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DIALOG



Single father offers gift of family

WHILE DICTIONARIES MAY CLASSIFY A FAMILY AS “a group of persons of common ancestry,” Richard Erdman would define the term differently.

A single parent who never married, Erdman has three grown children—who do not share a “common ancestry”—and four grandchildren.

His route to fatherhood occurred via foster care, but his journey actually began long before his first foster placement.

Erdman grew up in a “traditional” family with two parents and a brother and a sister. But in the 1950s, his grandparents began providing foster care to a 14-year-old girl named Gerry from The Lutheran Home at Topton—whose child-focused programs are now part of Diakon Adoption & Foster Care.

About 10 at the time, Erdman watched as his grandparents gave Gerry a home, food, clothing and love—and eventually helped her to obtain grants and scholarships (in fact, through The Lutheran Home at Topton) to go to nursing school. Gerry, now 76, and Erdman still keep in touch.

In 1974, Erdman, who worked in education, decided he, too, was interested in providing a home for a child in need. He went to The Lutheran Home at Topton—and met with some of the same caseworkers who were there when his grandparents fostered Gerry, so they knew his family.

When he asked if they would consider a single parent as a foster parent—procedures were different 40-plus years ago—staff cautioned him he would

not be able to foster an infant. Chuckling, he recalls telling them: “I can’t handle the little babies. I need somebody who is older.”

Soon, Erdman began providing foster care to Dale, a 12-year-old who faced some learning challenges.

Providing a home, guidance and support—which he describes as trying to keep Dale “on the straight and narrow”—Erdman also took the youth to Disneyland, Mexico and New York City. Once a month Dale’s brothers would visit him, and Richard would take them to the park and other fun places.

Sometimes, Dale spent weekends with Gerry (Erdman’s grandparents’ foster daughter), her husband and their three children in New Jersey.

Erdman says that fostering an older child was the right thing for him. As a single parent who worked full-time, he needed a school-age child who could be somewhat independent. As a teacher, Erdman had a schedule that usually coincided with Dale’s, and when Dale was sick and had to stay home from school, Erdman’s grandmother helped.

While many resource families are interested in infants, Erdman describes his placement as much easier because Dale did not require the constant attention a baby does and could accompany Erdman on errands and similar excursions as well as vacations! Erdman also appreciated the fact Dale could communicate his needs, something an infant cannot do.

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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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The President's **DIALOG**



Mark T. Pile

An elevator speech with historic import

AT DIAKON'S RECENT STRATEGIC planning retreat for leaders throughout the organization, we were asked to develop our "elevator speech"—the way we individually would describe who we are within Diakon and how we characterize the organization—for someone who knows nothing about us or Diakon.

While his remarks were intended as devotions and not a response to the elevator-speech exercise, I believe the Rev. Mark Wimmer, Diakon's vice president for church relations and ministry partnerships, may have written the best elevator speech.

It read simply: *We are the innkeepers.*

What a wonderful way to characterize Diakon.

His point arises from the story of the Good Samaritan and the oft-asked question of with whom you identify in that story. Let me quote Mark's devotions to explain:

"Most people say they would be the Good Samaritan or, perhaps, the victim. No one wants to be the Levite or the priest"—the people who passed by the injured man on the road—"even though we all probably have behaved like them at some point.

"But there is one character who almost never gets a vote—the innkeeper.

"The innkeeper takes continuing responsibility for the victim, assumes all the risks related to meeting that person's needs.

"Just imagine what that means. How severe are the victim's injuries? Possible broken bones; multiple cuts and contusions; loss of blood; trauma associated with being victim of a crime? This recovery will take a while; it will likely even require rehab.

"Plus the victim has no assets. Some money has been provided but it's uncertain whether more will be coming forth.

"But the innkeeper assumes all these risks to meet the needs of the victim.

