

# Family Connections



FALL 2016

## Diakon Adoption & Foster Care holds unique fashion show-matching event

Diakon Adoption & Foster Care recently held its fifth annual fashion show-style “matching event,” bringing together older youths in need of permanent families and prospective adoptive and foster families.

One of several matching events held annually by the program—others take place in such venues as professional baseball stadiums during games—the one-of-a-kind fashion show is held at The Lutheran Home at Topton, where Diakon Adoption & Foster Care’s northeastern Pennsylvania office is located.

The event employs a fashion show atmosphere that makes the youths “stars” for the day, with each youth receiving from area

vendors free makeup, hair and clothing consultation, as well as a new outfit they model. The event is designed so that youths and families have time for socialization following the fashion show.

This year, 17 youths and 16 prospective and current resource families participated.

“We were very pleased with the response. The families and young people had lots of time to interact and get to know one another following the show,” says Joyce Riche, director of the Diakon Adoption & Foster Care office at Topton.



The youths who took part in this year’s Fashion Show & Matching Event pose for a group photograph.



A youth walks the red carpet during the fashion show-matching event.



Steve Harper, a videographer for the French television network TF1, interviews a prospective adoptive family at the fashion show-matching event.

Beyond resulting in successful matches of waiting youths with adoptive families, the event has attracted international interest. Several years ago, a French documentary producer filmed the show. This year, a producer and a videographer from the Washington, D.C., bureau of the French television network TF1 attended the event and interviewed both youths and families for a nightly news broadcast in that country. A German television network remains interested in doing a Good Morning, America-style feature on the adoption effort.

# Summer Picnic Fun

Summertime is picnic time!

The Diakon post-permanency support group associated with the Topton office celebrated summer with its annual picnic in August at Shillington Memorial Park.

More than 40 adults and children enjoyed fun activities, crafts and good food and fellowship. Parents had the opportunity to socialize with other families who share similar experiences and concerns. Their children were delighted to take part in fun crafts and a candy walk and have the opportunity to win prizes.

The support group is for families who have adopted or added to their family by any other permanency arrangement. It meets from 6:30 to 8 p.m. the second Tuesday of each month at Atonement Lutheran Church in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania. Anyone interested in more information about the group should contact Christine Smith-Hoh at (610) 682-15010 or via email at [smith-hohc@diakon.org](mailto:smith-hohc@diakon.org).



*The Fitzgeralds were among families who found food, fellowship and fun at the Topton office-related post-permanency support group picnic. Pictured (left to right) are Charlie Grace, Liam, Sierra and Terri.*



The York and Mechanicsburg offices of Diakon Adoption & Foster Care celebrated foster and adoptive families with a family picnic and pool party sponsored by Thrivent Financial. Parents and children found plenty to enjoy, including great weather, good food and each other's company.



*Families gather for a picnic and pool party sponsored by the York and Mechanicsburg offices of Diakon Adoption & Foster Care.*

# Finalizations

Aaliyah  
March 4, 2016  
Jen and Rob  
Cumberland County

Kaya  
April 22, 2106  
Tyrone and Renee  
Lehigh County

Oliver  
May 3, 2016  
Tyler and Gabrielle  
Cumberland County

Asher and Shawn  
May 12, 2016  
Jim and Heather  
Berks County

Dariayn  
May 31, 2016  
Valerie  
Dauphin County

Darmani  
May 31, 2016  
Darnell  
Dauphin County

Faith  
June 1, 2016  
Andy and Tammy  
Northampton County

Lauren and Audrey  
June 3, 2016  
Andrew and Amy  
Cumberland County

Jazi'mae  
June 8, 2016  
Theodore and Tiffany  
Berks County

Ethan  
June 8, 2016  
Heather and Mary  
Berks County

Michael  
June 13, 2016  
Brad and Carol  
Cumberland County

Josani  
June 14, 2016  
Rob and Bill  
Dauphin County

Amier and Cordai  
June 22, 2016  
Jim and Angie  
Berks County

Brooke and Kharma  
July 6, 2016  
Wes and Shanon  
York County

Timothy  
July 15, 2016  
David and Veronica  
Northampton County

Deanna  
August 2, 2016  
Carol  
Northampton County

Faith  
August 9, 2016  
Brittany  
Northampton County

Drea and Justin  
August 31, 2016  
Kristin  
Berks County

Dariana  
August 24, 2016  
Josh and Jocelyn  
Berks County

Lily  
September 27, 2016  
Cindy  
Northampton County

Gabriel  
September 28, 2016  
Brenda  
Berks County

Mariah and Dashaun  
October 4, 2016  
Hope and Adrian  
Northampton County



*Oliver* was adopted May 3, 2016,  
by Tyler and Gabrielle, who holds him.



