

# DIAKONNECTION

WINTER 2002-2003

## Adoption 'natural' for Baltimore family

For the Rev. Gregg and Julie Knepp of Baltimore, adoption was a foregone conclusion when it came time to add to their family.

"For us, it was not an issue of infertility," says Gregg, 38, explaining that they already have a daughter Maya, 2. "We wanted a larger family and [adoption] seemed like the natural way to go."

The Knepps also knew exactly what their second child would be like. "We were looking for a child under one," says Julie, 33. "We were looking specifically for an African American child. We knew there was more of a need [for homes] for minority children."

With their decision made, the Knepps began adoption classes with *Tressler Adoption Services of Maryland*, which specializes in the placement of children with special needs.

Although many Tressler adoptions focus on older children and the Knepps were interested in an infant, they chose to work with the agency anyway. "We just

felt so comfortable working with them," explains Gregg, who worked for Tressler's Office of Social Concerns in the early '90s. "They were very accommodating and very up-front. They told us, 'don't expect us to be fast,'" since the couple's desire was to adopt an infant. It was a surprise to everyone when, within a few months of completing training classes and filing the necessary paperwork, the Knepps learned of Gabriel.

"We had been praying about him and thinking about him. It seemed like he was meant to be with our family," says Julie. "He came home with us April 19. He was exactly four months old."

Their recent finalization is included in Diakon's celebration of its 3,500th finalization, marked during Adoption Services' 30th anniversary year.

Bringing an African American child into their

*Please turn to Page 5*



The Knepp family



- Adoption Services, Maryland**
- Brandywine Program, Newark, Del.**
- Congregational & Community Ministries**
- Congregational Health Ministries**
- Diakon Housing & Development, Inc.**
- Frostburg Village of Allegany County**
- KidzStuff Child Care, Baltimore**
- Lutheran Village at Harbor Pointe, Salisbury**
- Ravenwood Lutheran Village, Hagerstown**
- Refugee & Immigration Services**
- The Village at Robinwood, Hagerstown**
- Volunteer Home Care**

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# Frostburg Village residents provide welcome for refugees

**Mission:** In response to God's love in Jesus Christ, Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries will demonstrate God's command to love the neighbor through acts of service.

Diakon serves some 50,000 persons annually in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware through adoption, foster care, refugee services, volunteer home care, retirement villages, housing accommodations, congregational ministries, hospice services, and more.

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The idea of a “Welcome Box” service project has been around for a long time in refugee circles, says Alan Dudley, executive director for *Tressler Refugee Services*, which maintains an office in Baltimore.

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.

Anita Blauch, executive director of *Frostburg Village* in western Maryland, says her management team was happy to donate a kitchen box to people who have a real need. “We work basically with older adults, so when we can do things for children and people in need, whether refugees or families, we try to do it,” she says, adding that the team's willingness to help humbles her.

“No matter what the need, there is a group of them that is always reaching out. It is nice to work with people like that and really live your mission.”

Rebecca Brown-McCusker, program director for *Frostburg Heights*, says residents recognized the program as a worthy cause and also donated a kitchen box. “We're pretty blessed down here with our program, so we wanted to help out a program that really needed our support,” she says.

Refugee Services, which takes any boxes collected and distributes them to refugee families, also worked with a number of Diakon's Pennsylvania retirement communities.

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.



*The Village at Robinwood* in Hagerstown, a joint venture of Diakon and Washington County Hospital, offers both assisted living and retirement living accommodations, as well as assisted living services for those with dementia-related illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease.

# Harbor Pointe village has culinary connection with historic hotel

About 23 miles separates *The Lutheran Village at Harbor Pointe* in Salisbury, Md., from an elegantly restored Victorian treasure, The Atlantic Hotel, in Berlin, Md. But the two have developed a special closeness, thanks to two talented culinary experts.

In April, after seven years as executive chef at The Atlantic Hotel, Larry Wilgus made a career change and joined The Lutheran Village at Harbor Pointe as director of dining services. Chef Michael Petroski took his place at the hotel.

