

Wilderness-based rehab facility to open on Penikese Island

The uninhabited island in the Elizabeth chain will soon be home to young men seeking to break the chains of opiate addiction.

By **Barry Stringfellow** - April 20, 2016

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The boathouse at Penikese. - Photo by Barry Stringfellow

One hundred years ago Penikese Island, the smallest of the Elizabeth Islands, was home to a leper colony, where people with a stigmatized and misunderstood disease were sent to die.

Soon, Penikese Island will be home to an inpatient drug-rehabilitation facility, also named Penikese, where people with the often stigmatized and sometimes fatal disease of addiction will go to begin life anew.

In June, Penikese will open its doors to 12 young men between the ages of 18 and 24. Residents will spend anywhere from 90 to 180 days working to build a foundation for their recovery, in order to withstand the triggers and temptations that will surely come their way once they're back in civilization.

The residents will lead a structured, spartan existence. They will live in a rustic two-story saltbox, with only wood stoves for heating and cooking. Oil lamps will be the primary source of light. They will have no cell phones and no access to drugs, except for their prescribed medications, which will be kept under triple lock. They will have daily group and individual therapy sessions. They will unplug and read books. They will chop wood and exercise daily. They will learn skills like boatbuilding, gardening, and fishing, and they will explore the unspoiled nature that the 75-acre spit of land, and the pristine waters that surround it, have to offer.

They will learn to slow down.

They will learn to be mindful.

Lengthy stay, better outcome

“We’ll infuse mindfulness into everything we do,” Coco Wellington, clinical director of Penikese, told The Times. Ms. Wellington said there’s a simple reason why the prescribed stay at Penikese is longer than at most inpatient treatment facilities. “The longer the treatment, the better the outcome,” she said. “We need

time to teach them their refusal skills, and you can't treat addiction if you don't treat the mental health piece. If you have a relapse in one, you're going to have a relapse in another."

Ms. Wellington said that part of the ethos at Penikese will be to change the way people speak about addiction. "We need to change the language," she said. "The more stigmatized the illness, the more we reduce people to their condition. They are not 'addicts.' They're people with substance-use problems."

Ms. Wellington said that while there's value in 12-step programs, the standard introduction, where a person states his or her name and says he or she is "an alcoholic and/or an addict," is self-defeating. "I find it disrespectful," she said. "How do I help you build self-esteem when you identify yourself as an addict? You're more than that. You could be a husband, a father, a schoolteacher, but you choose to identify yourself as an addict? That needs to change."

Penikese, as it will simply be called, is a reincarnation of the Penikese Island School, which was built in 1973 by retired Marine Major George Cadwalader as a wilderness program for "delinquent young men," which was shuttered in November 2014. It is being reopened as a wilderness rehabilitation facility as the result of an alliance created between the Children's Study Home, one of the oldest charitable organizations in Massachusetts, and the Penikese board of directors.

Jennifer Smith, director of children and Families at Children's Study Home, told The Times that the collaboration began when she met Matt Sutherland, chairman of the board of directors for Penikese, about a year ago. "The Penikese board was looking for a new partner, and when I went to the Island, I was spellbound by the place," she said. "It's an incredibly unique opportunity to access a very remote setting that offers so much."

Island of healing

The Times recently accompanied Ms. Wellington and Mr. Sutherland, along with staff from the Children's Study Home and a number of clinicians, including Martha's Vineyard Hospital staff psychiatrist and substance-abuse specialist Dr. Charles Silberstein, on a trip Penikese Island.

The group left Woods Hole on the Richard S. Edwards, a 36-foot converted lobster boat owned by Penikese, on a windy but mercifully temperate day.

"We envisioned this as an island of healing," Mr. Sutherland said as the boat began the hourlong journey. "We'll try to draw people from Falmouth and the Islands first, then Cape Cod, then the South Coast, then Massachusetts, then from everywhere. There were kids at the Penikese School from France. It's amazing how far the reputation of this place has reached."

"We looked at how the island could play an innovative role in helping with the opiate crisis," Eliza Crescentini, executive director of Children's Study Home, said. "We talked a lot about the unique and powerful tool that Penikese can be in service to people. Penikese isn't going to be for everyone, but for some people it might be the tipping point. It's an incredible place. You can't unsee that island once you see it."