"Jumping to today, I submit that we at Diakon are the innkeepers. People come to us seeking:

- Safe, secure retirement life
- Compassionate care in the later years of life
- Rehabilitation following surgery or injury
- Counseling
- Assistance with youths who need a second chance
- Help in finding a child's forever family
- Ways to preserve families
- Empowerment programs for young women

"All of these activities are absolutely consistent with the role of the innkeeper. We fulfill our mission by providing needed and critical services within an activity that is Biblical and sanctioned by God. We respond to God's love in Jesus Christ to assist our neighbors.

"We are the innkeepers."

I believe there is no more important elevator speech than that.

Mark T. Pile, MSHA, MSW
President/CEO



Man who lived in Old Main helps break ground for renovation, recalls childhood at ‘the home’

THE DAY WAS JULY 13, 1938.

William “Bill” Rohrbach was only 4 years old, but he still vividly remembers the day. It was a Sunday, and Sundays were special for him and his two sisters—2½-year-old Shirley and 6-year-old Patricia—who were all living with their grandmother on a small farm just outside Boyertown. Every Sunday they went to church and Sunday school. Then, in the afternoon, they would go for ice cream and a drive in the country.

But on this particular Sunday, the children noticed that the drive home seemed very long. Instead of being taken back to the farm, “we were taken to a great big building,” Rohrbach recalls today. “A strange lady took my sister out of the car, and Shirley and I cried, and then we were taken to the ‘Baby Cottage.’ That was five days after my fourth birthday, when I officially came to live in the orphanage” later known as The Lutheran Home at Topton.

What Rohrbach discovered many years later was that his mother “was a loving lady and that she really adored her three children. Unfortunately, her husband [Bill’s father] was an abuser and an alcoholic and therefore she took her life.” His father was unable to care for three young children, so their 62-year-old grandmother decided to care for them on her small farm.

Things were good for a while until two of his father’s sisters tried to split the children up. Determined that the children should remain together, their grandmother consulted with her pastor, who recommended she take the children to the Lutheran Orphans’ Home.

Bill Rohrbach spent five months in the Baby Cottage. Then, at the age of five, he went to live in the “Little Boys’ Home” with a pair of house-parents and about 18 other boys. At the age of 10, he moved to the campus’ Old Main building, where he lived with about 100 children.

Life at the orphanage was strict, he says. “We’d get up in the morning at six. We had to get dressed and we had to be down the hall. Then we had to line up two-by-two. A bell would ring, indicating it was time for chapel.” The children attended chapel twice a day and church once a week.

After breakfast, they had work detail. Rohrbach did everything from cutting grass to picking up rocks, and when he was older, he was in charge of taking care of the chickens. “One thing they did was taught you how to work, and I was appreciative of that,” he says today.

The building had a side for girls and a side for boys, with an imaginary line dividing the two. The children were not allowed to cross that line unless they were going to chapel or church.

He was not allowed to talk to any girls, not even his two sisters. If the children were good, each Sunday after evening chapel, “you could go out into the hall where that line was, and you could talk with your sisters, but you couldn’t touch. You couldn’t hug. You could just talk. You couldn’t hold hands, or you would lose that privilege.”

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Man who lived in Old Main *Continued from Page 3*

Rohrbach attended the home's school through eighth grade. "School was something. I was naturally left-handed, and I had one teacher ... who would slap my knuckles with a ruler" in an attempt to get the youth to use his right hand. "But," he adds, "I also had some very good teachers like Mr. Brossman."

When they reached the ninth grade, children in the home attended public school in Tipton if they were a good student (which Bill was) or a trade school if they weren't as educationally inclined.

Rohrbach's memories include many fond ones. He was very athletic and played both basketball and baseball. He also took part in plays, recalling one in which he played Joseph and his sister portrayed Mary.

"Christmases were a beautiful time there. The children didn't have to work, and the food was better. Everyone received a present. Everybody was happy, and they would sing. There was this lady who came every Christmas and gave all the children a box of candy and oranges. It was a big thing. She talked very nice. She was a very beautiful lady."

