



# DIALOG

## Happy birthday to us!

### DIAKON IS 150 YEARS OLD THIS YEAR.

And we are commemorating, dedicating, rededicating and holding numerous events to mark this milestone.

The first public event was held in mid-March at The Lutheran Home at Topton. It involved rededication of Topton's refurbished Old Main building and the opening of the Helen N. Palmer Center for Permanency for Diakon Adoption & Foster Care (see the related article, Page 6).

In addition, rededication services will be held throughout the year at all other Diakon senior living communities and many child-and-family program locations. Please visit [www.diakon.org/150](http://www.diakon.org/150) for more information.

The anniversary's major public event will be held at 4 p.m. Oct. 21: A benefit performance by nationally known humorist Jeanne Robertson. The event will be held at the Strand Theatre, the Appell Center for the Performing Arts, York, Pennsylvania. Visit [www.diakon.org/150/jr](http://www.diakon.org/150/jr) for more information and to purchase tickets.

**Diakon's history began in 1868** when the court in Perry County, Pennsylvania, granted a charter for the Tressler Orphans Home.

A year earlier, the Rev. Philip Willard, who had served as pastor of a local Lutheran congregation, traveled to Loysville with the idea of transforming the classical academy and soldiers' orphans home operated by the Col. John Tressler family into a church institution.

In October, delegates from the East, West, Central Pennsylvania and Allegheny synods of the church petitioned the court for a charter for the organization, to be known as the "Tressler Orphans' Home of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the United States of America."

That charter was granted Jan. 6, 1868, and the grounds and building purchased a month later for \$5,000. Capt. David Tressler donated his share of the proceeds; in appreciation, the institution was named the Tressler Orphans Home.

From then until the early 1960s, when the grounds and buildings were sold to the state—the result of societal changes in care for children—the home served thousands of children.

**A few decades after Philip Willard's** journey to Loysville, Lutherans in Berks County, Pennsylvania, began to take steps to care for orphaned children.

In 1896, the Rev. Uriah P. Heilman assumed superintendence of the planned "Lutheran Orphans Home in Berks County, Pennsylvania," the initial name of The Lutheran Home at Topton. Like Willard, Heilman was charged with raising funds for the home; he also played a personal role in getting the building program underway.



Jeanne Robertson

According to published histories, during a dawn in June 1897—one month after the first orphans arrived to stay in the original Topton farmhouse—"the Superintendent, with pick and shovel on his back, went out to the site of the projected main building and placed himself on the spot where his office was to be."

Asking God's blessing, "he dug out, in the shape of a cross, about the size of a man, several wheelbarrowsful of ground. Then looking towards the north and kneeling in the cross-shaped opening, he offered a brief prayer." Construction began in earnest later in the year, creating Old Main, the same building rededicated this year.

From those efforts in two different but also similar regions arose today's Diakon, created by the 2000 affiliation and later merger of the Tressler and Topton organizations.

**Diakon's history has never been a static one.** In fact, the organization's past is characterized by innovation and the ability to adapt and create new services to meet the needs of a changing society.

Among just a few examples of this leading-edge approach:

- Leadership at The Lutheran Home at Topton raised fund for an "olds folks" home in the early 1920s, long before such care was offered by many organizations. Those funds allowed a home for older adults to open on the Topton campus in the 1940s.
- Aware that helping youths to be successful requires their acceptance of responsibility, the Tressler Lutheran Home for Children created its own banking system for children, had an onsite fire department and established extensive vocational training programs—one of which provided giving envelopes for congregations across much of the nation.

# Our Mission

In response to God's love in Jesus Christ, Diakon will demonstrate God's command to love the neighbor through acts of service.

Diakon: Many Hands, guided by One Heart, transforming the lives of children, families and older adults. With programs ranging from adoption, foster care and at-risk youth services to counseling and comprehensive senior living services, Diakon annually helps thousands of people of all faiths through compassionate service, gracious hospitality and charitable care.