This fall, the hotel underwent changes. Though Wilgus had enjoyed his work at the village, the changes prompted an offer that allowed him to return to the Atlantic as general manager and executive chef.

Petroski, who like Wilgus before him wanted to make a career change, then joined the staff of The Lutheran Village as director of dining services. Wilgus continues to help with special events at the facility.

"It may be coincidental that both chefs made the journey from there to here, but it certainly has enabled us to maintain an element of expertise and excellence in dining for our residents," says Susan Demorra, director of marketing and admissions. "Both gentlemen have a fine-dining background and have brought a very fine level of service to our facility."

Wilgus made several changes to help give residents "the feeling of being guests in a fine restaurant." He added wait staff to serve meals, supplemented the kitchen's capabilities with a grill for outdoor cooking, and began to use more fresh foods.

Petroski, who formerly owned his own restaurant and also worked previously as food service director at a long-term care facility in Delaware, has continued in the same vein. He is committed, he says, "to make dining a rewarding experience with each and every meal."



*Larry Wilgus, while he served at The Lutheran Village at Harbor Pointe.*

The Atlantic Hotel connection has taken on another dimension for The Lutheran Village at Harbor Pointe, according to Demorra. The facility, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, this Christmas loaned Victorian memorabilia for events at The Lutheran Village; it also donated last year's Christmas decorations.

"The Atlantic Hotel has been good to us and we are very grateful," Demorra says. "Larry had a lot to do with that and Michael is continuing the tradition. We have good things to look forward to."

## Adoption *Continued from Page 3*

home was an easy choice for the Knepps. "We are a family that is very committed to diversity," says Julie. "We knew by adopting him we were making a lifetime commitment toward both diversity and making sure he was very aware of his cultural needs."

Having spent the last five years as pastor of St. John's (Pimlico) Lutheran Church in Baltimore city, Gregg knew his family would have the support they needed to enrich Gabriel's life.

"We felt that we have a support system in the African American community, and we would have many people that we could turn to for help and advice about issues that might arise that we might not be prepared to deal with ourselves," he says. "That was a very important part of our decision [to adopt]."

Because the Knepps know helping Gabriel foster his self-identity will be a very important part of his upbringing, they are committed to living in a multi-cultural community such as Baltimore.

"When Gabriel was baptized in September, we chose congregation members—African American men—as godfathers," explains Gregg. "We know that he will have positive role models to look up to. We are trying to do whatever we can to foster that sense of identity for him."



*Gabriel Knepp*

# 'Most Beautiful Person' volunteer works tirelessly to aid Maryland's seniors

In May, Alice Skidmore answered the phone to receive news she had been waiting years to hear: The Maryland State Legislature had agreed to increase Medicaid payments to the state's senior citizens.

Skidmore says that when she got the news, she threw her fist into the air and yelled, "Yes!" She certainly had good reason to celebrate.

This financial boost, which has helped to make a difference for the state's most needy seniors, is due in large part to her determination, hard work, and commitment to fight for those who can't fight for themselves. In late fall, Skidmore was recognized as Allegany County's "Most Beautiful Person" volunteer. She was nominated for that honor by Kathy Shippee, director of administrative services at Diakon's *Frostburg Village of Allegany County*.

Skidmore began her advocacy journey in 1995, when her late mother, Sara Parry, became a resident of Frostburg Village. While visiting her mother, Skidmore noticed another resident wearing a particularly pretty blouse. A few weeks later, she noticed a different woman wearing the same blouse.

When she asked about this exchange of clothing, she was told the original owner of the blouse had

passed away, and that her clothes had been redistributed to other residents. In fact, she discovered, some residents relied on used clothing, because they could not afford to buy new items.

Skidmore was surprised to learn about the financial situation of many nursing-home residents, and the more she learned, the more concerned she became. When she asked fellow members of Frostburg Village's family council about the situation, they agreed that residents who did not have families to support them often had little money to buy new clothes and personal items.

