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Cool, clear, and Kate: celebrating Vineyard House

By Jack Shea
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Mark Jenkins generally radiates a continental sang-froid, but the unflappable author admitted in his understated British accent that he was a "bit overwhelmed" Thursday night as he contemplated the record crowd of 400 at the 14th annual Vineyard House Water Tasting by the Sea at the Allen Farm in Chilmark.

Mr. Jenkins is president of the board of The Vineyard House, a group of safe haven lodgings for Island residents new to recovery from substance abuse. He acknowledged that the 2011 event had a triple threat going for it. "No question, the venue attracted people. Why wouldn't it?" he asked surveying acres of pasture curling down to a pond and stunning views of the barrier beach and the Atlantic beyond.

"Having Kate Taylor was an enormous draw," Mr. Jenkins added. "We usually get 250 to 300 people, but we had 350 advance tickets sold. I have to believe we have 400 or more here.

"We are grateful tonight to Clarissa (Allen) and Mitch (Posin) for opening the farm to us and to Kate for performing. And, thankfully, we have perfect weather."

The crowd took advantage of all three, many taking a private minute to imbibe the magnificent mixed vista of water, land, and sky. Only the horses, grazing in measured rhythm nearby, seemed oblivious to the beauty, perhaps because they live there and get to see it every day.

Vineyard House operates three houses — two for men and one for women — that provide a safe living environment for those in early recovery from alcohol and drug addiction, who need support while renewing their responsibilities to themselves, their families, and the community, according to the mission statement. The fundraiser is held to thank the friends of Vineyard House, raise awareness for the organization, and raise money to cover operating expenses.

"It's been difficult for us to bring out our success stories and to market our mission as effectively as we'd like, because it's a sensitive issue," Mr. Jenkins has said. "There are

many people on this Island who are the beneficiaries of Vineyard House, but for understandable reasons, don't want to go public."

The water-tasting event has a celebratory vibe because its one of few public events for people in recovery, professionals in the field, and their supporters. As Mr. Jenkins and others have commented, the business of recovery is largely carried on quietly and anonymously.

But there's no reason to be circumspect about the efforts of individuals and organizations that support those in recovery. That includes Islanders and seasonal residents, and some that are both here and there.

Jack Davies, for example, splits his time between Chilmark and Washington, D.C., where he is part-owner of the Washington Capitals NHL hockey team and the NBA's Washington Wizards. "I was raised to support my community, and the Island and Washington are both home to me," he said.

"Mary and Sherif Nada of Chilmark introduced me to the work of the Vineyard House and its work is important. There is a high degree of substance abuse here. It's a part of Island life that most people never see," he said.

Larry Conroy, proprietor of Courtesy Motors in Vineyard Haven has long supported the Vineyard House effort. "There's just a feeling of fellowship and caring around their work that is appealing and every family has been touched by the disease of addiction," he said.

Deb Hart was volunteering for the first time, staffing a silent auction table laden with goodies from 10-day Puerto Rico vacations to the miraculous lobster rolls and dessert from Grace Episcopal Church. "I'm doing it because I believe in the Vineyard House. I know people whose lives have been saved there. And we didn't always have that resource," she said of the 14-year-old recovery tool.

Among the hardest working folks at the event were the dervishes from Tea Lane Catering cranking out buffet offerings for six different palates, including a seafood paella and a sampling of savory pies from their diva, Dee Smith.

Then it was Ms. Taylor's turn. First, she exhorted the crowd to participate in the silent auction. "Don't see anything you want?" she asked, then hinted: "I have a list right here of what I'd love for Christmas." Then she sang several pure-voiced duets with her daughter Liz Witham. Ms. Taylor wove several of her own songs into her two sets, including one droll piece called "King of the Pond," written for salty Island sage William Vanderhoop.

"I know a lot of people who have benefited from the Vineyard House...and a lot who could have benefited from it. Vineyard House deserves all the support it can get," she said.

