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DIALOG

Opening her home for children leaves woman feeling “truly blessed”

SHARON MOORE SAYLOR'S LIFE HAS CHANGED IN MANY ways since she first became a foster parent 11 years ago. But one thing has remained constant—her devotion to ensuring a safe and nurturing environment for her children.

When she and her then-husband, Dean, were approved to be foster parents in July 2004, Moore Saylor says she never expected to be called upon so soon. A young boy and girl were placed with them, staying in their care for seven months.

“It happened quickly,” she says today. “We learned a lot with that first placement. They needed us and we needed them.”

The couple's second placement arrived a week after the first one ended. A boy stayed with them for 11 months but was eventually reunited with his birth mother. He is now 11 and Moore Saylor still stays in touch with him.

Then, three days before Christmas 2005, two sisters came to stay, Brielle and Alianna. Although it was the busy holiday season, the Moore Saylor's were determined to integrate the girls into their lives quickly. “With the help of my mom and sister,” Moore Saylor says, “we pulled together as a family and were all in church for Christmas Eve service!”

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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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Mark T. Pile

The President's **DIALOG**

2015 a spectacular start on 2020 vision

EACH JANUARY MEANS ONE THING (well, beyond possible snow) for Diakon's leadership council: our annual planning retreat.

Held at a rustic retreat center, chosen for central location and economy, the two-day event typically includes a review of the prior year from the perspectives of quality, overall service to people in need, and financial health and stewardship; occasional speakers; and—perhaps of most importance—collaborative sessions focused on strategies for the years ahead.

Staff members from both the Diakon Senior Living Services and Diakon Child, Family & Community Ministries groups meet separately at various times to plan how they will reach the various goals set forth in our vision.

Currently, their efforts revolve around a plan we call our 2020 Vision, a name chosen not only because it relates to a time-span but also because it calls to mind clarity of view.

Broadly the goals in that vision relate to ...

- Financial, operational and clinical performance that makes us the providers-of-choice in our various programs in various markets.
- Employee engagement and retention, such that our retention rate reaches 85% within the next five years.
- Growth in our core programs, with a goal of doubling or nearly doubling financial and operational performance in key programs including especially the number of people we serve.
- Optimization of technology not only to make work-life easier, but also to achieve the seamless integration with health-care systems necessary to survive in the marketplace.
- Board development, because board leadership is always key to the types of growth and impact we envision.

While these are ambitious goals, 2015 provided a spectacular start toward meeting them. For example, we achieved a cash-flow growth of nearly 10% in our core operations, exceeding the targets we set for them in our 2015 plan.

Although reaching or exceeding such targets is important to our overall organization health, doing so also allows us to take steps necessary to meet our 2020 goals, in this case the 2015 investment of more than \$16 million in capital improvements, particularly to our senior living campuses. These investments position us to serve ever-increasing numbers of older adults with changing expectations of the communities to which they will retire.

In addition, capital spending included significant spending for technology for our Diakon Child, Family & Community Ministries programs, critical not only to tracking and measuring performance, but also, in some instances, to integration with key networks.

These are but two measures of the exceptional year we experienced in 2015—which we'll discuss further later, particularly in our annual report and community impact report, which in 2015 documented a prior-year community benefit of nearly \$19.6 million—and they helped to lay the groundwork for a productive retreat.

Our Diakon Senior Living Services staff, for example, established an aggressive series of goals including continuing gains in independent-living occupancy levels, further improvements in survey results and quality measures (continuing a trend begun in 2015, which included one deficiency-free survey!), successful management of care transitions and continuing integration with partnership networks and other health-care configurations.

In Diakon Child, Family & Community Ministries, leadership team members set similar bold targets including improved financial performance in several programs, full implementation of electronic medical records where applicable and a \$1 million goal for fundraising for these critical community-based programs.

All of these planning efforts, of course, relate to one comprehensive goal—to serve as many people in need as we can with quality, efficient and cost-effective services that make a true difference in their lives.

As always, we deeply appreciate your support of these efforts.

Mark T. Pile, MSHA, MSW
President/CEO



Opening her home for children

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The next few years proved a little chaotic. The two girls' biological parents were focused on getting their lives in order, with a goal of bringing the children back home. The reunification, however, was unsuccessful.

Around the same time, in January of 2008, 2-month-old Julia, an adoptable child, joined the Moore Saylor family. A few months later, the sisters became eligible for adoption.

And so, by the end of the year, the Moore Saylor family had adopted all three girls.

More changes come ...

By 2010—totally unrelated to the adoptions—Moore Saylor and her husband had separated; they divorced in 2012.

However, both she and Dean eventually entered serious relationships that have resulted in the girls having four supportive parents. Now aged 9, 10 and 13, the children spend their time among the four adults, all of whom care deeply for them, says Moore Saylor.

