

# Lifesharing program needs participants

by Kathleen Bisset

When families or single people share their homes and lives with developmentally disabled individuals, social care agencies term it lifesharing. Lifesharing includes sharing goals, activities, holidays and daily life with another person. It gives a permanent home to those who may have never celebrated a birthday. It promises love and support to individuals who need and deserve them. And it can create long-lasting friendships that transcend social boundaries.

"I think it's the greatest job ever," said Nicki Reich, a Rebersburg resident and the only person in the county who has opened her home to someone through the Lifesharing program.

Josephine, 66, and Janet, 42, both with mental retardation, are members of the family for Reich. The family has shared their lives and home with Josephine for 11 years and Janet for six years.

"This is normal for us," said Reich.

"You're basically adding onto your family. It's wonderful."

Three organizations in Centre County provide Lifesharing services: Skills of Central Pennsylvania, Community Service Group and IFC Mental Retardation Services in Huntingdon County. Skills has placements throughout Blair, Cambria, Clearfield, Huntingdon, Mifflin, Juniata and York-Adams.

Lifesharing in Pennsylvania has been around since 1982, yet Centre County residents have not embraced the program and 12 people here continue to wait for someone or some family to become their Lifesharing provider.

Sarah Shaw, Lifesharing director for skills since 1988, knows the difficulties of recruiting in Centre County.

"It's too hard to find people to do Lifesharing," Shaw said. "I've tried mailing ads, getting the word out, even standing at the mall." Although Skills has sent out postcards, had functions, even made a television commercial regarding Lifesharing, they



Photo by Lori Lange  
Janet Leigey, a Lifesharing program member, lives with Rebersburg resident Nicki Reich, the only Centre County home provider.

have not received the response they were hoping for here.

"It's a great opportunity to make a difference in someone's life; to make a new friend. And it gives the family a chance to work at home," said Shaw.

The process of learning about and committing to the program is a deliberate and

supportive one. The interested home provider is matched with the person through personal meetings, thorough training for both parties and multiple visits. They start at a neutral location, eventually move on to home visits and then overnight visits, all assisted by agency staff.

"Visits can take months so people get to know each other, form a relationship and are sure that it is a good match," said Shaw. "We teach the potential family about the person and have them talk to the people who know them best." Additionally, there is an assessment which lists the individual's capabilities.

Debbie Woolford, Lifesharing Program Specialist for Skills, was so inspired by Lifesharing's mission that she switched jobs six years ago to her current position. Yet, like Shaw, Woolford has noted the difficulties in finding individuals or families to embrace Lifesharing.

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# Park Forest Elementary teaches democracy

by Tunomukwathi Asino

Students at Park Forest Elementary School are learning what it means to be active participants in a democracy, lessons that have won the school national recognition and motivated students to collective action.

While the trend in public education has moved toward preparing students for the workplace, Principal Donnan Stoicovy is preparing them to become active citizens in a civil society.

"I still believe that the purpose of public education is to help students to be ready to live in a democracy and be part of that," Stoicovy said. "How do you learn about a democracy unless you live a democracy?"

From helping to write the rules for homework to creating a more pleasant lunchroom, from improving recycling efforts to collecting books for children in Africa, first through fifth grade students have been involved and often initiate and lead the

process.

Stoicovy explained that it's not students making all the decisions about the curriculum or the school. Formal classes provide many opportunities as well.

"Social studies is really important; how do you get along with people, how you act in a democracy," she said. "Right now it often feels like a lot of our legislators and politicians don't have really good lessons in how to disagree with one another and we want to teach kids how to do that."

When there is an issue, Stoicovy said students will write or e-mail her or ask to have lunch with her.

Some students wrote letters asking for a compost bin in the teachers' lounge, for example.

One of the students' letters read: "I think we need a compost bin in the teachers' lounge. Can you please put your compost



Photo by Megan Fricker  
Park Forest Elementary students Heather Haller (left) and Maia Egan show off their recycling efforts in their posters.

