

Aaron's House

December 28, 2006

Ms. Diane Endres Ballweg
President
Endres Manufacturing Company Foundation
2621 Park Street
Middleton, Wisconsin 53562

Dear Ms. Endres Ballweg,

On behalf of the partners of *Aaron's House*, a new three-year pilot project in Madison, Wisconsin, I'd like to thank you for your expressed interest in our program and the opportunity to tell you more about what makes this initiative unique. The project is a combined effort between the Aaron Meyer Foundation, the Chris Farley Foundation, and Connections Counseling, LLC.

Clearly, addictions touch us all, even if the degree to that impact can vary. Sure, it is easy to peg the "skid row junkie" or "drunk" on the street—the person without a home, the prostitute or the panhandler who we ASSUME, rightly or wrongly, is in that position due to drug or alcohol abuse. We may even notice, yet not necessarily discuss, the relative who consistently "overdoes it" at family functions. Point is, people with addictions issues walk among us every day, and, more often than not, deeply resemble our most treasured loved ones—our parents, children, siblings, relatives, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. In fact, the number of people who struggle with such issues is probably largely under-reported until behavioral changes or personality shifts make it apparent to us, usually because the change is so significant that we can no longer ignore it. Only then do they join the statistics and are "labeled" with a traditionally derogatory brand.

At the most obvious level, addictions are known to affect a person's daily functioning. Most gruesome in this regard are loss of marriages and other relationships, homes, jobs or careers, physical health, and, sometimes, lives. Yet, there are many suffering in silence whose symptoms are less overt. Detecting a problem with a young person is especially challenging since rebellion and secretive behavior are considered "normal" parts of growing up and establishing our own autonomy as we move firmly into adulthood.

Sadly, stigma remains, which is part of why people who are facing addictions problems rarely come forward voluntarily. There is shame involved. Yet, should there be? Whether you accept the medical model of addictions or not, the commonality is pain. Recovery takes courage and determination, and there is NO shame in that. On the contrary, the only shame involved in this scenario is for people who *can* help to not step forward and lend a hand. Because of this, we accept our responsibility and that is why *Aaron's House* will soon be a reality.

The actuality is that the vast majority of addicts, regardless of substances used, are good, kind, non-violent, and much-loved people. This may, sometimes, be temporarily hidden by the addictive behavior itself, but the essence of their humanity remains the same. My son, Aaron Meyer, was one such person. His challenges did not make him a "bad" teenager. Challenged in some areas, for a time, yes—but that never took away his personal worth and all he had to offer to the world in the short time he was with us. In fact, his impact was more significant in 18 years than most people could ever match in a much longer lifetime. *Aaron's House* was actually his idea, though at that time, for course, he never thought to name it after himself. He just saw a need and a way to address it.

Establishing *Aaron's House* is particularly important for several reasons. For one, it is much easier to detect an addictions problem when a young person is still fully integrated into school, family, and other social systems that are more apt to notice changes or other signs of trouble. Because of this, the window of opportunity is slim, and, timely intervention, essential. It is also the time when younger persons in recovery are more likely to receive help

and guidance from interested adults in their communities and, if they are lucky enough to have them, supportive family members. Because of this, services like *Aaron's House* are crucial in our nation. Without this program, and national duplication of its model to also include young women in recovery, more transitioning youth will be lost. How can we allow that to occur when the solution only requires money, time, and the pooling of available talent and expertise? The answer is—we won't.

Not discounting the needs of other segments of our recovering population, *Aaron's House* provides a service within a highly specialized niche and will maintain this focus. The program was founded to support young, college-aged men who do not require more institutionalized or restrictive treatment modalities, are not court demanded to receive help, hold no history of violent behavior, do not suffer from significant emotional disturbances or chronic mental illness, and can most benefit from the supportive and unique peer-driven program model we are currently developing. For some, our program will not be an appropriate setting. But for those who fit our targeted program participant, it is the ideal service model.

We do not expect our residents to be perfect. Perfection is unattainable—for ANY of us. We do, however, expect them to be committed to recovery and a better life, to fulfillment of their individual callings, and to leading an existence as fully contributing members of their communities. We *do* also expect them to be likewise committed to each other—helping one another along the tumultuous path of sobriety, which, most certainly, is filled with both peaks and valleys.

Together, we will foster an environment that centers on inter-dependence, celebration of each other's strengths, non-judgmental acceptance of each other's personal limitations, the importance of dedicated service to others, and a culture of optimism, hope, compassion, and perseverance. This will all be achieved through mutual support—between the residents themselves, of course, in addition to the contributions of the multitude of people in their lives, old and new, who will support them along their journey. As a result, *Aaron's House* will define or redefine what “community” means—Responsibility *to* and *for* each other.

For anyone who was lucky enough to know him, Aaron was “Everyboy.” He was a valued friend, a cherished son, and admired older brother. He was athlete, a dreamer, a helper, and, to the end, an optimist. He had a knack for deeply touching the lives of others, and he continues to do so through his legacy and, now, *Aaron's House*.

As we approach you for your financial support, we remind ourselves of our dedication to creativity, “thinking outside the box,” and tailoring our approach to accommodate individualized needs. We also acknowledge and embrace your foundation's interest in “options.” Because of that, we are not requesting a specific amount at this time. Instead, we would like to begin dialog about how YOU see yourself fitting in with our project.

Perhaps a corporate sponsorship serves you best, or, maybe a foundation grant better suits your interests. As a result, we are providing two sets of documents for your review. Regardless, we would like the honor of calling you our partner as we embark upon this critical mission. We need your help, no matter what framework that takes.

Please call me 608-332-8331 with any questions about our project or with requests for additional documents. In the meantime, we thank you for your time and the review of our materials. We hope to soon include you among our distinguished list of program partners.

Sincerely,

Tom Meyer
Acting Executive Director
The Aaron J. Meyer Foundation