The theme for this year’s SWAN/IL Permanency Conference was “Illuminating Lives.” When I think of the word illumination it always conjures up visions of lighthouses, those beacons that light the darkness for sailors to move safely through the ocean. 

Recently, I’ve been reading a book in which lighthouses are the backdrop for the story. In the past lighthouses relied on the power of something akin to a large candle. The glow these early lighthouses gave off would never be powerful enough on their own to bring a ship to safe harbor. The light would be swallowed up within a few miles; it is actually the light’s ability to attach to the earth’s arch and glow from that curve that makes a lighthouse useful. This glow is referred to as the loom. 

As I reflect on this year’s conference I understand the loom and how it relates to us as a network. None of us, no matter how bright or clever, could ever do this work on our own. It is too complex; it requires too many varied skills. It is really our ability to join together, to join the arch made by all of our contributions that makes our light powerful. It is the joining to something larger than ourselves that makes us such a potent force for children and families. I believe the SWAN/IL network is like the loom, and it was never more evident than at this year’s Permanency Conference. 

The SWAN/IL summer statewide keynote speaker, Adam Pertman, nationally known author and adoption expert, asked how we in the Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network do it? How, when so many conferences across the county are closing or diminishing in size, do we continue to grow? While I didn’t have a complete answer for him, I believe it is because of the power of the loom. It is the power of us all joining together and believing in what we do so fervently that keeps our network strong and our conference growing. 

Like so many in the past, this was a wonderful conference! Just standing back and observing its spirit was phenomenal. This was our 20-year anniversary and it was spectacular! Special thanks to Carrier Keiser and the conference planning committee for the beautiful opening ceremony. Everyone loved the We Rock workshop group, along with the youth panel that really kept us grounded in terms of why we do this work. The lighted pens weren’t bad either. 

The workshops were tremendous, with a lot of variation and we all left a little wiser. Sandy Gallagher did an incredible job as this year’s master of ceremonies for the banquet. She led us through wonderful stories of hope and inspiration, while making us feel welcomed and appreciated, like we’d come home.
Congratulations to all the award winners from the 20th Annual Permanency Conference. Suzanna Cawley, wife of Lt. Governor Jim Cawley, and Beverly Mackereth, deputy secretary of OCYF, stopped by the conference to show their support of the conference award winners. Many thanks and congratulations to all. You are “Illuminating Lives.”
2012 Permanency Conference Award Winners

SWAN Advisory Committee Outstanding Service to Adoption
Steve Kepic, nominated by Stan Dorrance, Children’s Service Center of Wyoming Valley

Permanent Family Recognition
Families selected for this award have provided legalized permanency for a child or children in the child welfare system through adoption, formal kinship care or permanent legal custodianship.
Sam and Erica Zerkle, Erie County, nominated by Jennifer Renick, Family Services of NW PA
William and Pamela Vojteck, Indiana County, nominated by Suzette Prenni, Indiana County Children and Youth.
John and Jane Thomas, Delaware County, nominated by Paula Roberts, Lehigh County Children and Youth.
Jenell Lassiter, Philadelphia County, nominated by Marquetta C. King, Together as Adoptive Parents, Inc.
Kim Price and Susan Schwartz, Berks County, nominated by Heather Gillette, Josh Lieb and Lea Moyer, Diakon Adoption and Foster Care.
Dean and Michelle Lobaugh, Adams County, nominated by Sarah Merkel, Lehigh County Children and Youth.

Phelantréalry Recognition
The individual, business, congregation or organization selected for this award demonstrates a charitable contribution that promotes the permanency of children in foster care.
Rich Pais, Wilkes-Barre Racing, nominated by Roberta Daniels, SWAN Diakon/FDR

Permanency Teamwork Recognition
Teams selected for this award exemplify a collaborative effort that promotes the permanency of children with special needs.
Deb and Kent Sell, adoptive family
Laurie Park, Bethanna
Sarah Merkel, Lehigh County Children and Youth
Sheryl Brenot, COBYS Family Services
Helen Markunas, CASA Lehigh County Courthouse
Nominated by Kelly Myers, Bethanna.

