

## THREE MORE

by MARVIN OLASKY

**T**HE GREAT WRITER LEO TOLSTOY once recalled a big tale that he never got around to telling: "What a wonderful novel I could have written about a story I heard in Moscow, a supposedly true story. An officer's wife was about to bear a child. The doctor attending her declared that she herself could not be saved. A priest came hurriedly to give her the last rites. He was a monk from a nearby cloister."

Tolstoy continued, "It so happened that during his worldly life he had been a famous surgeon. He realized at once that there was a chance to save both the woman and her child. Without stopping

to think, he grasped the instruments and performed the operation. It was successful, and the happy officer fell on his knees before the monk. But the latter, in his turn, begged forgiveness and made those present swear they would never tell a soul of his deed, for he had sinned grievously, he said: He had seen a woman's naked body."

Tolstoy concluded, with tears in his eyes: "The news leaked out. The monk was sent to do penance in a distant cloister in Siberia. Oh, what a wonderful book could be woven about that." He was right. In our own day, a memorable book could start by telling of people who glorify God by showing compassion to the desperate. A book could continue by showing how something—maybe foolish governmental restrictions, maybe lack of

Christian support, maybe just the weariness that comes from day-and-night commitment—choked off that passion. But the best book would show how some, nevertheless, persevere.

The final three of the nine finalists in our Hope Award for Effective Compassion contest embody perseverance: The honored groups enlist parents who keep from snapping, retirees who refuse to retire, and volunteers who pour out their lives for the disabled and abandoned. Three of the nine organizations are scheduled to receive \$5,000 awards at a WORLD/American Bible Society dinner in Dallas on Oct. 16, and one grand prize winner will receive an additional \$5,000. The next issue of WORLD will report the winners and the names of the readers who nominated them.

# Keeping parents sane

Snappin' comes to help when the families of disabled children are about to snap by ALISA HARRIS in *Oconomowoc, Wis.*

**A**NNE KANTER DOESN'T TALK MUCH ABOUT her son's disability because people's eyes go vacant and they change the subject or walk away. Her 16-year-old son, David, has a chromosome disorder that makes him unable to talk, walk, dress, or feed himself. Stiff and rigid because of his nine operations—including two hip replacements, two kidney surgeries, and spinal fusion surgery—David is 64 pounds of dead weight: Kanter can no longer lift him out of his bed or into the minivan alone. She is trying to lift weights to get stronger, but with five other kids there's not a lot of time to go to the gym.

Still, she says, "God designed him to be this way," and "I don't really feel sorry for myself." Other people may think David doesn't know what's going on, but she knows that he recognizes the people he meets and has games that he plays with them. She knows he's scared to go to the dentist's office and loves walks and that he knows every dog in the neighborhood. Once, he said two words—"Papa, more!"—and it gave her joy in a way that other

there with little gifts and dinner. "I still have everything she's given me because it's so special," said Kanter. "She'd sit with me for a while and hear about his hospital visit and everything. Nobody does that nowadays. Just willing just to sit and listen and hear the story over and over again."

Dittrich started the support group for parents of special needs kids in 2002 after her second child, Charlie, was born with hemophilia, a condition that keeps his blood from clotting. Parents with bleeding disorders in their families welcomed to their circle Dittrich and her husband, Steve, but the Dittrichs did not want to join organizations that support embryonic stem-cell research or abortion.

Barbara Dittrich asked another special needs family to organize a support group with a Christian emphasis. She volunteered to host the first meeting in her living room and contributed a big box of Kleenex in case people got teary. She wanted someone more experienced to head the group, but as she gripped the problem, it gripped her. It became her calling.

parents couldn't understand—except the parents in a Christian group named Snappin' who have made the journey with her.

Now, when Kanter gets anxious before David's surgeries, she calls up Snappin' founder Barbara Dittrich to pray. Every time David comes home from the hospital, Dittrich is



**"IF THE PARENTS  
AREN'T IN GOOD SHAPE,  
THE KIDS AREN'T  
IN GOOD SHAPE":**  
Moms enjoy a Snappin'  
Spa Day; Dittrich  
(far right)



Now, Snappin' organizes babysitters so parents can have a date night. It works with community organizations like the local YMCA to make them more disability-friendly. It partners with a local salon to give special needs families a Spa Day: For a mom with an autistic son who screams when a pair of scissors touches his head, it's a relief to have someone cut his hair without recoiling or staring. In some cases, Snappin' provides financial help—groceries, meals, gas cards, and bill payments—to families without jobs or insurance. It runs a Bible study at a summer camp for disabled kids. It keeps parents sane.