*Dariana* was adopted  
by Josh (far right) and Jocelyn (back  
left) Aug. 24, 2016. Also pictured are  
Sophia and Kagen.

# Finalizations continued



Brenda adopted *Gabriel*, pictured with his adoptive sisters, Sept. 28, 2016.



Rob and Bill adopted *Josani* June 14, 2016.



*Brooke* and *Kharma* were adopted July 6, 2016, by Wes and Shanon.



*Amier* and *Cordai* were adopted June 22, 2016, by Jim and Angie.



*Lily* was adopted by Cindy Sept. 27, 2016.



*Hope* and *Adrian* adopted Mariah and Dashaun on October 4, 2016.

# Finalizations continued



Andrew and Amy adopted *Lauren* and *Audrey*, seated together in the judge's chair, June 3, 2016.



*Faith*, pictured with her new family, was adopted June 1, 2016, by Andrew and Tammy.



Brad and Carol adopted *Michael*, in Carol's arms, June 13, 2016.



*Aaliyah* in the judge's chair, was adopted by Jen and Rob March 4, 2106.

## Sunday Worship Services

Pastor Amanda Furbeck, a Diakon adoptive mother, is conducting Sunday worship services at The Lutheran Home in Topton for adoptive and foster families. Please contact her for the schedule and campus location. Contacts: [pastor@streamsofgrace.org](mailto:pastor@streamsofgrace.org), [www.streamsofgrace.org](http://www.streamsofgrace.org) or telephone (610) 349-9406. *All are welcome.*



# Help us to find *forever* families



## *Donnie, age 18*

Donnie is a young man who is easy to get along with and has a good sense of humor. He likes to laugh and make others laugh, too. Donnie is a creative person, having made creations out of Legos, K'NEX, and folded paper (origami). His creations include cars, houses, skyscrapers and rollercoasters (which actually function). He has won Lego competitions and been in Lego leagues. Donnie enjoys school, with math and biology being his favorite subjects. He says he dreams of an adoptive family with a mom and a dad, and maybe some older siblings, too, who like to be active. For more information, please contact Marian Kolcun, (570) 351-9290, kolcunm@diakon.org.



## *Franklin, age 18*

Franklin describes himself as shy at first with people he doesn't know well, but after he gets to know them, he is relaxed and can be himself. He likes to be active, to go out and do things, preferring to be dressed up rather than casual. When he dresses casually, he says he prefers clothes related to his favorites sports teams, the Forty Niners, the Philadelphia Eagles and Pittsburgh Flyers. Franklin gets good grades and has many friends at school. Franklin would do well in a home where he is the youngest or only child. He has been able to maintain a positive relationship with his birth father and wants to preserve that connection. For more information, please contact Marian Kolcun, (570) 351-9290, kolcunm@diakon.org.

## *Sean, age 15*

Outgoing and active, Sean likes drawing, playing sports, snowboarding, fishing, and making things. He says he'd love a family who would like to do any of those things! He also knows how to cook and bake—especially cookies—and says nobody would be hungry with him around. Sean is in 9th grade and doing fairly well in school. This past summer he trained to be a camp counselor as he wants to learn how to work with young children. Sean says when he thinks of family, he thinks of people who have one another's backs; they support and protect one another. God and religion are very important to Sean. He needs a committed family who will patiently and lovingly help him work through the significant losses he's experienced throughout his young life. He will do best in a small family with few other children. For more information, please contact Marian Kolcun, (570) 351-9290, kolcunm@diakon.org.



## *Brienna, age 18*

Brienna is a sweet and witty young lady who enjoys playing games, doing crafts, getting her nails done, and watching television. She says she would like to help people be more beautiful by doing their hair and nails or keep them 'full' by cooking for them. Brienna loves animals, and playing with them, dancing, playing basketball, and attending school; her favorite school subject is math. Brienna has experienced trauma in her life, yet is amazingly resilient and able to share fond memories she has experienced. She would like to have a family who will help her hold onto and claim the good memories, and commit to making many more memories with her. She would benefit from a family who is caring, loving, patient, and understanding as she transitions to a safe permanent home. Brienna is in contact with her brother and would like that to continue. For more information, please contact Marian Kolcun, (570) 351-9290, kolcunm@diakon.org.



