

Adoption offers chance at making the best of lives

For the Sharif family of Camp Hill, Pa., sharing their lives with two adopted children has changed life as they knew it, but also helped them experience it like never before, says Raihanna Sharif.

“Bringing another person’s child into your home connects you with humanity in a different way,” says the mother of five children. “It breaks down that wall of being uncomfortable with strangers. You don’t think twice about offering comfort.”

For Raihanna and Yasin Sharif and their three sons, Zakariyya, 18, Aqil, 17, and Yusuf, 14, there was no question that bringing sisters Alisha, 9, and Leena, 7, into their home was doing the right thing.

“Within Islam, adoption is encouraged, respected,” says Raihanna of their Muslim beliefs. “Over and over again in the Koran, we are told about taking care of the orphan.”

The road to adoption, however, was anything but simple for the Sharifs, who lost all their belongings in a house fire during their adoption-preparatory classes with *Tressler Adoption Services of Central Pennsylvania*.

“I remember thinking this is a message,” says Raihanna. “I didn’t feel like we weren’t supposed to [adopt], we were just to be delayed.”

After their paperwork was replaced, the Sharifs began the process

again. When one potential match fell through at the last moment, the Sharifs began to question whether they should continue. “I was done at that point,” says Raihanna. “My husband and our middle guy are really the ones who pushed me back in there. I think they both knew it was something I really wanted.”

In early 2001, the Sharifs learned about Alisha and Leena. “The problem was there were two [girls] and we were looking for one. The older girl was at the upper age limit that we felt would work in our family,” explains Raihanna.

Although the Sharifs had not intended to adopt two children, Yasin felt that it was either these two little girls, or no adoption. “They happened to be girls who needed a home and who had really struggled with foster care and their birth families,” he says. “I decided at that moment, personally, if the rest of the family was going to go along with it, that we would just take a plunge into the deep end of the pool.”

In April 2001, Alisha and Leena joined their new family and began the process of building a new life. The journey to their finalization was and continues to be challenging.

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The Sharif family

Adoption Services

Frey Village, Middletown

Perry Village, New Bloomfield

Refugee & Immigration Services

Senior Centers (Cumberland County)

Susquehanna Lutheran Village, Millersburg

TresslerCare

Tressler Counseling/Family Life Services

Volunteer Home Care

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Dialog, including the regional *Diakonnection*, is published quarterly by Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries.

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Counseling offers inmates hope for rehabilitation

For five years, *Tressler Counseling and Education* has been meeting the counseling needs of the Federal Bureau of Prisons in the greater Harrisburg area.

From an office in Penbrook United Church of Christ, counselors have provided individual and group drug and alcohol counseling for inmates housed in a Harrisburg halfway house. The bureau uses the house as a transition into the community for inmates who have been incarcerated for various drug-related offenses.

“When they are released, rather than putting them directly back in the community, the inmates go to halfway houses,” says Anne Leedy, director of Tressler Counseling and Education. “While living in the house, the inmates are getting jobs in the community and receiving counseling as a gradual re-entry” into society.

Those in the program follow one of two levels of treatment as part of their sentencing and release program, says J.D. Streiff, CAC, CCS, one Tressler’s two outpatient counselors for the program. There are those who are required to complete treatment, and those who are offered enhanced services. The Bureau of Prisons “wants counseling to continue on an outpatient basis in the transition from prison back to the community,” he says, explaining that the program lasts approximately six months.

The counseling helps the inmates break through any denial they may have about their addiction. “We’re dealing with issues that led to the addiction—how can they change the people and things in their lives, so they don’t go back out and use again,” says Leedy, who says the program counseled nearly 30 inmates in 2001.

While the inmates received cognitive behavioral-based therapy in prison, Streiff also recommends they consider Alcoholics

Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous when they leave the program. “I try to blend the two and show how the cognitive behavioral teaching they’ve learned also works with the twelve-step program.”