She approached Shippee and Anita Blauch, village executive director, to learn more. The problem, Skidmore discovered, was Maryland's Medicaid personal spending allowance, the "spending money" seniors on Medicaid can use to buy clothing or toiletries, pay for a haircut, or purchase a life-insurance policy. In Maryland, the allowance was \$40 a month, unchanged since 1987. The figure was much lower than the allowance provided by many surrounding states.

As Skidmore spoke to village residents, she realized \$40 was simply not enough. Hair-care costs could quickly eat up a major part of the monthly allowance. She saw residents relying on charity to keep them clothed and dedicated nursing staff paying out of their own pockets so that elderly men and women could have toiletries or other much-needed personal items. As she looked around, she thought of how the generation in the facility had seen the country through war and many difficult times. She decided to do something.

Although she had never been involved in politics, Skidmore resolved to have the personal spending allowance increased. Looking back, she believes now that she was "very naïve."

She began with a petition drive in 1997, sending the signed petitions to Sen. John Hafer of Allegany County. He, in turn, sent the petitions and letters to the state Department of Health and Mental

Hygiene. The state's reply, however, was that there was no money to institute an increase.

Next, Skidmore tried a letter-writing campaign to her local newspapers. Even though she continued to win support from nursing-home administrators and staff, families, and many others, the campaign had no effect. Finally, in 1999, Sen. Hafer suggested that Skidmore take a huge step—to change the state law.

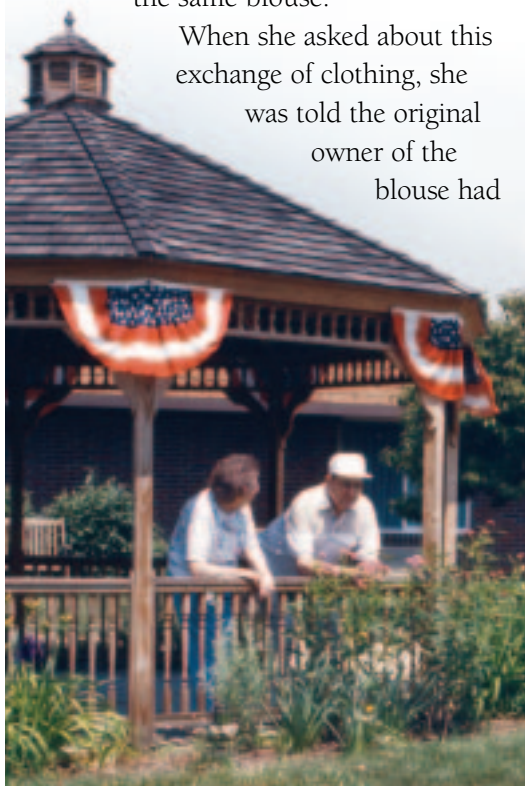
The following year, he introduced a Senate bill to increase the personal allowance to \$60 a month. Among those traveling to Annapolis to testify were Skidmore and her husband, Blauch, a resident of the village, and many other supporters.

Skidmore told the senators that while medical science had given people longer lives, it remained up to society to make certain that longer lives are better lives. Though she was nervous, her passionate testimony had a strong impact, and the bill passed the Senate and moved on to the House Appropriations Committee.

As the legislative session passed, Skidmore waited to hear about any action, but no news came. The bill was dying in committee. The legislative session ended, with no action taken. She was so disappointed that she sat in her kitchen and cried.

While her efforts had suffered a serious blow, Skidmore was not ready to give up. She turned to friends and faith to keep her strong. "When you know in your heart that something needs to be done, when you know that it's right, you do it. If I needed to direct my energy somewhere

*"Skidmore told the senators that while medical science had given people longer lives, it remained up to society to make certain that longer lives are better lives."*





Alice Skidmore, left, with her late mother, Sara Parry.

Photo by Jed Kirschbaum, *The Baltimore Sun*. Used by permission.

else, God would have told me,” she says.

As she waited for the next legislative session, Skidmore was surprised to learn of the support she had from people across the state. Newspaper articles about her battle prompted strangers to send donations for her to distribute to seniors in need. Boxes of clothing and money came to her house. This time around, Skidmore was determined to harness the energy of these concerned citizens.

