



Under the Tree

A PUBLICATION OF LUTHERAN SOCIAL SERVICES OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

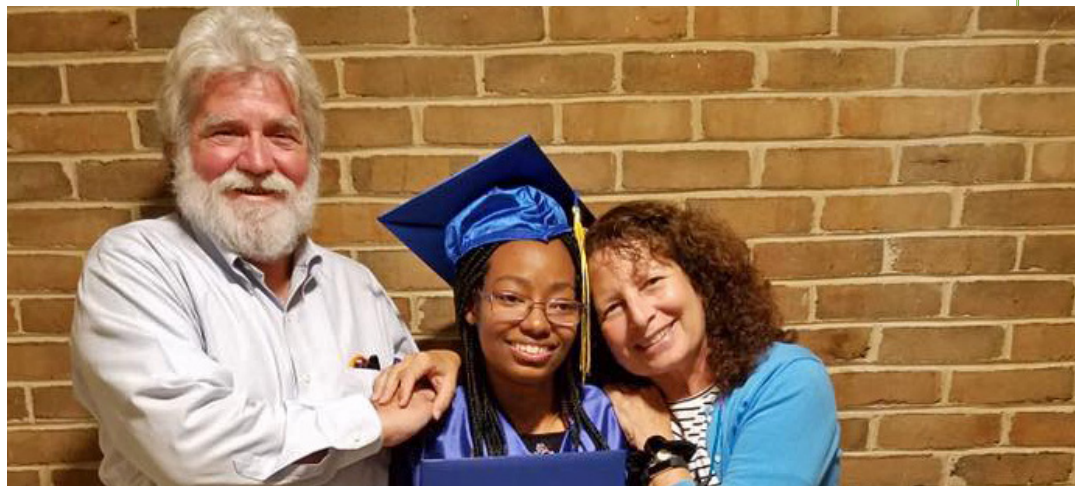
A Message from our Board of Directors President

Henry Smock, Esq.

What has attracted me to service at LSSVI is the fact that our agencies serve such a wide range of clients including children, persons with disabilities, seniors and victims of disaster. We are fortunate to have strong leaders throughout the years, including former Board Presidents Helen Owens, Luther Edwards and Eula Hymes, former Executive Directors Julie Swanson, and Chris Finch, and our current Executive Director, Junia John-Straker.

Challenges have been met and addressed — whether they be budget issues or hurricanes. The strain of dealing with such issues is more than offset by the satisfaction of seeing our programs benefit our community, such as our Early Head Start programs, independent living facilities and group housing for adults with disabilities. There is still so much more to do, not the least of which is fundraising for a new Sister Emma Cottage. But with the assistance of so many hard working Board members and staff, our goals are all within reach.

As we retrace the footsteps of our incredible journey, we want to highlight some of the amazing people who touched our lives and hearts. We invite you to read our story.



Your gifts gave Janeek her confidence.

We would like for you to meet **Janeek**, who came to Queen Louise Home when she was only two weeks old and lived with us until she was 18. Abandoned and never knowing her parents, she turned to those at Queen Louise Home for answers. When those answers were at times difficult to grasp or could not fill the void she felt inside, Janeek withdrew, attempting to isolate herself from a seemingly harsh and indifferent world. However, her withdrawal could not withstand the caring staff members around her, who were determined to give her the love and the support she needed, letting her know she mattered. She came to recognize in own words that “Queen Louise Home was my backup when I had nowhere to go, a place of true shelter.”

Like most teenagers, Janeek grew self-conscious of her physical mobility and need for crutches. She was concerned that people would look at her with disregard or pity rather than acceptance. However, Janeek became more accepting of herself as she matured, particularly after joining Queen Louise Home's Special Friends Program. Her friends were

Continued on next page...



Janeek as a young girl at Queen Louise Home for Children.