As an adult, he discovered that she was a member of his church—and was finally able to tell her how much her visits meant to him and the other children.

When Rohrbach reached the age of 16 in 1950, a local veterinarian took him in to help with his practice. "I worked for this veterinarian for two years ... he said that I would be part of the family. Well, I wasn't. He paid me ten dollars a week and I had to pay for all my expenses."

Following graduation from high school in 1952, Rohrbach went to live with his grandmother, his uncle securing him employment at the Boyertown Burial Casket Company.



Having served in the medical corps in a hospital in Germany from 1954 to 1956, he used funds from the GI Bill and his own earnings to attend East Stroudsburg University, from which he received a bachelor's degree in science. He taught chemistry at Boyertown Senior High School, retiring in 1993. He and his wife, Phyllis, whom he married in 1961, had three children.

Today, Rohrbach and his wife live in Boyertown. He enjoys spending time with his children and nine grandchildren, making sure he shows his children and grandchildren how much they're loved—something missing from his early childhood.

Proud of his upbringing at the home, he began collecting photos, newsletters and other memorabilia from the period he lived there. He has taken his children and grandchildren to former anniversary days at the home, as well as to the recent groundbreaking for a major refurbishment of the Old Main building in which he once lived.

In all, he says, the home helped shape him into who he became—a devoted husband, father and grandfather with strong religious beliefs who worked hard his entire life.



William Rohrbach, third from left in front, takes part in last fall's groundbreaking for major refurbishment of Old Main on The Lutheran Home at Tipton campus. The project will create a permanency center in Old Main related to adoption and foster care—a direct connection to the initial children's services at the home that once benefited Rohrbach.



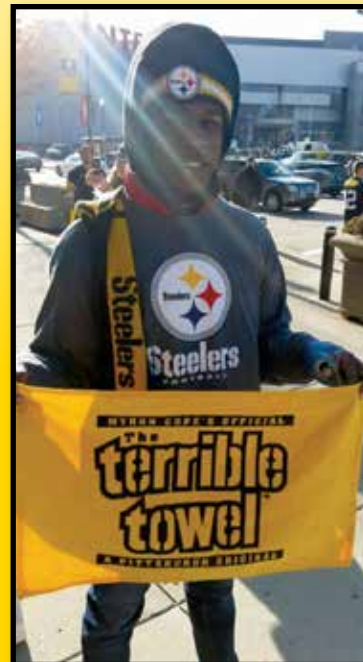
Youth's lifelong wish granted through donor's compassion

ON NEW YEAR'S DAY 2017, one of 18-year-old Ja'Mone Dabney's lifelong wishes was granted – to see a Pittsburgh Steelers game live and in person.

In September 2016, Ja'Mone was featured on abc27's Val's Kids (a joint effort of abc27's Valerie Pritchett, Pennsylvania's Statewide Adoption & Permanency Network [or SWAN, which Diakon administers] and the PA Adoption Exchange).

When asked what three wishes he would love to see granted, he had replied: "Go to a Pittsburgh game, get adopted and become a cop or a coach."

An anonymous donor was deeply moved by the TV segment and knew she could make one of Ja'Mone's wishes come true. She donated tickets in his name to the Pittsburgh Steelers/Cleveland Browns game, to be held in Pittsburgh Jan. 1 of this year.



Marjorie Hedmeck, a caseworker for the Lehigh County Office of Children and Youth Services, Permanency Unit, and her husband, took Ja'Mone to see the game.

"It was a warm and sunny day; very beautiful, especially for January," says Hedmeck. "It was in the 40s and warm from the sun."

Ja'Mone, she adds, "was ecstatic and kept talking about it for weeks prior!" In fact, the best part of the game for her was "seeing how excited Ja'Mone was when his favorite team won the game!"

