

The Stargazer

Spring 2009

Project STAR

Monaca STAR Hosts Open House to Celebrate National Foster Care Month



Monaca staff members Debbie Henry, Kim Majors and Kaleesha Grant pose beside a Project STAR display.

What do comedian Eddie Murphy, singer Cher and NFL quarterback Daunte Culpepper all have in common? Aside from fame, all of these stars lived in foster homes as children and benefited from the love and nurturing of foster parents. Almost 19,000 children in Pennsylvania currently live in foster families and there are always more children who need the love and stability that a foster family can provide.

In celebration of national Foster Care Month, Project STAR's Beaver County office in Monaca sponsored an Open House on Monday, May 11. The event also emphasized the need for foster parents in the area. Kim Majors, manager of the Beaver County office states, "Foster parents are a critical piece to improving the well-being of children who are placed in foster care. Project STAR is excited about partnering with new prospective foster families who are open to providing safe and loving homes for children in need."

If you are interested in more information about becoming a foster parent with Project STAR, please call 412.244.3066 or check out our website at www.amazingkids.org.

Growing Families Through Adoption a Success; Many Potential Matches Made

The third annual Growing Families Through Adoption matching event that was held on March 12 at The Children's Institute was an exciting night for the 56 prospective adoptive families that attended. Twenty-seven potential "matches"—prospective families suited to the individual needs of waiting children—were identified.

Twenty-two agencies from western Pennsylvania were represented at the event, each showcasing a specific child or children who are part of the hundreds of Pennsylvania children who are waiting to be adopted.

In addition to agencies, this year's event marked the first time that resource organizations were featured; eleven local resources were represented in an effort to provide adoptive parents with tools and resources they'll need even after an adoption is finalized.

Project STAR would like to thank all the volunteers and contributors for helping to make this special event a success.

Letter from the Director

Patricia Saunders-Madison, PhD



The following is an excerpt from Dr. Pat's article, "Finding Permanency for Older Youth with Disabilities" that was included in a University of Minnesota School of Social Work publication.

In 1985, when Project STAR at The Children's Institute opened its doors, our focus was finding homes for medically fragile children. Over time, we have expanded our services to include teens with disabilities. Consequently, resource parents who wish to become an adoptive family with Project STAR, come with the expectation of bringing children that have disabilities into their homes. However, in some instances, due to the negative past experiences of older youth, the bonding in a family is difficult. The adoptive family learns quickly that access to post-adoption services is essential for the sake of the older youth as well as for the family.

Families are motivated to adopt teens when they understand the sheer number of teens waiting for families and the negative outcomes for their lives after leaving care without having found a permanent family, and when they know that supports are available to them even after the adoption is finalized. Project STAR emphasizes these key pieces of information when recruiting new families and includes a segment on adopting teens in the pre-service curriculum. Post-permanency services are offered to every Project STAR family to increase the chances of the family's long-term success.

Cultural awareness and the potential adoptive family's community are other key components that must be taken into consideration when seeking permanency for the older youth with disabilities. Will the older youth fit in or will his or her disabilities create isolation between himself and others? Is the school structured for special education classes? Is the special education department well-versed in educational law? Does the child wish to attend a faith-based institution? Is that important to the family under consideration? Does the family share some of the child's ethnic history? If not, is the family prepared, financially and emotionally, to involve the older youth in activities that will affirm his or her identity?

Supporting our adoptive and foster resource families is another critical factor in successfully placing "the older child." Annual recertification is required for all fostering and adoptive families. However, upon finalization or adoption, this requirement is no longer mandated unless the family chooses to begin the process again with another child. Families are encouraged to stay in touch with the agency through our Family Enrichment activities. These include our Fall Festival and Hayride, the Holiday Gift Drive, support groups and respite care. Those families who do not continue their involvement with Project STAR upon finalization often discover that once the tie is broken with our agency, they begin to feel alone and sometimes bewildered on how to manage their older youth's disabilities.

Families quickly find out how receptive the staff of Project STAR is to assist them with resources and listen to their concerns. Support from their former permanency specialist often can be enough to answer questions and promote networking with other adoptive families with older youth with disabilities. Increased cooperation with medical and mental health facilities also plays an important role in the successful placement of an older youth.

There is a lot of planning that occurs prior to matching a family with the older youth with disabilities. However, on the day the adoption is finalized, the smiles on the faces of the youth and their families make the work worthwhile. We also know that post-adoption support and programs will increase the chances of long-term success for these youth and families.

Staff Updates



Congratulations to **Bethany Leas** on the birth of her first child, daughter Jayden Harley on March 31. Jayden weighed 6 pounds, 6 ounces and was 18 1/2 inches long at birth.

Project STAR welcomes new staff member, **Melissa Logan** to the Pittsburgh office. Melissa graduated from IUP in 2003 and lives in Harrison City. Melissa was previously employed at Family Care for Children and Youth.

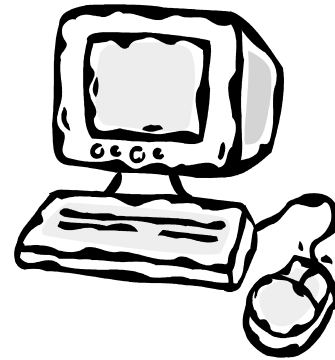


Congratulations to **Luisa (Hewitt) Rylott** on her recent marriage. Luisa, a permanency specialist from the Monaca office, wed Rich Rylott on March 28. (See page 5 for more about Luisa.)

