

network news

Fall 2009

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network news

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Diversity

by Trisha Gadson, Development Specialist, SWAN

Diversity: What is it and why is it significant to the mission of providing permanency to Pennsylvania's waiting children? Diversity is a buzz word that we have heard or used often. As child welfare professionals, we have asked ourselves how old is too old to become a resource parent? How do we define family composition for prospective adoptive parents? Should we emphasize the significance of ethnic or racial identity development in children? We have processed such questions in our private and professional thoughts as we grow into the realization that diversity is a broad topic. It encompasses every quality about an individual that makes them unique. Race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, cognitive and physical abilities, appearance, belief systems, family status, educational background, age and professional status are just a few dimensions of diversity. All the various aspects of diversity impact social service professionals who are the decision makers charged with finding permanent families for waiting children.

Consider these statistics:

- The American Bar Association reports that between five to 10 percent of youth in foster care identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-gender or questioning their orientation (LGBTQ). Of that five to 10 percent, 74 percent believe they have experienced prejudicial treatment by child welfare professionals.

- Casey Family Programs reports that more than half of the 500,000 children in foster care come from families of color despite the fact that children of color comprise less than half of the children in this country.
- The National Child Welfare Center for Family-Centered Practice highlights research that illustrates that while the involvement of fathers increases a child's overall well-being, the child welfare system consistently embraces practices that focus primarily and sometimes exclusively on mothers.

These findings reflect a need for increased cultural competence. Members of the Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network have responded by expanding opportunities for training and discussion on how diversity impacts best practice. Specifically, efforts have been made to develop cultural competence as a skill. For example, in Scranton within recent months, the SWAN Northeast Regional Technical Assistant organized a training session on diversity awareness. The Pennsylvania State Resource Family Association devoted two workshops to diversity topics during its 2008 Annual Conference. The SWAN Legal Services Training Specialist routinely offers workshops that challenge participants to develop practice that is consistent with the law, serves the needs of youth and is free of personal biases. A number of county and affiliate agencies have begun incorporating and expanding discussions

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of diversity within their family preparation programs. Finally, staff members from Family Design Resources received training on the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program,

differentiated instruction and two school-based models which promote culturally positive learning environments. These measures are steps towards reversing harmful statistics and

they remind us of the need for vigilance in increasing skill levels to provide culturally competent permanency services. ✂✂

statewide straighttalk

*From the
Department
of Public Welfare
by Lorrie Deck,
Director,
Statewide
Adoption and
Permanency
Network*



As hard as it seems to believe, we are now in the final year of the current SWAN prime contract held by Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries, in Partnership with Family Design Resources. The current prime contract expires on June 30, 2010.

Over the course of the past five years, much has been accomplished. SWAN and Independent Living, IL, have partnered not just in training for county and private providers, but in providing services to older youth who are in need of both permanent connections and the skills required to become successful, independent adults.

More importantly, we have increased youth participation throughout the SWAN program including youth attendance at SWAN/IL Quarterly Meetings and the Annual Permanency Conference where they have shared their success stories and presented their own matching moments. We began our Heart Gallery, a traveling photo exhibit of children in need of adoptive families. Through our partnership with the National Adoption Center, we had our first Matching Parties, both of which were huge successes.

We have increased the amount of services provided to the families and children we serve. In State Fiscal

Year (SFY) 2004 - 2005, SWAN provided a total of 10,714 direct services to families and youth. In SFY 2008 - 2009, SWAN provided 15,317 direct services to families and youth. This is a 43 percent increase in direct services!

Over the course of the past five years, 9,857 children have been adopted from the Pennsylvania foster care system. This represents 39 percent of all 25,156 children adopted from foster care in Pennsylvania since 1992.

We have seen the services of the Pennsylvania Adoption Exchange and the SWAN Helpline streamlined to provide better services to prospective and approved adoptive families who are expressing interest in children available for adoption. We created the Resource Family Registry, RFR, which maintains information on all foster, adoptive and kinship families providing homes to children from the foster care system.

As of July 1, the SWAN Legal Services Initiative, LSI, is no longer a pilot project; it is now a statewide initiative active in 54 counties. To date, the LSI has been instrumental in helping children move more quickly through the child welfare legal system, decreasing the overall length of stay in care in those counties with

the LSI by 11 months.

As a network, we have done some amazing work. As a prime contractor, Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries and Family Design Resources has been the support of that work for the past nine years. The children and families we serve deserve the best services and care we can provide. A sincere thank you to Diakon/FDR and all members of the network for the quality of service each of you has provided.

As we enter into the final year of the current SWAN prime contract, the Department will issue a Request For Proposals, RFP, to elicit bids for the next SWAN prime contractor. All county and affiliate agencies will be notified when the RFP is issued this fall.

Given what we've accomplished throughout the course of the current prime contract, I can only imagine where we'll be five years from now and I look forward to sharing the ride with each and every one of you!

Pennsylvania's Waiting Children



Meet Robby!

Robby is a 13 year-old who is usually quiet and shy, especially when you first meet him. Robby likes playing video games and card games, listening to hip-hop music, watching scary movies, and going to amusement parks. He also enjoys sports, especially playing football, and says his favorite position is wide receiver. Robby is a Philadelphia Eagles' fan and doesn't like to miss a game.

Robby would like to have a family who lives in Pennsylvania and who shares his passion for animals. He hopes his new family will allow him to have a dog or a cat. Robby would love to be an only child and hopes to have continued contact with his former foster family.

All families will be considered for Robby. Parental rights will be terminated when a permanent resource is found. For more information, please contact Karen Knodel at 215-355-6500 x193 or by e-mail at kknodel@bethanna.org. When contacting the exchange, please refer to Robby's PAE identification number, CO9AA54. 🌱



Meet Jasmine!

Jasmine is a sweet 18 year-old who loves swimming and has excelled on her swim team, winning several medals at a statewide swim meet this past summer. Jasmine also enjoys camping, attending church and participating in her church's youth group.