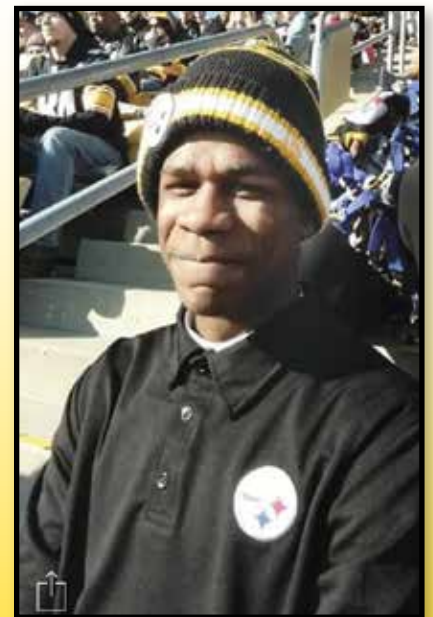
One wish down, two to go!

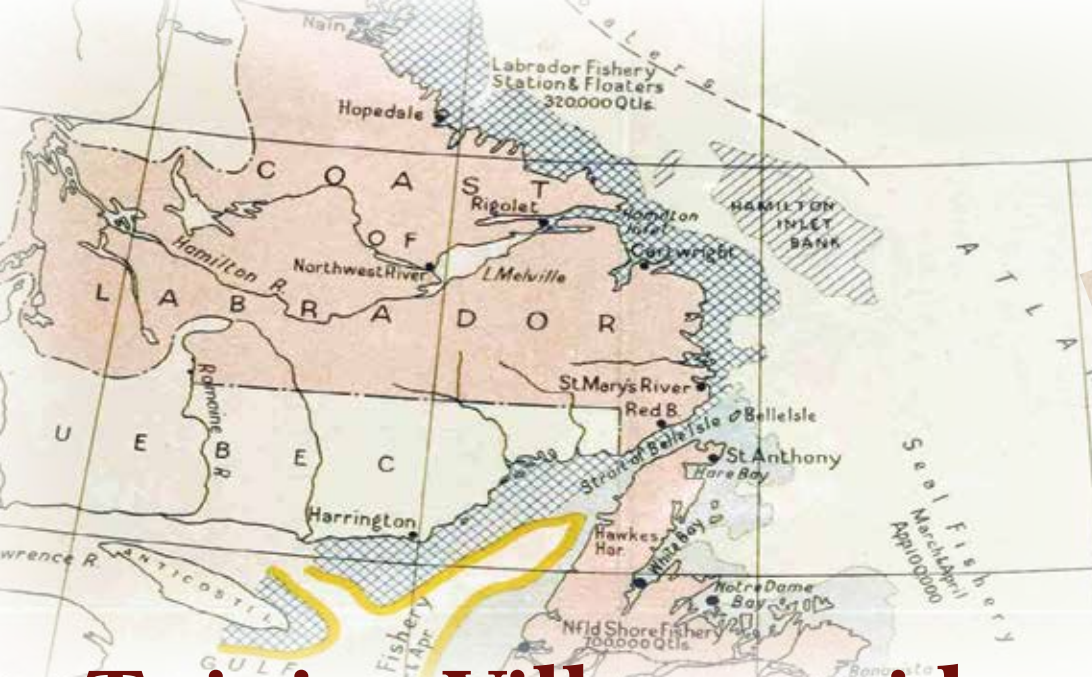
Ja'Mone is a youth in the Pennsylvania Older Child Matching Initiative. He is a high school student who loves math and plans to attend college. He also loves sports, particularly basketball and baseball.

"Ja'Mone is very active in his community. He coaches and volunteers at the local Boys and Girls clubs," notes Hedmeck. "He plays baseball on a community team. He aspires to become a coach and loves to help others. Ja'Mone's smile is infectious and brightens your day!"

