

## Soaring to New Heights!

# Flight Program



Volume 3 - December 2011



With the holiday season once again upon us, we want to take a moment and share with you the blessings and wonderful memories that 2011 has brought to those of us involved in the Flight Program. This was again a year filled with personal growth, challenges, and awesome achievements by our young men. The positive fraternity of our group continues to thrive, as well as Flight participants' individual commitment to success. I encourage you to take a moment to read a few of the following stories written by participants and one program graduate. The young men were given a simple question to answer: what would you like to tell others about yourself and your involvement in Flight? I hope you enjoy reading their accounts as much as I have enjoyed accompanying them on their journeys.

I am humbled and privileged to witness and be a small part of many of these young men's rights-of-passage, such as purchasing a first car, graduating from high school or successfully attaining a GED, landing that first job, moving into a new dorm or apartment, beginning college, or - my personal favorite - being baptized. To reflect on the challenges our young men have had to overcome along their journey, to see where they are now headed in life, is both inspiring and heartwarming.

What a great feeling when someone you've literally watched grow and mature from a teenager to an adult invites you to his new apartment for dinner. Or when someone you've known and assisted since his days of being in placement for juvenile delinquency is now invited to speak at colleges about the juvenile justice system. What amazing transformations! The stories go on and on, but I'll let you read them yourself - because they are stories told from the heart.

In Flight, we proudly strive to create an atmosphere of family. We share our struggles and triumphs with one another. We celebrate birthdays and holidays together. We travel together to new and exciting places and we work alongside one another during weekends devoted to volunteering and giving back to our communities. So far in 2011, we have successfully logged 244 hours of volunteer work with such organizations as Habitat for Humanity, My Brother's Table, the American Red Cross, Bethesda Mission's Mobil Mission, Paxton Ministries, and Mission Central. We also helped to build a church from the ground-up in Beech Creek, Pa., and spearheaded a project to ship unused bunk beds from the Diakon Wilderness Center to two orphanages in Haiti.

Between volunteering and enjoying such traditions as Thanksgiving together, we also have found time to enjoy mountain biking, canoeing, lots of hiking, caving, participating in the Polar Bear Plunge in Harrisburg, spending three days at Creation Christian



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**DIAKON WILDERNESS CENTER**  
A LUTHERAN FAMILY & COMMUNITY MINISTRY

*Soaring  
to New  
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Music Fest, overnight-backpacking, barbeques and picnics together, paintballing, attending the Philadelphia Eagles training camp, and even taking in a Broadway musical in New York. We certainly stay busy!

The Lord has blessed this group of young men. All Flight members are currently attending school, working full-time, or both. Those who continue to journey alongside their brothers toward success continue to fuel our commitment to help them reach their goals. In fact, our graduates regularly return to offer guidance and encouragement to current Flight participants.



When I think about Flight, I think about the day Tom, a program graduate, and I entered the frigid November waters of the Conodoguinet Creek to baptize Zach, a current member. He not only had overcome so many struggles and challenges in life, but he also proudly and unashamedly braved those cold waters to publicly proclaim his faith in Jesus Christ. Truly reborn in Christ, Zach is like so many of our young men—overcoming challenges, focusing on the future, and bravely moving forward with the help and encouragement of his brothers. Gone are the old ways of surviving; now life is about truly thriving.

Reborn. Yeah, *that's how we roll!*

Sincerely,

*Rob Kivlan*

Flight Program Supervisor

### *Milan's Story...*



Flight has affected my life in so many profound ways. The Lord has really used and been in the midst of this program through both subtle and direct ways and profound, unconditional love. It provided me with a brotherhood at a time where I was in a lonely place spiritually and when I was distanced from my brothers and friends. Flight helped me to get back into school for the fall 2011 semester by providing me with a scholarship to pay the difference I was missing in my tuition. Flight also has taken me places I never thought I would be, giving me a growing variety of experiences in traveling.

I came to know Flight one weekend in the summer where my brother Chris Chilton asked if Kyle and I wanted to go. So, we said yeah and ended up going with him. Instantly when we walked into the door of the cabin, it was real love. Didn't matter of any differences the world may point out, the Lord was truly in the midst because of the welcoming atmosphere. I opened up my story to the guys and from that point, I've been with Flight, participating in community service, fun activities, and trips all for the Lord who is definitely the center of this program. We are so blessed.