## Forever families Continued from Page 6

### *Jeremiah, age 18*

Jeremiah is a very charming and bright young man. He is athletic, outgoing and smart; he has a great sense of humor and loves to play practical jokes. He graduated from high school and has big dreams for his future, including going to a D1 school to play football and study business and marketing. He would like eventually to work in real estate. He is hopeful of be accepted by Temple University. He is a huge Philadelphia Eagles fan. He was on the track and field team his senior year of high school and made it all the way to “states”! He loves all pets and would love to have an exotic pet. He loves to eat and his favorite foods are pizza, steak, chicken, cake, ice cream, waffles, and bacon. He loves watching movies, playing and watching sports, playing video games, and shopping. Furthermore, he enjoys go-carting and laser tag. Jeremiah even knows how to crochet and has even taught peers how to do that! He has developed a lot of great coping skills to help when he needs to blow off steam. Jeremiah is great at advocating for himself and is able to ask others when he needs help. For more information, please contact Adrienne Gardina, (717) 795-0303, [gardinaa@diakon.org](mailto:gardinaa@diakon.org).



### *Edward, age 14*

Edward is a sweet, kind, loyal and loving young man. He is very friendly, smart, and has a knack for building things. His favorite things to do are swim and play video games. He carries goggles around with him in case he gets the chance to go swimming! Edward has a passion for photography, and loves to play with Legos and make different structures. He hopes someday to be an architect. He also likes to be creative and enjoys arts and crafts. Edward loves to engage in conversation with anyone who will listen. For more information, please contact Adrienne Gardina, (717) 795-0303, [gardinaa@diakon.org](mailto:gardinaa@diakon.org).

### *Kathleen, age 14*

Kathleen, who prefers to be called K.K., is a spunky young girl who loves listening to music and playing video and card games. She is an excellent Uno player! She also enjoys doing crafts and being silly. K.K. considers herself to be a “girly girl” and loves fashion, nail polish and doing hair and makeup. She is interested in trying cheerleading, gymnastics, dance, and ice skating. K.K. is a very fast learner and would pick up any hobby quickly! She loves the outdoors and says she is up for trying anything active. For more information, please contact Kathryn Juliana, (717) 795-0479, [julianak@diakon.org](mailto:julianak@diakon.org).



### *Isaiah, age 14*

Isaiah is an active, quick-witted, and intelligent young man. He enjoys being outside playing basketball, kickball, and baseball. Isaiah excels in math and believes that skill helps him to be an exceptional card player. Isaiah’s favorite sports teams are Ohio State for football and basketball, the Detroit Lions, Miami Heat and the LA Lakers. He also is a fan of WWE. When he is older, Isaiah is interested in joining the Marines. He would love to have a support person in his life who is knowledgeable about the military to steer him in the right direction. Isaiah would prefer a two-parent family that has pets and is open to his having contact with his older siblings. For more information, please contact Helene Kosciolk, (610) 682-1564, [kosciolkh@diakon.org](mailto:kosciolkh@diakon.org).

## Congressional coalition honors Diakon with Angels in Adoption® award

Diakon Adoption & Foster Care was recently selected for a 2016 Angels in Adoption® award by U.S. Sen. Pat Toomey (R-Pa). The award acknowledges the program’s “outstanding service” to children and youths served through foster care and adoption.

The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute developed the awards to raise public awareness of foster care and adoption programs and to give members of the U.S. Congress the opportunity to honor the work of constituents. This year, more than 140 “Angels” from across the country were honored. Since the awards initiative began in 1999, more than 2,500 “Angels” have been recognized.

The award presented to Diakon noted that the program’s “long history and adaptability to changing needs in society underscore the organization’s commitment to make a difference in the lives of at-risk children and youths. Such adaptability invites innovation.”

The Diakon program was one of the first in the country to focus extensively on the placement of children with special needs—and one of the first in the region to offer foster-to-adopt services.

In addition, the program provides a range of supportive services for families in various stages of the adoption or foster-care process including online resources, support groups and a unique sibling-training program.

An awards ceremony and gala took place in Washington, D.C., in September. Kathy Roach, executive director, represented Diakon Adoption & Foster Care. She shares more about her experience in her column in this issue of *Family Connections* (Please see Page 9).



