

# Fighting “Ed”



## At Magnolia Creek, a vital battle goes on every day

BY NICOLE SIEGFRIED

As I stand in the check-out line at Target, headlines from the tabloid magazines stand out like neon signs on the Vegas strip: “Lose 10 Pounds this Month!” “Which Celebrities Have Eating Disorders?” “Get Rid of Those Thunder Thighs!” “Extreme Weight Loss — How They Do It.” The nearby fashion magazines showcase waif-thin, prepubescent models with pouty lips and vacant stares. Two women behind me pull one of the magazines from the shelf and complain that they had to buy a larger size today and lament that they may not be able to wear their swimsuits from last year. I feel a flash of irritation at these women for allowing themselves to be influenced by the media. I stop short of making a fool of myself by turning around and telling them to stop perpetuating body dissatisfaction.

If you think I was being a little overly sensitive, it’s with good reason: I’m the clinical director of Magnolia Creek, a residential eating disorders clinic in Chelsea, Alabama. And I know first-hand the harm that those sensational headlines can truly cause.

Instead of causing a scene at Target, I grab five of the magazines and shove them onto the counter to pay. I’m taking them to Magnolia Creek. The magazines are actually considered “contraband” at the clinic because of their triggering effects on the residents, but today the magazines will serve a purpose.

My stack of contraband in hand, I walk through the front doors of the treatment center, a farm-style house that has been converted to a residence for the patients. In the entryway there is an exhibit of resident artwork, symbolizing the fight against “Ed,” a nickname for Eating Disorder that provides the residents with a human form to battle. The residents are gathered in the family room. Some of them are on after-meal observations, which

provide extra support during a high-risk time for purging. A few are resting, while others are completing assignments. I take the magazines to Kate,\* a resident who is graduating tonight. She smiles at me conspiratorially, “Oh good, more to burn.”

Later, with the help of her therapist, Kate will go through the magazines and rip out pictures and articles that represent her life with her eating disorder. She will add these to a box that includes her “skinny jeans,” her measuring tape and her old laxative boxes — kindling for the fire at her graduation. She plans to burn these items as a representation of abandoning her eating disorder for a life of freedom. She will read a poem announcing her commitment to her new life and then she will place her own stepping stone on the path of recovery just as all of the graduates have done before her.

In group therapy that day I look around at the women looking back at me. Some of them still have the vacuous look of the eating disorder (ironically similar to those of the models from the magazines). These women are still in bondage. They are mere shells of their former selves, starved into complacency. Others, who have been at Magnolia Creek longer, project an emerging confidence and strength. They provide encouragement and an example to the newer residents. But if you look closely, you can still see remnants of fear in their eyes — a recognition of their old ways in the new residents.

Kate is one of 10 current residents at Magnolia Creek. On the surface these residents have nothing in common — one is a student at Harvard, one cleans houses and one is a dancer. They represent different ages, different races and hail from different areas of the country. But they are connected by their pain, their experiences with the eating disorder and their hope for recovery.

These women have learned much during their stay at Magnolia Creek. They have learned that their bodies do not define them. They have learned about the factors that may have led to their eating disorders, including biological, societal and individual risk factors. They have learned they are women with special talents, gifts and dreams that are bigger than their eating disorders. These women have learned that the pictures in the magazine are airbrushed, computerized illusions that do not define real women. They’ve learned recovery is a war against “Ed” and that magazines are Ed’s ammunition. They have learned that reducing themselves to numbers — on the scale, on the tags of their clothes or on the tape measurer — is a distraction from living their lives to the fullest. They’ve learned they don’t need to change their bodies to match the ideal in their minds. Instead, they need to change their minds to allow them to accept their bodies as they are.

At Kate’s graduation, she reads her letter to “Ed,”

declaring her separation from him, and she burns it in the fire. She burns her box of eating disorder paraphernalia, including the magazine pictures and articles. The other residents shed quiet tears because they will miss her and because they have witnessed her transformation. As the smoke billows above the ceremony, she reads her commitment to leading a life with confidence and determination. She commits that she will no longer punish herself for not being able to meet the media’s definition of beauty. She commits that she will continue the process of learning to love herself, realizing that she deserves happiness, even if she sometimes doesn’t believe it. She commits that she will continue her path of recovery, knowing that it will be a process.

Then, she places her stepping stone in the Recovery Garden and walks back to the house, holding the hand of her roommate. The other residents and staff follow behind. I say a silent prayer that she will be in the percentage of individuals who truly recover.

As I close the door behind me and look out at the twinkling lights of the gazebo, I realize that I have also learned something at Magnolia Creek. I’ve learned what true resilience is. I’ve learned that the power of community is just as important as the power of therapy. I’m reminded that being a woman is not about wearing makeup, looking good in a pair of jeans or making a good dinner. Being a woman is about strength, relationships and authenticity.

I turn off the lights and feel proud to be a woman.

*\*Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of Magnolia Creek residents. Magnolia Creek can be reached at 678-4373 or [www.magnolia-creek.com](http://www.magnolia-creek.com).*



A STEPPING STONE READS “RECOVER FOR LIFE” AS A GROUP THERAPY SESSION MEETS IN THE GAZEBO BY THE LAKE AT MAGNOLIA CREEK RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT CENTER IN CHELSEA. THE STONES ARE MADE BY RESIDENTS AND PLACED IN THE GARDEN UPON THEIR GRADUATION.

“It was once thought that women of color were shielded from eating disorders by their cultures, which tend to be more accepting of different body sizes. Sadly, research shows that as African American, Latina, Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian and Alaska Native women are more exposed to images of thin women, they also become more likely to develop eating disorders.”

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services