Be sure to look for us on Facebook, keywords "Diakon Lutheran" or "Diakon Flight."

Interested in donating to the Flight Program?

Simply visit this page on the Web:

<http://www.diakon.org/give-now/>

and select "Flight Program" on the SECURE page.

## Zach's Story...



My name is Zach Lehman. I'm currently 18 years old and attending Central Penn College, majoring in criminal justice. I chose criminal justice because of my rough childhood; seeing all the violence and drug addictions from both sides of my family made me want to help the ones who are less fortunate like me. To help get drugs off the street, my ultimate goal is to become a D.E.A. (drug enforcement agent). I was in placement and locked up a few times as a juvenile for lack of parenting and decision-making on my part. I was placed in Youth Forestry

Camp #3 and also at the Diakon Wilderness Center's Center Point Day Treatment Program. But Diakon was different because I was only placed there to obtain my G.E.D. Plus, they cared about me! So I have learned a lot and wish to do better now and later in my life and keep pursuing the goals I have.

What has Flight done for me...? I don't even know where to start. I know I only have been part of Flight for a very short time compared to many others, but I accomplished so much within that time with the help from Rob and the Flight Program. The biggest accomplishment I have is being enrolled at Central Penn, thanks again to Rob. I was struggling so much to attend a college because of family-related issues, and within a week of meeting Rob, I was on the path of going to school. Just by being here I have less stress than at home, all my needs are met, and I don't have to worry about home problems anymore. I'm so thankful for the Flight Program and what it offers; if it weren't for Flight, I honestly don't know where I would be right now.

When Flight wasn't in my life, I was starting to head down the wrong path. I was having a criminal mind-set. Because of the stress level at home with money issues and the concern of where I was going to head in a few months with winter around the corner, I had very little support from anyone in my family and often times didn't know where we would live or for how long. Basically, no one was there to help and I know I'm eighteen, but on the inside I still consider myself a kid. I was living from place to place, and had no room of my own. In a nutshell, I had nothing, no one, or any place to call home. In Flight, I have the support I needed from the staff and the other Flight brothers. Thank you!

With Flight's support, I'm heading to a bigger and brighter future than I was before the program came into my life and I'm very grateful for it. I plan to graduate with an associate's degree and even possibly join the Army. Until then, I hope to find a part-time job to obtain a car and have some money of my own—and to be there for Flight just as it is there for me. My favorite activity so far was going on a hike up Tumbling Run with everyone (and Nala, Tom's dog). We took a three-mile hike up and down a mountain and saw waterfalls the whole way. I liked being with the positive people who were there; it was very peaceful and absolutely stress-free day. So once again, I am very appreciative of the Flight Program and couldn't imagine my life without it! Thank you all!



## *Luis' Story...*



My name is Luis Rodriguez and I joined Flight in an effort to discover things about myself that I never knew I needed to discover until I met these guys. I am also in need of the help of a brotherhood that understood my difficult path in life (like most of us, I grew up in the system and didn't have anyone or anything there for me after turning 18). A few months into the program I realized what I was missing—and it was simple: I wanted happiness as my goal. Watching the program director do his work made me realize that no matter

what happens, he loves what he's doing because he is happy. So in noticing this I made it a way of life and a motto for myself—I am in the pursuit of happiness.

The things I've done so far with the Flight Program is voluntary community service work, gatherings with the brotherhood to just relax and support one another, and a hike up to see a great view. Last week, we hiked six miles to another amazing view and the guys encouraged and supported me the whole way. It was awesome!

Currently, I am at Thaddeus Stevens College and am on my way to graduation year. I plan to continue school for Web development. I am currently a graphics major. I also have minor IT experience, which I hope to combine with my graphics skills.

So far my favorite thing in Flight was going on that hike. Toward the end, it challenged me physically, but the reward was a great view and a chill spot with the crew along with some food. I had fun and plan to get better at trekking in the wild. Thanks guys!

## *Chris' Story...*



Diakon has brought many different experiences that have affected me for the rest of my life. Knowing that after work on Fridays that I can spend most of my weekends with my brothers is probably the thing I love the most. I love being able to sit in the fire circle and discuss real issues that affect people's life and our own lives, not to mention the endless laughs. Because I grew up an only child and felt lost and forgotten in the system when I was younger, Flight has given me the extended family and support system I needed to be successful.

