then discovered Rebecca's passion for music. In 2016, Head of School Matt Burton asked Rebecca if she would sing at Thanksgiving on the Hill, if he accompanied her on the guitar. With trepidation, she agreed.

"I was very anxious. I was shaking," Rebecca recalls. Then she began to sing "Hallelujah," the haunting song by Leonard Cohen.

Her audience was entranced. The performance received a standing ovation.

It was Rebecca's first time singing solo. "And I loved it," she says — especially "the thrill of knowing that everybody really enjoyed it. That made me fall in love with performing."

She sang at other school events and began taking formal piano lessons. Yet as graduation approached, she began to worry about her future. "I was so confused and so stressed out," she says, "because I had no idea where to start."

"What are you passionate about?" her science teacher asked. The answer came readily: "Music. And little kids."

With the help of her teacher — and Elk Hill supporters like you — Rebecca charted a course. After graduating in January 2018, she's heading to Piedmont Virginia Community College to earn her associate degree, and then will pursue a bachelor's in education (focusing on pre-K through third grade) and a minor in music.

She credits her Elk Hill teachers and her parents with helping her find her way. "Had it not been for coming to this school, I can honestly say that I might not be here now. I'm just so grateful that I got the opportunity I did, and that I was able to come out of the dark times I was in." ■

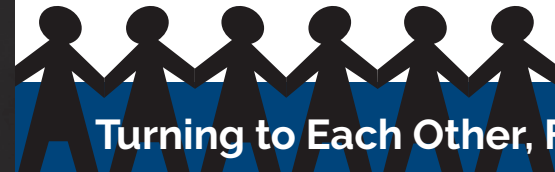
Why I Am Involved in Elk Hill

Alex Dahlgren, Donor and Board Member

My husband Matt and I first became aware of Elk Hill shortly after moving to Goochland 8 or 9 years ago. We were both very curious to learn more about this local organization that took a deep interest in children struggling with seemingly insurmountable challenges, and gave them the support and guidance they needed to overcome and succeed.

As a veterinarian, I believe we have a responsibility to care for and to protect those who do not have a voice and are the most vulnerable. And I believe our efforts produce the most good through the care we give as a society to our children. Children are both the most vulnerable and the most resilient, and breaking the cycle of abuse, poverty and suffering depends on the kind of support, care and protection we provide to children and youth.

It was the people we met who cemented our confidence in this organization: Michael Farley's sense of purpose, his clear focus on the values, goals, and mission, and his kind, inclusive leadership; the warm welcome from Jessica Cocciolone, and her dedication, organization, and drive; and seeing Ron Spears playing basketball with youth at the Parks and Rec Center in Goochland. It was meeting and talking to the children and their teachers, and seeing how they were still children, despite having experienced more trauma than most adults ever will, and witnessing firsthand the patience and kind, predictable guidance their teachers provided. It was the sense of humor and feeling of family among the teachers and other professionals, and the warm, friendly introductions to board members at the first board meeting I attended. In every person I met, I saw the competence and dedication of a true professional that you would hope to find within the best-run corporations. ■



Turning to Each Other, Fourth Graders Find Strength

Fourth grade is tough — and it's especially tough for girls. At that age, they're beginning to figure out who they are and how they fit into the world. Their bodies are changing. And many are "carrying so much trauma," says Joy Schiavone, an Elk Hill therapeutic day treatment counselor. "They've already been told so many lies about themselves, that they're not wanted."

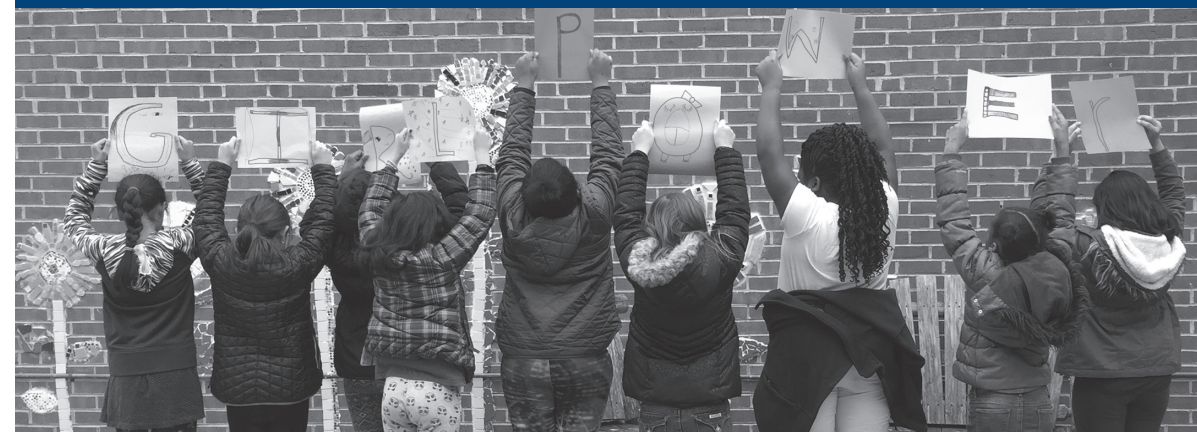
To combat these feelings of vulnerability and isolation, Schiavone and Latara Ragland, from City of Promise (a nonprofit that works with the city's at-risk children) started the Girl Power group for fourth graders at Charlottesville's Burnley-Moran Elementary School. This group, which is supported by Elk Hill's generous donors, is making a lasting difference in how these young girls see themselves.

