

First Ladies Support Jill's House

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Former Virginia First Lady Susan Allen, First Lady Maureen McDonnell, Jill's House co-founder Brenda Solomon and Del. Barbara Comstock (R-34) greeted guests at the First Ladies Christmas Brunch for Jill's House held on Dec. 8.

Remembering Matthew Shepard

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Snow Big Deal

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First Ladies Honor Supporters of Jill's House

Christmas Brunch recognizes donors, volunteers.

BY DONNA MANZ
THE CONNECTION

Virginia First Lady Maureen McDonnell and former First Lady Susan Allen joined 250 supporters and guests at the Dec. 8 First Ladies Christmas Brunch for Jill's House. The holiday celebration honored donors and volunteers, as well as Jill's House co-founder Brenda Solomon, whose 18-year-old daughter Jill inspired the birth of Jill's House.

Jill's House opened its doors in October as a weekend respite facility for families of special needs children. A state-of-the-art facility, on property owned by McLean Bible Church, Jill's House was designed expressly for exceptional children aged 6 to 17 and is the first of its kind in the nation.

"As a parent, I know how important it is to spend time with your children," McDonnell said. "With special needs children, the attention is more intense, especially when a family has other children. These parents can't just leave a special needs child with a babysitter."

"This place provides an option that these families might never have had otherwise."

"Respite changed our lives ... It gave us hope."

— Jill's House co-founder
Brenda Solomon

Brenda Solomon and her husband Lon, senior pastor at McLean Bible Church, had three sons when a perfect daughter was born to them in 1992. At three months old, Jill suffered seizures that damaged her brain. And on Jill's first Thanksgiving Day, the baby suffered 19 Grand Mal seizures. Bit by bit, the child lost language skills until the only words she had left were mama and daddy.

For the family, life was a challenge caring for a child needing 24 hour a day care. When Jill was two-and-a-half, a stranger, Mary, contacted Brenda Solomon, making arrangements to give respite to the Solomon family.

"Respite changed our lives," said Brenda Solomon. "It gave us hope."

"We built Jill's House because we wanted to

build an exceptional place for these exceptional children."

To Brenda and Lon Solomon, Jill's House extends the gift that Mary gave to them.

"Private donors really are the backbone of making Jill's House happen," said Jill's House President and CEO Cameron Doolittle. "There's been such a generous outpouring of support on behalf of children with special needs and their families."

While a stay at Jill's House costs the organization \$600 per night per participant, Jill's House charges qualified children \$75 only for a one-night stay. The respite program runs from Friday night through Sunday night and children – and their siblings – are eligible to stay either one night or both. The plan, said Development Director Lee Vaughn, is to add a night of respite per quarter in 2011. "Our ultimate goal is to get the whole place going 24/7," he said.

Among the challenges a weekday schedule produces is transportation from community schools to Jill's House. Currently, Jill's House is talking with Kilmer Middle School and George C. Marshall, both of which have centers for special needs students.

Sponsors of the First Ladies Christmas Brunch absorbed one hundred percent of the cost of the event. A harpist played and church musicians sang Christmas carols as waiters passed around finger snacks and beverages. A buffet table offered sweets and savories. Mostly, though, it was an opportunity for supporters and donors to mingle and discuss the future of Jill's House. Some guests came to learn more about the ACCESS program at McLean Bible Church and Jill's House. Some, like Joy Zorn, are MBC members who volunteer with ACCESS.

"We get to see these kids as individuals with their own personalities and strengths," said Zorn, wife of former Washington Redskin coach Jim Zorn, who volunteers along with her 23-year-old daughter.

"These kids are amazing and so are their parents. It makes you cry when parents come to pick up their children."

Jill's House, an integrated auxiliary of McLean Bible Church, is a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit, serving children with intellectual disabilities and their families. The 42,000 sq. ft. facility, with lodging areas, play areas, sensory room, indoor swimming pool, arts rooms and gym, is located at 9011 Leesburg Pike, Vienna, adjacent to McLean Bible Church. For more information, see www.jillshouse.org or call 703-639-5660.



PHOTO BY DONNA MANZ/THE CONNECTION

Co-founder of Jill's House Brenda Solomon spoke of the challenges facing parents of special needs children and the life-changing value of respite for the children's caregivers. Jill's House was named in honor of Solomon's daughter.



PHOTO BY ALEX MCVEIGH/THE CONNECTION

Supervisor John Foust (D-Dranesville) presented fifth-graders at St. Luke's with a certificate of appreciation for their "Treats for Troops" program, which collected 35 boxes worth of items to send to troops deployed overseas for the holidays.

Sending Treats to the Troops

Students at St. Luke collect holiday gifts for troops overseas.

BY ALEX MCVEIGH
THE CONNECTION

Fifth graders at St. Luke's School in McLean were recognized by Supervisor John Foust (D-Dranesville) for their "Treats for Troops" program, which collected 35 boxes of items to send to troops overseas in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The program, now in its second year, is led by the fifth graders, but students throughout the school participated. They saved their Halloween candy, toiletries, sundries, boxed soup and other non-perishable items.

"It was an idea by our room mother two years ago, and the students have really gotten behind it,"

said fifth grade teacher John Farnham. "We plan to do it every year, as long as there are troops overseas."

Foust presented the students with a certificate of appreciation at their weekly advent assembly Monday.

"This school already has a tremendous reputation, and they have added to it with what they've done," he said. "This is a great service to men and women overseas, including some that are away from home during the holidays for the first time."

The boxes were shipped by the Neighbors Program, which is a nonprofit group that ships packages to military personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan.



Spring Hill ES Chorus Performs at McLean Winterfest

On Dec. 5, thirty members of the Spring Hill Chorus sang at the McLean Winterfest Celebration. They performed to kick off a community parade and holiday tree lighting ceremony. The stage was decorated with poinsettias; it was located at the Virginia Commerce Bank. Deborah Rudd is shown conducting the students in one of their many holiday songs.