Dittrich says about half of the families involved in Snappin' are non-Christians and about 80 percent of disabled families are unchurched: "There were times walking into the Children's Hospital in Milwaukee, I'd have to look down at the floor because the mission field looked so big." Church participation, among other benefits, can lend normalcy and stability to families that desperately need it, and Snappin' provides to churches a handbook on learning how to accommodate disabled families.

When I visited Dittrich this summer—Oconomowoc is about 30 miles west of downtown Milwaukee—the air in her living room was heavy with the smell of scented candles and bath oils. She and her volunteers were filling gift baskets with devotional books, candy, and toiletries to give to parents whose children are hospitalized. "If the parents aren't in good shape, the kids aren't in good shape," Dittrich said. "If Mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy!"

The mamas who sat around Dittrich's sunny dining room table batted around medical acronyms and advice. They talked about cold bureaucrats, bullying children, court battles, red tape, state budgets, and school districts that take special needs funds

but don't accommodate disabled students. They helped each other think through problems: Should one mom put her son on disability? How would it affect his self-worth? How do you qualify for at-home help? Terms like "sensory integration disorder" and "chromosomal abnormality" are part of their everyday vocabulary.

When she's not at Snappin', Dittrich's own struggles help her empathize. Charlie—an active, sandy-haired 9-year-old—has had over 1,000 blood infusions, and Barb and her husband do the IV push of his clotting factor three times a week. At least once a week they trek to a doctor—the gastroenterologist, the hematologist, the psychotherapist, or the ear-nose-throat physician. This summer, Charlie went to the hospital for the third time to have both sides of his nose cauterized to stop nose bleeds. Doctors placed a tube called a PICC line into his arm so they could infuse him with blood more often; he got a fever; doctors fretted about infection; he went on antibiotics and started school a week late.

Somehow, she keeps her sense of humor—joking that Charlie's sprung a leak when his nose bleeds and cracking to people, "You know, if you have any trouble, I have handy skills! I can put an IV in ya!" She nurtures Charlie's ambitions with a dose of the humor that keeps her—and the moms she helps—sane: "Charlie's going to be a Lego designer when he grows up." She tells Charlie about his future company, "Just hope it has good insurance."

Others also look for humor amid hardship. At a vacation Bible school camp for special needs families, a group of scrapbooking moms broke into empathetic amusement when

one woman said she sat down at her computer to look for pictures and found a whole file of unusual snapshots: vomit and poo.

Jen Gienke—mom to two autistic sons, foster mom to a baby with a feeding tube and a toddler with reactive attachment disorder—said, “We all started laughing and saying, ‘Yup, I have that file too!’” Moms with “normal



**MEETING A SPECIAL NEED:** Parents at a Snappin' Bible study

kids” don’t take pictures of “what’s in the toilet or what your child just barfed out on the floor,” said Gienke, but special needs moms know that’s how to show a child’s ailments to a doctor.

Gienke likes that bond of strange, shared experience: “It’s not an oddity to have a 10-year-old who knows exactly what you’re talking about when you tell him, ‘Honey, go upstairs and run and get me a split IV sponge!’” The emotional, spiritual, and sometimes financial relief that Snappin’ offers to parents of special needs kids is priceless: Gienke said, “No one’s going to stare at us, no one’s going to freak out”—and no one finds it strange that half of her kitchen pantry is filled with supplements and medical supplies.