*Kathy Roach accepts the Angels in Adoption award for Diakon in Washington, D.C.*

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## Teaming up to grow services, strengthen programs

Staff of Diakon Adoption & Foster Care are excited that a new Permanency Development Council formed during 2016.

The council is a group of adoptive parents, board members, staff and concerned community members, teaming together to help grow our permanency (adoption and foster care) services in many different ways.

As has been reported, Diakon received a very generous bequest, much of which is going to fund renovations to the Old Main building on the Topton campus. The original building will undergo a redesign of the second floor, which will become the site of administrative offices, and our new Helen Palmer Center for Permanency.

In addition to housing the adoption and foster care staff, the space will include visitation rooms where children and their families can meet in a warm, friendly atmosphere; training rooms; library space; and room to grow our program.

The new space will allow the program to provide more service to the community.

The Council is helping to increase financial support for Diakon Adoption & Foster Care programs, to help more children find forever families.

Council members were involved in groundbreaking for the Old Main renovation project, held Sept. 24 (see related article in this issue). They also supported the annual Dining with Diakon event in October, which benefits adoption and foster care services.

Members of the council continue to create relationships with one another and other interested parties, and engage outside the council to discuss issues surrounding the continued improvement of adoption and foster care services.

Joyce Riche, director at the Topton office, says the group “already has been studying issues such as how to foster kinship relationships, how to recruit all of the types of families that we need to parent our precious children, and how to continue to fund our endeavors.

“This is an incredibly dynamic and passionate group of people, who are dedicated to the goal of finding permanency for our children. I couldn’t be more excited to be part of this group. The sky is truly the limit for helping our children, and with this coordinated effort, I know our goals are within reach. Nearly 2,000 foster children in the state at this time are not in permanent homes,” she adds. “We simply must work harder to find permanence for these children.”

# Highs and lows: A distinguished honor and a heartbreaking disappointment

I recently returned from Washington D.C., where I accepted an Angel in Adoption award for Diakon Adoption & Foster Care. We were selected by U.S. Senator Pat Toomey because of our dedication to positive child-welfare practices.

I had the opportunity to meet and discuss issues with families, organizations and individuals from across the country. Events that took place over several days included an advocacy fair, tour of the Capitol, Congressional breakfast or lunch, and legislative seminars.

The event concluded with a reception and gala attended by 700 people. I was honored to accept the award for our program and staff, reflecting the quality of services provided by Diakon to children and families.

## Vital legislation in focus, but failed

During the time I was in Washington, some very important child welfare legislation was being discussed in the U.S. Senate. The Family First Prevention Services Act of 2016 (HR 5456/S 3065) is a bicameral, bipartisan bill that would strengthen federal child welfare law to better protect vulnerable children and families.

This law was passed by the House of Representatives in June with hope support could be gained in the U.S. Senate before the election recess the end of September. Sadly, that did not happen.

The proposed legislation represented a historic step forward by better aligning federal child welfare funding with improved outcomes and goals for children and families who come into contact with child welfare systems.

It would have been the first time that federal child welfare dollars would be used on quality prevention services and programs so that youths can safely remain in their home rather than come into placement. To that end, funds would have been made available for mental health, substance abuse prevention and treatment services, and in-home-based parenting programs.

If children do need foster care, the legislation encourages placement in the least restrictive, most family-like setting appropriate to meet their needs, with special emphasis on their specialized treatment needs.

The bill also promoted permanent families for children by extending adoption and guardianship incentives. In addition, the bill had these goals:



*Kathy Roach receives the Angels in Adoption Award in the Russell Senate Building Office in Washington.*

- Address the special needs of pregnant and parenting teens;
- Offer support to help older youths transitioning from foster care to adulthood;
- Enhance the interstate placement of youth;
- Improve regional partnerships to assist families with drug and alcohol issues;
- Increase support for grandparents or other relative caregivers who come forward to parent children whose parents cannot do so;
- Offer increased support for post-adoption services;
- Continue the Court Improvement program; and
- Reauthorize expiring funding for Title IV-B and Title IV- E program provisions.

It was ambitious legislation, to say the least.

More than 400 of the leading child advocacy organizations in this country expressed support for the bill, as had all of our Lutheran partners.

The result of more than 18 months of negotiations, this was the most substantial piece of legislation in child welfare in the last 10 years.

And we knew that if it did not pass, we'd be back to starting over again. And that's where we are now.

But ... we remain committed to the important measures and reforms of the legislation and are prepared to keep pushing forward so that children and families in this country will be better served in the future.