The program is a great way for the bureau to continue the rehabilitation it began, Streiff believes. “They are not just warehousing people and ignoring what created the majority of their problems,” he says. “They are offering treatment with the hopes of rehabilitation.”



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Lower Susquehanna Synod Bishop Emeritus Guy Edmiston, Jr., center, spoke about social ministry during a recent Diakon luncheon for supporters and former board members of Tressler Lutheran Services, one of the two agencies that created Diakon in 2000. With Edmiston are, left, former board member George Tamke and Dr. James J. Raun, the first president of Tressler Lutheran Services and a current member of the Diakon board of directors.

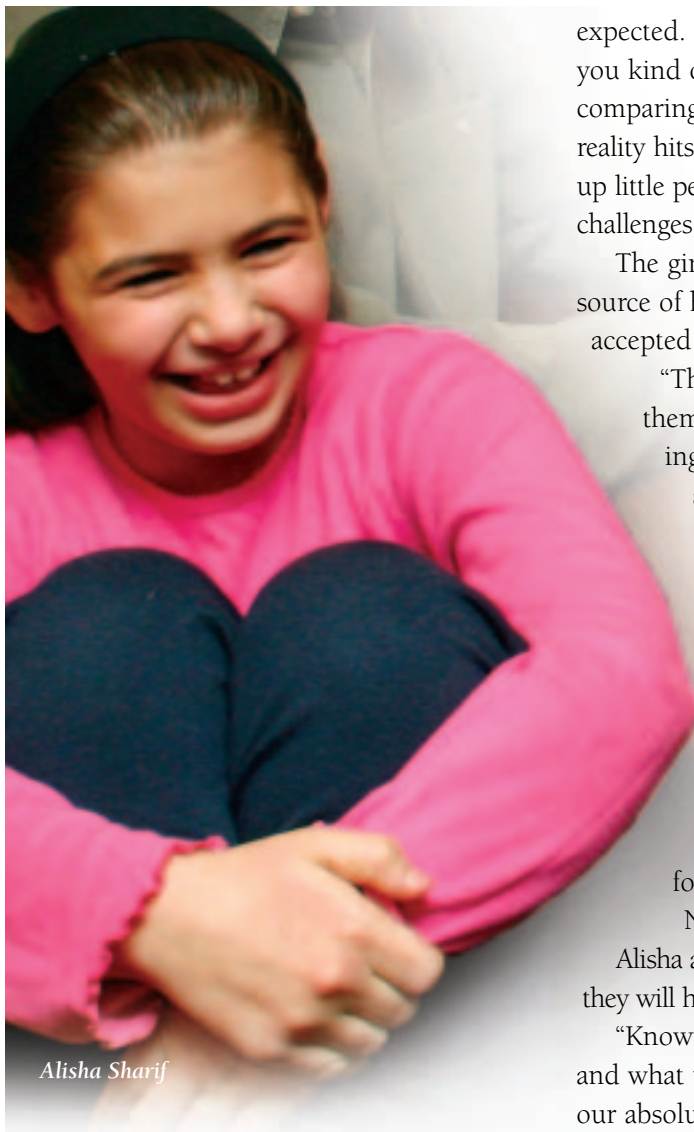
NEWS-IN-BRIEF

Tressler Counseling and Education Services/Family Life Services, based in Mechanicsburg, has joined in a partnership designed to serve sixth-grade children and their families in the West Perry School District in Perry County.

The program is called PROSPER, or Promoting School-community-university Partnerships to Enhance Resilience. The PROSPER team, which includes school leaders, Cooperative Extension staff, parents, community leaders, students, and health and social service providers, is working in cooperation with Penn State University to bring this free program to community residents.

Funded by a federal grant targeting 28 communities in Pennsylvania, the program is designed as a seven-week project, offering group workshops to parents, children, and families on such topics as substance use and emotional and behavioral problems.

The program began in January at Carroll Elementary, New Bloomfield Elementary, and Blain Elementary schools. Anyone interested in more information on the program should contact Anne Leedy, counseling and education director, at (717) 795-0330.