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William Swanger, M.A., APR, Senior Vice President, Editor  
swangerb@diakon.org

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### Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries & Diakon Child, Family & Community Ministries

Old Main

One South Home Avenue

Topton, PA 19562-1317

www.diakon.org

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# The President's DIALOG



Mark T. Pile

## The privilege of serving in my current role

### I WATCHED THE VIDEO WITH INTEREST

and a sense of pride.

The video showed re-enactors playing the roles of John Tressler, the Rev. Philip Willard and the Rev. Uriah Heilman in their efforts to found the Tressler Lutheran Home for Children, Loysville, Pennsylvania, and The Lutheran Home at Topton, Pennsylvania.

Willard and Heilman served as the first superintendents of the two homes—roles we would today call president.

I view it a privilege to be the person currently holding that role in the organization that brought Tressler and Topton together in 2000.

It's certainly a different world today than it was 150 years ago and it's easy to recount the challenges we face—challenges we recently reviewed at our leadership's annual planning retreat:

- Health-care reform and changes, accompanied by the need to be a "player at the table" as new networks develop among health-care providers.
- A growing emphasis on risk management in all programs.
- Ever-changing regulations and reimbursement structures, again in all programs.
- The importance of the federal star rating system for nursing care.
- Continuing changes in the way people access nursing and rehabilitative services.
- The need to make certain all our services respond to changing community need.

Yet I look back and realize there were always challenges; they simply change in response to a changing society.

The Rev. Willard, for example, spent his first year as superintendent on the road—and, then, "on the road" meant by horse or carriage—fundraising for the church's newly purchased orphans home at Loysville. He raised some \$4,000 during those travels—a nice sum for that time—before settling in to his role as "Father Willard." He served until he was 80.

At 47, the Rev. Heilman was slightly younger when in 1897 he assumed the superintendence of the Topton orphanage. Also charged with raising funds for what was a new facility, he played a personal role in getting the building program under way: He reportedly began excavation for Old Main by digging out earth in the shape of a cross.

In the spring of 1900, Heilman developed pneumonia, having pushed himself day and night for the sake of the home. Historical accounts indicate he did not have the strength to ward off the affliction; he died April 10 at the age of 50.

The spirit of ministry these two men personally embodied continues today through our many programs for children, youths, families and adults of all ages. I am deeply proud of how our staff members bring that ministry to life each day.

I also am proud to follow in these two leaders' historic footsteps.

Mark T. Pile, MSHA, MSW  
President/CEO



The Rev. Paul Herring, a resident of Diakon's Cumberland Crossings senior living community, played the Rev. Philip Willard in Diakon's 150th anniversary video. Here he is with Mark T. Pile, Diakon president/CEO, at Cumberland Crossings' 150th anniversary event.



## Happy birthday to us! *Continued from Page 1*

- Responsive to changes in society, both homes began foster care or group home services as children’s homes gave way to community-based programs.
- Tressler Adoption Services—a program now carried on by Diakon Adoption & Foster Care—became one of the first adoption services in the nation to focus exclusively on the placement of children and youths with special needs.
- The organization was among the first to employ the wilderness to reach adjudicated delinquent and dependent teens, using the setting to enhance team-building, acceptance of responsibility and self-respect.

Today, Diakon continues to exemplify that spirit of innovation and dedication as its nearly 2,000 staff members—Diakon’s “Many Hands,” guided by the “One Heart” of a mission fashioned during the last century-and-a-half—make a difference daily in the lives of children, youths, families, communities and adults of all ages.