“
Queen Louise Home was my backup when I had nowhere to go, a place of true shelter.” Janeek

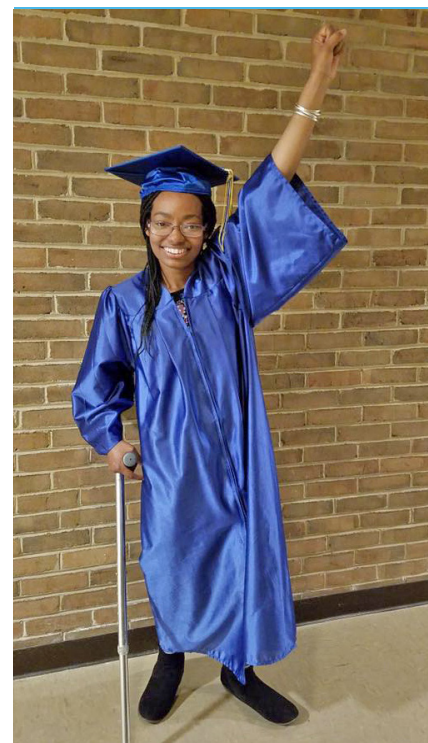
Continued from previous page...

Chris Finch and Ellie Hirsch, and they spent birthdays, holidays, weekends, art classes, and many memorable days together. Through her experiences with them, she grew more confident and says she “learned people skills – how to treat other people, realizing people are different, some easy, some hard, some in the middle.”

“I have a life I never thought I would have....” Janeek

It was not an easy journey, but Janeek persevered. She was surrounded by people who loved and cared for her, including mentors who helped to guide her pathway into adulthood. She graduated from high school a few years ago and is now a confident 23-year-old, young woman living on her own in Virginia. She has an apartment, a roommate, and a much-beloved cat. She has developed the life skills necessary for successful, independent living — able to balance two part-time jobs, her finances, make her own appointments and arrange her own transportation. As an alumna of Queen Louise Home, she is the first to acknowledge that she was “cared for in the best ways.”

We are very excited for Janeek and all her success, We are especially thrilled that she has developed a wonderful bond with a family in the US who loves, cares and supports her. In her own words, “I have a life I never thought I would have. I have a great relationship with mom, Emile, and her children.” Janeek is just one of the many children who called Queen Louise Home their home, and we are grateful that so many children found safe shelter through the storms in their lives.



Janeek on her graduation day.

Heroes of Hope: The Matzs & Mullens

In 1960, **Martha Matz**, a registered nurse, and **Harold Matz**, a WWII veteran, began their 10-year service of love as superintendents at Queen Louise Home for Children. The Matz family made the children their own, and were an incredible source of love and hope. Martha has written a riveting, detailed account of their time at Queen Louise Home. Here is an excerpt from her story:



Harold and Martha Matz

“...One time Harold had to take a darling little girl to the Frederiksted clinic... As he sat waiting, an older black woman who didn’t know who he was kept looking at this white man holding this little black girl. Finally,... she asked, “Is that your little girl?” Harold, always a tease, seriously said, “Yes”“How many children do you have?” Harold; as straight-faced as he could, said, “36”. This lady looked astounded and said, “My goodness, you ARE a good man!”

In 1963, they received \$1,000 — the largest donation they had ever received — from Mr. **Joseph Mullen**. Mr. Mullen and his wife, **Joanna**, had been regular visitors to St. Croix during the winter months. However, Joanna had died of cancer that year, and he made a generous gift in her memory. The Matzes invited Mr. Mullen to tour Queen Louise Home, and Mrs. Matz showed him the children’s upstairs play area, he said, “This is a cage!”. Three weeks later, he sent two of his friends to Queen Louise Home to announce that he wanted to build a new home for the children. He even personally hunted for land, purchasing five acres as a gift in memory of his wife. Altogether, he paid nearly \$400,000 for the land, the construction and the home’s furnishings. Queen Louise Home for Children is indebted to Joseph Mullen for his philanthropy, love and compassion that has given a home and hope to hundreds of children over the years. Our hearts also overflow with gratitude for the Matz family and the love and support they have shown us. Their years of dedication at Queen Louise Home and their faithfulness to the wellbeing of each child in our care touches our hearts, and we are forever grateful.

Growing and learning together is what we're all about.

LSSVI's Yellow Cedar Residence on St. Thomas cares for adults with developmental disabilities since 2003, and we have had some amazing people as our residents. We would like you to meet one of them — his name is **Felix** (his name has been changed to protect his privacy). Felix is twenty-five years old, and was born on St. Thomas with cerebral palsy and spastic quadriplegia. He moved to Yellow Cedar in 2016, and over the years, we have watched him grow into a strong young man. He is a people person with exceptional communication skills, and he is not afraid to make new friends. Felix loves singing karaoke and pretending to be in a radio station studio jamming on air. One Yellow Cedar team member said, **“Felix is capable, intelligent and full of life.”** When living a life where every day presents new and different challenges Felix manages to bring his unique brand of happiness to all of the staff and residents that cross his path.”

