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Kanchana Krishnan Ayyer leads a meditation class Thursday at Eagles' Haven wellness center in Coral Springs.

Anguish lingers for many after Parkland shooting

Now Eagles' Haven offering comfort and relief to anyone who needs it

BY SUSANNAH BRYAN

CORAL SPRINGS — This is Parkland's heartbreak more than a year later: A student in pain, haunted by the loss of two friends. A parent in pain, tormented by extreme anxiety. A teacher in pain, plagued by sleepless nights and waves of panic.

All three are finding help and hope at Eagles' Haven, a warm and welcoming healing center that opened in March to give all those affected by last year's mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High a place to gather and just be.

On Feb. 14, 2018, a former student walked onto the Stoneman Douglas campus and shot 34 students and staff, leaving 17 dead.

The shock of the shooting — the gunfire, the screams and the terrifying escape from a school that will never be the



Victoria Jusme and Kayfia Gordon pack up plants that will be distributed to the teachers and faculty at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School as a gift.

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HAVEN

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same — has worn off. But for many, the scars remain.

After the shooting, an army of therapists descended on Parkland to help students, parents and teachers cope with the trauma. School officials hired an extra 60 mental health experts to help students and quickly opened a resiliency center at Pine Trails Park to offer crisis and grief counseling. The center stayed open for more than a year until it closed on April 1, a week after Eagles' Haven opened.

The new center, staffed by mental health counselors, offers comfort and relief to those who show up.

The Children's Services Council of Broward County funds the center, which costs nearly \$1 million a year in taxpayer money to run. And JAFCO manages day-to-day operations. The Sunrise nonprofit, also known as Jewish Adoption and Foster Care Options, serves abused, neglected and disabled children.

"The point was to create a place that's a safe haven so you can go and feel supported," said Cindy Arenberg Seltzer, president and CEO of the Children's Services Council. "There's many different ways of dealing with trauma, different ways to reach different people."

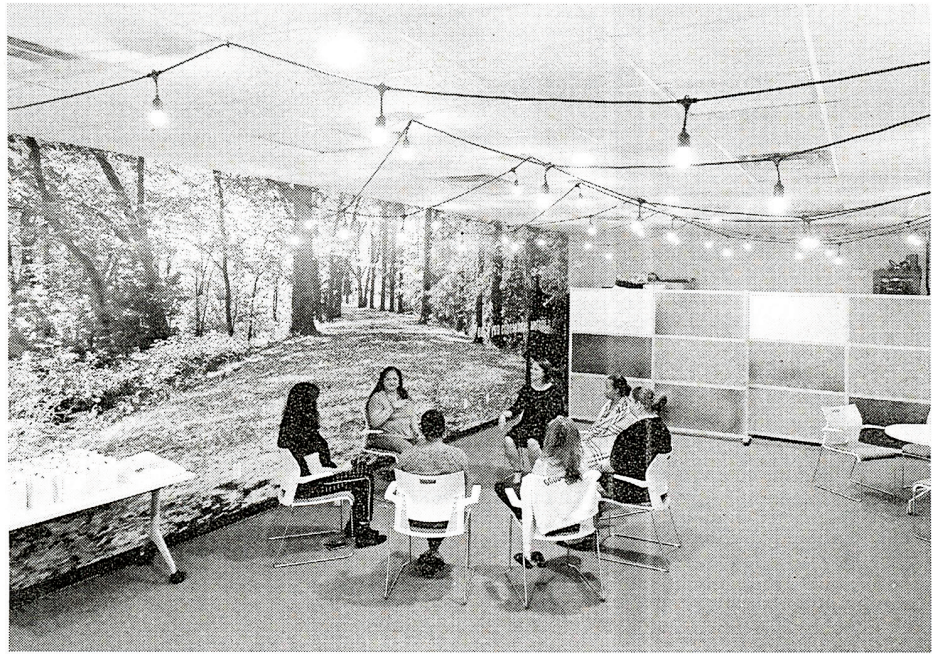
Eagles' Haven offers a potpourri of wellness classes and support groups designed to help alleviate feelings of trauma and move participants toward a path of healing, Seltzer said.

Eagles' Haven is not a therapy center, say those who run it.

Instead, it's more of a sanctuary where people still recovering from the tragedy can try out all kinds of classes seven days a week — all for free. The menu of classes includes kickboxing, drumming circles, power yoga, graffiti art, tai chi, healthy cooking classes, acupuncture and meditation.

And if someone feels like talking to a counselor, they can do that too, said Sarah Franco, JAFCO's executive director.

So far, more than 800



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Kanchana Krishnan Ayyer leads a meditation class at Eagles' Haven Wellness Center in Coral Springs. The center offers wellness and supportive services seven days a week.

visitors have gone to Eagles' Haven, located in a busy Coral Springs shopping center at 5655 Coral Ridge Drive. And at least 100 families have gotten referrals to traditional therapists with their own offices.