*Staff members of Diakon Adoption & Foster Care and Diakon Child, Family & Community Ministries in the new Helen N. Palmer Center for Permanency, Old Main, The Lutheran Home at Topton.*

**All photos on this page taken at Old Main rededication event; see the article on Page 6.**



*Joyce Riche, director of the Northeastern Pennsylvania office of Diakon Adoption & Foster Care, now located in Old Main on The Lutheran Home at Topton campus, leads a tour of Old Main’s third floor, which Diakon leadership members hope eventually will become a history center for the organization.*



*State Sen. Judy Schwank, at podium, and Rep. Ryan Mackenzie, left, present proclamations related to Diakon’s 150th anniversary and the refurbishment of Old Main at The Lutheran Home at Topton during the recent rededication of Old Main and dedication of the Helen N. Palmer Center for Permanency in Old Main. Between them is Mark Pile, Diakon president/CEO.*



# Diakon Wilderness Center alumnus returns to Boiling Springs campus to show children site that turned his life around

## **J.R. SMITH HAD EVERY REASON TO BE ANGRY**

when at the age of 16 he was placed in the residential program at the Diakon Wilderness Center near Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania.

After all, the center was just one more in a long line of facilities to which Smith had been sent since being placed in state custody at the age of 2.

Unfortunately, Smith's anger was leading him down a path of self-destruction. But, thankfully, with support from the wilderness center's staff, Smith was able to turn his life around.

Today, he's a successful business owner and father of three and he recently returned to the Diakon center—to show his children the program that turned his life around.

## **The early years**

The second of three children, Smith was just a baby when his father was sent to state prison for a statutory crime and voluntarily terminated his parental rights. By the time the boy had turned 2, his mother had come to the realization that, without child-support, she was unable to raise the three children; she relinquished her parental rights as well.

Initially, all three children were placed in a foster home, but were abused. When that came to light, the siblings were split up, with Smith eventually growing up in 19 settings—group homes, shelters and foster homes, nine of them. At one point, he came close to being adopted, but the placement fell through before being completed.

When Smith was in his early teens, his mother began visiting him at a school near Philadelphia, where he and both siblings were living. Eventually, the state allowed her to take the three children home to live with her.

“That was a huge mistake,” Smith says today, because within two years, the children had to be removed from her home because of mistreatment. Smith remembers going without food and clothing because their mother spent all the money given to her by the state to support her cocaine addiction.

## **The turning point**

It was probably natural that by the time Smith was placed at the wilderness center, he was bitter and angry with the world. He had been diagnosed with bi-polar explosive anger disorder but didn't like the way

he felt when taking prescribed medication, so he refused to take it. He fought with other students, punched a staff member and tried to run away multiple times.

But he soon realized that staff members at the center were different from those at other places he had lived; he could feel, he says, that they actually cared about his welfare. In fact, he adds, it didn't seem as if caring for him was a job or a chore for them, but a passion.

"It was a turning point for me. Prior to that, anger was a big part of my life. I was angry with everything. I stopped hating and regretting everything and putting the blame on everyone else. I took control of my life," he says. "There was so much support and love there that by the time I left, the anger was almost gone."

One staff member, he recalls, took a particular interest in him. "She actually wanted to know what I wanted and became like a mother to me," Smith says. Encouraging his passion for art, she took him to various art shows.

It was at the center that Smith's love for the outdoors grew. He spent his time playing basketball, running a four-mile trail and climbing on "the tower." He also spent a lot of time in the weight room.

Eventually, Smith became a mentor to newer students. He remained at the center until high-school graduation, but was given the choice of staying and applying for college or returning home to his mother. After having lived years in youth services settings, the taste of freedom was too compelling and he returned home.

In hindsight, he says, "I should have gone to college, but then again I wouldn't have met Amy or had our daughters."

## Today

It wasn't exactly a straight line but, today, Smith lives with Amy and their three daughters, ages 1, 6 and 12, in a home in Ephrata.

After having worked for a pressure-washing company for seven years, Smith decided to start his own business—WashItPlus, a pressure-washing company that also stains and refinishes decks. He also works with restaurants as a certified exhaust cleaning specialist.

"This year will be my fifth-year anniversary, and every year my business does better than the previous year," he says proudly.