Jasmine is searching for her forever family. She sincerely wants the permanency that adoption will give her, but she also wants a permanent family who will allow her to continue to visit with her grandparents.

Jasmine participates in a variety of volunteer opportunities. She assists with mail delivery at a large, nationally known medical center and helps out in a school-run day care program. She enjoys her volunteer work and reports she would like to work in child care and early learning when she finishes school.

All families will be considered for Jasmine. She is legally free for adoption. Families who are interested in making Jasmine part of their family may contact the Pennsylvania Adoption Exchange at 1-800-227-0225. When contacting the exchange, please refer to Jasmine's PAE identification number, C4910332. 🌱

Youth Ambassador Honored

by Edwin Turner, Youth Ambassador,
Child Welfare Training Program

One of our youth Ambassadors, Stacy Johnson, is being honored with an award from the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh. Stacy was chosen for the award because of her work as an advocate for foster care youth throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. As a former foster care youth, Stacey learned how to advocate for herself and others in the child welfare system. Stacey now works to change policies that will have a positive effect on children and families involved in the foster care system.

In May 2008, Stacey graduated from Carlow University where she received a bachelors' degree in Political Science. She is grateful to receive a college education that has taught her how to work with people and perform work from an administrator's point of view. Most importantly, college has taught Stacey to have a community organizer perspective when advocating for youth and families.

Stacy currently works for the Allegheny Department of Human Services Executive office. In addition, she is working on her MSW at the University of Pittsburgh and later plans to pursue her Doctoral degree. Stacy also has great advice for all child welfare professionals... "Realize you are working with someone's life. A stroke of a pen can alter that life." As Stacy begins her career, she will work to make changes in the child welfare system and become a light of hope at the end of the tunnel for many foster care youth. 🌱

It Starts With A Phone Call

by Judi Damiano, Western Technical Assistant Division Manager, SWAN

The expansion of family-centered services is now underway through the Center for Best Practices Academy sponsored by the Pennsylvania Court Improvement Project and the National Governor's Association. The Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network, SWAN, has responded by expanding the Legal Services Initiative, LSI, Project from 14 counties to 55 counties.

Charged with eliminating legal barriers that hinder timely permanency for children in the child welfare system, the SWAN LSI paralegal works side-by-side with county caseworkers every day. Depending on the needs of each county, the paralegal may perform a variety of tasks that range from completing a diligent search when a child first enters care through preparing court documents for a child's final permanency goal.

In some situations, practice issues may arise and a phone call informs the paralegal's supervisor, a SWAN LSI coordinator, of the need to get involved. If that happens, the LSI coordinator works collaboratively with their region's SWAN technical assistant, TA. The LSI coordinator and SWAN TA's work collaboratively with the Pennsylvania Adoption Exchange, to address and resolve individual situations and begin the process of organizing the results to identify any systemic issues.

When larger, statewide issues are identified, they are addressed by the SWAN/LSI training specialists and the SWAN research specialists, who all provide additional input and expertise in forming a global response that is based in best practice. Once the training is formalized,

the entire team works with the SWAN division managers to design the plan on how to inform the entire network.

The trainings that result are often held at SWAN/IL regional and quarterly meetings or the Annual SWAN/IL Permanency Conference. SWAN's conferencing department organizes and implements meetings across the state, starting with the registration process and continuing through to the distribution of continuing education credits.

Throughout all of these processes, additional staff act as resources to the network to ensure the timeliness and quality of SWAN services along every step of the way. These include data managers, fiscal and IT personnel, SWAN Helpline, LSI Warmline, internal support staff, and program and contract administrators.

Ultimately, this first phone call generates a collaborative and inclusive response that uses the expertise of the entire child welfare network and results in better outcomes for families and children – our most critical team members. 

Legal Services Initiative's Involvement with 2008 National Adoption Day Events Throughout Pennsylvania

by Natalie Witt-Washine, LSI Division Manager, SWAN

The Legal Services Initiative, LSI, paralegals were deeply involved in helping their counties organize National Adoption Day events during November. Whether the county was holding its first event or its annual event, whether it was large or small, the paralegals were key participants in making the events happen.

Each year, Westmoreland County holds an annual Adoption Day Event. The county paralegals, Michelle DeRosa and Sarah Distefanis, were instrumental in making this day a special memory for each child and family involved. The paralegals began preparing for this event in early summer. In the past, Westmoreland County has been nationally recognized for all of the hard work, dedication and energy that's involved in planning this event and this year was no exception.

Westmoreland County's 7th Annual Adoption Day celebration was held at the county Courthouse. Opening ceremonies began with a warm welcome by Amber Kalp, county case manager of the Westmoreland County Children's Bureau. A speech by a solicitor for the Children's Bureau, Charles F. Wade, included a reference to the "tons of work and heartache that goes into arriving to this day to create all the new families that we are creating." The Westmoreland County Commissioners proclaimed November 14, 2008, as the county's official Adoption Day. The Honorable Judge Christopher Feliciani gave a heartfelt

speech and played a song that he and his daughter recorded, titled "*The Face of this Child.*" There was not a dry eye in the room. On this day of celebration, 17 children received permanency through the finalization of their adoptions in the court, creating 11 new families. Two of the children who were adopted included a 15-year old girl and a 15-year old boy who had both long awaited a place to call home. Five of the families adopted sibling groups so the siblings could stay together.

The Westmoreland County Children's Adoption Day was celebrated with a circus theme that included face painting, a clown who made extravagant balloon animals, cotton candy and other sugary treats to help keep up the energy levels of the children. Each child was able to make a "Build-a-Bear" circus animal after their adoption hearing as a tangible memory of their special day. Each parent and child kissed the heart before it was placed into the doll to symbolize the love of their new legal family.

Lycoming County celebrated its first Adoption Day event on November 12. During the course of the morning, 13 children were adopted into eight families. After the adoptions were finalized, a celebration was held at the Acacia Club in Williamsport, with a lunch buffet for the families and their guests, the judges, commissioners, caseworkers, Court Appointed Special Advocates volunteers, attorneys, and other members of the agency. Judges Richard Gray, Dudley Anderson and

Charles Greevy all spoke. In the family's honor, small trees were donated from the county to each family to symbolize their new family tree. Representatives from the local paper were present for the event, as well as television and radio news reporters.