County Collaborative Recognition
This award recognized a collaborative effort between a county court and a county children and youth agency that expedites permanency through adoption, formal kinship care or permanent legal custodianship.
Butler County Children and Youth Services
Butler County Court of Common Pleas, nominated by Tricia L. Holfelder and Renee J. Murray, SWAN Diakon/FDR

Permanency Advocate Recognition
This category recognizes a dynamic individual or organization that does not fit the criteria of the other categories and may include parents, judges, attorneys or other individuals who, through their professional or volunteer efforts, had an impact on system change, judicial improvement, service delivery or family support either locally or throughout the state of Pennsylvania.
Jennifer Pokempner, Juvenile Law Center, nominated by Elisa M. Esh, Diakon Adoption and Foster Care and Robert G. Schwartz, Juvenile Law Center.

Independent Living Professional Recognition
The individual working in the public or private child welfare agency selected for this award has demonstrated they have helped a youth transition to a successful contributing member of society.
Heather R. Finnegan, Sullivan County, nominated by Lisa Wilcox, Sullivan County Children and Youth.

Permanency Professional Recognition
Individuals selected to receive this award are permanency professionals working in a public or private child welfare agency, who have actively demonstrated their support and commitment to finding permanency for children in the child welfare system, through adoption, formal kinship care or permanent legal custodianship.
Crystal Minnier, Lycoming County, nominated by Joe Weber, Lycoming County Children and Youth.
SWAN/IL Conference fun!
August 13-17, 2012 marked the 21st year of the annual Pennsylvania Youth Retreat. More than 125 youth between the ages of 16 and 21 attended the retreat this year.

The youth who attended are all currently receiving services through a county children and youth agency or a private child welfare agency. Youth and staff attending the retreat spent a week living in dorms and using the campus facilities at the University of Pittsburgh’s Johnstown Campus.

The youth and staff were busy all week participating in group discussions and fun activities such as hip hop dance, stained glass, theater and art. Group entertainment was also planned for each day and included a talent show, sports tournaments and dance. Throughout the busy schedule, youth and staff alike developed new friendships, created lasting memories and planned for future youth advocacy in the child welfare system for the implementation of Fostering Connections.

Throughout the week, quotes from the older youth were gathered about their retreat experience. On these pages are a few of their thoughts.

Be sure to check the Youth Advisory Board website for more pictures and videos from the 2012 youth retreat at www.independentlivingpa.org.

“An important message that I received about my experience is that no matter what you are told, called, named or how you are viewed, it does not mean that is who or what you are!”

“I learned that I do not have it so hard, but the people who do have it harder can still pull out of it!”

“The most enjoyable part about the retreat for me was seeing the other youth and hearing about their experiences.”
“I learned that collectively, no matter the race, ethnicity, religion or sex that everyone can work together.”
Over the years, many of you may have met Justin Lee at SWAN/IL conferences, Independent Living, IL, site visits and other meetings. In July 2012 Justin transitioned from the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center to a new position as a project manager for Casey Family Programs in Washington, D.C.

Justin has worked in the Pennsylvania child welfare field since 2001, helping to change the lives of older youth and alumni. In 2004 he helped create Montgomery County’s first ever supportive housing program for youth who were aging out of foster care. That program brought together partners and funding sources from across systems - a model that still operates in Montgomery County today.

In 2008 Justin took over leadership of both the Youth Advisory Board, YAB, and Retreat Steering Committee. His dedication helped to develop the YAB leadership model that involves more youth and expands their voices in policy matters and social networks, training models and peer-to-peer mentoring, among others. While enhancing the YAB leadership model, Justin consulted with county and private agencies on youth leadership and engagement, strengthening IL programming, transition planning and other issues important to youth who are aging out of the child welfare system.

In 2009 Justin received a master’s degree in public administration from the University of Pennsylvania and then continued his advocacy and policy strategies for youth who are aging out by developing and teaching courses at Cabrini College.

Justin’s commitment to education and advocacy about permanency for older youth is shown through his ongoing dedication both inside and outside of work. Justin feels that “permanency isn’t just a goal or an initiative when it comes to older youth in the child welfare system; it’s a necessity.” Justin also praises the commitment and dedication of the IL caseworkers. “IL caseworkers are gifted individuals. The good ones know ‘it’s not about me.’ They support youth and alumni through tremendous times of struggle and triumph. They rarely get the recognition they deserve but their successes shine bright in the young people’s lives that are forever positively changed.”

