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\$4 million earmark jump-starts mental health nonprofit's new campus

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Julie and Scott Halpert

A \$4 million earmark that a small suicide prevention nonprofit secured in the most recent round of federal funding is helping catapult its plan for a Washtenaw County campus to provide support for young adults facing mental health challenges.

The funding, included in the most recent round of earmarks made for fiscal year 2023, will put Garrett's Space about halfway to its more than \$8 million goal to fund the project.

As planned, the campus will combine peer support groups led by licensed social workers with the natural environment, recreation, the arts and exercise to provide support for people 18-28 facing anxiety, depression and other mental health issues. It will offer both day programs and three- to four-week residential stays, adding another layer of support beyond therapy.

The plan is the vision of Julie Halpert, a journalist who's written for the New York Times, Wall Street Journal and other media outlets, and her husband Scott, former in-house counsel for Masco Corp.

They founded the nonprofit in their son Garrett's memory after losing him to suicide at the age of just 23 in 2017.

"Our son was really struggling toward the end of his life. He needed more than weekly or bi-weekly therapy," Julie Halpert said.

Like many people these days, he was feeling isolated, alone and demoralized and didn't want to go through the stigmatizing experience of going to the emergency room, which is not designed to help people long-term, his parents said.

Garrett's Space Residential Center will be "the type of place he would have liked to have gone," with a non-medical, retreat-like atmosphere and peer support, Julie Halpert said.

Therapy isn't enough for some young adults going through mental health challenges, Scott Halpert said.

"They need to see other young people going through similar challenges as they. That allows them to put their own challenges in perspective."



Provided

Garrett Halpert poses next to the cherry blossoms in Washington D.C.

A vital cause

Suicide was the third leading cause of death among individuals ages 15-24 in 2020, the [National Institute of Mental Health](#) said, citing a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report.

The Halperts didn't want to wait to help other young adults like their son while they worked toward the vision for a residential center. In 2021, Garrett's Space began hosting free, virtual, peer support groups, each led by a facilitator and licensed clinical social worker, to let young adults suffering from anxiety and depression know they are not alone. Recently, it's begun shifting some of the virtual programs to in-person activities and gatherings held at Washtenaw County restaurants and other public places.

With increased donations and a handful of grants, the budget for Garrett's Space grew to about \$250,000 in 2021 and over \$800,000 last year, President and CEO Scott Halpert said.

The suicide-prevention nonprofit has only one full-time licensed clinical social worker and one part-time staff member, in addition to Halpert who works full time without pay and his wife, acting COO, who spends about a third of her working hours focused on the nonprofit.

Contracted facilitators and licensed social workers also help with the peer support groups, and a yoga instructor is present at every meeting to help teach clients breathing and movement exercises.

Twenty-five young adults are logging on to attend one of three weekly meetings, Scott Halpert said. Another 40 have attended the peer support groups since 2021.



First Glance View of Garrett's Space Residential Center

Provided

A rendering of the Garrett's Space Residential Center that the Halperts hope to be able to create using land where a house sits now.

Getting the word out

While launching the peer support groups, the Halperts began reaching out to help spread the word about their plans for the residential center and holistic wellness campus.

"We'd never done any fundraising (or) worked in nonprofits," Julie Halpert said. "We just jumped in."

The Halperts said they were fortunate to know a lot of people in the mental health space and nonprofit sector. Julie Halpert had also covered mental health issues extensively in her reporting work and had many contacts at the University of Michigan where she's served as a regular lecturer on environmental and science writing for 20 years. They attracted experts and colleagues to the nonprofit's board and advisory group, and list of supporters along with family and friends – theirs and their son's.

"Garrett was just the most incredible person," his mom said, with friends his own age, parents of his friends and others of all ages.

In 2019, Garrett's Space attracted the attention of Kacee Must, founder of Citizen Yoga Studio, who hosts an annual yoga event for about 1,000 people at the University of Michigan's Big House. She invited the nonprofit to be the beneficiary for the event that year and again in 2022, Julie Halpert said.

"That really jump-started things for us."

People attending both yoga events have followed it up by volunteering their time and skills and donations, she said.