Lehigh County celebrated National Adoption Month with an adoption celebration held at the Government Center on November 18. The county's annual event honors the families and workers who make adoptions happen. Lynn Kovich, Director of Human Services for Lehigh County, welcomed an audience of professionals and families, and Pamela Buehrle, Director of Lehigh County Children & Youth Agency, presented awards to individuals and families for their achievements relating to adoption and permanency for children.

Brenda Michael, adoption supervisor at Friendship House, was honored for her diligent and passionate work with adoptive families and also received the first Linda Lofft award, which is planned as an annual award. This award is in memory of Linda Lofft, a former Lehigh County adoption worker and adoptive parent, who lost her battle with cancer earlier in the year. Judge J. Brian Johnson of Lehigh County was recognized for his conscientious work in pursuing permanency for children and in looking for ways to streamline the legal process through his cooperation with the Children's Roundtable.

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Shawn and Yvonne Kreiner were honored as Adoptive Parents of the Year for their recent adoption of a sibling group of three girls. They proudly displayed family pictures and spoke of the joy brought to them by their beautiful daughters.

Three siblings, Keya, Trenton and Jonathan, who are legally free and waiting to be adopted, were celebrated for their resilience and optimism. Keya spoke for herself and her brothers and shared their desire to find a forever family and to have a mother and father to care for them.

The final award of the celebration went to 17-year-old Shanita, who was adopted in early 2007. She shared her relief and excitement about finally having a home and a mother after almost a decade of uncertainty and shifting placements in foster care. Refreshments were served after the celebration, and local news covered the event. A luncheon followed for the

honorees and for the adoption and permanency staff of Lehigh County.

Lancaster County held its annual adoption day festivities on November 20. Fourteen children, three of whom were part of a sibling group, were adopted by 10 families. The county had balloons and goodie bags for each child, including a photo album, an adoption day button and an adoption day candy bar. The courtrooms were filled with balloons and Judge Jay Hoberg spent time with each family, posing for pictures with all of them. The paralegals reported that it was a very special, happy day. The event was planned and hosted by the adoption workers. However, the LSI paralegals felt very satisfied just attending and assisting where possible, knowing that they were able to be a "behind the scenes" part of the children's journey to permanency.

Lackawanna County's Adoption Day event was held on November 21 in the

Orphans Court in Scranton, with 10 adoptions taking place. There was food, a magician for the kids and plenty of publicity.

Other counties held smaller events to recognize this month. For example, Centre County recognized November as Adoption Month by hosting an event at their local mall where they distributed brochures and information about adoption and had games for the kids. A larger event is held in May for foster parent recognition month at the courthouse in Bellefonte.

Despite the size of the event, every adoption finalization is precious to the child and family involved. We are so pleased that LSI could help to make each day special and more importantly, to be able to witness and share the joys that these families will always treasure. 



Children enjoyed getting their faces painted by local high school volunteers.



All of the children who were adopted were given the opportunity to help create and take home their own "Build-A-Bear."



Adoption of a sibling group



Kinship adoption of a sibling group



Adoption of an autistic teenager

PAE and Helpline Move to Seamless System of Service

by Jane Johnston, PAE Manager, SWAN

The Pennsylvania Adoption Exchange, PAE, and the SWAN Helpline are working together to improve services for our waiting children and prospective adoptive families.

In the past, both PAE coordinators and Helpline specialists took calls from families and provided them with information about children and referred families to the child's caseworker. Coordinators and specialists often spoke with the same families about children they saw on the Web site. To provide better services to our families, all phone calls from prospective or approved adoptive families will be directed to the Helpline immediately for assistance. PAE coordinators will focus their efforts on collaborating with children's workers to match children with families.

This improved collaboration between PAE and Helpline is creating a seamless system of services in the network. Approved families are now being provided with more specific details about a child's special needs when they contact Helpline. When Helpline provides these details initially, it enables the families to have a better understanding about the child and decide at an early stage of the adoption process whether they should pursue contacting the child's caseworker.

If a family is still interested in a particular child after speaking with Helpline and learning about that child's special needs, the family's caseworker will provide the family's profile to the child's caseworker. The child's caseworker, family caseworker and CSR worker, if applicable, will be kept informed about each family's level of interest in a particular child by the Helpline. To keep all parties informed, it is imperative that agencies keep the e-mail addresses for family and child caseworkers current with PAE. As Helpline follows up with families periodically, they will also notify families of a county's decision to review or consider their family profile.

Family and child caseworkers should follow normal procedures for notifying PAE when a family no longer wishes to be matched or a child is no longer available for adoption.

If you have additional questions about this new process, please contact Jane Johnston at PAE at (717) 231-5362 or Karen Oldham at the SWAN Helpline at (717) 558-1222. 

Myth-busting Night at the Lancaster Science Factory

by Kelly Myers, Matching Specialist, Bethanna

“Ask Me About Adoption” is what the bright purple T-shirts read that were worn by representatives of the Adoption Coalition of Lancaster County, ACLC, at the recent recruitment/celebration night at the Lancaster Science Factory on November 17, 2008. Adoptive families, recruited by the coalition agencies, also wore buttons with the same statement, encouraging new families from the community to ask questions and learn more about the adoption process.

ACLC is a coalition of seven agencies in the Lancaster County area who have come together to promote adoption awareness and better serve the children in the foster care system to achieve permanence. The coalition was excited to learn that the Office of Children and Youth, OCYF, was providing funds for agencies in Pennsylvania to promote adoption activities during National Adoption Month. The seven agencies worked diligently in just a few short weeks to put together a proposal of their idea to send to OCYF and to plan for the event once they realized that the money was available to them.

The event served as a combination of an adoption awareness night for families who were invited to the



Families and children enjoyed the day learning and playing together.