But officials are hoping more people in need will turn to Eagles' Haven for help, Seltzer said.

"We are happy people are coming," she said. "But there are so many more people we want to reach."

The one-stop wellness center swung into gear one month early after the suicides of two students who survived the Parkland shooting.

Eagles' Haven aims to serve the entire Stoneman Douglas community: current, future and former students; parents and family members; teachers and faculty.

In the lobby, visitors can sink into a comfy couch, sip coffee and have their pick of free snacks.

Each room has a wall dedicated to calming scenes of forests or mountains or clouds with uplifting messages: "The journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step." "The best views come after the hardest climb." "Once you choose hope, anything is possible."

The student with PTSD

Sara Cardona, now a 17-year-old senior at Stoneman Douglas, said she struggles with PTSD, anxiety and depression.

The Parkland teen was not in school on the day of the shooting, but several of her friends were. Two died in the shooting: Alex Schachter and Gina Montalto. Another, Ashley Baez, was wounded.

"I texted both Ashley and Alex that day," Cardona said. "Ashley eventually got back to me. And Alex never did. I think about that a lot. I was supposed to be in the freshman building, on the third floor."

Cardona did not know Calvin Desir, the 16-year-old boy who died by suicide on March 23. But she was in tears over his death.

"I took it really, really hard," she said. "It made me sad to think we weren't able to be there for him. I think of a lot of us can relate to that feeling of hopelessness."

Two days later, Eagles' Haven opened.

"The first time I went was to just visit and look around and see what it was about," Cardona said. "Then I went back with my family."

So far, Cardona has taken the art and kickboxing classes, but she plans to try more.

"It's nice to be around kids that kind of know what you're going through," she said. "I like the sense of community we have and I like the idea of us all bonding together. Just being with people who know what you're going through helps a lot."

The teacher with insomnia

English teacher Nadeen Ashman was already heartbroken over the shooting that shattered her school. Then, more than a year later, came the suicide of Desir, one of her favorite students.

"That ripped my heart out," she said. "I would see him every day. His smiling face. And I blame myself that I didn't notice any signs."

At the time, the single mom from Coconut Creek was battling insomnia and anxiety, raising a toddler and a teen, and making no time for self-care.

Then one day in May, she decided to visit Eagles' Haven with her 2-year-old daughter. The staff, all social workers or mental health counselors, gave her



Kanchana Krishnan Ayyer leads a meditation class Thursday at Eagles' Haven wellness center in Coral Springs. Eagles' Haven opened in March to serve all those still recovering from last year's tragic Parkland shooting. (Mike Stocker / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

a warm greeting. She went into a private room with one counselor to chat about what was going on in her life.

"I felt very comfortable, like talking to an old friend," she said. "The ambiance puts you at ease. We sat there for about 30 minutes just talking about how I was coping since the tragedy."

Ashman returned several times over the summer and meets weekly with one of the center's counselors, now a trusted confidante.

"We just talk about everything," Ashman said. "You have a shoulder if you need it. As a teacher you deal with 100 kids today, 100 attitudes. And you take that home. And rarely do we have someone asking us, 'How are you?' And at Eagles' Haven, they ask, 'Hey, how are you?'"

The anxious mom

Jacqueline Cahill, whose two sons survived the school shooting, wasted no time in visiting Eagles' Haven.

"Some people took 10 years after [the terrorist attack on] Sept. 11 to realize they needed to go to a wellness center," said the Coral Springs mom. "I told myself, I am not going to wait 10 years. I am going right away. It is the best place to be for healing."

Her younger son, now a junior at Stoneman Douglas, saw the bodies of three dead friends right outside his classroom when he walked out of the freshman building that day.

"He was traumatized by the shooting," Cahill said.

And so was she. Consumed with worry over her son, Cahill began experiencing extreme bouts of panic and anxiety.

Things changed for her when Eagles' Haven opened.

"It is so nice to have a place to go to where there are other people doing things to try to stay well," she said. "Now I feel more in touch from within. I just wish everyone would make time for it."

Cahill has been going to the center five times a week, trying out Zumba and yoga, meditation and kickboxing — even sampling a "cooking with chocolate" class.

For those willing to walk through the door, Eagles' Haven can be like a home away from home, she says.

That home away from home will be around for awhile.

"We recognize that the community is going to need support for a long time," Seltzer said. "I expect it to be around for many years to come. As long as there is a need, we'll be there."

In addition to classes, Eagles' Haven includes parent guidance sessions and support groups for students, parents, siblings and teachers; in-home private consultations and crisis support; and private and group walk-ins.

The center is open 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekends.

Visit www.eagleshaven.org/ for more information.

Susannah Bryan can be reached at sbryan@sunsentinel.com or 954-356-4554