"It's important for the girls to see positive relationships among their caregivers," she says. "We want them to know that these are all people who love you and will take care of you."

Diakon resources of assistance ...

Moore Saylor first became a foster parent with a York County agency. It was there she met and developed a rapport with fellow employee Denise Roe. When Roe took her current position as director of the York office of Diakon Adoption & Foster Care, Moore Saylor followed in terms of providing foster care.

Today, Moore Saylor praises the assistance and services Diakon offers for families, including a support group that both she and the girls attend when they can.

"We are welcomed with love and support," she says. "We get to talk with other families [involved in both foster care and adoption]. It's very comforting that once our adoptions were finalized, resources remained available to us."

Moore Saylor credits her extended family and friends for their support as well. Her sister also has adopted through Diakon; the two women now have six children between them.

"We are surrounded by family on all sides," she says. "Everyone embraces the girls."

As with any family, there are the occasional conflicts, but Moore Saylor works to keep them to a minimum, encouraging the girls and other family members to "pray on it" instead.

"We keep our faith at the forefront," she says. "If difficulties arise, we are going to pray."

A paralegal, Moore Saylor lauds her employers as well, noting that they were "totally supportive" when she needed time off for various visits and appointments related to her adoptions. All in all, she says, she feels "truly blessed."

"I knew it would not always be easy," she says, "but I knew it would be worth it."

Her three daughters couldn't agree more.

Care Transitions model being implemented across Diakon senior living communities

IN TODAY'S HEALTH-CARE ENVIRONMENT, it's not uncommon for older adults to see multiple physicians, receive various levels of treatment, take several different medications and deal with more than one insurance provider.

Sometimes, that approach can be a little daunting, which is exactly why Diakon has developed a Care Transitions program, complete with senior living campus-based "care navigators."

"Part of what we do at Diakon is help our residents to navigate this sometimes-confusing time of life by coaching them through each transition and making sure there are no gaps in their care along the way," says Punam Amin, Diakon's regional director of Care Transitions.

"From the pre-admission process onward, our care navigators help to identify the appropriate resources and services for each resident, closely following their progress and ensuring that they live in the least-restrictive manner possible," she adds. "In other words, we make certain that our residents are in the right place, at the right time, with the right level of care."

The program's interdisciplinary approach allows the care navigators to coordinate with staff from virtually every department within a Diakon senior living community—from nursing and physical therapy to dining

to activities, from social services to the business office—all with a goal of meeting each resident's individual needs.

"We even make residents' appointments for them, ensure their external vendors are providing outstanding service and communicate with their family physicians to keep everyone informed and involved," Amin explains. "We also strive to reduce the length of hospital stays and follow up with residents afterward to reduce the risk of readmission. By doing all of these things, we 'connect the dots' so that residents and their families can rest assured that health-care needs are met and transitions well-managed."

She adds that Diakon has found this patient-centered, goal-oriented approach to work best for helping older adults make their way through the continuum of care. The approach provides a strategy on which everyone involved can agree, Amin says.

"It also utilizes the resources of the entire Diakon community and, most important, it delivers the highest level of care available."

By spring 2016, she says, the care transitions model should be in place at all Diakon senior living communities, "demonstrating to our residents that someone is truly managing their health-care goals and striving always for positive outcomes."

Grammy Award winner's visit delights senior living residents

SHE WALKED INTO THE LOBBY OF THE ASSISTED LIVING COMMUNITY, immediately rushed over to a woman sitting in a chair, and smiled. "Hi," she said, "my name is Linda Davis and I'm here to sing for you this morning!"

Senior living communities often host singing groups and performers, but it's not every day, as occurred late last year at Diakon Senior Living – Hagerstown/The Robinwood Campus, that the performer has a Grammy Award.

Administrative assistant Anita Bussard had made contact with the singer, who had just finished a Canadian tour with Kenny Rogers and was due to perform at the Maryland Theater that night.

The singer's unique performance was full of surprises, says Jeff Brown, director of residential services on the campus. "She danced and sang with one of the cottage residents and sang a duet with a staff member. Those will always be great memories."

The singer also told stories of her childhood, he says, citing sources for ideas for some of the songs she has written.

Davis received a Grammy Award for Best Country Vocal Collaboration, with Reba McEntire; a Country Music Association Award for Vocal Event of the Year; a TNN Music City News Award; and a 2007 Candlelight Award from The Music City Christian Fellowship. In addition, she has been inducted into the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame.

"Not only is she the mother of Hillary Scott of 'Lady Antebellum,' but she is also one of Nashville's favorite vocalists. She is a humble and sweet person," says Bussard. "Our residents nicknamed her 'The Angel of Diakon!'"