"Obviously 12 beds is barely making a dent in the problem, but we're hoping the concept of what we're putting together here can work in other places," Mr. Sutherland said. "We're also looking at smaller groups because of fundraising — it's very hard to fundraise for a 100-bed program."

Mr. Sutherland said the cost of a stay at Penikese will depend on the number of residents at any given time, but that it will be in the range of \$400 per day.

“That’s incredibly inexpensive compared with most places,” Dr. Silberstein said. “And it’s also less than many people’s drug habits.”

Ms. Crescentini said Children’s Study Home hopes to be able to bill private insurance companies and MassHealth in the near future, and that regardless, fees will be based on a sliding scale. “It’s incredibly important to the Children’s Study Home and to the Penikese board that this be as accessible as possible,” she said.

Mr. Sutherland, a successful financial executive who lives in Woods Hole, said that raising scholarship money is a top priority. “\$400 a day is still beyond the reach of a lot of people,” he said. “We’ve raised about \$250,000 so far, and we’re looking to raise enough money so the 12 beds can be completely filled, and we can be completely blind to the financial circumstances for those 12 people. Scholarship funding will be very important, given the duration of stays.”

Mr. Sutherland said Penikese will be all-male because according to addiction experts, it will help the residents focus on their own issues. Dr. Silberstein wholeheartedly agreed. “Sexual relationships can feed into addictions; they can be a source of triggers,” he said. “It’s a hard and fast rule that people in early recovery not become sexually involved with each other.”

“I was told there was a brief coed experiment at Penikese School,” Mr. Sutherland said. “Apparently it didn’t work out very well.”

There will be at least four staff members on the island at any given time, which includes recovery counselors and clinicians for individual and group therapy. Two staff members will be certified wilderness first responders, and all staff members will have wilderness first aid training.

Coalition of healing

The aquamarine waters surrounding the Island looked almost tropical. Penikese Island is also a bird sanctuary, owned by the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW). The sky and the shoreline were teeming with bird life. Once the boat engine was shut off, the caws of terns and gulls and the high-pitched chirp of a circling osprey were the only audible sounds over the gusting wind.

The main house has dormitory-style beds upstairs. Downstairs, a well-stocked and well-seasoned kitchen leads to a den, which is lined with overflowing bookcases. There are no televisions, computers, or electronics of any kind. “We had a 17-year-old kid [at Penikese School] who had never read a book,” Mr. Sutherland said. “He discovered reading here, and he was hooked. He read 23 books in 70-odd days. It was just amazing.”

A stone’s throw from the main house is a renovated one-room schoolhouse that will be used for group therapy sessions. Computers will be installed for online learning and for Skype calls between residents and their families. There is a dilapidated barn on the grounds that will one day be renovated for staff housing.

There is also a woodworking shop, where all manner of tools hung neatly on the walls, and where a wooden dory was in the early stages of restoration. There is also a basketball court, and a swath of land for gardening.

Mr. Sutherland led the group to the high ground of the Island, passing two concrete pillars that once demarcated a boundary which no leper could cross.



On the western shore, a concrete skeleton of what had once been the laundry for the “unclean” still stood. A promontory on the north side of the island afforded sweeping views of Buzzards Bay and Vineyard Sound. To the southeast, Gay Head Light was barely a speck on the horizon, but its beacon will surely be visible on clear nights.

The location is also where 14 inhabitants from the leper colony are buried. Their graves are marked by simple, flat stones. One of the interred was a Japanese man who missed home so badly, he secretly built a boat and rowed 13 miles to New Bedford, only to be apprehended on a train to Boston.

“Leprosy was one of the worst diseases of the time, and the people were treated terribly,” Mr. Sutherland said. “Yet they found family among themselves. They were buried here according to communal bonds that they formed.”

On the ride back to Woods Hole, Dr. Silberstein suggested that a “coalition of healing” be developed between Penikese and Vineyard House, the only sober living community on the Island.

“It would be great if someone who couldn’t make it at Vineyard House could come to Penikese and get their footing, and come back to Vineyard House,” he said. “There’s not a program like this for people in early recovery in our area. If I had a friend or family member determined to stay clean, I think the best hope would be in long-term residential treatment.”

Deaths attributed to substance abuse have become all too familiar on Martha’s Vineyard. This week, another Island family grieved over a young man lost in a battle that he and they could not win. Penikese will provide another option for those on the front lines.

Children’s Study Home will begin accepting applications for Penikese shortly. Interested parties can call 800-828-7677 for more information.