Alisha Sharif

“Our younger one is . . . oppositional. The first morning we brought them home, it took us 45 minutes to get her out of the [adoption] facility. The next morning she ran away,” says Raihanna, who adds she has made remarkable progress since then. “She allows you to get in there. She has handed over a huge amount of control and trust.”

With their older daughter, Alisha, the Sharifs struggle with the effects of Attachment Disorder that make it difficult for her to love and be loved in return.

“She does everything she can to push us away. You have to parent her very differently,” says Raihanna, who says she hasn’t been able to parent her girls the way she wanted. “That’s not what they needed. I’ve had to fight for their trust.”

Yasin readily admits that their adoption has had more ups and downs than they

expected. “You only know so much and you kind of have a romance,” he says, comparing adoption to marriage. “Then reality hits and you realize you have grown-up little people who have had extreme challenges and you are their only hope.”

The girls have also found a strong source of hope in the brothers who have accepted them from day one.

“There are moments where all of them will interact and it is so amazing that it just takes my breath away,” says Raihanna. “Those moments make me feel as if that was the reason why I do it. We wanted our boys to see that you sacrifice for things you believe in. They might be uncomfortable and hard, but there are bigger things in this world than yourself and you need to strive for those things.”

No matter what the future holds for Alisha and Leena, their family knows that they will have made a difference in their lives.

“Knowing where they’ve come from and what their life has been like, if we try our absolute hardest, even if it doesn’t go the way we had hoped, they will still have been given an opportunity for proper safety, health care, and education,” says Yasin, “as well as a chance at making the best of their lives.”

Which, in the final analysis, is all any parent can hope.



Leena Sharif

Philadelphia youth finds way in wilderness

At 15, Anthony Stukes' life was moving at a pace faster than most children his age were experiencing.

"I had no parental supervision," says Stukes. "I was parent to most of my brothers and sisters. I saw that the older ones were fed and got off to school, then I stayed home with the younger ones. Somebody had to do it. That's just the way it was."

Stukes says things began to go downhill when he was 12 years old and his great-grandmother died. "She raised me. She was pretty much my everything," he says. "She taught me how to be a young man, make decisions, and be responsible when nobody else was around. It is very difficult when the person who has always given you guidance is gone."

Stukes' father wasn't in the picture and his mother, who has now been "clean" for more than three years, was then addicted to drugs.

His West Philadelphia environment also contributed to a life he decided he didn't want.

"I woke up one morning, looked at my environment, saw what I had going for myself, and came to the realization there was nothing or no one that could help me get what I wanted out of life," he says. "I made a phone call to the Philadelphia Department of Human Services and they sent me" to the *TresslerCare Wilderness School*. The school is one of four programs operated by Diakon at the Wilderness Center near Boiling Springs.

Many of the school's students—who are adjudicated either dependent or delinquent—enter society "way behind the starting line," says George Eckenrode, director of marketing and fund raising for TresslerCare. "What we do is give them an opportunity to do some catching up. We help them academically, provide them with family counseling,

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Anthony Stukes is interviewed by a television reporter during the groundbreaking for the Wilderness Center capital campaign.

Frey Village residents provide welcome for refugees

The idea of a "Welcome Box" service project has been around for a long time in refugee circles, says Alan Dudley, executive director, *Tressler Refugee and Immigration Services*.

It just hasn't been around that long in tying Refugee Services to other Diakon programs. But now it has.

Involving the collecting of new or used items in good condition and packaging them according to categories, such as "kitchen," "bathroom," and so on, the project seemed to be a good fit for Diakon's retirement communities.

Following a presentation to retirement services staff, *Frey Village* of Middletown was first to step forward.

"We began with Frey Village, partly because it is close to our Mechanicsburg office and also because staff and residents have given us gifts of cash through the years," Dudley notes.

The six members of the village's Chapel Committee approached residents with the project and were encouraged by their reaction.

