

Network News

Voice of the SWAN/IL Network

In this issue:

page **2** *Brandon's
Forever Home*

page **4** *Monroe
County Foster
Care
Awareness*

page **6** *Meet
Sabrina!*

page **8** *Talent
Spotlight*

page **10** *Surviving
College*

Network News

is published by the
Statewide Adoption and
Permanency Network and
Independent Living Program

Pennsylvania Department of
Human Services
Office of Children, Youth &
Families
P.O. Box 2675
Harrisburg, PA 17105-2675



Welcoming our Dynamic Duo— the Joy of Foster Parenting Teenagers

By Sharon Hykes, foster & adoptive parent,
Diakon Adoption & Foster Care

About this time two years ago, my husband and I decided to move forward with something that had been weighing on our hearts for many years—to welcome children into our home and hearts through foster parenting.

Our adult daughters were settled and married; both have children of their own and while we are not “young,” we believed we had much to offer a child.

As we went through the education and certification process, it became clear to us what type of child would be a good fit for our family. Because we had daughters, we thought it would be less likely for us to compare them to boys, so boys it would be! Then, because of our age, we thought teenagers would be a better fit. Lastly, if there was a sibling group of brothers, that would be perfect!



Continued on Page 9 ▶

Brandon's Forever Home

By Jan Scherer, SWAN Technical Specialist—Helpline

Recently the SWAN Helpline staff had the opportunity to visit with Brandon's Forever Home, a 501c charitable organization in Hazleton, Pennsylvania. The charity was created by State Representative Tarah Toohil and Lorine Angelo Ogurkis to raise awareness about children in foster care that are waiting for a permanent family. The organization helps to mentor people interested in adoption. They do annual Christmas drives, Easter baskets, and spotlight children on SSPTV who are in need of adoption. They started "Operation Duffle Bag" to make sure that all children in Luzerne County foster care would have a duffle bag and a basic toiletries kit when they enter care instead of a garbage bag to move their belongings from one place to the next. They also oversee the "Rest in Peace" program for foster youth that pass away to have a grave marker to mark their place.

Lorine and her team also provide legal services for families wishing to adopt from foster care to offset those costs to families. This is just a little of what they do. They are a "safe place" for foster children to come to relax and talk with someone who cares about them. Children can come to the house and pick out new clothing, toys, books, and know that this place is "theirs." It is one of the grandest homes in Hazleton as

Lorine and her team wanted foster children to feel valued.

Beyond all of that, what struck us about our visit was how passionate Lorine and her staff and volunteers are to the mission and the kids they serve. Lorine wants all children in foster care to feel loved, and valued, and to have a place they can always come for advice, help, and to call their own. What you are left with upon leaving is a longing to help them do what they do. Even though they are in Luzerne County they are open to helping foster children anywhere in the state and hope to open more Brandon's Forever Homes throughout the state.

To learn more about their cause please visit their website at www.brandonsforeverhome.com. They also have a Facebook page and they are close to 7,000 followers. Please help to boost them over 7,000!



Dates to Remember

2017 SWAN/IL Fall Quarterly Meetings

Scranton - October 4, 2017

Radisson Lackawanna Station Hotel

Clarion - October 11, 2017

Park Inn

Monroeville - October 12, 2017

Doubletree Hotel

Philadelphia - October 15, 2017

Clarion Hotel

Kulpsville - October 26, 2017

Holiday Inn Lansdale

Enola - October 30, 2017

Central Penn Conference Center

2018 SWAN/IL Winter Statewide Meeting

January 17, 2018—January 18, 2018

Penn State Conference Center

215 Innovation Blvd.

State College, PA 16803

Monroe County Foster Care Awareness Event



Above: "Swagger" the clown, played by Robert Calvache, engages the children in a game.



Left: Berthy Calvache-Murphy, Foster Parent Coordinator, plays a fortune teller at Monroe County's Foster Care Awareness Event.

Youth Friendly Flyers for Normalcy and Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard

By The Youth Advisory Board

The Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board is an organization made up of former and current youth in the substitute care system that use their stories to educate, advocate and form partnerships to create positive change for child welfare communities. Information about the Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board (YAB) can be found on our website at www.independentlivingpa.org or by searching for us on Facebook.