Science Factory for a free night of fun for the entire family, and an adoption celebration night for families who have already adopted who were invited to the event to mingle with the new families and enjoy the Science Factory

activities and food. A spread of desserts was available for the families to enjoy and the Science Factory activities peaked the interest of children and adults alike. The Science Factory was reserved especially for this event and provided a wonderful atmosphere for adoptive families, community families and adoption social workers to mingle.

Kate Eberz, adoption supervisor at the Lancaster County Children and Youth Agency, had been thinking about the

idea of “busting the myths” that society holds regarding special needs adoption. So the coalition created the myth-busting theme of the adoption awareness and celebration event. Common myths held about special needs adoption such as “it costs too much” and “single people can’t adopt” were busted during the evening with signs posted throughout the Science Factory and through hourly presentations to interested families detailing basic information about adoption.

Door prizes were awarded to several families including gift cards to Rockvale Square, Park City Mall and Chuck E Cheese; as well as gift baskets that were donated by Perkins Restaurant; and a one year membership donated by the Science Factory.

Most families found it very informative to talk to social workers and adoptive families and found the evening to be very enjoyable overall. The biggest myth that was busted during the evening was that special needs adoption is too expensive. In reality, it is often at no or very little cost to the family, especially when compared to private or international adoption which can be quite costly.



Stefan, who was adopted a few years ago, proudly displays his “Ask me about Adoption” pin

A student from Elizabethtown College helped ACLC to plan for the event and compiled the results of the evaluations into a research project. The coalition enjoyed the help and support that the student provided in the advertising and planning for the event and hopes to use other students in similar capacities in the future.

ACLC is very interested in making the event an annual one, in order to promote adoption awareness in the Lancaster County area and recruit families. Busting the

myths about special needs adoption is an ongoing goal of the coalition so that more families will be comfortable in going through the process to adopt and provide permanence to Pennsylvania’s waiting children. 

Milestones Along the Way: From Post Adoption to Post Permanency

by Phyllis Stevens, Director, Together as Adoptive Parents (TAP)

We all know that the lifelong impact of adoption may require members of adoptive families to want or need additional support. One of the greatest milestones for families came in 1997. This was the year that SWAN sent out a Request for Proposals for post adoption services. Proposals were received from all across the State; eight were chosen for funding. Families would now have the opportunity to get good adoption books at libraries. An adoption competency training video was made for medical professionals. To help support groups with adult and children's activities, a manual was developed called "Following Adoption," which still can be downloaded from TAPlink's website, www.taplink.org.

As more and more children and youth were being placed with relatives or in other permanent legal custodianship homes, another milestone emerged – Post-Permanency Services. These ongoing services are seen as prevention services in order to enhance permanency in families. The three services include:

- Advocate for Post-Permanency Services
- Support Group
- Respite Care

The decision to fund post-permanency services acknowledges that there is a need for these services. Most families will reach a crisis before seeking help. By that time the parent has reached the heart-wrenching decision to give up on the child. These services are in place to prevent a family from getting to that point.

Post-Permanency services really do work, just asks Jenell Lassiter, who received our first TAP Award. The word "Together" means, "jointly, as one, in concert." It does not matter what difficulties Jenell may be facing in her own family; she is always willing to lend a helping hand to any member in need. That is why TAP chose to honor Jenell for National Adoption Awareness Month. 🌱



Phyllis Stevens presents Jenell Lassiter with the first TAP Award for her work with Post-Permanency Services.

Face2Face: Pennsylvania's Teen Matching Parties

by Julie Marks, Project Manager, National Adoption Center

Thirty-two of Pennsylvania's waiting teenagers interested in being adopted and 39 approved adoptive families interested in becoming parents to a teenager attended the National Adoption Center's, NAC, Face2Face teen matching events in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. The NAC, through funding from the Department of Welfare and the Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network, SWAN, had the opportunity to provide these events for the first time in Pennsylvania.

Prior to each Matching Party, participating teens and their workers met twice during pre-event meetings. The purpose of these pre-event meetings was to help the teens get comfortable with the idea of meeting prospective parents and to have a preview of what would take place at the match party itself. Another goal was to help the youth feel more empowered and assume a leadership role at the match party.

At the two Philadelphia pre-events, we were excited to meet 22 teens who came from several different counties on the eastern side of the state. Our meetings were facilitated by Christopher Ridenhour, a dynamic group leader experienced in working with youth. Dancers from "Faceless, Inc," the hip-hop dance group that performed at the Philadelphia Matching Party on March 28, 2009 also came to the pre-events and got the teens excited about the upcoming performance. Many of the children volunteered to get up and learn "the robot," "the funky chicken," "the moonwalk" and a few other classic hip-hop dance moves. The teens reported having a good time and felt ready to meet the parents.

On the big day of the Philadelphia Matching Party, teens and families arrived bright and early. Some of the parents were just as excited and nervous as the teens. Christopher Ridenhour, our Master of Ceremonies, helped everyone to quickly realize that we are all people and that we all have things in common and some things that are different about each of us. We spent the next several hours engaged in different activities designed to help the teens and adoptive parents meet, mix and mingle. After getting to know each other better, eating lunch together and watching the hip-hop dance performance, we ended the day by presenting two gifts to each teen: a framed certificate of appreciation for the youth's leadership and involvement and a t-shirt that pictured a famous person the youth told us he or she admired.

We received so many inquiries on the teens that we knew we had accomplished one of our main goals – to confirm that prospective adoptive parents really do want to adopt teenagers. Eighteen of the 22 youth received at least one inquiry. Another goal was to make sure that the teens enjoyed the experience of participating in these events, no matter what. The "teen interviews" we conducted with each teen at the end of the day gave us an idea of what they thought and felt about their experience with the Matching Party. The teens were asked how they would describe the day to someone else and among the comments were: "It was awesome. It was fun.," "Amazing and you learned to be yourself," and "If you don't come you are missing out on great fun and humor."

The bowling party that we held as the follow-up event gave several parents and teens another chance to get better acquainted and to begin building relationships. Several of the teens wanted to know if we would be getting together again!