Justin has successfully advocated and enhanced the perspectives of older youth and their leadership roles here in Pennsylvania. We truly appreciate his commitment and dedication to the older youth and know that he will be able to make a lasting change for older youth nationally. Thank you, Justin Lee for the past 11 years, and we wish you the best of luck as you change lives once again!
Fun at Camp Agawam!

I caught a fish!
Match parties for older youth have proven to be both a fun day for the teens and a wonderful way for families to meet some of the great kids who are looking for their forever families. In 2012 SWAN funded match parties in both the eastern and western parts of the state. The National Adoption Center organized and facilitated both of these parties.

Saturday, March 31 was a bright and sunny morning. But the weather is not what got 17 youth from 10 different counties out of bed early. It was the chance to ride go-karts and play laser tag and arcade games to their heart’s content. It was also the opportunity to meet some new people – families who are approved and interested in adopting older youth.

Arnold’s Fun Center, located in Oaks, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia, provided the stage for this very special day. The teens, all of whom came to the party with their social workers and adoption recruiters, had a lot of fun. In addition to enjoying all the action that Arnold’s has to offer, the kids had a chance to meet prospective adoptive parents in a relaxed and fun environment. The kids also had a chance to meet other youth who, like themselves, are waiting for a permanent place to call home.

The prospective parents were able to see in person just how smart, funny and articulate these youth are, and what an enjoyable group of teens they are.

At the end of the day, which included ice breakers and interactive games between the parents and the teens (in addition to arcade games, go-karts, etc), the teens were each individually honored and presented with a few gifts, including a personalized autograph board. They were able to get their new friends and acquaintances to sign their boards before leaving the party. Families were able to request additional information on any of the youth they wished to learn more about. Some of the kids also let their social worker know which families they especially liked meeting. Since Pennsylvania is a large state that covers 46,055 square miles, there was no way that all of the state’s waiting older youth could travel to the party at Arnold’s.

A second party was held in the western part of the state on Saturday, June 2. The party was held at Camp Agawam, a charming Boy Scout camp, located in New Castle, Pennsylvania. There were 19 youth accompanied by their social workers and several prospective adoptive parents who turned out for a fun-filled day of kickball, fishing, marshmallow building contests and a scavenger hunt. Fishing was by far the most popular activity of the day. A couple of kids even caught turtles!

Like the first party, the teens had a chance to get acquainted with prospective adoptive families. The families joined in with the teens throughout the day’s activities. They also got to know the teens through ice breakers and interactive games led by our motivational group facilitator, Christopher Ridenhour.

Evaluations from each of the parties showed the positive responses of just about everyone who participated.

After each party social workers and the families followed up on any prospective matches. The parties in the past have led to permanent adoptive homes for several youth, and we are hopeful that these parties will too!

Are you or someone you know thinking about adopting an older youth? We hope you will join us for a future party. In the meantime, you can ask the adoption coordinators at the National Adoption Center for more information about any of the teens that attended this year’s parties.
PHILLY TEEN MATCH PARTY
Pennsylvania resources
Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network
www.diakon-swan.org

Independent Living—www.independentlivingPA.org
Pennsylvania Adoption Exchange—www.adooptpakids.org

SWAN Helpline—800-585-SWAN
Legal Warmline—888-793-2512 or lsiwarmline@diakon-swan.org

Office of Children, Youth and Families
Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare—www.dpw.state.pa.us

Network News—Karen Lollo at klollo@diakon-swan.org
SWAN listserv through Google Groups—Desiree Weisser at dweisser@state.pa.gov

SWAN Facebook page—Join the conversation

2013 Savethedate

SWAN/IL Winter Statewide Meeting—January 23-24, 2013—Harrisburg, PA

SWAN/IL Spring Quarterly Meetings
April 10, 2013—Scranton
April 17, 2013—Monroeville
April 18, 2013—Clarion
April 24, 2013—Philadelphia
April 25, 2013—Ft. Washington
May 2, 2013—Harrisburg

SWAN/IL Summer Statewide Meeting—July 9-10, 2013, Lancaster, PA

21st Annual Permanency Conference—July 10-12, 2013, Lancaster PA