There are many new opportunities for youth in care in light of federal legislation passed in 2014, "The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act," (H.R. 4980/P.L. 113-183) and Pennsylvania Act 75: "Activities and Experiences for Children in Out-of-Home Placement." Since education is a part of the YAB's mission, it is with much excitement that we present youth-friendly flyers that summarize all of the great new practices that are happening in Pennsylvania. We have developed two informational flyers:

- **Youth-Friendly Flyer Summarizing P.L. 113-183 and Act 75**
- **Youth-Friendly Flyer Summarizing the Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard**

The Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center is currently working on distributing hard copies of the posters to all counties through their assigned Practice Improvement Specialist or the county administrator. You can find the electronic copies of the flyers at this website: <http://www.independentlivingpa.org/Youth-Friendly-Flyers.htm>. Also available on the

website are pictures that you can save and share via social media and other picture friendly venues.

We are distributing these materials in an effort to be a part of the conversation about youth experiencing normalcy and understanding the new laws. We look forward to working and speaking with counties and organizations on these exciting new practices. The YAB would like to work with organizations interested in having youth participate in the implementation work. Please feel free to distribute this information to your professional networks. If you are interested in the YAB or would like more information about the attached flyers, please contact Barbara Huggins at bmh75@pitt.edu or 717.795.9048. We look forward to working with you!



Meet Sabrina!

By Shannon Szymanski, Kinship & Adoption Resource Coordinator,
Family Services of NWP

Sabrina can be described by those that spend time with her as an energetic, warm girl who loves to laugh. She enjoys music, particularly silly songs and nursery rhymes, and loves to hum along to songs she knows. She will also sing the alphabet when she is in the mood. She is working on language and impresses those around her with the progress she makes day to day. Sabrina also enjoys playing with blocks and balls. She is very social and enjoys interactions with others and she squeals in excitement when she gets to play with other children or animals. Sabrina responds positively to auditory and visual stimulation. She is limited verbally and functions at the level of a two-year-old.

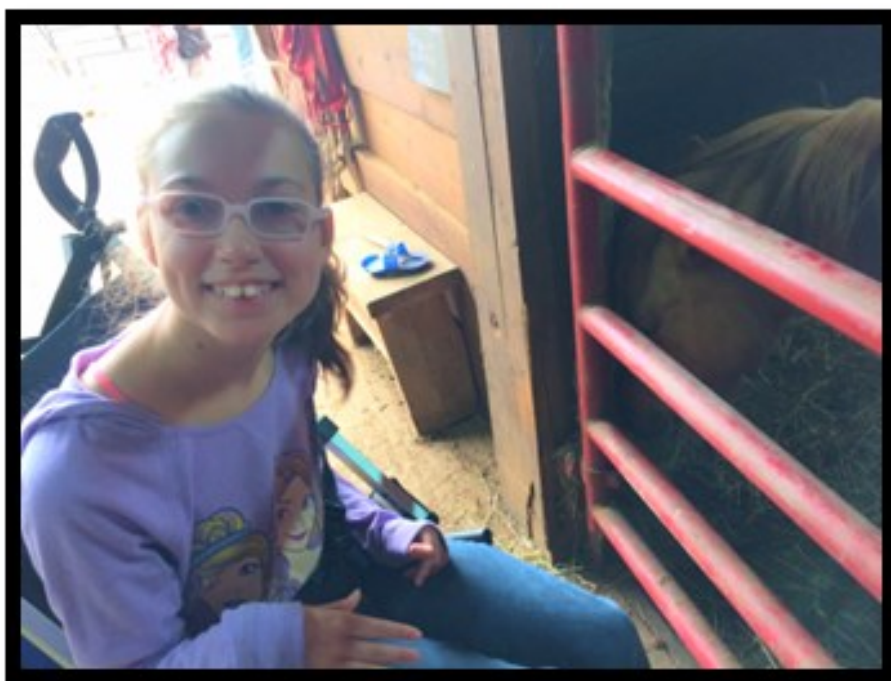
Sabrina likes to ride her adapted bike and use her backward walker. She is always on the move. People describe her as a little girl with a big personality who has a laugh that is contagious. Sabrina is on a special diet, but has a big appetite. She loves to

eat and try new foods. She also loves bath time and traveling for field trips and vacations.

Sabrina has some medical needs that cause her to be reliant on her caregivers. She has made great strides in how much she can do physically since her placement in foster care.

