

Georgia Living

People
&
Places

**Pro-Basketball's
Dikembe Mutombo**

**Monticello Is Still Home
For Trisha Yearwood**

**What's Hoppenin' at
The Kangaroo
Conservation Center**

**Fanciful Folk Art
At Urban Frontier
In Buckhead**

**Georgia Growers
Go Gourmet**

Giving Kids A Chance

A boy and his housefather groom a horse at Eagle Ranch.

Southern Living



Eagle Ranch Changes Lives

Children here learn how to face problems—and how to become kids again.

A towheaded boy sits in a conference chair that swallows his small frame. Quiet yet intense, he warily observes as two other boys talk freely about their lives before and after Eagle Ranch. When Kris finally speaks, his words seem much too adult for a child of 13.

"It's like I'm on a road in a runaway carriage," he says of his angry outbursts. "I can see the 'Bridge Out' sign a mile away." Before coming here, Kris says, he rarely tried to stop the rage. Now, after living at Eagle Ranch for two years, he controls his temper—most of the time.

Eddie Staub admires Kris's honesty. "An immature kid would have said, 'It's perfect now, everything's okay,'" says the 46-year-old founder of the ranch in Chestnut Mountain.

When Eddie first started Eagle Ranch in 1982 he thought his job was "to put [these boys] back together again." He explains, "Behind that mindset was [the thought that] 'I've got my act together.'

That's not true. I'm just as broken as these boys are. I'm just broken in a different kind of way."

How Eagle Ranch Got Wings
Eddie baffled even his mother when, at age 27, he first outlined his plan to start a special home for troubled youth. As a child Eddie had lived a stable and sheltered life in Mountain Brook, Alabama, one of the most affluent communities in the South. He first realized his golden childhood was the exception when he joined the Big Brothers program while at Auburn University. An eye-opening visit to the home of his "little brother" started Eddie on the road to making Eagle Ranch a reality.

Not that financing the ranch was easy. "I was a second-string catcher at Auburn," says Eddie. "No one knew me in Alabama, much less Georgia."

He had chosen Georgia to fulfill his dream after a search in Alabama revealed



PHOTOGRAPHS: KARIM SHAMSI-BAGHA

TOP: (Left to right) Scotty, Levi, Nicholas, Anthony, and Christian share a giggle together. Children who come to Eagle Ranch heavily burdened find joy.

ABOVE: Eagle Ranch's mission includes spiritual training. The children regularly attend worship services and Bible study.



ABOVE: Prayer and spirituality become strong forces in the lives of Eagle Ranch children. **LEFT:** Levi high-fives an Eagle Ranch brother. The children come to the ranch because "for whatever reason, things aren't working at home," explains Eddie Staub. The ultimate goal is to get the kids living with their own families.

the need was already being met. After many months of pursuing funding in Georgia, he'd lost 30 pounds from his 6'5" frame, had \$50 remaining in his pocket, and only a few days left in his rent-free house-sitting arrangement. At that point, a minister dismissed Eddie's vision as unrealistic. That night, Eddie gave the quest one more week.

The next morning, a donor called ("I hadn't even given him my phone number") and pledged \$10,000 with a promise of \$5,000 more from another source. Off to a good start, Eddie raised \$144,000 in 120 days to buy, debt free, the northeast Georgia site just outside of Atlanta.

Home Away From Home

Today, the ranch thrives with six homes for boys, ages 6 to 18, and plans to open two more houses for girls, ages 6 to 18, this summer. Another two girls' homes are planned for the future. Each home accommodates up to seven Eagle Ranch kids, as well

as a housemother and father and that couple's own children. The kids, divided by age into young, middle, and senior groups, live in a homelike setting, complete with a dog. Each child performs daily chores, such as kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom cleanup. Discipline for older kids who break ranch rules might include mowing the grass, hauling rocks from fields, or chopping wood. Younger kids might go in time-out, have computer time taken away, or write repetitive sentences.

Kris remembers being asked to write 300 times, "It was childish and immature to be disrespectful when confronted." He refused for three weeks. Noncompliance meant he wasn't allowed to socialize with his friends in the afternoon. When his housedad upped the ante to 400 sentences, stubborn Kris finally ended his three-week standoff. "I did so well, he cut back my assignment to 350," the boy says.

The ranch's recognition system, which includes several achievement levels, rewards obedience and initiative. Becoming a crow, hawk, falcon, or eagle motivates kids to "live the Eagle Ranch life."

"If you're an eagle, you pretty much have the run of the ranch," says Matt, age 16. ▶



PHOTOGRAPH: SYLVIA MARTIN

TOP: (Left to right) Scotty, Levi, and Anthony lap up attention from housefather Dave Channell. Eagle Ranch houseparents typically remain in their positions four years. **ABOVE, LEFT:** Christian gets some loving attention from housemother Karen Channell. **ABOVE, RIGHT:** A lake full of fish, one on the line, and a gorgeous day translate into a happy grin for Jordan.

School's In

Along with trustworthiness and empathy, eagles must obtain the highest marks they can. Grades stop many children from advancing along the crow, hawk, falcon, eagle flight plan. Many of the children arrive at Eagle Ranch ill-prepared academically.

This fall, Eddie plans to open a school at the ranch for sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. The school will add grades one through five in the fall of 2002. "My wife [Kayanne] says I create crises," laughs Eddie about his ambitious plans.

With the addition of the school and girls' homes, the ranch's annual operating budget rises from \$1.6 to \$2 million, yet the facility remains debt free. "We don't build anything until all the money is in hand," says Eddie, who has never sent an appeal letter. "We just believe that when it's time to build, the money will be provided." Such tremendous faith undergirds all aspects of the Eagle Ranch program—and reaches the hearts of wary kids.

Reaching Kids

"I didn't trust anybody," says Grant, 16, who came to Eagle Ranch at his mother's urging. His behavior became unmanageable after his father's sudden death. When Grant came to the ranch for the required initial interview, he remembers breaking into sobs; he also recalls the comforting hug he received from a caring staff member.

"It's pure liquid love here," Grant says. "You walk into the house and you're just plastered with niceness by the houseparents."

Devoted houseparents treat the kids as their own, but the ultimate goal is to get each child back home. Most Eagle Ranch kids come from single-parent households, usually mothers "who love their child with all their being but they're overwhelmed," Eddie says. "The kids go home every other weekend, or if they don't have a home, they go to a 'respite' [foster] parent's home."

Both parent and child receive counseling while the child is at the ranch, usually three to four years. And each child willingly agrees to come—or he doesn't get in.

One mother wrote to Eddie about that interview experience. "I remember you...saying to Billy, 'You've got to decide whether you're ready to make some changes in your life.' I firmly believe that God's small still voice opened your heart to our plea. You accepted Billy and changed his life forever."

As they heal young lives, listening to God's "small still voice" remains crucial to Eddie and his staff.

Nancy Dorman-Hickson

FINDING OUT MORE

For more information contact Eagle Ranch at P.O. Box 7200, Chestnut Mountain, GA 30502; 1-800-455-9929 or www.eagleranch.org. You can purchase the book *On Eagle's Wings: The True Story of the Founding of Eagle Boys' Ranch*, written by John Vardeman (Looking Glass Books, \$19.95), on the Eagle Ranch Web site.