The event at which I had the most fun involved the laughter and joking while we made flood clean-up kits for the victims of the recent flooding. Knowing that the kits we made for Mission Central were being shipped out that very day to those in need made it all worthwhile. This program really has helped me in my life and without it I don't even want to think where I would be. Thanks.



## *Jamile's Story...*



Well, life as a kid, I mean, it was a normal childhood, although I got picked on a lot growing up. People called me names and told me all kinds of things, like you're a nobody, you're never going to be anything, and you're a mistake. Even the people closest to me, like my brother, said these things, but I always had hope and faith in the God that I seemed to believe in. Even though I didn't know much, I knew there was a better life out there and I was going to get there and help others get there, too.

Somewhere down the line life started getting a lot harder to deal with. I'm usually good with handling this type of stuff because for me it was just part of having a hard life, but then it got worse and worse. Of course, at first I thought I'm going to get through this, but I started to lose hope as it got harder and harder for me to deal with. My family life was unthinkable and my church-life was all I had, but when support from my church started to fail, well so did I.

I started out a good kid, the one who got straight A's, had good behavior, and was just a good person. Everyone thought I was "the kid to have," that I was just perfect, you know – always smiling, helping, and praying for others. It didn't take much to make me happy; I was very appreciative. I was always there for others and all I wanted was to be helped, loved, and cared for, just as I did for others. When that expectation wasn't being met, I started to fail. I lost hope and lost sight of my goals. I began to get in trouble, but hid it under this secret life. It was just eating me up inside. I didn't know what to do or where to turn. I no longer had that support I needed and now I lost hope, faith, and trust in the God I so-called believed in.

After being charged for car theft three times from ages 15 to 17, I was charged a fourth time and was sent to placement. After spending months at Shaffner Detention Center, I was sent to the Diakon Wilderness Center. I spent four months there and learned a lot – enough to not want to come back into the system; I also learned a lot more about who I was too after being there and going through that experience. After that placement, I received help and support from Rob and got a job and started to work to pay off my fines. It was going OK, but another hard wave of life hit me and, again, I was struggling and not reaching out. I had learned a lot and knew a lot, too, but my brain seemed to be failing me and I couldn't seem to put the good thoughts in my mind. As life got hard again, so did my decision-making. I had a problem, but didn't realize it.

Even before I left Diakon, I had met Rob, the leader of the Flight Program. When I got home he and Flight were very supportive and tried to help me in every way they could. But I was reluctant and I had the biggest wall up and didn't really trust anyone. I eventually ended up at Dauphin County Prison, because now I was 18 years old, and spent months there. They were the worst times of my life. They also were my wake-up call from God. He was trying to reach me and I wasn't letting him in, so I believe He put me in a place where he knew I could hear Him. So that's when He began to work in my life through this experience.

Through it all, Flight was still there for me. Even after having put up a wall for so long, they never gave up on me. Rob would write me; he and Tom, a Flight graduate who is basically

staff, would visit me often and pray with me. In doing that, Flight had proven that they weren't going anywhere and that this commitment that I had taken was for real and to better myself. To this day, I don't regret it and I am going to stick by them as they stuck by me.

Rob had given me this book called *The Purpose-Driven Life*. That book completely transformed me – mind, body, and spiritually. I was renewed and not through myself, but through others and God. Flight reached out to me to show me that they cared and loved me. So I started finally to trust and rely on them and Flight turned into the support system I didn't have and I'm now back on the road to greatness for my life. I now have the people who understand and support me—to go down this road with me. In Flight we depend on each other, we love each other, and we're there for each other. We're not just Flight, we are brothers. Even though I am still struggling and I have to finish my GED so I can get into college, I have to work at multiple jobs to pay off my fines, and my home life is still unimaginable for most people, yet I know that even with all this on my plate I have Flight with me as I try to get through this. I now know I have a purpose in this world and that's where I am headed – to fulfill that purpose. Thank you and God bless.

### *Tom's Story...*



As I look back on these past several months, I can't help being overcome with joy when I see the amount of growth that has occurred – growth of individuals, who are wisely investing their time and efforts in plans for a brighter future, as well as our family as a whole, which has grown exponentially over the past couple months. Recently, we have welcomed several young men into our family, and this addition not only has strengthened our sense of community and brotherhood, but also has provided us with the benefit of witnessing our fellow senior members rise to the occasion, assuming roles of leadership to give guidance and lend a

helping hand to those who are new to our family.