"I would just like to see Ja'Mone in a family that has similar values to him," adds Diakon Caseworker Helene Kosciolk. "God and church are very important to him as well, so a family that has those values would be important for him to have in common—as well as an active lifestyle to support him in his interest in athletics."

To watch the Val's Kids segment featuring Ja'Mone, readers should visit: <http://abc27.com/2016/09/09/vals-kids-jamone/>.





Twining Village resident shares life lessons from Eskimo childhood

GROWING UP IN ISOLATED NAIN, LABRADOR, often in sub-zero temperatures, was far from easy for Twining Village resident Elizabeth Solis.

Born Lisabak, Solis grew up learning how to live off the land and sea by fishing, hunting and trading. In fact, she was taught how to use every piece of flesh and bone from seals, among various skills native Eskimo women gained such as how to knit, sew and care for a large family.

Solis' young life was marred by tragedy. When she was 7, she and her five siblings lost both parents. Her father died of botulism poisoning after drinking the blood of a seal—a common practice among the Eskimo people—and her mother died just days later after Elizabeth's sister accidentally shot her with a hunting rifle.

Solis also lost a brother, who froze to death, while an older brother lost both legs trying to save the younger boy.

The children moved in with Solis' grandmother, remaining there until the grandmother passed away. Elizabeth and her siblings were split up to live with other relatives, with the girl moving in with her mother's sister.

At 15, Solis took a job working for a young American family, William and Connie Ogletree, who were in Nain while William set up a communications station that would enable the Eskimos to remain in contact during hunting trips.

Mrs. Ogletree taught the Eskimo children English, and Elizabeth was hired to help with housekeeping and cooking while the two were away from their home. The couple grew increasingly fond of Elizabeth, and when Mrs. Ogletree became pregnant, they invited Elizabeth to return to the United States with them.

"I had never been more than 30 miles from my home, but I just had to go with them. They had become my parents and wanted to offer me more opportunities in the United States. I told them 'yes, I would go,'" she says today.

It took two years for Elizabeth to complete physical health screenings and, in 1951, she arrived in the U.S. The Ogletrees enrolled her in Upper Southampton High School, where she improved her English skills.

But tragedy struck again.

Mrs. Ogletree, pregnant with twins, lost her life during childbirth and Solis was left to care for all three children.

Upon finishing high school, she attended secretarial school and took a job with a research center. She later became a U.S. citizen and met her husband, Peter, in 1952. They married in 1956 and had three children.

Years have passed and Elizabeth Solis is now the proud grandmother of six grandchildren, and 12 great-grandchildren.

Despite these tragedies, Solis has always been a positive influence on her family and others, frequently lecturing about her young life in Nain.

In fact, other Twining Village residents enjoy hearing about her life and culture and perusing the memory books and artifacts from her childhood.

"When I lecture, I remember what my life was like, but I am not sad. This is the life God gave me and I am grateful for it."



'Great Decisions' just one of many senior living events

A DIAKON SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITY IS FOCUSED

on "great decisions."

Luther Crest, Allentown, Pennsylvania, is hosting a "Great Decisions" discussion program this spring and early summer. America's largest discussion program on world affairs, the series involves reading a briefing book, watching a DVD and meeting in a group to discuss critical global issues facing America. Topics of discussion this year will include Latin America's political pendulum, prospects for Afghanistan and Pakistan, trade and politics, nuclear security and U.S. foreign policy and petroleum.

Created by the Foreign Policy Association, the program provides background information and policy options for the eight most-critical issues facing America each year and serves as the focal text for discussion groups across the country, typically led by Ph.D.-level or similar speakers. In fact, the grassroots, face-to-face model adopted by Great Decisions more than 60 years ago today involves thousands of participants annually taking part in discussions nationwide, including those planned at Luther Crest.

The Great Decisions program is just one of numerous events regularly planned by Diakon senior living communities to provide education and enlightenment to older adults throughout the regions served by the communities.

