

Clark's Manor: New safe haven for adults with mental health challenges

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Clark Widger (right) enjoys a 37th birthday celebration outside his new home, Clark's Manor, with (from left) John Kaplow, Clark's sister, Ashley Widger, his aunt, Peg Currie, and parents Barbara and Chuck Widger. "I see Clark living his best life in the present, with a very bright and happy future ahead," says Art Fastman, director of operations at Clark's Manor.

Clark Widger has found his way home.

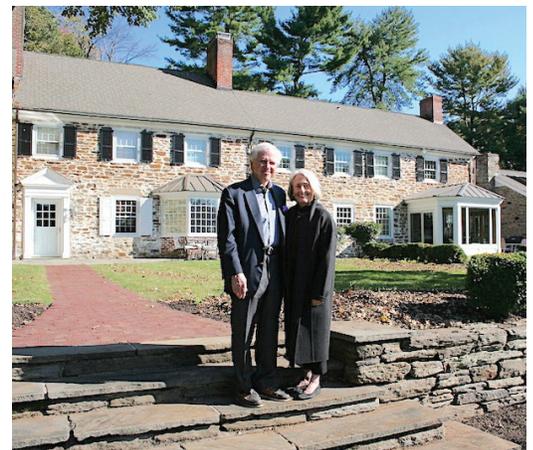
And his new front door is wide open – he's ready for housemates.

A former Conestoga athlete with chronic mental illness, Clark now lives in a home that bears his name.

Clark's Manor, a lovely 10,000 sq. ft. Okie-designed farmhouse on four acres off N. Providence Rd. in Media, was years in the making, a labor of love from his parents, his therapy team, and the behavioral health experts at nearby Elwyn.

"Chronic mental health problems affect families across all socioeconomic levels," says Chuck Widger. "I don't care who you are, you want to know your adult child is going to be safe and well taken care of."

Before settling happily in Media a few months ago, Clark, 37, had cycled through a half-dozen residential programs in the last 18 years. His last stop, Wild Acre, was a winner – the therapists, place and program were perfect.



Chuck and Barbara Widger at Clark's Manor, the home they created for their son and others in partnership with Elwyn.

But Wild Acre was in Boston. And his parents, Barbara and Chuck, and his sister, Ashley, were in Berwyn.

Clark wanted to come home.

Alas, the Widgers couldn't find a single program between Boston and DC that followed Wild Acre's innovative "milieu" model of collaborative living.

So they created their own.

"It's so hard to find the right fit for adults with chronic mental illness. There's no 1-800 help line," Chuck Widger tells SAVVY. "These illnesses are so different and care can be so uneven. It's a real shortcoming in our mental health system."



The kitchen at Clark's Manor.

(No stranger to blazing trails, Widger founded Brinker Capital, a top investment firm in Berwyn, and was the leading benefactor of the Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law.)

Clark's Manor is geared to adults who are stable and committed to their treatment but need extra support. Residents live together as a family. They head out to work, school, doctor's appointments and errands, then return home to have dinner together at night.

Clark himself hits the gym, goes skateboarding and food shopping, takes online courses in art and music, does his own laundry and helps make meals. When COVID passes, he'll get out and do even more, his father says.

"The doors aren't locked. There's nothing institutional about it," says his father. Staff from Elwyn are all master's trained clinicians. They don't live on site but are there 24/7 to subtly keep residents on track and productive.

Clark is but the first resident; there's ample room for seven more. His mother Barbara has taken the lead on redesigning the property for comfort and privacy.

If the day comes when Clark can leave to live on his own, Clark's Manor will live on. The Widger Family Foundation will fund the program in perpetuity.

"I know this works and can help a lot of people," says Chuck Widger. "We'd like to be a model that's cited in academic literature and replicated elsewhere around the country."

He believes milieu programs can be a godsend for families. "Finding the right solution for your adult child changes not only the child's life but it also changes the lives of family members. It's a beautiful thing."

Families interested in learning more about Clark's Manor are invited to contact Art Fastman, Director of Operations, at art.fastman@elwyn.org or call 610-675-7669.

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