In Pittsburgh we offered a parallel set of events. The NAC team and Christopher Ridenhour were thrilled to again find a great group of teens ready and willing to participate in this opportunity to meet prospective parents. Just like in the Philadelphia pre-event meetings, the youth met twice prior to attending the Pittsburgh Matching Party, which was held on May 9, 2009. Christopher helped the teens to get ready for the Matching Party by orienting them to the kind of activities we would do at the event and by helping them to feel comfortable with the upcoming party. The party, which followed a similar format to the Philadelphia one, yielded positive responses from both the teens and the families.

Another post-event bowling party was held following the Pittsburgh Matching Party. The turnout was small but the families who attended were very impressed with the young people who were there.

Everyone knows that children, including teens, need permanence and connections to caring adults. These Matching Parties gave the teens a voice and an opportunity to show the adoptive parents who attended how lucky they would be to have them as part of their families. We are still following up on the outcomes of these two wonderful parties.

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The outcomes of these parties are astounding, and additional follow-up with caseworkers will continue. These are some of the highlights:

- A total of 32 youth and 40 families participated in both events. Families expressed interest in 27 of those youth after attending the parties.
- Families are still exchanging information with seven of the youth, some of whom have multiple families interested in them.
- One youth has been matched with a family and five of the youth have started visits with families they met at the party.

One of the prospective adoptive parents, Cheryle L., had been looking forward to meeting the right child or even a sibling group ever since her family profile was completed. She was thinking about adopting a pre-teen or young teen. After participating in the Philadelphia Matching Party, it turned out that two different sixteen-year-old boys really impressed her. Cheryle attended the post-event bowling party with the teens to get to know them a little better. After this meeting, Cheryle exchanged information with the worker of one of the boys and is about to begin visits with him. 🙌



The Pittsburgh youth show off their certificates after the event.



The Philadelphia youth had a great time at their pre-event meeting.

My Life is....

by Kelly Myers, Matching Specialist, Bethanna

On November 13, 2008, the Delaware Valley Adoption Council, DVAC, sponsored a heart-warming evening of workshops for adoptive families in celebration of National Adoption Month. The event was funded with money received from the Office of Children, Youth and Families as part of the statewide effort to celebrate adoption in November. Families who have adopted through DVAC agencies were invited to the event to come together, relax and celebrate with each other. The event was held at the Chester County Government Services Building in West Chester, Pennsylvania. The evening was kicked off with a warm reception and registration and pizza dinner for everyone to enjoy. Dinner was followed by concurrent workshops for all members of the family.

The parent workshop entitled “My Life is My Family—How Laughter Can Help” was led by Lynn Hammer of Concern. This session was attended by 16 adults who completed overwhelmingly positive evaluations regarding the entire evening and their workshop. The adults commented that they were led to the event because of the topic and the opportunity to celebrate their adoption. They reported that they found support from both the facilitator and from other adults in the group. All agreed that they benefited from the practical suggestions on how to use laughter as a stress reliever in parenting.

There was also a teen workshop led by Irma S. Holland of Bethanna that offered a unique experience in helping teens to look at their lives through song. “My Life is a Song” was a mini song-writing workshop that encouraged teens to feel a sense of pride about the story that they have to offer to their

families, themselves and this world. It was a way to help the teens to help others understand their reality even when filled with a wide array of emotions such as happiness, sadness, excitement and anxiety. There were nine teens in attendance who all gave overwhelmingly positive evaluations for this workshop session as well.

The children’s workshop entitled “My Life is a Story” was facilitated by Kelly Myers from Bethanna. There were 10 children in attendance. As part of the celebration, children enjoyed excerpts from the book, “Adoption Stories for Young Children” and closed out the evening with an original craft activity created by two Bethanna adoption workers. The children created Story Tube kaleidoscopes to celebrate their own stories and their individuality. DVAC also offered a play group as part of the evening’s offerings for children under the age of four.

Thirteen DVAC members worked together to bring the event together under the leadership of Irma S. Holland. A special thank you goes out to Louis Couderc, Louise Shea, Bethany Hester, Shadell Quinones, Dawn Kollonige, MaryLou Beck, Jeanine Almario, Nina Eppley, Anne Kybert and Carrie Ramsey. There was also a representative from the Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network in attendance. The event boasted special door prizes for the adults and great giveaways for the children and teens. Everyone had a splendid time and families reported that they were glad that they attended the event despite the rainy weather. 🌧️



An adopted sibling group enjoyed a pizza dinner during the event.



Jeanine Almario from Friends Association lends a hand in the child care room during the event.



Shadell Quinones from Chester County Children and Youth Agency and Kanerah had a great time doing an arts and craft project in the children’s group room.

Adoption and Foster Care Night at the Laserdome

by Elisa Esh, Director, Diakon Adoption and Foster Care

Diakon Adoption and Foster Care hosted the Diakon Adoption and Foster Care Night at the Laserdome in Manheim on October 27, 2008. This event was in partnership with the SWAN Older Child Matching Initiative, OCMI, grant partners, Bethanna and Project STAR, and was supported by funds contributed by the Department of Public Welfare. The goal was to create awareness around November, National Adoption Month, and special needs adoption as well as to facilitate a matching event for waiting families. Nine children from the SWAN OCMI grant were present at the event. Several of those children had “blind dates” with prospective adoptive families that night. The remainder interacted with waiting families throughout the night while playing laser tag and video games, trick or treating, and eating dinner. Four other children from the SWAN Network who are available for adoption attended and enjoyed the evening which gave them added hope that they too would find their forever family.

Eight affiliate agencies and Allegheny County Children and Youth Agency attended the event and displayed materials for waiting families and the general public. Powerpoint presentations were played at half hour intervals in the Laserdome which included all 64 children within the OCMI grant and five other children from the SWAN Network. Nineteen families were present from the general public and were provided information about Diakon Adoption and Foster Care, the OCMI youth and SWAN brochures. Thirty-four waiting families attended the event and the matching event with their children and relatives. In total, 222 attended the exciting event and reported that they enjoyed being able to interact with the waiting youth.