In the meantime, Sen. Hafer worked to have the bill filed in both the House and Senate, assuring testimony on the matter before both legislative bodies. Again, Skidmore and her friends traveled to Annapolis to argue their case. More newspapers ran articles about the struggle to help Maryland’s financially needy seniors, and Skidmore used the press to encourage citizens to write to their delegates.

Finally, it seemed that victory was near. The bills passed both the House and the Senate. All that remained was the governor’s signature. But by May 2, the bill had still not appeared on his schedule. Time was running out.

At a volunteer dinner that night, Skidmore asked everyone to pray. The next day, Sen. Hafer’s aide called with good news: The

bill was to be signed the following Monday. “There must have been a lot of prayers said that night!” says Skidmore happily.

Signed on May 6, the new law increases the personal spending allowance to \$50 per month in Fiscal Year 2003 and \$60 in Fiscal Year 2004, with an increase based on a percentage of the cost-of-living rise for each year thereafter. This last point is especially important, because it means Maryland’s senior citizens will be provided for into the future.

Even in victory, Skidmore is humble and quick to praise those who have stood by her. “There isn’t anything in this world you accomplish by yourself,” she says.

She is not one to rest on her laurels, and even before the ink had dried on the new law, she had turned her attention to her next project: While some have suggested she run for county commissioner, she is more concerned about the national shortage of nurses. She also is concerned about the special needs of older persons with dementia-related illnesses such as Alzheimer’s disease. She wonders how future demands for care will be met.

While Alice Skidmore may say she doesn’t yet know much about these subjects, you can be sure she will find out.

## 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 Maryland and Central Pennsylvania 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

# Congregational and Community Ministries Partnerships pay off for communities

By partnering with area congregations and community agencies, Diakon's *Congregational and Community Ministries* office in Baltimore is bringing needed services to the people of central Maryland.

## Interfaith Good Neighbors

With the help of a \$35,000 Faith in Action grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Congregational and Community Ministries is collaborating with local congregations and community agencies to bring non-medical assistance to those who need help.

"Interfaith Good Neighbors is an outreach ministry in which we are planning to offer free non-medical assistance to individuals in need of help because of age, illness, frailty, or just because they are alone," explains Terry Langdon, director of Congregational and Community Ministries.

The office had offered similar In-Home Care services in the past, but funding ran out. However, the need still existed.

"In talking with other community agencies that we've worked with for a long time, we decided we wanted to start something like this again," Langdon says. "Based on the success Diakon has had in northeastern Pennsylvania with a similar program called Volunteer Home Care, we decided to do the same thing here."

Inspired to move forward, Langdon hired Barbara Ruland last spring as program manager and began to assemble a steering committee of representatives from nine area congregations and various community agencies. Since that time, the committee has been busy identifying what services to offer, how to recruit and orient volunteers, and how to publicize the program.

"We're hoping to start matching volunteers with people who need services as early as late March or April," says Langdon, adding that the program will begin initially in north Baltimore. "We plan to expand from there and initiate other teams in other parts of central Maryland."

Interfaith Good Neighbors will offer transportation, assistance with household

or outdoor chores, telephone reassurance, help with errands and shopping, and friendly visitation and respite.

Langdon says the program looks to participating churches, the Diakon Lutheran Fund, the Delaware-Maryland Synod, and other grant sources for supplementary program funding.

## Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Another group with which Congregational and Community Ministries has collaborated is the Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America of the Delaware-Maryland Synod.

"We are working with them in the area of domestic violence," Langdon says. "We hosted workshops in the fall of 2001 and 2002 that were specifically targeted to clergy and lay leaders of the church. We are trying to help them feel comfortable talking about domestic violence because we know there are people suffering in our congregations."

The women's group and Congregational and Community Ministries also have been working in support of the Family Crisis Center of Baltimore County to develop an unused parsonage into a transitional shelter for abused women and children. The effort is in concert with St. Peter Lutheran Church, Eastpoint.