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# Technology allows blind people to drive cars

by Joel Solkoff

Imagine racing a Ferrari F430 (worth \$406,000) at nearly 182 miles per hour and being blind since the age of three. This event took place last month at an airport in Turkey where Metin Fenturk, a folksinger, broke the Guinness "world record for fastest unaccompanied blind driver" previously held by a British manufacturer. On winning, Fenturk said, "I don't know if there are any words to describe this feeling. I am completely happy. It was really hard, like a dance with death."

On a less-than-pedestrian note, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) has made a major contribution to the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) challenge:

Design an automobile for an individual who is totally blind to drive safely to and from work by oneself.

"Can you imagine a blind person behind the wheel of a car?" the narrator of a video produced by Virginia Tech asks. "Well today it may not be long before you won't need to imagine." Virginia Tech's vehicle was driven by a person who is totally blind and successfully passed a parking lot driving course of considerable complexity.

Virginia Tech's Steven Mackay, at the engineering college, told me this month two Ford Hybrids are arriving to be retrofitted for people who cannot see. I have been trying frantically to understand the intricacies involved with this technology. My mind is overflowing with technical details I do not yet understand. Meanwhile, Mackay's clear



*From  
Where I Sit*

explanation will have to suffice:

"This laser sensor, mounted on the front of the...vehicle, operates similar to sonar. It sends out a laser beam that will bounce back to the device as it hits an obstacle. The sensor then figures out the distance to the obstacle by measuring the time of flight of the laser beam. As the laser sweeps the environment, the computer constructs a map of all obstacles around the vehicle."

Here in State College, a discussion with Cary Supalo provides context to encouraging developments for career training for blind students and how Virginia Tech technology energized an NFB science camp when camp members lined up eagerly for their turn to drive. Supalo is president of the local chapter of the NFB, but he is best known for his Penn State career in chemistry. Supalo has a master's degree on the subject at Penn State and is expected soon to obtain a doctorate and a job as a professional chemist.

Supalo's work to encourage blind children to take math, science and engineering courses has been exceptional. As someone who has recently begun a job [technically "a job training program" with the opportunity of a permanent position], I look with hope to Supalo's lead.

My job for the Altoona-based Blair/Clearfield Association for the Blind is to find jobs for people who want to work

but cannot see. Most people who are blind in Altoona and want work do not have the educational background to do anything but the most menial work. Altoona has a surplus of "able-bodied" unemployed

workers who can't find work. On the order of the ladder, in these still difficult economic times, people with disabilities are at the bottom. The immediate solution is to work to improve the economic situation as a whole throughout central Pennsylvania. As the expression goes, "All boats rise with a high tide."

Meanwhile, the orchestration of Virginia Tech's successful test has Supalo's handwork written all over it. Supalo is an energetic leader. When I visited Supalo's office, he was developing professionally required tests a blind chemist can perform independently. Supalo, who is charming and astoundingly energetic, comes closer to anyone I have met to having the charisma to lead the emerging disability rights movement—a movement that badly needs leaders.

The Jernigan Research Institute wrote the following about Supalo: "His loves are helping blind students expand their comfort zones, assisting them to stretch their minds



to go beyond societal limitations placed on them since birth and encouraging them to strive to follow their dreams."

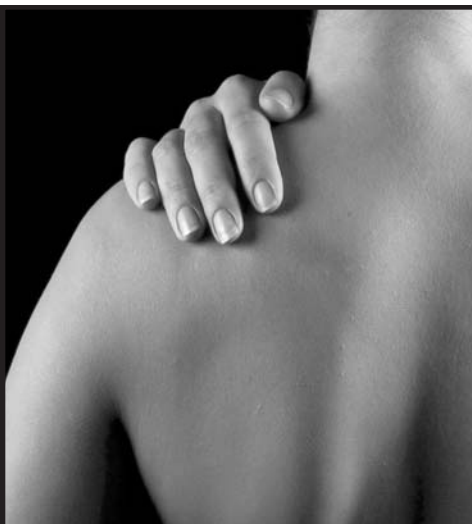
The best job a disabled person can have is one that is part of a career—well-paid, stable, leading to advancement and providing profession rewards. Our disability community through central Pennsylvania must work vigorously to change our area's education system so students graduate from high school after mastering basic requirements so becoming a scientist is an achievable goal. As a society, we are wasting the talent of the physically disabled whatever their individual career goals. This waste is not only a crime; it is bad for the economy.