Sabrina is in need of a pre-adoptive family that will be committed to her throughout her entire life. The family should be willing to learn Sabrina's disabilities, dietary and educational needs. Sabrina hopes to find a family that is able to ensure that she gets the medical care that she requires. Sabrina needs a committed, patient, and diligent family.

Sabrina, PAE ID# C62AA80, is legally free for adoption. For further information about Sabrina, please contact Shannon Szymanski, Kinship & Adoption Resource Coordinator, Family services of NWP, at sszymanski@fsnwpa.org or 814-558-0949.



The Results are In!

By Deb Thomas, Child & Family Preparation Technical Assistant,
Family Design Resources

The newly-launched SWAN Permanency Toolkit excels in its mission to create greater understanding of the permanency process in Pennsylvania, drawing from resources both historical and procedural, to provide detailed, up-to-date information to the network. Most importantly, the SWAN Permanency Toolkit creates *access* for its users, who are now able to readily obtain information on permanency practices and laws. Easier access to permanency-related resources allows for adherence to best practice and expedites the often lengthy process for children seeking permanency in Pennsylvania.

We've heard from the network and the response is positive!

Shari McConnell at NHS says, "I have used the toolkit personally to look at bulletins/regulations. I think it is an easy tool to use with an abundance of information. It's nice that it is one place with all the information there." Her staff adds that it reinforces what they are doing, and gives them ideas.

Cheryl Longstreet from Jewish Family Services of Pittsburgh likes the Acts, Laws, and Bulletins section, saying it's so much easier than searching the Internet. She appreciates having access to the forms in the SWAN Benchmarks & Templates section. She was looking for the Child Profile Addendum Protocol and found it immediately. Cheryl found that sharing the link with a potential funder was an easy way to help the funder learn all they needed to know about special needs adoption.

At The Bair Foundation, they are enjoying the professional, appealing design that is user-friendly and easy to navigate. They have shared the link with churches to get them on board with what's going on at The Bair Foundation and they have incorporated it into their family preparation, making sure all their resource families know how to access the toolkit.

We've also heard from the SWAN Legal Services Initiative (LSI) staff. They appreciate the many benefits of the toolkit, commenting on how user-friendly and easily searchable it is. Direct access to resources promotes better understanding of their roles in the permanency process, as well as, others' roles within the SWAN network. LSI paralegals can access benchmarks in the SWAN Benchmarks & Templates section and useful information in the SWAN Units of Service section, both of which can increase their understanding of how SWAN services are completed, which could enhance the LSI function of expediting permanency.

The SWAN Toolkit is indeed a "one stop shop" on the SWAN information highway. There is something for everyone – counties, affiliates, guests, veteran and rookie workers, alike. We encourage you to enter the SWAN Permanency Toolkit to explore, discover and see what you can find: <http://swantoolkit.org/>.

TALENT SPOTLIGHT

Aicha, Southeast Youth Advisory Board Member

Crocheting is a very relaxing and hands-on activity. Crocheting is known as an old lady hobby. For example, all of my friends would call me old or say, "isn't that what old people do?" But to me, crocheting is how I cope.



My crocheting journey began when I was in Africa. I was around the age of 6 or 7 years old. My grandmom and second cousin would sit there and crochet their lives away. They would make blankets, scarfs, hats, bedsheets, etc. From that day I knew it was time for me to learn how to crochet. My first project was making a blanket. Crocheting wasn't easy for me at first. It took me about 6 months to make one blanket, and it was the ugliest blanket ever! Now, it takes me about 3 weeks to a month depending on the size of the blanket.



After 5-7 years of practicing, I am able to make blankets, baby sets (medium-size blanket, booties, and a scarf), scarfs, and hats. I am working on making a big quilt for my pops. My skills are still a work in progress.

Crocheting is not just about how fast you can move your hook or the pattern you want to make. To me, the purpose of crocheting is that each blanket has their own colors or mixed colors in one. My blanket calms and relaxes me during times of stress or overthinking. Everybody has their own ways of explaining what having a crocheted item meant to them.



I've been crocheting for about 13 years. I enjoy it, and I am proud to make people warm and cozy.

Welcoming Our Dynamic Duo (*cont'd. from p.1*)

Many of our friends thought we had lost our minds or were experiencing a mid-life crisis; others considered our

plan a wonderful thought, but were we sure? Honestly, we were never more sure of anything in our lives! Our extended family was nothing but supportive. While some were surprised, they were always supportive.