“It’s going the long journey with God,” said Dittrich. “And sometimes you’re hanging on by a thread and He’s got you. And it’s hard, hard stuff. You watch your child suffer and you’d give anything for it to be you instead of your child.” And at the point where parents are ready to snap, compassion arrives. 🌍

## Snappin’

► Delivered \$1,400 in gift cards and 255 gift baskets in the past 10 months

► October 4 Spa Day: Haircuts and spa services for more than 100 moms and special needs kids

► More than 60 volunteers provide spa services, house cleaning, and refreshments

► 2009 revenue: \$9,301\*

► 2009 expenses: \$11,714\*

\*Revenue and expense figures are through Sept. '09

# Roving retirees

Seniors trade golf clubs for hammers to help Christian nonprofits **by EMILY BELZ** in Denton, Md.

**I**N THE RURAL FLATLANDS OF EASTERN Maryland sits a 112-year-old, 100-acre Christian camp filled with rows of tiny white clapboard cabins that show their age. Some need to be repainted. Some need carpet ripped out. Some need toilets.

Grunts and demolition sounds come from inside one of the old cabins. Inside, three men over the age of 60 pry back boards and discover that termites have carved their own patterns into the wood. They rip out all the ruined wood and put in new sheetrock and trim. Their wives stop by one of the cabins the men already cleaned out—“It’s ready to paint!” says one, with genuine delight.

The three couples are a team of retirees who arrived in their recreation vehicles (RVs) at the beginning of

September to volunteer for a month at the Denton Wesleyan Camp. They serve through Roving Volunteers in Christ’s Service (RVICS), which is based in Smithville, Texas. The 37-year-old organization sends its volunteers, all retirees, all over the country to work at Christian nonprofits.

Last year the organization’s 150 or so volunteers served 67 different organizations—but RVICS has about 400 projects waiting in the wings, if only more retirees would join and serve. RVICS asks its members to serve at least three projects every year. When volunteers grow frail and infirm, they can move into the RVICS Village in Texas, a retirement community exclusively for former volunteers.

“We’re old people,” said Jeannette Dunmyer, 71, who leads the Maryland team with her husband, Ray. She and the other women had just finished their day of work and were chatting in her RV. “We’re just all hyperactive.” When the team members aren’t on the road with RVICS, they volunteer in local nursing homes, work under car hoods, and generally stay busy.

“We didn’t want to be put out to pasture,” said Kathy Ball, 67, another member of the team.

“These people are crazy,” said Fred Flatten, the caretaker of the camp, as he plopped into a chair outside the Dunmyer’s RV, his shirt and hat both blazoned with bald eagles and American flags. He only had a few minutes to talk before



heading off to work at the Christian school and retirement community next door. He complained good-naturedly that the RVICS volunteers were going to “work me out of a job.”

The camp relies on the dollars of about 70 Wesleyan churches and on contributions of time from volunteers, like those of RVICS, who recognize that many Christian camps, schools, and other nonprofits are scraping to get by. RVICS president Gale Hickman is especially worried about the survival of these groups in the current economic climate. He told of one Christian school RVICS serves near Miami, Fla., that may close in the next two years because of falling enrollment.

The retirees know that their labors allow schools and camps to get down to the business of preaching, teaching, and ministering. “This is a second opportunity. We can do this for the Lord,” said Ken Ball, 67, a volunteer on the team from Niagara Falls, N.Y., as he paused from the cabin renovation: “Otherwise we’re wasting our life.” He and his wife Kathy have been working with RVICS for nine years.

Mrs. Ball said her retired Christian friends think it’s “nice” that she volunteers—nice for her, but not for them. But RVICS volunteers find a lot to enjoy out on the field. Their constant activity makes them feel younger. They travel the country, sometimes finding assignments within driving distance of

relatives. Deep friendships form on the team after sitting around campfires all summer talking and talking. Every morning the team has devotions together.

“Sometimes it feels a little selfish,” said “Big Ray” Dunmyer, 73, who used to work as a mason. Another volunteer, Ray Moody, 62, goes by “Little Ray” since he’s younger. The places the team serves usually provide free hook-ups for water and electricity to the RVs, so aside from the cost of gas, the volunteers can live inexpensively. When gas spiked up to around \$4 a gallon in 2008, Hickman said their volunteers still showed up to travel.

Sacrifices do have to be made here and there: Nonie Moody, 64, said they have to buy all “the little things” at Wal-Mart to fit the RV lifestyle. Jeannette gets homesick sometimes. They often have to wash clothes at the nearest laundromat, and once two of the men got their underwear mixed up when it was hanging on a line outside their RVs. “He’s got the same kind as me,” explained Big Ray, who ended up wearing his teammate’s underwear.