—Joel Solkoff, author of *The Politics of Food*. Contact him at [jsolkoff@gmail.com](mailto:jsolkoff@gmail.com). See the cars run at Joel's blog: [voicesweb.org/joelsolkoff](http://voicesweb.org/joelsolkoff)



Totally blind Ishaan Rostogi, 15, right, navigates a course at the National Federation of the Blind science youth camp last month.

Photo used with permission by Virginia Tech.



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A monthly, tax-free stipend is provided to the caregivers, the amount of which differs depending on how much care the individual needs.

“It’s not going to get you rich,” said Woolford. “But it’s a way of life.”

Additionally, with State College, a town with a largely transient population, the largest metropolitan area in Centre County, finding people to participate in the program is difficult.

“With the university here, every year we struggle in Centre County,” said Deb Tate, assistant administrator for the Centre County Office of Mental Health/Mental Retardation-Drug and Alcohol. “We try to get the word out, to educate people on opening their lives.”

But for the one person who has opened her home, it’s a mystery why more don’t.

“I think they would find it so rewarding,” said Reich. “I just don’t understand why

more people don’t do it.”

Reich has three children of her own, one of whom experienced severe head trauma and brain injury from a car accident at the age of six.

“I needed a job where I could be at home,” Reich said. Lifesharing gave Reich the opportunity to work from home and provide for both Josephine and Janet. “You get so much out of it,” she said. “You’re able to make a difference in someone’s life.”

“They might not have ever had the chance to be in a family,” Woolford said of Josephine, Janet and others with developmental disabilities.

“Joey had never had a birthday party, she had been institutionalized her whole life,” Reich said. “Now we celebrate her birthday. And we still have Santa Claus!”

Reich said her children have become more open, understanding people due to their interesting family dynamic. Josephine is non-verbal, which sometimes scared friends of Reich’s children while growing up. Yet, even her young grandchildren are

understanding and aware, and know just when Josephine might need a hug.

“It’s such an advantage for my kids, they don’t look on those with disabilities any different,” she said.

Families or individuals who provide Lifesharing are supported by a case manager who tracks progress and goals, and keeps up with the individuals, families and the agency.

Paul Zimmerman, a point of contact for Lifesharing at the county, said the state requires monthly visits to the person being cared for, as well as a home visit for the provider every three months. The monthly visits can be during community events, at a day program if the person attends on, or during normal daily activities and events. Skills also has 24-hour on-call staff for immediate assistance.

Additionally, if the caregiver needs a break or needs someone to watch the individual while they are away, a Substitute Care Provider is an option.

“We can pay another person to temporar-



Photo by Lori Lange  
Janet Leigey (left) and her Lifesharing provider Nicki Reich.

ily care for the individual if the Lifesharer needs a break, has a date, is ill, etc.,” noted

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in it like paper and fruit. Are you willing to do it so you can compost in the teachers' lounge? Please! Our teacher told us the teachers' lounge does not have a compost."

Another group wanted the lunch salad to change. Fifth grade teacher Jennifer Cody explained that one of her students was lactose intolerant but loved salad and was very frustrated by the salad because it contained a lot of shredded cheese.

The student was discussing this with a friend who was a Muslim and she had a similar problem; she couldn't eat the salad because it had ham and she couldn't eat pork. Another girl was a vegetarian and could not choose that salad because of the meat. Some of the students that did not have any issue with the salad wanted to be helpful and were very outspoken, Cody said.