I have watched as my fellow brothers gave insightful advice to those who are experiencing college for the first time, continuing on their journey of faith, and even to those who are going through the daily struggles that most young men face in their lifetime; in short, I have witnessed a whole family supporting its contributing members through highs and lows. Some have strayed from the flock over the past several months, but that hasn't stopped us from continually reaching out to them and preserving for them a spot in the family that only they can fill.

I'm sure from the outside looking in, Flight seems to be a "program," with "participants" and expected results, but from the perspective of a graduate, I see Flight as a family more than anything. Participants come and go, taking with them only fond memories of a time since passed, but my brothers are permanent. They take the legacy of our family with themselves wherever they travel, knowing that no matter what struggles or pains they may face in life – no matter how weary or faint they grow on their journey – they will *always* have our loving family walking right beside them, encouraging them to press on and fight the good fight; for as iron sharpens iron, so one person (or family) sharpens another.

## Mike's Story...



The Diakon Flight program helped me a lot in my path to success by teaching me the responsibility of handling my decisions on my own. Before I met Rob Kivlan, my view of the future was kind of low because I was blinded to the fact that I was on the road to destruction and disappointment. Luckily (and kind of weirdly) I came home from school one day to see Rob in my living room talking to my dad. From that day on my life has been a complete 180 and in a more positive light. Since being with Rob and my Flight friends there have been plenty of memories for me to share.

Sadly, there has been a change in direction in my life related to college plans and that has affected my being with my brothers in Flight. I now reside in another state, but I hear from Rob often and wish I was there with them all. While in Flight, I was able to graduate from high school and decided to move out of the city for the summer to avoid the negativity there, before starting college Flight had helped me get into. I came back to the area the end of the summer to start school, but the day after I came back I was shot three times outside my own house - once through the leg and once in the back, while the third bullet grazed my hip. That was the last thing I was expecting because I just wanted to go to college and move forward on my new positive path in life.

I'm not writing this for sympathy but to let you know I moved to a better environment for myself and my family and I now start school in January at a community college here. Not the best option but the No. 1 thing is that I'm safe and my mother doesn't have to worry. I'm



not going to sit here and say I don't miss my friends and Rob because I do. If it weren't for them I wouldn't be where I am today. That may sound clichéd but sometimes clichéd is right.

I was on the wrong path before I met Rob, not so much in terms of facing jail time but in terms of failing in school, worried about the wrong things at the wrong times. I was naive back then; I see clearly now and my goals are coming much closer. I do miss the weekends with Rob and the



gang but I guess I have some weekends dedicated to them and they will know I am with them in spirit. I call them my family because they were right by my side during and after I came out of the hospital. You don't meet people like that every day. I don't know how much I could thank them but I hope they know...

## *Who we are:*

We are the Flight Program. We are a group of young men who made poor choices when we were younger and some of us ended up getting sent to placement at the Diakon Wilderness Center. Most of us have been in and out of the system, placements, and detention centers. That was the past.

Today is our future. Today we are voluntarily participating in the Flight Program, and we're taking new and challenging steps in our lives to change and become successful. We rely on one another for support. We attempt to do what is right, not what is easy. We now look towards the future and our goals instead of living "in the moment." We want the best that this world has to offer and we're now ready to go after it, the honorable way. We are separating from our old friends. They don't know what to think of us anymore. Our families don't know us anymore. They're impressed. Our old teachers, probation officers, and everyone else in our communities (who we struggled to understand) are beginning to see that we're going to make it.

We now have positive dreams and goals. We believe in helping others along the path to success: "*As Iron Sharpens Iron, So One Person Sharpens Another.*" We are discovering and using the tools and resources in our communities to achieve our goals. We are breaking free from our comfort zones and *Soaring to New Heights*.

We sacrifice our weekends to be with our brothers. We let go of the old Friday night parties, now we spend that time helping each other and the community. We're not afraid to cry in front of each other. We're not afraid to ask for help. We dropped that front. Fridays and Saturdays are now about positive people, places, and things. We're on the move, in and out of state, going to new events, helping wherever there is a need, meeting new people, hiking new trails, and always... telling our stories.

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