"The response was immediate and abundant," says Gladys Snyder, village resident and committee member. Because of the project's initial success, the Chapel Committee plans to repeat the project at designated times throughout the year.

"The very nature of how we live means things aren't as abundant as they could be," she says. "We are going to work with Admissions so, when people are down-sizing, they can donate items for this project."

Refugee Services, which takes boxes collected and distributes them to refugee families, also worked on the project with Frostburg Village in Maryland and five Diakon facilities in the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod.

The response to the Welcome Project campaign has been strong and continues to be appreciated.

"It goes beyond having the nice things for our refugee clients, to knowing that other people in our agency know what we do and support our mission," says Dudley.

NEWS-IN-BRIEF

Zion Lutheran Angel Tree brings Christmas to TresslerCare

Since the early 1990s, members of Zion Lutheran Church in Hummelstown have brought Christmas joy to children and youths in *TresslerCare's* Foster Care, AfterCare, and Wilderness Center programs.

In early December, volunteers from the church coordinate an Angel Tree that results in the donation of more than 100 gifts for children and youths who might not otherwise have much under their tree Christmas morning.

"The church just gives and gives. It's amazing," says Skip Wachter, a congregation member who has helped to coordinate the project in recent years.

The approximately three weeks that it takes to buy, wrap, and deliver the gifts is a project for young and old alike, says Lois Miklas, co-coordinator of the project. "We use it as a way to make kids aware of doing something for someone else."

Appleby receives 2002 President's Award

Long-time agency board member Fae E. Appleby has received Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries' 2002 President's Award in the Lower Susquehanna Synod.

She was one of a number of people recognized at the synod's third Celebrate Social Ministry program. The synod's Committee for Church in Society, Diakon, LUTHER-CARE of Lititz, and Lutheran Social Services of South Central Pennsylvania, York, jointly sponsor the event. Dr. John Scibilia, coordinator of Lutheran Disaster Response-New York, was guest speaker, describing the Lutheran church's efforts following the 9/11 attacks on New York City.

A resident of Diakon's Frey Village at Middletown, Appleby received the award for significant service to the organization.

According to the Rev. Daun E. McKee, Ph.D., Diakon president/CEO, "Fae brings together strong faith and a deep commitment to her work on behalf of social ministry, her community, her congregation, and the synod. Her service to Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries and, before that, Tressler Lutheran Services has been long and distinguished. She has served on numerous agency boards and committees over the years, holding a number of offices on those boards as well. Her knowledge of the agency goes back to the days of her youth in Perry County, when she knew students at the nearby Tressler Orphans Home."

In addition to her service to Diakon, Appleby is active in her home congregation of St. Paul Lutheran Church, New Cumberland, having served there for more than a decade as secretary and advisor. She also has served for numerous years as Lower Susquehanna Synod vice president and staff liaison to such synod committees as Church in Society and Women of the ELCA.

The depth of her commitment and her faith were the basis of her receipt in 1999 of The Dr. Bertha Paulssen Award from The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg.

The focus of the Celebrate Social Ministry event is to recognize individuals and congregations in the synod for significant social

ministry efforts. Agape Awards in the north-central portion of the synod, where Diakon is the primary social ministry organization, were presented to:

- Women of the ELCA, St. Mark Lutheran Church, Harrisburg, for a variety of social ministry efforts benefiting, among others, local service organizations, halfway houses, homeless shelters, and Lutheran World Relief.
- Sara Miller, Christ Lutheran Church, New Bloomfield, who as a teacher and social ministry leader has both served others and taught still others the value of service. According to her congregation council, Miller is a tireless champion for the local food bank, meals on wheels, Cooperative Extension food and nutrition projects, literacy programs, and much more.
- St. Paul Lutheran Church, Millersburg, which manages a food pantry and clothing closet that serves many area families,

operates a yearly Santa project to deliver toys and clothing to needy children, supplies food baskets to elderly families, and extensively supports Lutheran World Relief and numerous other social ministry groups.