**– Kathy Roach, Executive Director  
Diakon Adoption & Foster Care**

# Old Main to gain new role as Center for Permanency takes shape

The initial groundbreaking for Old Main on the Lutheran Home at Topton campus took place when the first superintendent of the home took axe and shovel in hand and dug some ground in the shape of a cross.

Nearly 120 years later, Diakon staff and friends did the same, as ground was overturned for the new phase of life for the Old Main building. The latest groundbreaking marked the start of a major renovation of Old Main, which, when finished, will include space for Diakon Adoption & Foster Care.

The Sept. 24 event served to launch the \$8.2 million renovation and refurbishment project.

The adoption- and foster care-focused facilities to be established in the building will be named the Helen N. Palmer Center for Permanency. A significant bequest from Mrs. Palmer of Wyomissing, who passed away in 2012, provided seed money for the project, which also will include bank financing and a fundraising campaign.

Project construction will begin late this fall, with a tentative completion date of late 2017. In addition to exterior and mechanical systems work, the project will turn the currently unused second floor of the 32,000-square-foot building into the Diakon Adoption & Foster Care permanency center as well as create space for Diakon Ministry Support offices currently located in the Medical Arts Building on the Luther Crest campus, Allentown.

The recent event included activities for children, participation by community organizations including food cooked and served by local Boy Scout troops, music performances including selections by the Brandywine Heights High School band, a blessing of the site and tours of Old Main.

The “center for permanency” related to Diakon Adoption & Foster Care will include space for training of adoption and foster care staff and support groups for parents as well as family-style areas helpful in the process of transitioning children and youths into foster and adoptive families.

Old Main’s first floor will continue to house the Brandywine Community Library, the historic Putz train layout and some staff offices. Plans include eventual development of a center to highlight the history of the Topton and Tressler orphanages, the two homes for children in Diakon’s past. Old Main is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.



*Groundbreaking participants for the Old Main project on The Lutheran Home at Topton campus formed the shape of a cross in honor of the building’s history. That history tells of how the first superintendent of the Topton Orphans Home began work on the foundation of the building by digging out “several wheelbarrowsful of dirt” to form a cross. Participants were, left to right, MaryEllen Dickey, senior vice president, Diakon Office of Advancement; Cayden Roth, served by Diakon Adoption & Foster Care; the Rev. Dr. Paul Buehrle, former president of The Lutheran Home at Topton; William Rohrbach of Boyertown, who lived at the home from 1936 to 1950; the Rev. Dr. Daun McKee, former president/CEO of The Lutheran Home at Topton and Diakon; Kenneth Mertz, Diakon board member, adoptive parent and chair of the adoption program’s advisory council; Scott Habecker, Diakon’s chief financial and operating officer; Kathy Roach, Diakon Adoption & Foster Care executive director; Mark T. Pile, Diakon president/CEO; Shari VanderGast, senior vice president, Diakon Child, Family & Community Ministries; Emried D. Cole, Jr., board chair, Diakon Child, Family & Community Ministries; Mia Manley, served by Diakon Adoption & Foster Care; and Laurie Manley, adoptive parent.*

# Proud of who I am: An adopted daughter reflects

*This essay was written by a young Pennsylvania woman who was adopted as an infant.*

Did you ever stop to think of yourself as a small child or infant? When is the first time you had a true memory of your childhood without the influence of photographs or sentimental items to help cast that memory?

I know I was adopted and I know I spent a week or two in a foster home. I know I have lived in two different areas of Pennsylvania. I know I am an African American girl with two Caucasian parents.

We all deal with ups and downs in our life, but I believe memories are what make us who we are and keep us “real.”

Who am I? I love who I have become and everything I have dealt with to become who I am.

But who am I exactly? I am a fun-loving, charismatic girl. I love to laugh and make people laugh. I am very opinionated but respect the opinions of others as well. I have an extremely low tolerance level for ignorant, closed-minded people. I live by the saying: “Do not judge a book by its cover.”

I was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, Sept. 10, 1988. I was placed in a foster home while my parents finished up paperwork and my adoption was finalized. I do not truly remember anything about the adoption besides my Mom having later shared with me some of the paperwork from 18 years ago. Sometimes I believe I can remember my foster home, but then I realize I just remember one room, the same room I am in, in a picture my parents took when they came to pick me up.

About three years later, my sister Rachel was born and went through the same procedure I did. Even though I was only about 3 years old, I feel I remember more about my adoption because I was able to witness my sister’s; I was so excited to have a little sister and someone to play with.

