

A Dream House Built From a Nightmare

Peggy Harris Turned a Personal Tragedy Into a Home for Brain-Injured Adults

By NANCY MYERS
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“Build it and they will come,” says former Palisadian Peggy Mallett Harris, 59, who last month completed her dream house: a home for brain-injured adults in Ventura.

The one-story home is beautifully landscaped, with a large back yard, four cheery bedrooms, and an open-style kitchen family room. Called the Central Coast Home for Brain Injury Survivors, it's a sister home to Back in the Saddle in Apple Valley.

But for Harris, a licensed caretaker with 16 years of experience in the field, her dream began as a nightmare. On August 10, 1992, her 16-year-old daughter Jennifer survived an auto accident, but was left in a coma for three months. Nine months after her discharge, Jennifer had suffered permanent brain damage.

Peggy and her then-husband, Dr. Jeff Harris, worked hard to learn what they could to help Jennifer through the critical stages of recovery. They tried to incorporate her back into the family household, but Jennifer's frontal-lobe injury left her without discretion as to language or behavior. She fought with her parents and siblings.

“Brain-injury victims are different from other handicapped people because they have a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ life,” Harris says. “They remember much of what they did before the injury, and understand that their lives abruptly changed. They are frustrated, and can be very angry.”

Harris's other daughters were 6 and 10 years old at the time. Ultimately, the Harrises took Jennifer to live at Back in the Saddle—at the time the only such care facility in L.A.'s Westside.

Slowly and painfully, Jennifer

learned to control her hostile tendencies. After years of patience and help from her family, Jennifer graduated from Apple Valley High School.

“Brain injured people want to be loved and appreciated,” Harris says. “They don't want to be depressed. They don't understand why they cannot manage themselves anymore. They want to be independent. And they can also be painfully blunt and outspoken, which is hard on the people around them.”

A Palisades High graduate, Harris holds a B.A., cum laude, in English and a master's in public health from UCLA. She has worked at L.A. County-USC Medical Center and the USC School of Medicine as assistant director of their Office of Federal Health Relations. For 20 years, she assisted her former husband as vice president of his private practice of pediatrics and general medicine in Malibu. Following a divorce, she took UCLA courses in landscape design and formed her own business, P.M. Harris Landscape Design.

“I am now an administrator,” Harris says, “licensed by the state of California to provide a group home for up to four adults. The Community Care Licensing Division, under the Department of Social Services, requires an exacting education. I did lots of studying, took classes, and passed tests.”

“Currently, about two percent of the adult population has brain injury,” Harris continues, “and about 50 percent are traumas from car accidents. The typical patient is a male, 20 years old, who was in a car or motorcycle accident. There are about 23,000 brain-injured adults in Los Angeles County.”

In 2008, Harris's dream of forming a home for head-injured adults merged with Isaac Muta-

bazi's interest in starting a second Back in the Saddle facility. Harris chose the house because of its proximity to Ventura College, renowned for its brain-injury programs. Harris spent nine months upgrading the property. She did the landscaping herself, and she lives on the premises full time, as does Jennifer. Inside the house, the cozy living area opens into the kitchen, featuring a hearth and a fireplace. The house has both private and semi-private colorful bedrooms. The Central Coast Home features wheelchair-accessible pathways meandering through gardens leading to restful benches, surrounded by attractive floral and vegetable patches. There is a large patio with a dance floor and a parrot's cage.

“Brain injured adults have hopes and aspirations just like non-injured people, except their dreams are much more difficult to achieve,” Harris says. “I can provide case management with trips to doctors' offices,” Harris says. “I can provide support for activities for the brain-injured adult: things like gardening, cooking, dancing, computer work, yoga, arts and crafts. I am seeking people such as Jennifer who want to improve their quality of life.”

This past summer, the Central Coast Home was used by the Brain Injury Center of Ventura, a nonprofit organization, for its successful Wednesday night dinner events, and the Home recently obtained a contract with the Veterans Administration.

Harris considers the Home her crowning achievement.

“The Central Coast Home has been 16 years in the making. It seems like every thing I have done in my life professionally has led me here.”

For information on the Central Coast Home for Brain-Injury Survivors, contact Peggy Harris at 805-659-2106.