These aren’t muscled, protein-shake-drinking senior citizens in track suits. They look and act their age and everyone gets tired after each day of manual labor. Sometimes doing things the way the host organization wants them done can be frustrating—but Little Ray said that organizations often underestimate the amount of work they can do.



**“THESE PEOPLE ARE CRAZY”:**  
Ray and Jeannette Dunmyer,  
Kathy and Ken Ball,  
Ray and Nonie Moody  
(from left to right)

The women do anything from painting to sewing curtains to cleaning to washing dishes, depending on what they're good at. "I make it known that I am the world's worst painter," said Mrs. Ball. The men do all sorts of maintenance, construction, and demolition. They all work four days a week, but the men work six hours each day and the women three. They all receive equal pay: zero.

The road trips to reach assigned projects can demand a pioneering spirit. On the way to an assignment in California the Dunmyers used their GPS gadget for directions—they have a hard time reading signs—and ended up heading toward a mountain on a dirt road that turned into impassable mud. They couldn't turn around in the RV, so they had to back up a bit, then get a running start to speed over the mud to the top of the mountain. By then it was dark. They came across a lone store and asked the man there whether they were at Pillsbury Lake, their destination. He responded, "No, this is hell." They spent the night by the store and found their way in the morning.

"You leave it up to the Lord," said Big Ray, referring to that detour as their "mountaintop experience."

On the road, the team goes to whatever church is tied to their host: The volunteers come from different denominational backgrounds, but they want to worship together on the field. The Dunmyers listen to sermons as they drive. All have cell phones, and email lets them keep in touch with friends and churches back home.

Volunteers from a spectrum of denominations are united by "the saving blood and grace of Jesus," RVICS president Hickman said. The organization won't do projects for any group that is part of the World Council of Churches, which is theologically liberal.

Mrs. Ball, standing outside her RV, quotes Isaiah 52:7—"How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news"—and then chortles, "If it depended on my feet, no one would know the gospel, because they are not pretty." But that's exactly how the couples see their work: They may be retired, their health may ebb, and they may wish for more of life's comforts from time to time—but this calling makes perfect sense if, as several of them say, "everything you have comes from the Lord." ☉

## RVICS

► **Mission:** To serve Christian organizations so staff members do not have to perform routine maintenance and repair work.

► **Requirements for volunteers:** Believe in Jesus Christ—and have an RV, a desire to serve, sufficient finances, and health coverage.

► **Budget:** \$37,000 (2008), which covers bills for things like utilities and maintenance at the headquarters. No one at RVICS is paid.



**"WE DIDN'T WANT TO BE PUT OUT TO PASTURE":**  
RVICS volunteers at the end of a day of manual labor

# Welcome home

Children with severe disabilities, many of them abandoned, find more than just a place to live at Galilean Children's Home

by **JAMIE DEAN** in *Liberty, Ky.*

**F**OR ABDUL SAMAD, THE PATH from Kabul to Kentucky was shorter than he once imagined. Born in northern Afghanistan in 1976, Samad had a childhood marked by fear of the Soviet troops that invaded the country in 1979. In 1981, Samad says fear turned to horror when soldiers opened fire on a bus carrying dozens of civilians, including his father. At age 5, Samad became fatherless.

With his mother, two brothers, and two sisters, Samad moved south, where his mother began gleaning in fields. Poverty-stricken and desperate, his family returned north a few years later, while Samad stayed behind to work for a local farmer. He soon lost contact with his family and worried they had been hurt or killed.

Samad's troubles deepened: While walking through an Afghan field, the 13-year-old boy spotted a shiny object. He picked it up. In an instant, the damage was done: The exploding landmine ripped off both of Samad's hands and destroyed his left eye.

More than 7,000 miles away, in a rural corner of the rolling hills of eastern Kentucky, Jerry and Sandy Tucker were busy caring for children like Samad. In 1986, the couple founded the Galilean Children's Home (GCH), a Christian organization for children and adults who are disabled or abandoned, or both. Some need a home temporarily. Some stay permanently.