"One of the things we are doing is writing a grant proposal to help the Women of the ELCA get the funds they need to purchase needed items for the house," says Langdon. "They are hoping to open the house by July 1."

## Computer Labs for Churches

A group known as Senior CyberNet is helping Congregational and Community Ministries to address the "Digital Divide" that faces children in urban areas, says Langdon.

"We are helping several congregations to establish computer labs for youth groups and others to use," she explains. "We've been able to access computers through Senior CyberNet, whose mission is to establish computer labs at community sites for youth, in addition to bringing computers to home-bound seniors."

Although the program is in its infancy, Congregational and Community Ministries is working with three urban churches in poverty-stricken areas to help them establish after-school computer programs.

"The people living in these areas do not have a lot of resources—even the schools are disadvantaged," Langdon says. "We want to give the kids the chance to develop computer skills, use e-mail, and explore the Internet."

Senior CyberNet provides both the equipment and technical support for the program. "What Diakon does is try to consult with the churches to help them decide what programs to have and how to go about it," she says. "If they need help recruiting volunteers, we can help."

*For more information on how to support or volunteer your help, contact Congregational and Community Ministries at (410) 631-0724.*

## Interfaith Good Neighbors Congregational and Agency Partners

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 Diakon Congregational Health Ministries  
 Senior CyberNet, Towson University  
 Baltimore City Commission on Aging and  
 Retirement Education  
 MedBank of Maryland  
 First English Lutheran Church & Action  
 in Maturity (A.I.M.)

# Housing office opens in Baltimore

**Diakon Housing and Development, Inc.**, has opened an office in Baltimore.

A Maryland non-profit organization, Diakon Housing and Development is a subsidiary of Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries, created to provide affordable housing for people of all backgrounds and financial means.

The Housing and Development office, scheduled to be open by mid-February, is located at St. Mark Lutheran Church, 1900 St. Paul Street in the city.

Diakon Housing and Development, Inc., is staffed by the Rev. G. Stanley Steele, executive vice president, and Rebecca Albright, housing development director, both of whom work out of the program's Baltimore and Allentown, Pa., locations.

"Diakon Housing and Development was born of our desire to help rebuild our communities, to re-create neighborhoods in the truest sense of the word," says

Steele. "At the heart of what we're doing is our faith-based mission to help to provide affordable housing, to rebuild hope for those in need."

With the support of Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries, the housing division is designed to enhance neighborhoods by emphasizing a holistic approach to development that focuses on a community's vision.

Diakon Housing and Development, says Steele, is designed to offer a variety of services to meet needs of both urban and suburban markets within Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware. Among its focuses are:

- Affordable housing including tax-credit, HUD, multi-family rental, and for-sale housing options.
- Community development planning that is responsive to the concerns of the targeted region's residents.
- Property management.

"Because we're a socially conscious, not-for-profit organization, we also work to improve

lives within the communities we serve.

Whether involving Diakon's network of services or the organizations with which we would develop partnerships, we plan to connect residents with a strong system of supportive services that meet their needs," adds Steele.

"Because we're part of a social ministry organization that has been serving people since the 1800s, and because we now operate some 20 retirement and housing campuses and free-standing facilities, we believe we can bring a variety of benefits and economies of scale to our partners as we see a project through completion," he says.

Building such partnerships to help renew communities is one key to the program's success, Steele notes. Currently, he and Albright are working with a number of congregations, churches, and community groups on plans for the Old Goucher/South Charles Village area of Baltimore.

# Family finds success with Brandywine program

The program may have been considered a "step-down" for the 11-year-old, but for the boy it was a step home.

The boy entered the **Brandywine Program's Intensive Outpatient Program** last spring. Based in New Castle County, Del., the Diakon program serves children, adolescents, and their families experiencing multiple difficulties.

With an extensive history of severe temper tantrums and physical aggression toward peers, teachers, and his mother, the 11-year-old had responded well to previous residential treatment, psychiatric hospitalizations, day treatment, and outpatient services. He came to the Brandywine IOP as a step-down from day treatment, says J. Roy Cannon, clinical director and the boy's primary counselor.