Congratulations to **Lucinda Wiebe**, Family Recruiter, for completing the 12-week CORO Center Women in Leadership program. The Coro Center for Civic Leadership provides the participant an opportunity to enhance personal leadership potential within a diverse network of people dedicated to creating positive change for women in the region. Admission to the program is highly competitive and designed for high-achieving women with demonstrated leadership experience in the private, public or non-profit sectors.

Eight adoptions have been finalized from January to May 2009. Congratulations!

Visit us on the Web



Has Project STAR at The Children's Institute helped your child in an *amazing* way? Share your story at amazingkids.org. On the Project STAR page, click "Meet our Families" and tell us about your experience.

While you're there, sign up to receive your edition of *The Stargazer* in your e-mail inbox instead of by snail mail!

Ducky Awards



Has a Project STAR staff member gone above and beyond while working with your family?

If so, we'd like to know. Project STAR is taking part in The Children's Institute's "Ducky" incentive program, which recognizes staff members who exceed expectations. If you know of someone who fits the "bill," we'd love to hear from you! Call us at 412.244.3066 or email cpa@the-institute.org to nominate someone today!

Amazing Kids are Waiting for You!



Duke

Duke is an energetic Caucasian sixteen-year-old boy who would love to find a forever family. He has many interests that include cruising around the mall, playing pool, playing ball outside anytime of year and trying to learn magic tricks.

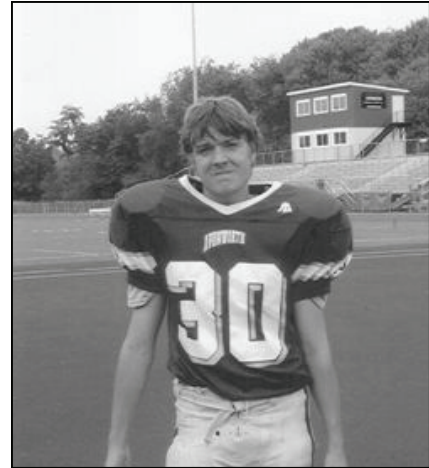
Duke loves art. He enjoys creating unique pieces of artwork that he hopes to be able to sell someday.

Duke's favorite foods include pancakes and pasta. He also enjoys tacos as long as they aren't too spicy.

Duke loves positive attention from adults and would love to be able to receive love and attention from a family of his own one day.

For more information about Duke, please contact Michael Jozwiak, permanency specialist at 412.422.3069 or by email at mij@the-institute.org.

Duke is legally free for adoption.



Reed

Reed is a sixteen-year-old boy who enjoys being active. Reed loves football; he plays on a local high school team as a placekicker. Because of his kicking skills and his ability to stay calm under pressure, he has won several games for his team!

In his spare time, Reed likes watching movies. He enjoys comedy, action and horror films. He loves to go fishing and to go biking in parks.

Reed gets good grades in high school and would like to attend college to major in education. He says that he would like to be "the coolest teacher in the world."

Reed would like to be a part of a two-parent family and hopes for parents that will be active in his life.

For more information about Reed, please contact Michael Jozwiak, permanency specialist at 412.422.3069 or by email at mij@the-institute.org.

Reed is legally free for adoption.

Information Meeting Schedule

Project STAR information meetings are a free opportunity to learn more about adoption, foster care and providing short-term respite care. All meetings run from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. To register and receive a free informational packet, please contact Lucinda Wiebe, family recruiter, at 412.244.3048 or lwe@the-institute.org.

Pittsburgh

Project STAR
1405 Shady Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15217

July 13
August 3

Beaver County

Project STAR
1598 Virginia Avenue
Monaca, PA 15061

July 20
August 10

Staff Member Spotlight



Name: Luisa (formerly Hewitt) Rylott

Position/Years at Project STAR: Permanency Specialist, 16 ½ years

My most memorable moment at Project STAR was... when a judge ruled according to our recommendation that four children should stay with the foster family where they had lived for two years instead of leaving the state to live with relatives they didn't know and didn't want to live with.

I'm a social worker because... In the early 80's, I made friends with a woman in my church who was deaf, blind and in a wheelchair, who lived alone in adapted housing. I saw how she could remain independent with just a little help from others. I started out wanting to be a sign-language interpreter, but then found the Masters in Social Work program and headed into social work instead. Then I adopted my own children from Korea and Colombia and have had a heart for adoption ever since.

A lot has changed in my life since I started working at Project STAR: When I started, my daughter was in kindergarten, and she is about to graduate from college. My son was in 4th grade, and he is about to become a registered nurse. I went through some tough times, and I am grateful to many at Project STAR for standing by me. On March 28, I was married to Rich Rylott! I never expected anything like this to happen, and it is God's biggest surprise in my life.

I enjoy... gardening, photography, traveling, reading, knitting and crocheting, making jewelry and spending time with my husband **on my days off.**

Coollest place I've traveled: Colombia, Honduras, Egypt, Israel and Rwanda

Where I want to travel next: Israel

Last book read: murder mysteries

Favorite ice cream flavor: chocolate (there really is no other flavor!)

Favorite musician/band: The Beatles (OK, so that dates me...)

The best news I've heard lately was... I'm a newlywed, right now there is nothing better.

When I was little, I wanted to be an artist when I grew up.

In ten years, I see myself... retired, maybe with grandchildren, maybe living somewhere warmer than here.

Visit us on the Web at amazingkids.org.

The Stargazer is a publication of



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The mission of Project STAR is to promote the right of all children to grow in a safe, nurturing, lasting family. We exist to provide the highest quality of service to children and families, especially those with physical, emotional and intellectual disabilities.

This newsletter is available in Braille, audio format and large print. These formats are created in limited quantities as requested. For more information, please call 412.244.3066.