The couple's connections at the UM Department of Musical Theatre, especially professor Mark Madama, helped them connect with Broadway performers, who – with yoga and pilates instructors, people touched by suicide and politicians – have supported the 24-hour virtual fundraiser Garrett's Space has hosted the past three years, Julie Halpert said.

She also spent most of the past two summers emailing hundreds of publicists she found on IMDbPro (the Internet Movie Database), a web-based database of information on television shows, movies and entertainment professionals.

"I sent a blurb about our organization, and I asked if their client would be a part of this," sending a short video in support of our work, she said.

Those appeals have attracted many videos of support for their work from high-profile people and celebrities, including:

- Actress Rosie O'Donnell
- Andy Lassner, executive producer of "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," who said he has suffered from depression all of his life, according to a testimonial on the Garrett's Space website.

- Maryland Congressman Jamie Raskin, who lost his son to suicide.
- Jo Ellen Pellman, an actress who starred in the Netflix show "The Prom."
- David Axelrod, senior political commentator for CNN and chief strategist for President Barack Obama
- U.S. Rep. Debbie Dingell
- U.S. Sens. Gary Peters and Debbie Stabenow

"People saw famous people being touched by our mission" and came forward to support Garrett's Space, Julie Halpert said.

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Building relationships

It was through the relationships it had built that the fledgling nonprofit was able to secure an earmark.

An emailed letter to the nonprofit from Dingell's office invited it to propose an earmark in a funded area.

Scott Halpern said it took some effort to read through the lists of areas a project could fit into for funding. "But we realized our project fit right in with some of what they were funding."

He talked with many community organizations, eventually securing 19 letters of support for the center, from organizations including Washtenaw County Community Mental Health, Michigan State Housing Development Authority, Ann Arbor Mayor Christopher Taylor, the National Alliance on Mental Illness Washtenaw County and mental health leaders at the University of Michigan and Eastern Michigan University.

"That was instrumental in showing not only what we are doing is important, but that we are a credible organization," Scott Halpert said.

The earmark will fund 14,000 square feet of new construction to build a residential center to house 15-20 people for short-term stays and a separate creativity studio, Scott Halpert said.



Brandt Real Estate

Garrett's Space is under contract to buy a 5,000-square-foot house on 75 acres in Superior Township as the first step in developing a residential center and holistically focused wellness campus for young adults facing mental health challenges.

Garrett's Space is under contract to purchase the site for that construction – 75 acres at 3900 N. Dixboro Road. The property, which includes a sprawling, 5,155-square-foot house the nonprofit plans to use for programming, is listed for \$4.8 million.

The purchase is contingent on securing rezoning of the property to medical services and special use from its current residential and agricultural zoning in the coming months, Halpert said.

Garrett's Space is paying cash for part of the house and financing the rest with the seller, he said.

In addition to the residential center and peer support groups, Garrett's Space will offer programs focused on healthy behaviors and wellness, including meditation, yoga, art and music.

The campus will include walking trails, a creek, basketball and pickleball courts, gardens, hammocks and therapeutic animals. Inside, the house will feature a large communal kitchen, and private spaces for reflection, gathering, yoga/exercise and other activities.

Boston-based Mass Design Group is serving as project architect.



Brandt Real Estate

Garrett's Space is under contract to buy a 5,000-square-foot house on 75 acres in Superior Township as the first step in developing a residential center and holistically focused wellness campus for young adults facing mental health challenges.

Garrett's Space plans to move its administrative offices to the house and begin initial day programming including support groups, meditation and yoga there shortly after it takes possession, Scott Halpert said.

It will operate on a fee-for-service model based on a sliding scale, seeking insurance reimbursement, grants and donations to fund the program, Scott Halpert said.

The goal is to make Garrett's Space Residential Center and programming a model that can be replicated across the country, Julie Halpert said.

People in the current peer support groups and wellness programs have credited them with saving their lives, she said, whether through direct support for themselves or through helping others.

"We want young adults to realize that so many people are struggling...(and that) others have struggled and gotten better."

Editor's note: The original version of this report contained the wrong source of funding of the earmark Garrett's Space received. This version is correct.

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