Some months ago, while visiting Amy's brother near Boiling Springs, Smith took his daughters to see the Diakon Wilderness Center.

A lot had changed, he notes, including the fact there is no longer a long-term residential program, the result of changes in county funding; the cabin in which he lived is now vacant, but other buildings are still



*J.R. Smith today with his business truck and one of his daughters.*

used for the newer alternative-education Center Point Day Program and the longer-term Weekend Alternative Program.

In addition, the Alpine climbing tower is still there and Smith hopes that, one day, he will have opportunity to climb the tower again, this time with his children, sharing with them one of the positive experiences he had at a young age.

He also says he would be willing to speak with youths going through some of the things he experienced.

"If you dwell on the past and continue to place blame, it's hard to move on," he says, wisdom gained by someone who began life with few advantages.

But, thanks to Diakon, he eventually gained what he needed—the stability, love and support to turn his life around, put aside anger and become a contributing member of society, eventually finding love and happiness.

# Old Main, permanency center dedicated as part of anniversary celebration

## MAGIC HAD OCCURRED ALREADY.

“A new resource family arrived for a review of their family profile—that’s the document we create about each new foster and adoptive family as they go through our training and approval process,” explained Shari VanderGast, Diakon’s senior vice president for administration and child and family services operations.

“They had just finished their meeting when a foster care case manager hung up the phone in her office and walked down the hallway to them. During that call, our manager learned of emergency need for care for two very young children—and in their profile, the young family noted they had room in their hearts and home for—two young children. So they entered this beautiful space as a couple and left as foster parents.

“It was magical.”

That “beautiful space” is the new Helen N. Palmer Center for Permanency, recently dedicated as part of Diakon’s 150th anniversary celebration and re-dedication of the refurbished Old Main building at The Lutheran Home at Topton—on which a \$7 million renovation project was completed earlier this year. The anniversary event included a blessing of the iconic Old Main building and the adjacent senior living community.

“Last year,” VanderGast added as part of her remarks at the event, “there were 16,000 children in foster care in Pennsylvania with an average amount of time of 18 months in care. About one-third of the children are in our care as a result of their parents’ drug use. Last year, for the third year in a row, the number of children entering foster care was greater than the number leaving foster care. On any given day here in Pennsylvania, the average age of a child in foster care is younger than 9 years old. The need for families is great.”

In addition to creating the permanency center and additional office space on the second floor of Old Main, the project involved installation of an elevator and completion of various exterior refurbishments including renovation or replacement of exterior porches, window replacements or

restoration, installation of new heating and air-conditioning systems and upgrading of the electrical system, all of which will help to preserve the building’s underlying structure and ensure continued use of Old Main, listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The project was done with respect for the building’s historical character and architecture.

Project seed money came from a significant bequest received several years ago from the estate of Helen Nicholson Palmer of Wyomissing, who passed away in December 2012. Palmer had served on the board of managers of the Home for Widows and Single Women, Reading, which was merged into The Lutheran Home at Topton in 1975. She also attended board meetings at Topton.

“Mrs. Palmer was very devoted to service to people in need, including children. We are pleased we could name the permanency center after her,” noted Mark Pile, Diakon president/CEO.

“Families interested in providing foster care or adopting will learn in the center’s new training room. The center also has a wonderful playroom where children and their parents can visit. In our new kitchen, families can make a meal for their children. The Palmer center’s space will allow us to hold ‘matching events’ at which prospective parents can meet children and youths who are available for adoption, a space where we can ask older children in need of a family what they want to do when they grow up, where they see themselves in five years and a place for them to dream about what family means to them,” VanderGast said in describing the center’s purpose.

Founded in 1896, The Lutheran Home at Topton represents one of the two major roots of the Diakon organization; the other is the Tressler Orphans Home in central Pennsylvania, which was founded in 1868.

