

# Reaching Out to Others

Susan Phillips seeks to help people through various ministries

BY BETTY FLEMING



“Things aren’t important, relationships are.” So says longtime volunteer Susan Phillips — and she should know, as her life is one of service to other people.

Phillips is awaiting her ordination as a deacon in the Episcopal Diocese of Delaware. As part of her four-year preparation for this role, Phillips developed a mental health ministry that has touched the lives of many people in Sussex County.

“My son Mark has had mental health issues

in his life, and I’ve researched a lot to help him,” Phillips says. “That was background information for me.”

“I knew I wanted to do a person-to-person ministry,” she says. Through her contacts in the mental health field, she found Taton House in Harbeson and Hope House in Milford, both run by Fellowship Health Resources. They were interested in working with her. “The idea was that members of the Episcopal Parish of All Saints’ Church in Rehoboth Beach and St. George’s Chapel in Harbeson would interact with people living at the two mental health resi-

**Susan Phillips created a mental health ministry through All Saints’ parish as part of her work to become a deacon.**

dences,” says Phillips, a member of the parish.

After much deliberation and discussion, along with parish member visits to the two residences, Phillips began hosting suppers at St. George’s Chapel every other month in 2007. Attendance was modest at first, but the idea took hold and grew. A recent supper drew 45 people, about half of whom were residents and staff of Taton House and Hope House. Parish members made up the rest of those present, supplying fried chicken, side dishes and desserts.

“No one stays in the kitchen and works,” Phillips says. “We all interact, and many friendships have been formed.” The suppers include live music, impromptu singing, even dancing on occasion, a reading or two and prayer.

“The eight men housed at Taton House really look forward to the suppers,” says Mary Lou Speziale-Blades, director of the group home. “Men from the parish visit them, too, and they appreciate that. Some of them have no family.”

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“We love Phillips,” Speziale-Blades continues. “She can relate to the men here and we all feel that she is a wonderful human being.”

In addition to organizing the suppers, Phillips and other parish members now provide a food bank and a supply of personal care items at a mental health service center in Ellendale, also run by Fellowship Health Resources. The women of the parish, as the Episcopal Church Women organization, make financial donations to support this effort.

Phillips has other interests as well, such as a shawl ministry she started in the parish. Members or friends of the parish knit or crochet shawls, which are dedicated during a church service and given to people who are facing illness, surgery, loss or the celebration of a life’s milestone.

Phillips lives in Milford, having established a residence there when her husband, Warren, a physician, joined the staff of Milford Memorial Hospital. She has served in many volunteer positions at the hospital, including board member, auxiliary presi-

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dent and fair chairman. Currently, she serves as an on-call hospital chaplain and does pet therapy with her Shetland sheepdog, “Linus.” “Linus eases fears for patients and stress for staff,” Phillips says.

As a hospital chaplain, Phillips provides spiritual support in the form of prayer, scripture and the sacraments during emergency situations such as accidents, the end of life, and during difficulties that accompany illness and hospitalization. “I offer shared presence, listening and support to patients, families and staff,” Phillips says.

Starting when she was a teenager in Philadelphia, Phillips served as a volunteer in a hospital. An only child, she remembers the example her mother set when she became a nurse in her 40s, when Phillips was 15 years old. Phillips’ mother also inspired her daughter with tales of her work with the Red Cross during World War II.

Phillips went on to earn a Bachelor of Science degree in nursing and a Master of Science degree in pediatric nursing. She worked as a nurse in Philadelphia until she met and married her husband, now deceased. They have two sons: Mark, 35, and Adam, 28.

As a deacon, Phillips will assist with public worship, the sacraments and other ministerial duties. “It is an honor to serve in such an ordained position,” she says.

In her home church, the Parish of All Saints’ Church and St. George’s Chapel, Phillips will work with both congregations and the clergy: the Rev. Max Wolf, rector, and the Rev. Chris Moore, associate priest.

“Already Susan fulfills one of the roles of a deacon in better connecting our congregations to the needs of the world,” says Wolf. “The circle continues to widen with her mental health ministry leading us in building loving relationships with people often marginalized by society. Only God knows what future needs Susan will help us identify and address together.”

“Serving others is a response to God’s first loving you,” Phillips says. “In serving others, you learn something about yourself. And, you plant a seed. There’s also a ripple effect as you see related things happen when you contribute something.”

Phillips was pleasantly surprised recently at the response to a presentation at Taton House. “One of our parishioners asked Teri Smith-Jones [a member of St. George’s Chapel] to talk about the work she has been

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## How to Help

For more information on Susan Phillips' ministries, or to contribute food or personal care items to the mental health service center in Ellendale, contact the All Saints' parish office at 227-7202. ■

doing raising money for the purchase of specially treated anti-mosquito nets for African children," Phillips says. "[As a result,] those present chose to make a contribution to the drive sponsored by the Episcopal Church through Episcopal Relief and Development. They wanted to reach out to others," Phillips says.

"Sometimes the problems of poverty, disease and mental illness seem overwhelming," Phillips says. "Somehow, God takes our small, combined efforts and great things happen." ■

BETTY FLEMING of Lewes is a freelance writer with extensive experience writing for newspapers such as the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Trenton Times, the Cape Gazette and the Coast Press.



Susan Phillips regularly hosts suppers at St. George's Chapel Parish Hall for people with mental health issues, offering music, food and fellowship.



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