

Eagle Ranch founder like a father to many

By **Bob Carlton**
New staff writer

CHESTNUT MOUNTAIN, Ga. - The dark green Toyota Camry comes to a stop, and Eddie Staub points to an old barn on the right.

"That was my first office right there, where that tractor is," Staub says. "That was the only structure here."



Among the children living at Eddie Staub's Eagle Ranch in northeast Georgia are Jerry, left, Scotty, Billy, Andrew and Michael

It was 14 years ago that Staub, a Mountain Brook native and Auburn University graduate, moved into that old barn and started Eagle Ranch, a home for abused and neglected boys. It took him another two years to get the ranch ready to take in its first group of boys in 1985.

A sprawling, 220-acre spread in the hill country of northeast Georgia, the ranch is now home to 28 boys, who have houses to live in, a lake to fish in, a recreation center to play in, and a chapel to worship in. And horses to ride and lots of fresh air to breathe.

"There's just something about the outdoors," Staub says as he takes a couple of visitors on a tour of the ranch. "I just wanted a place for kids to be able to ride bikes and be little boys."

Growing up on Ryecroft Road in Mountain Brook, the oldest son of Ed and Teleete Staub knew what it was like to be a little boy. He had two younger brothers, Billy and Bobby, to play with, and a mother and a father to love and look after him. He was blessed.

"I had parents who were committed to me," Staub recalls. "I went to good schools. And for the longest time, I just assumed everybody had that. Or, at the very least, that my life was the rule, not the exception."

“But as I grew older, I came to realize that my life was very much the exception.” Staub, a distant relative of former major leaguer Rusty Staub, played baseball at Auburn, but he realized by his junior year he didn't have a future in the majors.

“I can honestly say that none of his (Rusty Staub's) baseball genes got to my side of the family,” he says.

Staub graduated from Auburn in 1978, and after teaching science and coaching wrestling at Campbell High School in Fairburn, Ga., he found his calling when he spent a summer working at John Croyle's Big Oak Ranch near Gadsden.

But he knew he had an enormous task ahead of him. So before he left to start his own boys' ranch, Staub scrawled an inspirational message to himself on a piece of scrap paper:

“Attempt something that is so great for God that it is doomed for failure unless God is in it.” That same piece of paper, complete with ketchup stains hangs in a frame on a wall of the Eagle Ranch administration building.

Knocking on doors

When he was looking for a place to start his ranch, Staub found a need for a boys' ranch in northeast Georgia. After looking around, he found the land he wanted in Hall County, about an hour's drive from Atlanta. But to pay for it, he had to raise \$144,000. The bank gave him 120 days to do it.



Eddie and Kayanne Staub have a full house with their five children: Kaylin, 7, left, Daniel, 6, who holds newborn Joseph, Anna, 2, and Nathan, 3.

“I was a second-string catcher at Auburn University,” he recalls. “Nobody knew me in Alabama, much less in Georgia. I had my cars and my clothes and that's it.”

Living off cheese and crackers and sleeping wherever he could find a roof and a bed, he went knocking on doors.

One of those was the door to SunTrust Bank in Atlanta. Staub went to Victor Gregory, the bank's community affairs officer, asking for grant money for the ranch.

“This youngster came in in bluejeans and a ragtag shirt,” Gregory recalls. “I was pretty busy explaining to him that he needed to go back to Birmingham and learn something about the facts of life.

“Before that meeting was over, he turned the tables and explained to me the facts of life,” Gregory adds. “The end of the story is that he provided such a powerful demonstration of what God can do when you're in His will that I quit banking and am now studying for the ministry.”

An Atlanta TV station picked up the story, and Staub's grass-roots, fund-raising efforts made national news. The TV stations called it "The Miracle on Chestnut Mountain."

But about a week away from his 120-day deadline, Staub was still \$7,500 short of the goal. A businessman from near Atlanta read about Staub and called and offered to buy him a truck and a van.