“In 1896, the Rev. Uriah P. Heilman broke ground at this very spot for Old Main at the Topton Orphans Home,” said Pile. “The ministry that arose is continued today, in a very significant way, by Diakon Adoption & Foster Care.”

*Taking part in the ribbon-cutting, left to right, front, are Valerie Minett and Zaiden Lanning-Minett, Diakon Adoption & Foster Care family members, and Cayden Roth, served by Diakon Adoption & Foster Care and an Old Main project donor; rear, Lillyana Lanning-Minett, family member; Joyce Riche, director of the Topton-based office of Diakon Adoption & Foster Care; Shari VanderGast, SVP, Diakon administration and child and family program operations; Mark Pile, president/CEO; Larry Delp, Diakon board chair; Steve Daniels, Diakon facility planning and development; Scott Habecker, Diakon CFO/COO; state Sen. Judy Schwank; Kathy Roach, executive director, Diakon Adoption & Foster Care; Jayla Lanning-Minett, family member.*



# Manatawny Manor resident donates WWII uniform

## WHEN 95-YEAR-OLD CELAN SCHAEFFER MOVED

to Manatawny Manor in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, nearly 10 years ago, he brought with him an old uniform that he wore as a young man in World War II.

The uniform no longer fit him and he wonders, in fact, why he continued to hang onto it.

Eventually, however, he decided to give it to Susan Gettler, activities coordinator, who displayed the uniform in Manatawny Manor's lobby every Veteran's Day. A few years later, Jack Budnick, who had a relative living at Manatawny Manor, began displaying his collection of war-time memorabilia alongside Schaeffer's uniform.

Budnick's collection includes uniforms from World Wars I and II, military equipment, a few items from the Korean War, and "home-front" memorabilia such as posters, war propaganda, a field desk, typewriter and more.

The two men began talking about items in the collection, which Budnick has been sharing with various organizations over the years. After some discussion, Gettler and Schaeffer decided to donate Schaeffer's uniform to the collection so that more people could see it.



*Mr. & Mrs. Celan Schaeffer*

## World War II

Schaeffer, who grew up on a farm in Pine Grove, Pennsylvania, was inducted into the U.S. Navy in October 1943. He went to boot camp in Sampson, New York, and attended diesel school in Richmond, Virginia. As a first-class motor machinist, he was sent to the South Pacific, where he worked in the main engine room of the USS LST-747 for nineteen months.

Schaeffer says he sat between two large engines on the ship (to which he today attributes his need for hearing aids), making certain the engines remained in working order.

Schaeffer and the crew on LST-747—Landing Ship Tank—supported amphibious operations by carrying tanks, vehicles and cargo and landing troops directly onto the beach. Schaeffer's ship was part of two invasions: the landing in Luzon in January 1945 and the assault and occupation of Okinawa in April 1945.

The Manatawny resident recalls dropping off 300 soldiers on Okinawa and picking up about half of them two weeks later; he never knew definitively what happened to the other soldiers. Schaeffer also remembers strolling around Tokyo with a couple of buddies two weeks after peace treaties were signed in 1945.