My family and I left our Wilkes-Barre home bound for Greensburg when I was around 4 years old. I do not remember having any negative thoughts about leaving, but from looking at photos and hearing stories, it turns out I was very upset to be moving. I had to leave behind my only girl pals and my favorite neighbors in the world.

Not once through my entire short-lived life in Wilkes-Barre did my race, gender, or family ever come into my mind. For a small African American girl, I grew up having the perfect life. Maybe I was just young, or maybe I just chose not to see it, but I never noticed that my nationality was different from my



immediate or extended family. In fact, it wasn’t until I was about 6 years old and settled in my new city that these ideas started to come into my head.

As I began to grow older I had a thousand questions running around inside my head. Who is my birth family? What nationalities am I made up of? What am I going to grow up to look like?

The information given to my parents was so minute and didn’t answer even half of the questions I had bundled up inside. I hate expressing my feelings so I’ve kept many of my thoughts to myself over the years. I used to feel so uneasy and almost awkward about who I was.

Over time, however, I’ve learned to cope with my feelings and have jumped over the hurdle of not knowing my birth family. Rather ironically, I am now 18 and according to the law I am able to search for my biological family if I wish. But I just feel that 18 years have already gone by and I am fine—why change what I already have?

From another point of view, I wonder how my parents have dealt with everything throughout the 18 years of my life. I can only imagine what it must be like to adopt a small infant, care for him or her and watch the child grow into an independent adult, only for the person then to be intrigued by their birth family.

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# A generous gift from one adopted child to others still waiting

Clair Wallace wanted only one thing for her 11th birthday—for her friends and family to give her gifts cards that she, in turn, could give to Diakon for children in foster care.

Adopted as an infant from foster care in Guatemala by David and Lynn Wallace, Clair asked for gift cards instead of gifts because of her own history, she says.

Thanks to her generosity and those who helped to fulfill her wish, Clair collected nearly \$400 in gift cards. The congregation of her family's Quaker Meeting House in Exton joined her gift-card campaign, along with her family and friends.

Clair's brother also was born in Guatemala and adopted by the Wallaces. She hopes that one day she and her brother can visit their native country.

"Diakon Adoption & Foster Care thanks Claire and her parents for this thoughtful and very generous gift," says Joyce Riche, director of the Topton office. "What a wonderful effort!"



*Clair and her family present her gift of nearly \$400 in gift cards to Joyce Riche, director of Permanency Services.*

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## Proud of who I am Continued from Page 11

People who adopt are overly generous and make huge impacts in children's lives. These individuals are definitely not given the recognition they deserve. Not only did my parents adopt two girls, they went beyond "the call of duty" and adopted two biracial girls.

I like to think my family and I lead a unique and splendid life. In a class I am taking, we talked about "the family." The family norm was described as a mom, dad, two kids, dog, white picket fence and, of course, Caucasian. In all honesty, if you turn on the TV or look at children's books, that is exactly what you see. With all of the media portraying that image I almost cannot really blame the people who stare and pass judgment when they see my family together.

Sometimes, I feel that the fact my family and I don't care about our differences affects people even more than if we were to constantly and publicly acknowledge our different ethnicities. The older generation especially seems aware and disturbed by our differences and you can tell they are bothered by our comfort and acceptance of our distinctive outside appearances. What seems glaring to them is something we have come to see as natural.

Another thing I have noticed over the years is how people try to relieve their own tension about our family by trying to find and comment on similarities between my features and my parents' features. "Oh that is most definitely an [name omitted] face; you and your father have the same exact shape!" But my father and I have nothing close to the same shaped face!

Another thing people are quick to do is to say how much my sister and I look alike, based only on the fact that we are the same ethnicity, disregarding my parents completely. My sister is about five inches taller than I am, has a lighter complexion with freckles, and a round face. We look absolutely nothing alike, but people have gone as far as to ask if we were twins.

If someone were to ask me what I see when I look at my family I would respond: I see a single-family unit that works together and loves each other, just as any other family does.

Has it been harder growing up the way I have? No, I don't think so, at least for me.

Have there been prejudiced people in my life? Yes, there have been racist people in my life, but you have to learn they can't stop you from doing what you want.

I just know that I will always be proud of who I am and where I come from.



## Strengthening Families through Parent-focused Support

“You get this intense training before. You’re listening to it, thinking about it, but you have no idea what you’re really going to face.”