Regular topics of "Smart Seniors" and other programs include lifestyles within a Continuing Care Retirement Community, financial literacy, how to downsize and sell a home, caregiving for those with Alzheimer's disease or similar illnesses, issues affecting veterans and much more.

For more information on the range of events, including locations and topics, please visit any Diakon Senior Living Community website. A list is found at www.diakon.org/senior-services.



Single father offers gift of family *Continued from Page 1*

When the boy was in high school, however, his birth father suddenly decided he wanted him back, so Dale moved in with his birth father. Erdman was devastated but kept in touch with Dale.

After just a few months, though, Dale asked to return to Erdman's home and during the resulting hearing stood and said: "My 'real' dad wanted me back only for the money. My foster dad really cares about me and loves me."

Dale lived with Erdman until he was 18, when he secured a job and moved into an apartment. Eventually, he married, but a few years ago passed away from liver failure. Erdman arranged a memorial service in the same church in which Dale had been baptized and confirmed.

During the time Dale lived with him, Erdman attended a foster parent conference where he happened to thumb through a book of children and youths available for adoption. One photo stood out—that of Alan, a 14-year-old boy living in a group home in New York.

Because Erdman believed Dale would benefit from having a sibling, he took the first steps toward adoption. The pair visited Alan in the group home, and he visited with them. His adoption was finalized in September 1979, just days short of Alan's 15th birthday.

The times were reflected by the fact the county court clerk resisted issuing a certificate without a mother's name on it. "Alan must have been the first child adopted by a single father," Erdman surmises.

"Alan was a quiet boy, and the other children in the group home picked on him a lot, especially when they discovered he was going through the adoption process," he says.

So for the second time, Erdman took a child into his home and began raising him as his own.

"The three of us would go to Disney World or out to California," Erdman says, adding, "Alan was a varsity swimmer; he was a good swimmer."

Alan lived with Erdman until he began college. Today, the 51-year-old lives with his daughter in central Pennsylvania.

By 1997, both boys were grown and out of the house and Erdman, around 51 at the time, felt he had room in his house and life to help even more.

He called Kathy Roach, now executive director of Diakon Adoption &

Foster Care: "I want you to tell me if I'm crazy or not. I'd like to adopt again, but this time I want to adopt a child with special needs."

He was not crazy, she told him and so, working with Roach and Pennsylvania's Statewide Adoption & Permanency Network, popularly known as SWAN, Erdman again began the process of adoption.

Why a child with special needs? At this point, Erdman had experience raising two boys, he was in a better place financially and, he says, "I had more to offer. I was ready to provide more attention and more nurturing to a child with special needs.

"I just knew that this was the right thing to do. It was like I had a mission to serve others and this was how I was going to do it."

Eric, a child from Louisiana, arose as a possible candidate, but clerical issues prevented the adoption. However, years later, when Eric was 18, Erdman contacted him to see if he would like to attend college in Pennsylvania. "He came up. He visited. He liked it. He stayed here."

While that adoption "was not meant to be," another was. In May 1998, Erdman adopted Brian, a nearly 10-year-old child with autism.

"The bond between us was instant," says Erdman. "I knew the first time I met Brian that there was no question that I was going to adopt him. Brian must have felt it too because when I went to leave after our second visit, he tried to block my way. He didn't want me to leave."

The youth "had a horrendous background. At times he was locked in a room. He was malnourished and had rotten teeth. I had the resources to take care of those things immediately. He met with a psychiatrist within the first 16 hours of arriving in my home."

Brian thrived in his new loving environment.

"The potential with Brian was limitless. He was on the varsity track team, he can snow ski, he can kayak and he loves to travel. The things we've done together have been amazing," says Erdman.

Today, Brian, 28, continues to be the center of Richard's life.

"Biological or adopted, single or married, it makes no difference. A family is a family," says Roach. "Richard and five generations of his family have experienced the same joys and sorrows that most families experience and in the process changed the lives of four very lucky boys forever."



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