Linda Davis shakes hands with Kathryn Barone.



Linda Davis with resident Bernice Miller.

Read Anita Bussard's intriguing story about her country-music connections on Diakon's Many Voices. One Heart. blog found online.

A “second mother” to many, Sister Zora remembered fondly

MARY SULLINS OF ELLICOTT CITY, MARYLAND, remembers Sister Zora Heckart as “a second mother” to her when Sullins lived at the Lutheran Hospice in Baltimore.

Heckart, a “tremendously kind” Lutheran deaconess, served as housemother of the Lutheran Hospice in Baltimore from 1918 to 1958. In those days, the term hospice referred not to services for people with a terminal illness, but to a residence for young women living, for work or study, in the city.

The Baltimore hospice was located at 509 Park Ave. next door to the Lutheran Inner Mission Society of Baltimore, which operated the residence. Diakon continues the heritage of service begun by the Lutheran Inner Mission Society, among a number of other organizations.

Approximately 800 “girls” lived in the home over the 40 years that Sister Zora served as housemother. “She was so easy to talk to and always gave good advice,” Sullins notes. “I can’t say enough good things about her.”

In fact, Sullins honors her friend and mentor with a twice-yearly donation to Diakon in Heckart’s name, on the sister’s birthday in September and again at Christmas.

“It’s been a long time since I lived at the hospice, but I think Zora should be remembered,” she says.

Sullins moved to the hospice in 1943 after graduating from high school in Taneytown, Maryland, at the age of 15. She wanted to attend Strayer’s Business School, so her pastor recommended she live at the hospice under Sister Zora’s care.

“My mother and I went and looked it over, and she was very impressed with Zora,” Sullins says. “It was a lovely brick house in a very nice part of town—a home away from home. There were also homes for Methodist and Episcopal girls nearby, and the YMCA and YWCA were just up the street, so it was very safe, and the business school was within walking distance.”

Room and board at the hospice, including breakfast and dinner, was \$7 per week, Sullins says, adding that most of the 30 girls who lived there at any one time slept three or four to a bedroom.

“The rooms were large and well-equipped,” she says. “We also had an upstairs living room with a radio where we could talk and play games or use the sewing machines. It was very pleasant and family-like.”

After graduation, Sullins took a secretarial position at a local company and remained at the hospice until Sister Zora left in 1958 to become housemother at the deaconess school on Charles Street.

“I stayed there longer than most of the girls did,” Sullins says. “I asked Zora several times if she was sure she didn’t want me to leave, and she always said, ‘Yes, I’m sure, because I like to sit and talk with you.’ She was such a sweet lady.”

At the same time, “she expected everyone to follow the rules . . . if anyone went out at night too often, she took them aside and tried to discourage that behavior. Also, if a young man came to see one of the girls, they had to stay in the downstairs living room to talk.”

Another former resident, Geraldine Mullinix of Cumberland, Maryland, says Heckart “had a lot of warmth and was very caring toward her little flock of women. She loved her job and took good care of us.”



Sister Zora Heckart, right, with just some of the 800 young women who lived at the Lutheran Hospice in Baltimore during her 40 years as housemother. Mary Sullins is pictured third from the bottom on the left. Geraldine Mullinix is second from the bottom on the right.

“I remember one time there was a big snowstorm and we couldn’t go anywhere, so Sister Zora had us all in the kitchen making cookies,” Mullinix recalls. “It was so much fun. And as some of the young ladies moved out and got married, Zora tried to make it to all of their weddings.”

Like Sullins, a friend and former housemate, Mullinix remembers the hospice rules: “You had to be in by 11 on weeknights and by midnight on weekends or you got locked out,” she chuckles. “And, yes, that happened to me once in a while. Also, if you weren’t home in time for dinner, too bad. But she was an outstanding housemother for all of those reasons.”

Sister Zora retired in 1961 and lived at the Deaconess Center in Gladwyne, Pennsylvania, until her death at the age of 92 in 1979.

This slightly condensed article appeared originally as the February 2016 edition of eDiakonnnect, an online monthly “magazine” and email blast of stories about Diakon and the people the Diakon organizations serve. To read more of this article—or other similar stories—go to www.diakon.org and click “Keep in Touch” on the sidebar menu, then select eDiakonnnect. To receive the monthly email eDiakonnnect email blast, click the opt-in box on the www.diakon.org homepage.



Little visitors are a big hit

IT'S DIFFICULT TO TELL, as they sit around a table coloring together, who is having a better time—the young ones visiting or the older ones who live at Diakon Senior Living – Hagerstown/The Robinwood Campus.

Certainly the children, all younger than four, have more-recent practice with the art of coloring, but the older adults are definitely keeping pace.