- Trindle Spring Lutheran Church, Mechanicsburg, for its long history of supporting social ministry efforts, especially New Hope Ministries, a regional food bank and referral service that the congregation hosts. The congregation's social ministry efforts also reach out to help groups across the country and around the world.

Mrs. Laura Heinly of Lebanon received the Dr. Betty R. Amstutz Memorial Award for Significant Social Ministry for a lifetime of commitment and social ministry service to others in need. The award memorializes the late Dr. Amstutz, a Lutheran deaconess known throughout central Pennsylvania and Maryland for her efforts to promote social ministry and compassion.



Diakon President's Award recipient Fae E. Appleby, left, with Laura Heinly, who received the Dr. Betty Amstutz Memorial Award for Significant Social Ministry at the recent Celebrate Social Ministry banquet.

Youths learn value of community service



Youths from TresslerCare Wilderness Center programs contributed more than 1,200 hours of community service last year to the Capital Area Greenbelt Association in Harrisburg. Here, students from the center work on clearing ground as they continue efforts to conclude the greenbelt project, which was begun 102 years ago.

Nearly every Saturday, youths from the *TresslerCare Wilderness Center* near Boiling Springs can be found planting trees, spreading stone, and installing pipe in a community service project to support the Capital Area Greenbelt Association.

“We do a little bit of everything,” says Norman LaCasse, past president and founder of the association. “Whatever needs to be done, the kids do it.”

The Capital Area Greenbelt is a 20-mile greenway surrounding Harrisburg. The 102-year-old greenbelt was never completed and was abandoned in the 1970s, says LaCasse. “I rediscovered it more than 12 years ago. We formed an association to restore the parts that were uncompleted and then finish the greenbelt.”

For at least five years, adjudicated youths from the Wilderness Center have swung shovels and slung picks—some for the first time ever—in an effort to support the restoration effort. Now, as many as 15 students from the Wilderness School and

such other center services as the Weekend Alternative Program show up every Saturday ready to work. In fact, in 2002, they have dug ditches, spread stone, and planted trees for more than 1,200 hours.

LaCasse, who has built a special relationship with the youths, explains the day’s project each week, helping the youths to understand how they are making a difference. He also notes the historical significance of what they are doing.

“We’ll start in the morning and by 3 o’clock, we will have finished the project,” he says. “If you break up a project so they can start and finish that day, I’ve found they take a lot of pride in that.”

At the end of the day, LaCasse takes photos of the crew and their completed project. “A couple of weeks later, I’ll bring the pictures in and they see that they’ve contributed to society,” he says.

“They can see they’ve accomplished something they didn’t think they could even do.”

TresslerCare youths’ work on the Capital Greenbelt is just one of numerous community service projects on which they worked in 2002.

In fact, the kids amassed a total of 6,603 hours of service for the year.

“There are several primary reasons we do a lot of community service,” says George Eckenrode, *TresslerCare*’s director of marketing and fund raising. “The first is that, if the youths came to us through juvenile probation, community service may be a condition of their placement.”

However, he continues, “we have been doing community service long before it became *de rigueur*, in fact since the Wilderness School began in 1987. Community service teaches youths the value of giving back to the community, of sharing their time and talents with others.”

Perhaps, Eckenrode adds, “they have taken something away from the community through the behaviors” that prompted their placement. “This gives them a chance to give back” and to understand how worthwhile service can be to the community.

Among those organizations that benefited from the 2002 community service of youths in the Wilderness School, the Weekend Alternative Program, and the Wilderness Course were:

- Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Harrisburg (tree planting)
- Carlisle Parks and Recreation Commission (tanbark application)
- Cumberland Domestic Violence Services (house and yard work at women’s and children’s shelters)
- Cumberland Crossings Retirement Community (intergenerational activities)
- Habitat for Humanity in Mount Holly Springs and Carlisle
- Letort Trail, Carlisle
- Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (stream, trail, and picnic-area maintenance at a number of state forests)
- YMCA, Carlisle (stage set-up)
- Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (Adopt-a-Highway clean-up)

The following memorial gifts were received by programs within the Lower Susquehanna Synod from early fall through November. In 2003, memorial gifts will be listed in a new donor publication.