In May 2016, we traveled two hours to meet a dynamic duo, biological brothers who had been in the foster care system for more than four years. At the ages of 14 and 15, they struggled to order from the menu at lunch. The younger found it difficult to make eye contact, the result of nervousness though he was quite the chatter box.

They both spoke very openly of past foster families that had not worked out, but the one thing they both made very clear was that they wanted a family.

In fact, that is one of the best things about teenagers—they have no problem telling you what they want and are still young enough to believe anything is possible. We spent three hours with these two delighted teenagers and hated to say goodbye. We were already eager to see them again. And, it turned out, they felt exactly the same way.

The next month that dynamic duo moved into our home. In the past near-year, we have discovered many things.

Some of the lessons we learned are that teenagers who do not have a family realize what they are missing. They often know their biological parents well—and miss them—so while they understand they now have the opportunity for a better life, their hearts still hurt. We encourage them to talk about their past, and we talk about ours, acknowledging they haven't always been part of our family.

We also realize that many of the challenges we encounter are not because the children are in foster care; those challenges are because they are normal teenagers! Teenagers are not neat, they don't pick up after themselves, they listen to loud music and they will have a smart mouth

at times...they are simply growing up!

They weren't born knowing how to be adults and, in some cases, haven't been exposed to things that we never even think about, such as ordering from a menu. We learned that nothing will keep you young like the laughs of teenagers in your house, hearing about young love and the enthusiasm of wanting to learn to drive.

There are things that have happened that we totally expected, such as struggling through the holidays, and then there were things we didn't see coming—like when they realize they love you and their new home but simultaneously fear it could all disappear.

Through it all, the number one thing we have learned is to keep the lines of communication open. We never ask questions such as, "How was your day?"—which could result in just an "Okay." In our home, we ask what was the best part of their day, allowing the conversation to open from there. But be prepared if you try this with your own teenagers—you may learn more than you were expecting!

For those who thought we were crazy, we just laugh and say a little crazy helps—adding that we wouldn't change a thing.



Surviving College

By Danielle, Northwest Youth Advisory Board Member

I just finished my third semester at Edinboro University and it has been everything and nothing that I expected! As the school year is coming to a close, I'd like to share some of my experiences with you and share some helpful tips for those of you starting your adventures to college! Good luck future leaders! You've got this!

- First and foremost, this is the next step to reaching your goals, so make sure you don't forget why you decided to come to college; your education!

- All that stuff you packed "just in case", you probably won't use. Think hard about what you want to cram into that small dorm room!

- **Special tip:** Utilize the room under your bed. Also send your empty boxes/totes home with mom/dad after you unpack, they take up a lot of space!

- Parents, friends, and pets will always be there when you come home, so you might think you won't miss them, but you will! And it's okay to Facetime your dog during finals week! You're not the only one!

- **Special tip:** Tie a string from one command hook to the other, and clothespin pictures of your loved ones. (See picture)

- Studying is definitely as important as everyone makes it seem, DO NOT wait until the last minute to cram, it never works!

- **Special tip:** Try getting a white board calendar to write down the test dates and make a study schedule. They help!

- Do not get the smallest meal plan just to save money, you'll regret it when you run out of meals half way through the semester!

Plus, campus food is better than high school food, you'll want to eat it. I promise.

- Take advantage of all of the free events, discounted trips and free stuff you come across on campus, they're everywhere, but sometimes hard to catch!

- Keep a healthy balance between work, school and being social! Trust me!

- Finally, even though you're there for an education, remember to have fun!



Pennsylvania Resources

Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN)

www.adoptpakids.org

Prime Contractor for SWAN

www.diakon-swan.org

Independent Living

www.independentlivingPA.org

SWAN Helpline

800-585-SWAN

SWANhelpline@diakon-swan.org

Pennsylvania State Resource Family Association

www.psrfa.org

SWAN Legal Services Initiative Warmline

888-793-2512

lsiwarmline@diakon-swan.org

Office of Children, Youth and Families, Pennsylvania Department of Human Services

www.dhs.pa.gov

Network News

Jennifer Casner-Hockenberry at JCasner-hockenberry@diakon-swan.org

SWAN listserv through Google Groups

Joe Warrick at jwarrick@pa.gov

SWAN on Facebook

www.facebook.com/AdoptPA

SWAN on YouTube

www.youtube.com/AdoptPAKids