

Clark's Manor in Media: Innovative, independent living for adults with mental health challenges

February 21, 2021

Parents don't live forever. When they leave behind an adult child with special needs, that child's care often falls to a sibling.

In the case of Conestoga '02 soccer star Clark "Widge" Widger, who has chronic mental illness, his parents Barbara and Chuck can rest easy.

They know Clark, 37, will be well taken care of, even when the responsibility for his care falls to Clark's big sister, Ashley.

That's because the family, in partnership with Elwyn, has created the perfect landing place for Clark and it's just minutes from their Berwyn home.



Clark with his sister Ashley at Clark's Manor, his new home off Providence Rd. in Media. "It's a warm, bright inviting residence on enough land to spend time outside and still feel private," says Ashley Widger, who had a hand in creating the innovative collaborative living program for her brother and others.

Named for its first resident, Clark's Manor is a unique group home for adults with chronic mental health challenges who are stable and committed to their care.

It's the first of residential program of its kind in the tri-state area.

Through their family foundation, the Widgers will fund Clark's Manor in perpetuity and hope to replicate the program to help families in other states. (If the name rings a bell, Chuck Widger was the leading benefactor of the Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law.)

The family bought a lovely 10,000 sq. ft. farmhouse on four acres in Media and worked with nearby Elwyn to create an innovative program there for Clark and up to seven housemates.

It's modeled after Wild Acre, a similar "milieu" style program in Boston in which residents live independently but with individualized supports in place to help them manage day-to-day living.

After cycling through a half-dozen residential programs in 18 years, Clark had thrived at Wild Acre but wanted to live closer to home.

He moved into Clark's Manor six months ago and couldn't be happier, reports Ashley Widger, also a standout Conestoga athlete (Class of '95).

"We've absolutely seen him flourish," Ashley says. "He's settled in beautifully and is really taking charge of his responsibilities and self-care there. He's really brightened up."

Clark shops for groceries, takes online courses, runs errands, does his laundry and helps make meals. During COVID, he's had to stick close to home to pursue his many hobbies, like skateboarding, drawing and painting, playing guitar and collecting comic books.



Chuck and Barbara Widger at Clark's Manor. Barbara Widger oversaw the redesign of the home and grounds for comfort and privacy.

When the pandemic passes, Ashley says her brother will get out even more: volunteering in the community, jamming at the School of Rock (as he did in Boston) and possibly taking a part-time job.

"It's so hard to find the right fit for adults with chronic mental illness," says Clark's father, Chuck. This program works because it's homey but with flexible, customized supports. "The doors aren't locked. There's nothing institutional about it," he says.

Adds Ashley: "It's hard to see someone you care about so deeply and want to support so intensely not be able to find the right space – with the right support – to be themselves. This really is a gift for people who don't fit in a box institutionally but need more of a homelike setting."

Master's trained clinicians from Elwyn don't live on-site but are there 24/7 to keep Clark on track and productive.

"He's really clicked with the staff," Ashley says. "These are really talented people who have a passion for what they're doing. I enjoy spending time with them, too. Elwyn really does attract top talent. We feel really lucky."

All that's missing now for Clark is company. It's a big house for just one person. "He's excited to have housemates," Ashley says.

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.

*This article first appeared in Savvy Main Line: Caroline O'Halloran, 2021, Savvy Main Line, "Clark's Manor in Media: Innovative, independent living for adults with mental health challenges", Savvy Main Line, February 21.