Both the event and the owner of the Laserdome, Karl Ross, who hosted the event were featured on Channel 27 ABC news station during the “Hometown Heroes” segment. Valerie Pritchett shot two “Val’s Kids” segments with children from the OCMI grant at the Laserdome and did separate shots with other youth in the program to encourage viewers to come down to the Laserdome to learn more about special needs adoption and the youth who are waiting for a “forever family.” Over 1,500 flyers were distributed to elementary schools local to the Laserdome to further increase general public attendance.

Elisa Esh, Diakon Adoption and Foster Care, stated, “It was a great venue for us to bring prospective adoptive families together with our waiting youth. Some families brought their birth children, relatives, nephews, nieces, etc. and they were able to interact with our waiting youth to get a true picture of our youth and their strengths. The biggest piece of this, for myself, and the recruiters who work with children in the OCMI grant, is that during these types of events, families can really see that our waiting youth are real and just like most children their age. That, in itself, is a huge gift to us as we recruit because it is so much more three-dimensional than a flyer or a Power Point.”

If you would like to learn more information about the youth participating in the SWAN Older Child Matching Initiative who are in need of “forever families,” please contact Elisa Esh at 717-724-7979 or by e-mail at eshe@diakon.org.



Jennifer Bircher and Elisa Esh from Diakon Adoption and Foster Care pose with Brittney, an OCMI youth



Dashawn, another OCMI youth, having fun at the Laserdome!

It's Their Life

by Stephanie Oliver, Coach, Achieving Independence Center

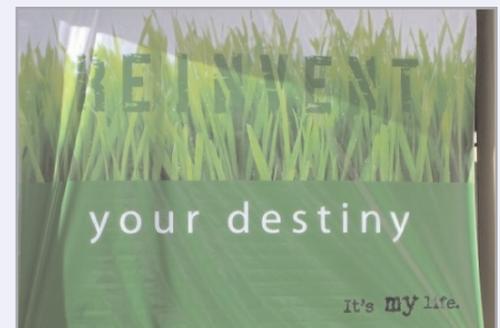
From October 31, 2008 through November 2, 2008, hundreds of youth in foster care, alumni of care, caregivers, advocates and child welfare workers from across the country gathered at the Renaissance Hollywood Hotel in Hollywood, California for the 6th Annual Its My Life Conference. The three day event was full of empowerment, fellowship, networking and fun. The Achieving Independence Center (AIC) was proud to have had three youth attend this year's conference. Escorted by Coach Stephanie Oliver, current AIC members Sharon, age 19 and Ammina, age 17 and AIC alumni, Rachel, age 21 were selected to share in this wonderful opportunity and experience.

Conference participants selected from a variety of workshops and special events designed to guide and uplift them as they transition out of the foster care system and prepare for adulthood. The theme of this year's conference was "Rewrite, Renew and Reinvent." For many youth growing up in the foster care system, it is easy to become discouraged by the situations that they are put into and let their past dictate their futures. Throughout the conference, youth were encouraged to **Rewrite** their next chapter, **Renew** their Passions, and **Reinvent** their destinies. The idea of paving one's own path in life was well received by the three young women who attended the conference.

Rachel is currently a senior at Penn State University, where she is majoring in journalism. After graduating, Rachel's goal is to work for an entertainment public relations firm. With her resume in hand, the conference offered Rachel the opportunity to network with some entertainment industry professionals during singer, Usher's, "New Look" mini-camp. The goal of the New Look workshops was to teach youth business skills, marketing concepts and introduce them to professionals in the entertainment field as they share their experiences and insights. As Rachel prepares for life after college and entering the work force, she will be able to use the knowledge gained from the conference to assist her as she moves towards a successful career.

Sharon is sophomore at Widener University majoring in accounting. The conference served as a reminder to Sharon that she was headed in the right direction. Sharon met and spoke with representatives from Foster Club, the national network for young people in foster care, and learned more about how her involvement in the club could help encourage, educate, motivate and inform other youth in care through the sharing of her experiences. Sharon was surprised by the number of youth who on the outside appeared to be very different but shared stories similar to her own.

For Ammina, the conference was exciting and inspiring. Ammina is a first year student studying nursing at Howard University. The trip to California was the first time she had traveled by airplane. Flying out of Washington, D.C., Ammina faced her fears and, by herself, bravely took her first plane ride. Each workshop she attended and every person she met seemed to bring new feelings of pride and acceptance for her. Ammina walked away from the conference feeling more grounded and confident in who she is as a person, despite her past experiences.



Inspirational banner displayed at the conference.



The UPS Cyber Café was a popular place for the youth who attended the Conference to meet and socialize.

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The 2008 “It’s my Life” Conference gave youth in care the chance to interact with one another without feeling like they had to explain their situation or hide it. Each session gave these young people the opportunity to share their stories and life experiences, with peers and supporters who could identify with their struggles, hopes and successes. Many youth in care aren’t given the opportunity to be open about their lives without feeling embarrassed, ostracized or judged. For some, words of encouragement and praise aren’t often heard. Casey Family Programs, along with other partnering agencies and company sponsors, did an excellent job in creating a space where Ammina, Rachel, Sharon and the other youth in attendance felt accepted, connected and hopeful for promising futures. 

aroundthestate

PAINTING FOR PREVENTION ACROSS PENNSYLVANIA

by Beth Bitler, Program Director, PFSA

In April 2009, for the second time, Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance, PFSA, observed Child Abuse Prevention Month with a “Painting for Child Abuse Prevention” project. The project is designed to build public awareness of child abuse and the important role of family support programs in prevention.

Local organizations came up with ideas for the design of the murals, and artists from Heart to Art, a woman-owned arts education organization, came up with sketches on mural boards. Then, members of the community, families, children and teens collaborated to paint the murals. This year, the events were held in Harrisburg at the State Museum of Pennsylvania, in Allentown at the Lehigh County Government Building, in Scranton at the Lackawanna County Courthouse Square and in Uniontown at the Fayette County Courthouse. It is estimated that over 2,000 people painted on the murals.