## After the war

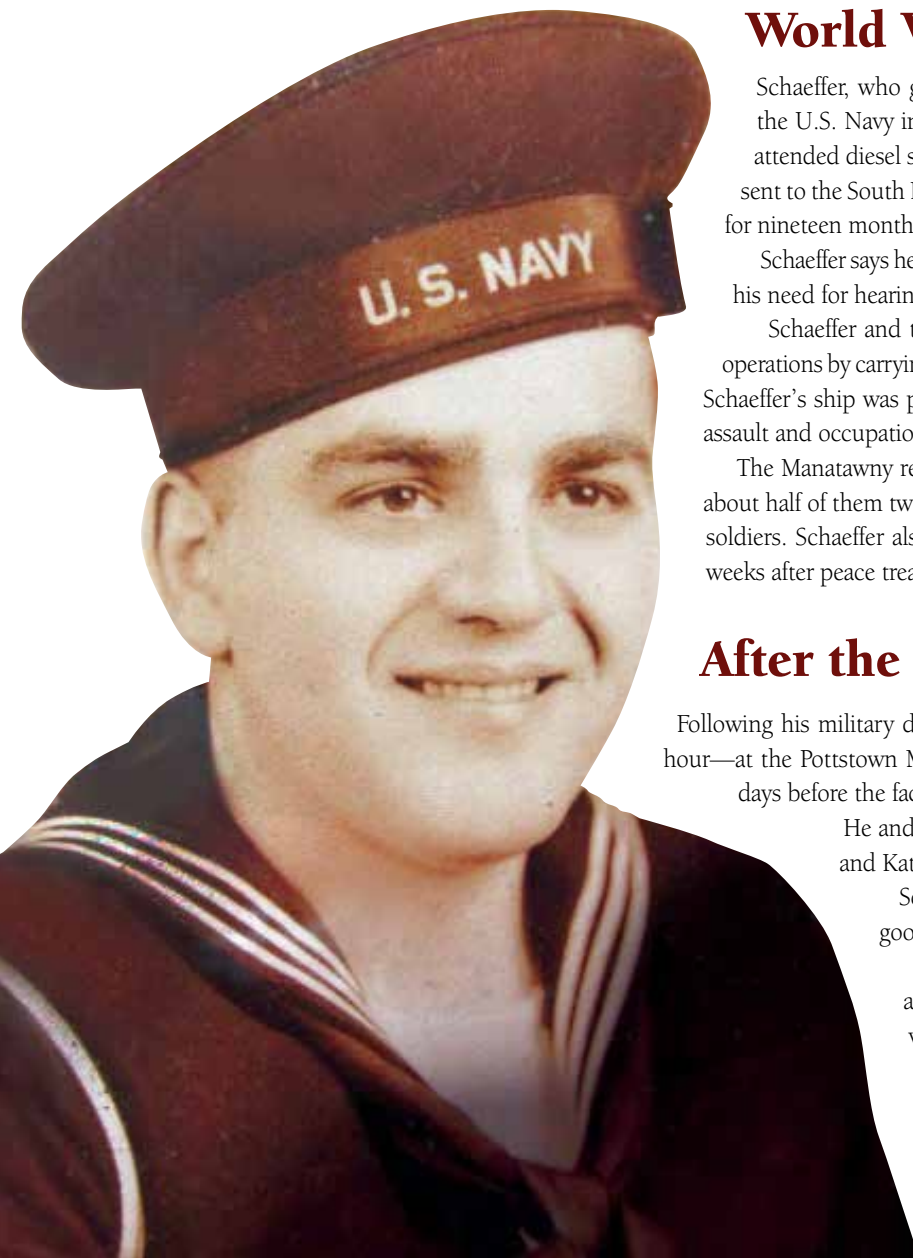
Following his military discharge, Schaeffer worked as a machinist—at first for 30 cents an hour—at the Pottstown Machine Company for more than four decades, retiring in 1985, 19 days before the facility shut down.

He and his wife, Jane, were married in 1947 and have two daughters, Carol and Kathy, who live nearby, and two grandsons.

Schaeffer's memory remains sharp. He and his wife, he says, "have a good life here."

And next Veteran's Day, Schaeffer will proudly wear the hat he donned as a young soldier more than 70 years ago. And hundreds of people will view his uniform in Budnick's collection.

*Mr. Schaeffer's military photo*





798 Hausman Road, Suite 300  
Allentown, PA 18104-9108  
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# HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO US!

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HANDS. ONE HEART.

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MORE ABOUT  
DIAKON'S 150TH  
ANNIVERSARY, OPEN!**

*Mark Pile, current Diakon president/CEO, with the Rev. Dr. Paul Buehrle, former president of The Lutheran Home at Topton.*