The young Samad—separated from his family and reeling from devastating injuries—was about to get a new home.



Samad



**RUNNING THE GOOD RACE:**  
Tucker at his cabin in Kentucky

**N**EARLY 20 YEARS LATER, MORNINGS BEGIN early at GCH. It's still dark outside, but Mr. Tucker sits at the head of a long table in a small cafeteria, reading a devotional booklet to eight attentive residents. The Bible passage comes from Hebrews, and Mr. Tucker sums up the meaning: "Life's a race. It's hard but we've got to finish it. God is the only one who can help us do that."

For these adult residents, and others still rousing from sleep in a dorm downstairs, the race is especially hard. Some are mentally disabled, but physically functional. Others are both mentally and physically challenged. All need substantial help.

For Mr. and Mrs. Tucker, offering substantial help to vulnerable people became a way of life long ago: The couple adopted their first child 40 years ago, thinking they were unlikely to conceive. A biological daughter followed, and so did six more adopted children. After the birth of another daughter, the growing, Christian family moved to a farm in southern Kentucky.

In 1981, the Tuckers adopted Elizabeth, an 11-year-old girl with Down syndrome. The couple began learning of more children from states all over the country—and countries all over the world—with mental and physical challenges, and they wanted to do more. They were driven by Jesus' words in the book of Matthew: "Whoever welcomes one such child for My sake, welcomes Me." Against that backdrop, the Tuckers opened the Galilean Children's Home

in 1986 and began hiring staff and recruiting volunteers to welcome and care for a growing number of children.

The couple adopted nearly 30 of the children over 40 years. Most of those children are now adults, and many of the chronically disabled still live on-site. There's no age limit and no requirement to leave after a set period. In the last 20 years, the home has served more than 800 people, says Mr. Tucker.

These days, Mr. Tucker's job is filled with a new mix of responsibility and sorrow: His wife of 44 years died in June 2007 after a long battle with cancer, leaving Mr. Tucker to carry on the work they began. Mrs. Tucker, known as "Mom" to everyone on campus, was pivotal in day-to-day operations. "We didn't realize just how big her shoes were," Mr. Tucker says.

From the wraparound porch of a nearly finished log cabin that the couple began building together before his wife grew sick, Mr. Tucker says the new reality is hard—mostly because he misses the wife he cherished, but also because there's still lots of work to do.

That work involves managing a staff caring for children and adults with lots of needs: First, there's the Angel House, where staff and volunteers care for babies and toddlers while their mothers serve time in prison. Then there's the Blessing House, where workers care for mostly teenagers and adults—some of whom have lived here for decades—with disabilities like cerebral palsy, brain damage, Down



Residents at the Galilean Children's Home's Blessing House

syndrome, and spina bifida. (Some of these residents have been abandoned or brought by parents unable to care for them.)

Another dorm serves a few residents who have disabilities but can function on their own. (These residents have often come from developing countries and needed advanced medical care, like Samad.)

The ministry has served as many as 90 residents at one time, but that number has declined as residents have grown older and as the process for bringing children from other countries has grown more difficult since 9/11. Still, the ministry is serving nearly 50 residents now.

Part of the ministry includes a Christian school that serves 66 students, including some from surrounding areas. The operation also includes a carpentry shop, where workers build all the furniture and other needed items for the ministry's campus. Workers in the "bus barn" maintain the ministry vehicles that transport residents to doctor appointments, activities in town, and church on Sunday mornings.

It's an expansive operation that employs 112 workers, including those who work at the ministry's thrift store in nearby Liberty and at The Bread of Life Café, a popular restaurant

## Galilean Children's Home

► More than 800 children and adults served since 1986

► Workers maintain a farm with some 100 chickens supplying eggs for nearly 50 residents

► Recipient of President George H.W. Bush's Point of Light Award in 1992

► 2007 total revenue: \$2,455,076

► 2007 total expenses: \$2,606,916 (Deficit reflects expenses on credit the ministry was in the process of paying off at end of year)

owned by the ministry and run by the Tuckers' two biological daughters, Becky and Jessica. (Both daughters are active in helping with operations at the home as well.)