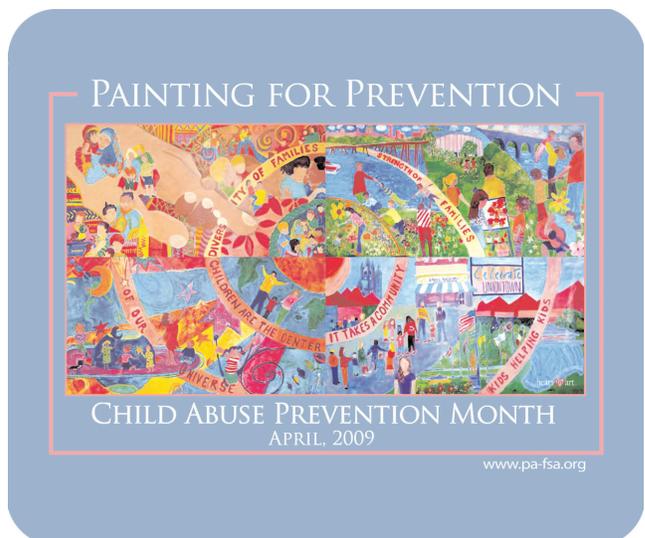
Each mural had a different theme. Harrisburg’s theme was “The Strength of Families,” Allentown’s theme was “Diversity of Families,” Scranton’s theme was “Children are the Center of Our Universe” and Uniontown’s theme was “It Takes a Community.”

During the month of April, PFSA distributed over 100 copies of the “Strengthening Families and Communities” book, approximately 6,000 blue ribbon pins and hundreds of brochures on positive parenting.

Special thanks goes to our partner organizations: Department of Public Welfare Office of Children, Youth and Families, along with Childline/Abuse Registry and the Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network, SWAN; PA Children and Youth Administrators Association; PA Coalition Against Domestic Violence, PCADV; PA

Coalition Against Rape, PCAR; PA Catholic Conference; Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children; Protect Our Children Committee; State Museum of Pennsylvania; Employment Opportunity and Training Center/ Scranton Family Center; Children’s Advocacy Center of Northeastern PA; Project Child, Program for Women and Families; Exchange Club; Crime Victims Center of Fayette County; Families United Network; Families United Network for Children and Youth; Graystone Bank; PNC Bank and several individual donors.

For information on how you can support prevention efforts in your community or to learn how to become a part of “Painting for Prevention” in 2010, please contact PFSA at 1-800-448-4906 or at www.pa-fsa.org. 



All four murals show a common theme – strong communities help prevent child abuse.

Older Child Matching Initiative Youth Find Fun, Friendship and Connections

by Angie Gillen, OCMI Child and Family Recruiter, Diakon Adoption and Foster Care

On March 28, 2009 the National Adoption Center hosted a Face2Face match party in Philadelphia, with the intent of helping introduce 22 waiting youth ages 12 and older to 35 potential approved adoptive families. The event consisted of having the attendees participate in ice-breaker activities, eat lunch together, watch a hip-hop dance presentation and observe some of the youth in a circle discussion about their lives.

The youth who took part in the match party know that this event was about much more than having a great time. It was about fostering hope, building connections and finding the courage to share some of themselves with others. The party was a unique opportunity for the families and youth since typically, matching takes place over a photograph and a child profile, with the children themselves having very little opportunity to represent themselves or learn about families on their own.

Of the 22 youth attending the Face2Face party, 13 were part of the SWAN Older Child Matching Initiative, OCMI. The OCMI youth committed a large portion of their own time to the event, which included two pre-event planning meetings and a significant amount of travel. The youth were enthusiastic about having the opportunity to interact with other teens who are also searching for families and they took time to share some of their life stories with one another. One of the teens became emotional during his ride home from the first event and told his caseworker that he didn't

realize how lucky he was to have people who care about him – that there are so many other children who have no one in their lives. The sense of camaraderie and cooperation between the teens as they prepared for the event shone through in the way they talked to, laughed with and supported one another.

So many changes occurred for the youth attending the event and the pre-planning meetings. We watched as shy and withdrawn teens stepped out of their comfort zone to get up in front of the group and try hip-hop dancing; we marveled as teens who have a history of struggling with authority and rules took on leadership roles; and we were impressed by the caring and consideration the youth showed to others who had learning or physical challenges.

The matching party was a great success, families inquired about most of the youth who participated.

As the CFR recruiter for many of those youth, I have to add that I am one of the unexpected beneficiaries of this event. Traveling with my kids to the meetings and to the party, and supporting them through the whole adventure, gave me such great insight into who they are and what they have to offer the world. I saw first hand their potential to grow, to give of themselves and to connect with others. These are children whom any parent would be blessed to have as a part of their family, and I am grateful for the opportunity the Face2Face matching event provided for the youth who attended. 🙌



OCMI youth who attended the Face2Face Matching Party pose for a quick photo after the event.

Family Group Decision Making: Giving Families Hope

by Danielle Reese, Washington County FGDM Coordinator, Try-Again Homes

The Truancy Intervention Program, TIPP, is aimed at preventing truancy by assisting with the identification, referral and assessment of high-risk students. The main objective of TIPP is to identify and assist in keeping “at risk” students in school, to reduce and to prevent juvenile citations, petitions and the placement of children out of their homes.

Austin was referred to TIPP in the fall of 2007. At the time of the referral Austin’s attendance was only a few days missed. Austin’s mother blamed sickness, especially migraines, saying that Austin was forgetting to turn in excuses; she was quick to blame and use excuses. As time went on Austin continued to miss school and he did not seem to have many friends and was self-conscious about his body. He did not speak up in class or socialize during school; he was timid and tended to hide behind his long hair. Austin had a lot of anger issues along with his truancy. He became violent at home, either by breaking items in the home or at one point hitting his mother. Austin’s mother did not seem to have the motivation to follow through with having him evaluated and did not provide rules and consequences for his behaviors. The family was feeling hopeless and was expecting to get referred to children and youth services due to Austin’s truancy issues. The TIPP

counselor referred the family to Family Group Decision Making, FGDM, in the spring of 2008. “I feel that FGDM gives families new hope and a reason to care. All my experiences with FGDM have been positive and I thought this was a great opportunity for Austin’s family,” stated the TIPP counselor.