Twice a month, during the lunch period, a group of about 10 girls meets with Ragland, Schiavone and Elk Hill counselor Tabitha Kebi. They begin by talking about their day — classroom challenges, family strife, playground drama. Then,

the counselors lead a discussion on a specific topic, such as self-esteem, health and fitness, or being a positive role model. They've role-played situations when a girl is being teased: What can she say? What steps can she take?

One shy, quiet girl shared that her mother was being treated for breast cancer, within the group she found a safe place to voice her fears and feelings. Once withdrawn, the girl is now able to look others in the eye and smile. At the end of every meeting, the girls write in their private journals.

Attendance at the meetings is voluntary — "that was part of helping them learn to have a voice," Schiavone explains — yet this year, every girl has chosen to attend consistently. Teachers have already identified rising fourth graders they think would benefit from the group next year. The end goal is to give these girls the support they need to enter fifth grade, and the precarious middle school years, with a lasting confidence in themselves. ■



**Notes From
The Field**



Heather Clinedinst
Teacher, Elk Hill Staunton School

"Between every two pine trees there is a door leading to a new way of life."

—John Muir

According to the NYU Child Study Center, on average, a girl's self-esteem peaks at the age of nine. What does that mean to me as an elementary teacher? A lot, actually. It means that the impact I have on each child in my classroom has the potential to have lifelong significance, but none more so than for my female students. It means that I have a responsibility to make sure all my students hear the words, "You matter to the world and you matter to me." It means that each and every one of my students needs to know that they are loved for who they are, right this moment. It's an awesome responsibility to have, and one which I know I cannot accomplish alone. It takes all of us to make sure that the children in our lives know they are priceless.

I firmly believe that strong, confident girls will grow into strong, confident women who are ready to accept the joys and challenges that life will bring their way. At Elk Hill, we strive to meet each child, boy or girl, where they are. Then, we have the great opportunity to come alongside our students and support each child as they begin to rise to their full, capable potential. I, for one, am blessed and humbled to be part of that legacy. ■

Join us on the
2nd and 4th
Monday 3-5 p.m.
Elk Hill's
Charlottesville Day
School

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COLLABORATE,
and
CONTRIBUTE**

at Elk Hill Charlottesville
School's Synapse Hub.
The Synapse Hub is a
networking group, but it's
more than just networking.
The "Hub" facilitates
connections between
businesses and nonprofit
groups for community and
economic development.
To learn more at
www.synapsehubs.com
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jcoccione@elkhill.org.

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Gillian Kunkel,
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@ GKunkel@elkhill.org
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Honor a strong woman

with a Gift to Elk Hill

All of us can think of one — or several — women who made a lasting difference in our lives. Maybe it was a teacher, like Heather Clinedinst, who made sure you knew YOU mattered. Maybe it was a friend you made in fourth grade who stood up for you when you needed it most. Maybe it's your mother, your aunt or your sister.

Please consider making a gift to Elk Hill this Spring in honor of a strong woman who has inspired you — and share your story on our Facebook page! Your gift will help us make a difference in the lives of more young women like Rebecca and Anna.

Voices



"A woman is like a tea bag - you can't tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water."

– Eleanor Roosevelt

"A wise woman wishes to be no one's enemy; a wise woman refuses to be anyone's victim."

– Maya Angelou

"Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, 'I will try again tomorrow.'"

– Mary Anne Radmacher



Planned Giving

Join Elk Hill Society

The Elk Hill Society recognizes individuals whose foresight and generosity ensure the long-term stability of Elk Hill for future generations. We encourage you to consider joining a very special group of Elk Hill supporters – Elk Hill Society members. Society members are those friends who express their support for the future of Elk Hill by including a bequest or other life income gift for the Foundation in their estate plan.

It's a simple gift that costs nothing during your lifetime – but makes a world of difference in a young person's lifetime. Let us answer your questions! Contact: Michael Farley, CEO (804) 457-4866 ext. 311 or Mfarley@elkhill.org ■