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## Eley helps others heal in honor of his son Brent

BY AMY BRYER  
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It's called Brent's Place, but his family sees it as Brent's gift.

In 1987, Brent Eley was a popular 13-year-old boy who was just discovering girls, enjoyed skiing and was beginning to learn how to snowboard.

Also in that year, he was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer, went through chemotherapy and later required a bone-marrow transplant.

Donn and Linda Eley took their son to a hospital in Iowa City, Iowa, and spent 120 days living out of a suitcase throughout the transplant process.

Unfortunately, Brent's diminished immune system after the chemo treatment couldn't fight a viral pneumonia, and he died in October 1988.



PHOTOS BY KATHLEEN LAVINE | BUSINESS JOURNAL

**Donn Eley, vice chairman of Village Homes, at the Design Center play area with a photograph of this year's residents at Brent's House.**



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**Donn Eley at Brent's Place near 17th and Downing. A portrait of his son Brent hangs near the common area. Brent died of complications while undergoing treatment for cancer. Brent's Place plans a move closer to the new Children's Hospital at Fitzsimons.**

"We had to come home [to Colorado] without him — you come home with a big hole," Donn Eley said. "We committed to do something, but we didn't know what yet."

At the time, Donn Eley was the CFO for Englewood-based Village Homes. The year after Brent's death, the Eleys were asked to get involved in a fundraising event for the American Cancer Society. It was a small tennis tournament at the Colorado Athletic Club, and it raised \$5,000.

Eight years later, that same event would raise \$200,000, and Donn Eley decided it was time to do more than just raise money. He founded the Brent Eley Foundation in honor of his son.

But the foundation didn't immediately have a mission. Remembering their time with Brent away from home during his cancer treatment, the Eleys decided to open a home in Denver for families going through the same thing.

Brent's Place was born in 1998. Located on 17th Avenue, one block from The Children's Hospital, Brent's Place has 11 fully

### CORPORATE CITIZEN OF THE YEAR

**Donn Eley**

**Title:** Vice chairman

**Company:** Village Homes

**Charity:** The Brent Eley Foundation, Brent's Place

**Charity Web site:** <http://brentsplace.org>

furnished apartments that can be rented for \$15 a night or \$450 a month by families with children or adults from outside the Denver area who are undergoing cancer treatment.

Brent's Place houses about 60 families a year with a 59-day average length of stay.

But Brent's Place is much more than an affordable home for families dealing with cancer, said Karen Tilley, a social worker at The Children's Hospital.

"It's more than an apartment with dishes — it's the caring atmosphere, the staff, the Eleys, the volunteers," Tilley said. "It's other families who know what you're going through. It's the underlying knowl-

# ELEY: Move near Fitzsimons planned

edge that I'm at a place that was created by people who went through this and they understand."

Eley couldn't make sense of Brent's disease. Parents ask why, when a child becomes sick, but the answer never comes, Eley said.

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## **Karen Tilley**

social worker at The Children's Hospital

But when Eley looks back at his life and the way opportunities for Brent's Place presented themselves to him and his family, he can see some design among the chaos. Some call it coincidence, Eley said, but he calls it part of God's plan.

"I didn't understand how I was going to deal, but you live through it and you resolve to do something to help," Eley said.

Before Brent's death, Eley didn't think much of the fact he was a CPA who went into the housing industry.

"Here I was sitting in the housing business, thinking about what I was going to do with Brent's Foundation," he said.

Now he's the vice chairman of Village



PHOTOS BY KATHLEEN LAVINE | BUSINESS JOURNAL

## **Donn Eley at Brent's Place with photos of former residents.**

Homes. Eley realized his job exposed him to the housing industry which helped in the property acquisition and development for Brent's Place.

"This is where my passion is," Eley said. "I love my job — it's enabled me to do all of this."

Fundraisers for Brent's Place continue to be successful, as well. The foundation raised \$1.7 million last year. The money will help fund the next step which is to move Brent's Place out near the new Children's Hospital at Fitzsimons in Aurora in fall 2007 or spring 2008.

"I don't know if I could have done what they've done," said Caryn Ellison, who sits on the Brent Eley Foundation board and is the vice president of finance for Crocs Inc. shoe company.

Ellison has known the family for 25 years and was devastated when the Eleys lost Brent.

She's amazed to watch how they turned their grief into Brent's Place.

"Other people might write a check, but they've done so much more," she said. "How they take that and do something so remarkable ... it's really special. I'm inspired by them."

Eley may be inspiring others, but he finds encouragement from the kids at Brent's Place.

The Eleys visit Brent's Place each Monday night to have dinner with the families and they draw strength from the children.

"Their spirit and courage is incredible ... There's a tremendous optimism that feels good to be around," Eley said. "The whole thing has helped us heal. That was Brent's gift."

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