"We provide intensive community-based services through family, group, and individual counseling," Cannon says. "One of the things that was very helpful to the

boy was the opportunity we provided for social skills development."

Diagnosed with a developmental disorder, the boy is socially delayed and immature, according to Cannon. "He also has a medical condition, a genetic illness that affects both the vascular and nervous systems of youngsters."

When he entered Brandywine's IOP, the boy was taking a variety of medications, with physicians having difficulty in finding medicines to maintain stability.

"Dr. Caroline Ekong, our psychiatrist, was able to get him on an effective medication regime," Cannon says. "By the time he was discharged he was responding very appropriately. He was no longer physically aggressive and he had fewer and less severe temper tantrums."

The boy's mother also benefited from the program. As a single mom, she found herself overwhelmed by the pressure of holding a job and rearing a child with special needs. "The family counseling was helpful because we were able to help her reorganize and

manage her life better," Cannon explains.

"During the time the boy was with us, his mom went on to get engaged and her fiancé has become an important part of the family."

It was Brandywine's team effort that made the difference in the boy's success, says Cannon. "Jamila Jones, his community interventionist/case manager, was very involved and had a key role in helping him accept himself, improve his self-esteem, and help him learn limits socially and in the family," he says, adding that the boy has reduced the intensity and frequency of his misbehavior and is doing very well in school.

Successfully referred to an outpatient program, the boy will continue with counseling as well as medication while he is helped with maturity and social issues.

"He is an endearing kid," says Cannon of the young boy who is captivated by Hot Wheels. "He likes to come up and give you a hug."

# Choice is Harbor Pointe hallmark

Choice is one of the hallmarks of retirement living at *The Lutheran Village at Harbor Pointe*.

“With the chance to pick many of your options, now is the ideal time to consider retirement living at The Lutheran Village,” says Susan Demorra, director of marketing and admissions at the Salisbury, Md., village.

“In new units, you can select your carpet, cupboards and appliances, as well as the choice of a sunroom, screened-in porch or open porch,” she says.



“You also can choose colors of paint, vinyl flooring, and carpeting to create a very personalized setting. Your cottage can be a single unit or part of a duplex.”

Many amenities are standard in the village’s retirement homes, including a full-size washer and dryer, electric range with overhead microwave, garbage disposal, refrigerator, dishwasher, natural-gas water heater, and central air conditioning with gas heat. Safety features such as smoke detectors and fire extinguishers also are standard.

“Enhanced kitchen lighting brightens up the entire kitchen, creating an inviting atmosphere for those who enjoy cooking,” notes Demorra.

Retirement living at The Lutheran Village is virtually hassle-free when it comes to the care and maintenance of a cottage, she adds. A monthly service fee covers lawn care and landscaping; snow and leaf removal; trash removal; move-in service such as hanging pictures and installing window treatments; a bi-annual preventive maintenance visit; insurance on building and grounds; and specified repairs to building, grounds, and appliances.

“Also included in the fee are use of our community center, recreational activities, and regularly scheduled transportation,” she says. “Plus the fee covers the cost of basic cable television, water, and sewer. Additionally, you get the protection and security of a 24-hour call system connected to the main building.”

Currently, The Lutheran Village at Harbor Pointe has 12 cottages, with a new phase of cottages under development. A newly installed underground irrigation system will help to assure the vitality of freshly landscaped areas, while beautifying the village campus.

Demorra may be contacted at (410) 860-8750.

*These memorial gifts were received by programs within the Delaware-Maryland Synod from early fall through November. In 2003, memorial gifts will be listed in a new donor publication.*

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Diakon’s *Ravenwood Lutheran Village* in Hagerstown, Md., recently collected food for Food Resources Inc., a non-profit food warehouse from which other charitable organizations can obtain food for programs for low-income persons. Staff, residents, and visitors of the village Nursing Care Center collected more than 1,400 items in what became a “competitive food fight,” in which various departments tried to donate the most items. The nursing department’s day-shift employees are shown with the facility’s donations.