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Piccolo heads adoptions

A York woman is leading adoption services at Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries.

Suzanne Piccolo recently joined the staff as executive director of adoption services, which consists of *Tressler Adoption Services* of Central Pennsylvania and Maryland and *Adoption Services of The Lutheran Home at Topton*.

"I'm excited about this opportunity to work with Diakon because of the agency's outstanding reputation in the adoption community," says Piccolo. "Having the opportunity to place children in two states with permanent families is very rewarding."

She has more than 30 years' experience in child welfare, with the past 20 spent in the adoption field. Most recently, she was director of social services for York County, where she supervised adoption, foster care, and independent-living programs.

In addition, Piccolo developed a curriculum entitled "Foster-to-Adopt," which is presented to caseworkers and foster parents throughout the state. Foster-to-adopt encourages permanency by placing children with foster parents who plan to adopt them after parental rights are terminated.

Diakon's adoption services offices are located in York and Topton, Pa., and Baltimore, Md.



Suzanne Piccolo

Stukes

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and begin the process of reintegrating them into the community and their families.”

The process is a two-way street, and any success the programs achieve depends to some extent on how much the students want to change. “To come from the city environment to ours is a total change,” Eckenrode says. “One of the most important things Anthony had going for him was his desire to do something with his life.”

Although Stukes was “wholeheartedly ready to improve his life,” he was not sure about accomplishing it in the wilderness. “I had never even thought about going camping,” admits Stukes, who now works at the Wilderness Center. “The closest I had been was a park, and that was only in the daytime.” He spent his first days at the center “terrified.”

As he gradually came to accept his surroundings, something else happened: With the help of Wilderness School staff, he began turning his life around.

“The big difference was that somebody cared about me,” he says. “Before, I could be in a room full of a thousand people, and nobody’s paying attention.

Everybody’s moving at 100 miles a minute. In this environment, it’s about half a mile a minute. They made me pay attention to individuals, how to show the people that I love that I love them,” he says. “That was the bottom line.”

Eleven months after he entered the Wilderness Center, Stukes was ready to leave for life in an independent living program. “I was the same person I was when I came in, but I had an abundance of knowledge to go on. It was self-knowledge,” he explains. “I was much more comfortable with who Anthony Stukes was and who he would become if he focused and believed in himself.”

Although the return to inner-city life was a challenge, it was one that Stukes faced head-on. “That was when the challenge began for me,” he says. “There was ample opportunity to get into things I had been into.”

Stukes successfully met that challenge and, in 1998, was graduated as his high school’s class valedictorian. “That was a big

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step for me. Being that my mom had never graduated and that I was the firstborn made me feel like I was leading my brothers and sisters,” he says. “I paved the way so they can look at me and say, ‘Let’s try and pass him.’”

With acceptances to four colleges, Stukes began his academic career at a community college, which offered him a full scholarship. Knowing his great-grandmother always wanted him to be a lawyer, he chose criminal justice as his major. “She always had dreams for me to be a successful young man. A lawyer was one of her favorite professions,” he remembers. “What’s amazing is that the law comes so easy to me.”

Stukes went on to complete his four-year degree in criminal justice at Temple

University in the spring of 2002. When the graduation ceremony was over, he sat back and put things in perspective.

“That first night I went home and realized that the road isn’t over,” he says. “I was so happy. Never in a million years did the 16-year-old Anthony Stukes think the 23-year-old Anthony Stukes would have a college degree and be looking to go to law school.”

The Wilderness Center is currently in a \$2 million capital campaign to serve more youths like Anthony Stukes. Contributions may be directed to the Wilderness Center Capital Campaign, Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries, 960 Century Drive, Mechanicsburg, PA 17055.