The interaction is taking place during one of the regular visits to the Robinwood campus of children served by Lisa's Treasure Chest Child Care. Visits by the day-care center youngsters allow the two generations to get to know each other and have fun, says Lisa Noel, owner of the center and family child-care provider. The intergenerational initiative arose following a visit from children and staff of the day-care center who delivered "Thankful Pouches" to senior living community residents around Thanksgiving.

"We filled the pouches with little items such as hand sanitizer, tissues, fuzzy socks, and a woman from my church made cards with hand-written notes," says Noel. "We wanted to extend the holiday for residents."

During that initial visit, Connie Weaver, activities coordinator for assisted living on the Robinwood campus, spoke with Noel about making the visits a regular occurrence. Knowing everyone would benefit from the intergenerational interaction, the two agreed on a monthly schedule. The visits would include a group lunch and craft or other activity.

"We partnered each child with a resident and the older people helped the younger ones," Noel says. "It's good for them and for the kids. Plus I've had a very positive response from the parents" of children enrolled in the center.

While residents are free to participate if they choose, there is a lot of interest in doing so, says Weaver. "Some of the kids are shy at first, but not for long," Weaver says. "Our residents love children."



Resident Harriet Downing with 3-year-old Sophia



Resident Doris Middleton with 4-year-old Fiora

Diakon Adoption & Foster Care launches unique training program for siblings



The Sinkovits family.

DIAKON ADOPTION & FOSTER CARE'S family training now extends beyond parents.

The program's northeastern Pennsylvania office in Topton recently began a unique "sibling training" program for children in families that plan to add a foster child to their home.

The idea of the daylong program, which runs concurrently with weekend training for prospective foster and adoptive parents, is to prepare youngsters already living in the home for the changes they may experience and give them the understanding and coping skills they'll need to make the transition easier.

Amy Silfies, a recruitment and family development specialist, says the new effort has already received "a lot of positive feedback from families. The goal is to increase a child's empathy, understanding and patience for newer children moving into the home. The approach can reduce conflict and adds an extra level of support, not just for the parents but also for every member of the household."

Tim and Marie Shaner, who recently accepted a little girl into their home, were very pleased with the results when their sons, Riley, 10, and Brennan, 8, participated in the sibling program.

"The kids really enjoyed themselves," says Marie Shaner. "I thought it might be a long day for them, but the kids kept busy and I was pleasantly surprised by their reaction."

"We played board games, had snacks and got to talk with each other," Riley says. "We played Chutes and Ladders, and instead of the real cards we had cards that said what coping skills you should use if you're stressed, like play music, go outside, go to your bedroom, talk with your family members or play games."

The boys, their mother reports, were "very excited to get a new sister" and "handled it well" when she arrived the week before Christmas.

"After the rush of the holidays," however, "I think they had to dip back into the techniques they learned in the program to help them deal with some stresses they weren't anticipating.

"They know there's an adjustment period and that it won't always be easy," she adds. "They've learned there are times when they may feel anxious or left out, and they've had to come up with some strategies to deal with that, but it's created an opportunity for us to have those conversations."

Karen Sinkovits, a staff member of The Lutheran Home at Topton, is currently in the foster-care approval process with her husband, Mark. Their 15-year-old son, Joseph, also found the sibling program helpful.

"There are a lot of unknowns when you're going through something like this for the first time, so it's good to have people who can give you information," says Sinkovits. "It's also good for kids to be around other children who are going through a similar experience."

For Joseph, a key aspect of the training was learning "what foster kids go through and about all of the possible issues they can face. They explained that where children in foster care come from can affect how they act; they tried to prepare us for how foster children could respond in certain situations. They taught us coping skills, about finding ways to keep ourselves stable and make sure we're in sync with what's going on.

"I'm still a little bit nervous," he adds, "but I liked going through the training to be prepared as much as possible," he says.

Geared to children and youths ages 6 through 18, the training program includes age-appropriate physical and learning activities with crafts and games mixed in to make the day fun, explains A.J. Zehner, a preparation and profile specialist at the Topton office.

One such game, she notes, is an altered version of Candy Land in which the future siblings draw cards and learn more about the circumstances of children in foster placements such as "why they go to court so much, the experiences they may have had in their birth homes, and how the foster care system works."

The siblings, Silfies adds, are asked to consider how they would handle certain scenarios such as sharing a bedroom with a "new kid," responding if a toy gets broken, handling an infant's crying at night, or jealousy they might feel when their parents need to spend more time with the youngster new to the home.

"It's important for siblings to understand what foster children may have been through and where they're coming from emotionally," Silfies stresses.

"As far as we know, we're the only agency providing an all-day program like this," says Zehner. "We're definitely unique."



The Shaner family.



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