"Then he said, 'How much do you owe on that land?'" Staub remembers. "And he said, 'Be down here tomorrow. I'll write you a check. '"

Once he got the land, Staub set up shop in the barn and began raising the money to build a home for the boys. On April 13, 1985, the Eagle Ranch took in its first group of boys.

Staub says he remembers driving down the road one night and for the first time seeing the lights on inside one of the houses. "What an incredible privilege to be able to be a part of giving children a chance," he says. "Just seeing those lights; I will never forget that."

Leaving a legacy

The Eagle Ranch is now home to 28 boys, seven each of whom live with a set of house parents in one of the ranch's four residences. The homes are named "Love," "Peace," "Joy" and "Grace." Most boys stay at the ranch two to three years, Staub says. Their average age is 13.

Staub and his wife, Kayanne, whom he married after he opened the ranch, live in a modest house with a yard filled with children's toys, including a wayward boomerang that's crash-landed on the roof.

They have a houseful of children of their own - 7-year-old Kaylin, 6-year-old Daniel, 4-year-old Nathan, 2-year-old Anna and the youngest, Joseph, who is 4 months old - and the 42-year-old Staub says they may have more.

"Children are our legacy," he says. "That's how we touch other people's lives."

The Eagle Ranch now has a staff of 27 full-time and part-time employees. Its board of advisers includes Vince Dooley, athletic director at the University of Georgia, and Dan Cathy, president of Chick-Fil-A. The ranch's annual budget is slightly more than \$1 million, with about 90 percent of the revenues coming from donations.

The Eagle Ranch has housed about 130 boys since it opened in 1985, Staub says. Some have gone on to college, and others have entered the military. A few are married with children of their own.

One called Staub recently to brag about his new baby. "He said, 'I'm holding my boy,'" Staub says. "You could just see him, saying to himself, 'This child is going to belong.'"

Not every story at the Eagle Ranch has a happy ending, though.

"We had a boy who came to me when he was 13 years old," Staub says. "He was an all-area defensive back (in football) after his junior year."

“He said, 'Eddie, I want to leave the ranch.' I said, 'Please, don't go, son.’”

But the boy left. He didn't play football his senior year, and didn't finish high school. In what would have been his freshman year of college, he was found dead of a drug overdose.

“At the memorial service, I'm looking across the pulpit at the casket of a boy I was responsible for,” Staub says. “It's hard to put into words what that is like.”

For a year, though, the Eagle Ranch brought a ray of sunshine to the boy's life. “It was the happiest year of his life,” the boy's mother told Staub.

Spreading its wings

As it continues to spread its wings, the Eagle Ranch will soon bring happiness to 14 more boys. Builders have completed a fifth home and a sixth one is almost complete, which will bring the ranch's capacity to 42.

The ranch also serves as a model for the other Eddie Staubs around the country who feel the calling to work with children in need. Twice a year, the Eagle Ranch staff hosts a- “Sharing the Vision” seminar to show others how they've done it.

Soon, Staub wants to buy some adjoining land and start a girl's ranch, too. But he says he won't buy or build until he has the money in the bank. That's why the Eagle Ranch has stayed debt-free.

“Everything the fellow laid out, and more, too, has come to pass without debt, and that's the most amazing thing,” says Chestnut Mountain resident Loyd Strickland. Founder of Crystal Farms, an egg-producing operation, Strickland lives a mile from Eagle Ranch and is a member-emeritus of its board of advisers.

“I feel like the fellow has just scratched the surface,” Strickland adds. “He has other plans, and I think he is going to do it.”

With five children of his own, and 28 boys on his ranch, Staub has much to be thankful for on Father's Day.

“There's a saying that goes, 'Children are the living messages that we send to a time that we will never see,’” Staub says.

“It's not your net worth or your power, but it's your investment in others that's our legacy,” he adds. “That's sort of what Father's Day means to me.”