The family participated in a FGDM conference. As a result, the child now has developed a comfortable self-esteem. He has turned his life around as he is sociable and making new friends and is participating in class. Austin has not missed any school days this year and has become a leader in class. At home, Austin’s mother has established rules and consequences for Austin and has been following through with them when necessary. With the motivation and confidence that was established at their FGDM conference, Austin and his family have a new outlook towards school and their lives. Austin has been building his relationships with his family members since the FGDM conference. “FGDM was great! It was what our family needed as it helped us out a lot,” declared Austin’s mother. FGDM has given this family the ground work to be able to handle whatever comes their way as a family and as a team. ✂✂

Northeast Matching Event

by Joyce Gardiner, Executive Coordinator, Children’s Service Center

The Children’s Service Center in Wilkes-Barre held a very successful matching event in Northeast Pennsylvania on May 14, 2009.

Twelve agencies from Scranton, Reading, Harrisburg, Southampton, Mechanicsburg, Hampton and Kingston attended the event. Our Wendy’s Wonderful Kids Recruiter had several adoptive resources interested in the children highlighted at the event.

It was a great opportunity for sharing and networking. Approximately 25 prospective families attended. There was ample food and beverages for all. Everyone gained information and support.

We are encouraged that this event will be held again next year. Spring is a beautiful time in Northeast Pennsylvania and a time for new beginnings. ✂✂

Highlighting an Older Child Matching Initiative Youth

by Angie Gillen, CFR Recruiter, Diakon Adoption and Foster Care

On December 29, 2008, 17 year-old Destiny, one of the SWAN Older Child Matching Initiative's, OCMI, amazing waiting children, learned that she was stronger and braver than she ever imagined. On this special day, Destiny participated in a taping of a Wednesday's Child segment, hosted by Vai Sikahema. The Wednesday's Child project highlights children who are searching for forever families by inviting them to participate in a day of fun activities and then airing it on a special segment on Philadelphia's NBC 10 news.

When Destiny was initially asked whether or not she would like to participate in the news taping, she was excited to have the opportunity. She and I discussed what kind of activity she would enjoy, and she decided that she would like to do something with arts and crafts. Destiny was very surprised when she learned that instead of a relaxing and calm artistic activity, Wednesday's Child arranged for her to take a snowboarding lesson at Camelback Mountain in the Poconos!

I telephoned Destiny to let her know what was planned and she was adamant about not snowboarding. She was sure that she would end up with broken bones and was certain that she wouldn't like it. After several phone calls to Mr. Sikahema, I was able to reassure Destiny that she would not have to snowboard if she did not want to. Once we arrived at beautiful Camelback Mountain, met Mr. Sikahema and took a tour led by Ricky Durst, of Camelback Public Relations, Destiny hesitatingly agreed to try the snowboarding lesson, reserving the right to stop if she didn't enjoy it. Although Destiny was still a little apprehensive, I could see the spark of interest was there for her.

With snow pants, gloves, boots and a snowboard provided to her by Camelback Mountain; a very cool Torino Olympics jacket loaned to her by Mr. Sikahema; and a great snowboarding instructor, Destiny was ready to head out to the slopes. She did a great job following her instructor's lead and was sliding down the hill on her snowboard in no time! My favorite part of the day was seeing the enormous smile on Destiny's face as she went down that hill for the first time and heard all of the applause from those of us watching. Destiny enjoyed the snowboarding so much that she asked if she could go down the hill one more time when the lesson ended!

After the snowboarding lesson, Destiny was interviewed by Mr. Sikahema. He told her how proud he was of her for overcoming her fears and taking on something new. Destiny

shared that she really does believe that "what doesn't kill you can only make you stronger," and that today's



Destiny receiving her Camel souvenir after a fun day of skiing.

adventures showed her once again how true that is. Vai Sikahema, Ricky Durst and even the cameraman, gushingly told Destiny how proud they were of her and what a good sport she was. Camelback Mountain gave Destiny a stuffed



Destiny poses with Vai Sikahema (left) and her ski instructor (right).

camel as a souvenir and let her keep her ski gloves and pants in the hopes that she would try snowboarding again some day.

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The Destiny I drove home that day was not the same girl I drove to the big mountain. This Destiny was proud, excited and confident. She loved that she had gained the respect of so many adults and was amazed by her own ability to express herself so well during her interview. She loved that she had gone outside her comfort zone and found that she could have fun taking on a new challenge.

This day is an amazing representation of who Destiny is. She is a young lady who is very protective of herself and can be guarded. With the patience, support and encouragement of people who care about her, the amazing potential Destiny has within her shines through.

Any family interested in being considered as a match for Destiny should contact Angie Gillen, SWAN OCMI Child Focused Recruitment Specialist, Diakon Adoption and Foster Care at (484) 300-2074 or gillena@diakon.org.



Destiny showing what a great time she had snowboarding!

Governor's Newsletter

The Rendell Administration is committed to creating a first-rate public education system, protecting our most vulnerable citizens and continuing economic investment to support our communities and businesses. To find out more about Governor Rendell's initiatives and to sign up for his weekly newsletter, visit his Web site at: www.pa.gov.

Savethedate

[2010 SWAN/Independent Living Spring Quarterly Meeting](#)

April 8 at the Radisson Lackawanna Station Hotel in Scranton

April 14 at the Holiday Inn in Clarion

April 15 at the Comfort Inn in Monroeville

April 21 at the Central Penn Conference Center in Enola

April 28 at the Embassy Suites in Philadelphia

April 29 at the Holiday Inn in Fort Washington