The girls went to Cody and asked if they could do something about it. Cody encour-



Photo by Megan Fricker  
Student Kate Selleck recycles by dispensing plastic bottles in proper receptacles.

aged them to come up with their own plan. Now they have implemented it, speaking in front of the entire school about the issue and going from classroom to classroom surveying other students' salad prefer-

"I think anytime you can empower children, that's a good thing."  
--Ron Meyers

ences. They took the plan they found consensus for - salad with a selection of toppings on the side - to the cafeteria manager, asked clarifying questions and are now busy developing a presentation for the head of the food department in the school district.

Cody hopes the district makes concessions, even if they are small. She said the students are shooting for the stars hoping to change the salad offerings district-wide.

Recycling is also another issue that students at Park Forest Elementary School are passionate about. Third grade teacher Ron Meyers and his students were talking about recycling when his class of children took the initiative to help recycle some of the plastic milk bottles the school uses.

So far, he said they have collected thousands of milk bottles. Meyers explained how that project was then used as a learning tool, taking the information gained while recycling and implementing it in math lessons including estimation, counting and sorting. It developed into a research project, where students learned how much energy it takes to create a pound of plastic, and then calculated how much energy went into creating all the bottles used by the school.

"I think anytime you can empower children, that's a good thing," Meyers said.

And like with many schools, Park Forest students also get involved in humanitarian

projects. When the earthquake struck Haiti, students sold pins and donated the money to the Red Cross. Students learned about Haiti, where it was located and what it was like in Haiti. They also learned more about what an earthquake is, instructional support teacher Marion Wheland said.

"We jumped up and down in our places for a little over a minute, so that they can feel what it would be like to be in an earthquake that long," Wheland said.

Students also worked to raise books for a school in Swaziland, a country in Southern Africa. The project was called the "African Book Project" and was in collaboration with students from Penn State, Wheland said.

The goal was to collect between 1,000 and 2,000 books, but they ended up collecting 11,000 books, Wheland said. She explained that the project started after a former student teacher sent an e-mail informing staff members at the school that he was working with 900 students and 30 teachers and they had no books.

Last year, Park Forest Elementary School was recognized as a "school of success" by the Education Commission of the States (ECS), a nonprofit organization based in Denver, and the National Center for Learning and Citizenship (NCLC). The

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## Tribal dance at Kaarma



Photo by Kelsey Stratton

The Pepper Lotus Dance Troupe, led by Shannon Bishop, has been performing at Kaarma Indian Cuisine on every third Friday of the month for more than three years. Their tribal belly dances consist of group dances and duets.

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school was one of only 10 in the country receiving that designation.

“The schools were selected based on their support of five elements critical to the successful, school-based integration of service-learning - shown to lead to greater student achievement and success; leadership, curriculum and assessment, professional development, community-school partnerships and continuous improvement,” the announcement read. Park Forest Elementary received \$10,000 over two years to expand its service-learning initiatives.

Wheland explained that success is defined differently than the best scores and said success is how teachers are engaging students, including in decision-making.

“What we are doing is really to look at the civic engagement of students,” she said.

Principal Stoicovy agreed.



Photo by Megan Fricker

Some of the thousands of plastic bottles students are recycling.

“That’s part of our belief at the school,” she said. “Is helping children to see examples of being involved and being part of a democracy.”

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Shaw. “The Substitute Care Providers have to pass a screening process as well.”

“There is a lot of support for families who do Lifesharing,” said Tate. “Although it’s a big commitment, it teaches you so much to open your life in that way. You’re making someone’s life better while enriching your own.”

Lifesharing is a permanent process for families or individuals who are stable and secure with their lives. The program is looking for people who can make a long-term commitment, Shaw said, but the bene-

fits go both ways.

“It’s the ability to make a new friend and companion, and each benefits from the other,” said Shaw. “The provider benefits from the unique gifts and talents that the individual brings, and the individual is given a home and a family.”

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