But the heart of the ministry is its residents: At the Angel House, that includes 15 babies and toddlers born to mothers serving prison sentences. On a quiet afternoon in clean, bright rooms, a handful of infants nap, including the youngest—a 2-week-old girl wrapped in a soft, pink blanket.

Her mother followed a familiar pattern for pregnant inmates: When an inmate goes into labor, prison officials transport the mother to a hospital to deliver. Two days later, the mother goes back to jail. If she's asked GCH to care for the child until she's released, a ministry staffer brings the baby back to the Angel House. Once a week, staff members pack up the babies and take them to Louisville to visit their mothers in prison, allowing the moms to stay connected to their children during their incarceration.

At least five staffers or volunteers work each shift, and supervisor Linda Lee is in charge of managing the babies' medical care. A grinning 5-month-old baby boy on a



**ANGEL HOUSE:**  
“When you get attached to one of those little ones, you just have to trust the Lord to take care of them.”

changing table shows how serious some health problems can be: Stitches on his tiny chest reveal evidence of a recent heart procedure. (His twin sister—also living here—has had no health problems, and doctors say the boy will be fine.)

Lee has worked in the Angel House for five years: She glows with enthusiasm when talking about her job. After enduring a difficult upbringing herself—her mother died when Lee was 10 and her father was an alcoholic—she says she has a special empathy for these babies: “I know what it’s like to feel like you don’t have anybody.”

The hardest part of the job, she says, is letting the babies go when their moms finish their prison time: “When you get attached to one of those little ones, you just have to trust the Lord to take care of them.” She says she continues to pray for the children after they leave: “I really do feel like I have a ministry here. Sometimes I feel guilty for getting paid.”

Not everyone is paid, though attracting full-time volunteers can be difficult in a rural area. Kyla Hochsteler came here to volunteer after graduating from Crown College, a Christian school in Minnesota. “I wanted to do something in the volunteer sector before I started a career,” she says.

On an early Tuesday morning, Hochsteler and another volunteer prepare breakfast in the small kitchen of The Blessing House, where more than a dozen disabled residents live. The young women spoon oatmeal and applesauce onto plastic plates, noting that many residents can’t chew solid food. Other workers make rounds, waking up residents and helping them with dressing and personal hygiene. It’s hard work, but the staffers and volunteers are affectionate to residents who have difficulty responding from wheelchairs or hospital beds.

The workers encourage the more able-bodied residents to help: Medina is blind and walks with a cane but manages to take out the trash. Others sweep the floors. At dinnertime, some help feed their fellow residents.

George—a 39-year-old man who has been here nearly 25 years—is particularly helpful: He cheerfully wakes up residents and helps lift some to their wheelchairs. He guides new visitors to the right place and remembers names. Though mentally disabled, he absorbs Christian teaching. When a minister at the school chapel service asks why we should go to church, George is the

first to respond: “So we can have Jesus in our heart.”

Samad from Afghanistan still lives here too. Now 33 years old, he remembers when he first arrived in America with a medical visa after a series of surgeries on his face and arms in Pakistan and Egypt.

An American sponsor brought him to GCH, where he met another Afghan boy who could translate for him. Samad couldn’t speak English, but he surprised himself by becoming good at basketball, even without hands. He decided to try other new things, and at age 17 he entered first grade at the Christian school.

Within a few years he graduated from high school, then from a community college. Today, Samad efficiently buses tables at The Bread of Life Café, while waiting to apply for U.S. citizenship and trying to help his family in Afghanistan come here. (He reconnected with his mother and siblings in 2001.)

Samad says he’s grateful for the Tuckers’ ministry: “Mom and Dad have given their lives for us.” And he’s grateful for finding a home when he was alone and wounded: “The home is a place where people without hope find hope.”

Even as Mr. Tucker grows older, he’s confident the home will continue to provide hope through the gospel. His daughters and other long-time staff members are committed to continuing the ministry, and Mr. Tucker, 69, isn’t planning to retire anytime soon: “Retiring is for old people,” he says with a grin.

In the meantime, Mr. Tucker says he relies on God for strength and continues to pray for patience, knowing how that sometimes comes: “Every time we’ve prayed for patience, God’s given us another kid.” ☺