Maria Jones is describing how she felt after she and her husband, Greg, adopted three young sisters a few years ago.

“You have no idea of the chaos that can come. That first summer was so lousy.”

Thankfully, what Jones has learned since those early days is that she is not alone in what she experienced and, importantly, she found a resource to help her understand and deal with that early chaos.

Through a unique program that Diakon Adoption & Foster Care offers at its Topton office, the Joneses were helped by a “family support manager,” a trained therapist. She worked one-on-one with them to find the best tools for parenting the girls and helping them through the adjustments that needed to be made.

Jones says she learned techniques to help her daughters cope with the upheaval in their young lives, and to manage the effects on her husband and herself.

The focus on parents is what makes the Family Support Services program different from other services that support adoptive families, says Kathy Roach, executive director of Diakon Adoption & Foster Care.

“The family support manager position was created to assist resource families with trauma-related training, information and support to preserve the placement of the youth in their home,” she says.

“This person works directly with the resource parents to provide a thorough assessment of their concerns, to evaluate the family’s needs and to provide recommendations for services. Families and youths who would benefit from the supportive services are referred by their case manager, recruiter or program supervisor,” she adds.

“Case managers work with the family, but their role is not therapeutic; it is case management,” Roach continues. “In some cases, there is a lot more support that parents need. They need the skills to parent a child who may have trauma issues or other significant behavioral issues. Many changes to the family system occur in order to incorporate a newly placed child, so the equilibrium of the family is disturbed and needs to be reestablished.”

Intervention by the family support manager sometimes takes place when the family is in crisis, but is most effective if it can occur proactively.

“The ultimate goal is to help strengthen the family and give them the necessary tools and skills to parent, so that their newly created family is successful,” Roach says.

### *Keeping the family together*

Family Support Manager Heather Gillette, MA, LPC, worked with the Joneses as well as a number of other adoptive parents. She describes what she often sees in the children as they adapt to a new family setting.

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## Strengthening Families Continued from Page 13

“Challenging behaviors, emotional stress, attachment issues, aggression ... you can imagine what they have been through,” she says. “In some cases, there has been abuse or neglect. Some children have been forcibly removed from their home. Each child responds differently.”

Gillette assesses situations at a “clinical and therapeutic level.” She can then educate and train parents to understand the behaviors and their response to the behaviors, and then develop ways to mitigate the stress and upheaval the behaviors cause.

“We understand more and more that trauma is an underlying problem for these kids, even very young ones,” she says. “It can be eye-opening for parents. We want them to know we support them on a personal level and if they need other services, we can help connect them.”

In fact, she adds, “We’ll do whatever it takes for as long as it takes. What we’re really aiming for is to keep the family together.”

### *Hoping to lead the way*

According to Roach, there is only one other initiative in Pennsylvania of which she is aware like Diakon’s Family Support Services: Adams County Children & Youth contracts with Hempfield Behavioral Health, Inc., to provide a similar service. Both programs are relatively new.

In fact, Roach hopes that additional funding can be found to add staff to serve more families. She believes the Diakon and Adams County programs are good models for a statewide effort.

Adams County is pilot-testing its program and hopes to see it fully funded, says Sue Cohick, county Children & Youth administrator.

“Ours is supported as a promising practice in our needs-based budget. This affords us two years to pilot the program before fully implementing it,” Cohick says. “We realized we do a lot to help meet the emotional needs of children we serve, but we never provided support for the resource family. This program lets us say to parents, ‘We will train you and give you skills so you feel competent.’”

In Adams County, Kirsten Johnson, MSW, LSW, works with resource and adoptive parents in much the same way Gillette does in the Topton area. She explains that, as a pilot, her program is evolving, with the goal of having assessment

techniques and intervention strategies standardized, to some extent, for every family in need.

“We started with some specific children in families we knew were already in a state of tension, trying to understand the pressure points,” Johnson says. “The system believes that families can be prepared—there is a lot of parent training—but until families actually have the child, there is just no way of preparing for that reality. A tremendous amount of information and skill is needed to understand the child’s needs, to heal and connect, and to build a relationship. Resource parents have the desire, but not always the skills.”

Teaching the skills is where Johnson comes in.

“When a child demonstrates difficult behavior, that behavior provokes a reaction in us as parents,” she says. “We work to help parents interpret the behavior and learn to control their own emotional response. What helps the child heal is for the parents always to respond in a way that builds their relationship. Parents feel more competent when they have the ideas and coping skills to do that.”