Our team at Yellow Cedar includes AmeriCorps service members through the Corporation for Community and National Service. **Christian**, a veteran of the United States Navy, served as an AmeriCorp member in 2017. He was a life-skills assistant, helping the residents develop in areas like personal care, money/time management, communication and critical thinking. He would even accompany working residents to their jobs to help them navigate their tasks and environments. Upon completing his service term in 2018, Christian began classes at the University of the Virgin Islands and was hired as a full-time employee of LSSVI. We are thrilled to have Christian as a member of the Yellow Cedar team, and it is such a joy to see residents like Felix grow in our care. We count it a privilege to have our residents live their best lives with us, and are grateful for the work of our amazing AmeriCorps service members.



By Love, Serve One Another: Employee Highlight



Meet **Naomi**. She is an upbeat and compassionate lady who has been caring for children at LSSVI for almost 40 years. When Naomi first came to St. Croix, she kept hearing about the residents at Queen Louise Home. Filled with compassion, she wanted to work to help “those little children that needed someone to love them”, and give her time working in the nursery. She walked from Campo Rico to the main office in Frederiksted, filled out the application, and walked back home. When she did not hear back, she walked back to the office again. She made the walk two more times, and later that year, she received word that they needed a temporary childcare worker at the nursery. Her love for the children brought a gentle, motherly care, and she worked at the nursery until it closed in 2002. LSSVI was opening an Early Head Start program to serve and educate families with infants and toddlers. Naomi soon obtained her degree in Early Childhood Development and a certificate as a Child Development Associate. She was again eager to work with children at LSSVI, except this time, she would be an early childhood teacher. Naomi now serves as a Lead Teacher at Early Head Start center. When asked why she has remained at LSSVI for such a long time, she said, **“Each year I say this will be my last, but I can't because the children need me – but it is the other way around, I need them more.”** Everyone at LSSVI, is so thankful for Naomi's dedication and selfless service. Cheers for Naomi!

Your gifts go towards love and miracles.



There are special people with stories of hope and happy ever afters that reach out and bring so much encouragement to our hearts. **Joe** and **Julie** Caracci became cottage parents at the Queen Louise Home in 1985. Joe had a degree in deaf education while Julie had her Masters degree in Counseling. They fond memories include "stories at bedtime, sitting on each child's bed to say goodnights and give hugs,... days at the beach, under the tree time and homework after school..." They also met **Oyamo**, the only deaf child at Queen Louise Home at the time. His positive spirit and big smile won their hearts and, instantly knew they wanted to spend their lives with him. The Caraccis took to teaching Oyamo sign language, and applied to become his adoptive parents. They extended their volunteer positions and got jobs locally until the adoption was finalized and Oyamo had completed kindergarten. They were now a family, and moved to Pennsylvania where they enrolled him in Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. He thrived in his classes, sports, and social life, and Oyamo has become a successful young man. We were thrilled to have The Caraccis visit Queen Louise Home in 2017 to share their memories and stories. Joe and

“Oyamo has brought so much joy to our lives! ... I can't imagine him not being part of our family.” Julie



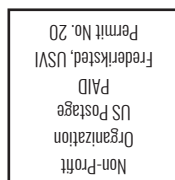
Julie said, "Oyamo has brought so much joy to our lives! We don't think we did a wonderful thing by adopting Oyamo. Instead, we feel like we were blessed to become his parents. I can't imagine him not being part of our family." Oyamo feels "fortunate to have a supportive family I could rely on... I have a full time job at Pressley Ridge School for the Deaf and a second job at the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf residential program... I am glad I was at Queen Louise Home... [It] was my first home...." We celebrate Oyamo's success and all he has become, and we send our gratitude to Joe and Julie for their service to the children at Queen Louise Home. Their family reminds us that our mission and love have touched lives far beyond the shores of St. Croix, and that love can bring miracles to every child we reach.




SAVE THE DATE

20th Annual Kayak for Kids: June 14, 2020

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED




Lutheran Social Services
OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
516B Hospital Street, Frederiksted, VI 00840-3824
Phone: (340) 772-4099 Fax: (340) 772-0589
Email: info@lssvi.org Website: www.lssvi.org