### *Helping parents helps the children*

Cohick believes that if you support the parents, the children benefit. That’s the bottom line.

“We need to invest in support of the resource families so the children don’t come back into the child welfare system,” she says.

Maria Jones echoes that. She taught young children, a factor that weighed in her decision to adopt; she felt it would help her be prepared. Now she describes herself as “willing, but naïve.” She is smarter now—thanks to help from Heather Gillette and Diakon—and understands that she could never have anticipated the trauma-induced needs her daughters had.

“Most of the healing takes place in your home,” notes Jones. “They will never re-set unless you are in a position to help them.”

“Right now we are working together with Adams County to collect our joint outcomes with the hopes that funding can eventually be found so that more families and youths in Pennsylvania can benefit from this service,” Roach says.

If interested in more information on the program, please contact Kathy Roach at [roachk@diakon.org](mailto:roachk@diakon.org).

## MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

### Information Sessions

Families interested in learning more about adoption and foster care are invited to attend Diakon Adoption & Foster Care's free informational sessions, held throughout the year at various locations. If none of the scheduled sessions is convenient for interested families, individual sessions may be scheduled.

#### Eastern Pennsylvania – Topton office

Location: Topton

Children Services Building (Annie Lowry Building), The Lutheran Home at Topton campus, One South Home Ave.

(2016) Dec. 15

(2017) Jan. 19, Feb. 16, March 16, April 20, May 18, June 15, July 20, Aug. 17, Sept. 21

Location: Bethlehem

St. Peter's Lutheran Church, 474 Vine Street, Social Room

(2017) March 22, July 26, Sept. 27

Location: Pottstown

Manatawny Manor, 30 Old Schuylkill Road

Dates: (2016) Dec. 20

(2017) Jan. 17, Feb. 21, March 21, April 18, May 16, June 20, July 18, Aug. 15, Sept. 19

Sessions run from 6 to 8 p.m. For more information, please call (610) 682-1504 or check our website at [www.diakon.org/adoption](http://www.diakon.org/adoption).

#### Central Pennsylvania (Mechanicsburg)

Location: Mechanicsburg

Diakon Adoption & Foster Care, 960 Century Drive

(2016) Dec. 7

(2017) Jan. 4, Feb. 1, March 1, April 5, May 3, June 7, July 5, Aug. 2, Sept. 6

Sessions begin at 6 p.m. For more information and to register, please call (717) 219-2790.

#### South Central Pennsylvania (York)

Location: York

836 S. George Street

(2016) Dec. 8

(2017) Jan. 3, Feb. 7, March 7, April 4, May 2, June 6, July 11, Aug. 1, Sept. 5

Sessions begin at 6 p.m. For more information and to register, please call Jolene Keefer or Heather Crone at (717) 845-9113.

### Training Classes

Families preparing for the addition of a child into their home are required to attend family group training, which takes place on three consecutive Saturdays.

#### Eastern Pennsylvania – Topton office

Location: Topton

Children Services Building (Annie Lowry Building), The Lutheran Home at Topton campus, One South Home Avenue

(2016) Nov. 19

(2017) Jan. 7\*, 14 and 28

March 4\*, 11 and 18

May 6\*, 13 and 20

July 8\*, 15 and 22

Sept. 9\*, 16 and 23

Nov. 4\*, 11 and 18

Time: 9 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. each day

\*This session includes our Sibling Preparation Class for children ages 6 to 18, whose parents are attending training classes. To register, please call (610) 682-1504.

#### Central Pennsylvania – Mechanicsburg Office

Location: Mechanicsburg

Diakon Adoption & Foster Care, 960 Century Drive

Dates: (2017) Feb. 4\*, 11 and 25

April 1, 8 and 22

June 3, 10 and 17

Aug. 5\*, 12 and 19

Oct. 7, 21 and 28

Time: 9 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. each day

\*This session includes our Sibling Preparation Class for children ages 6 to 18, whose parents are attending training classes. To register, please call (717) 795-0320

#### South Central Pennsylvania – York Office

Location: York, 836 S. George Street

Dates: (2016) Nov. 19

(2017) Jan. 7, 21 and 28

March 4, 11 and 25

May 6, 13 and 20\*

Sept. 9, 16 and 30

Nov. 4, 11 and 18\*

Time: 9 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. each day

\*This session includes our Sibling Preparation Class for children ages 6 to 18, whose parents are attending training classes. To register, please call Jolene Keefer or Heather Crone at (717) 845-9113.