

spring 2022

ECHOES

UNDER THE RIMS

DEVOTION



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ABIDING & ADAPTING

They devoted themselves



congregations for formal review and call for support. Closing words within the document were these:

Because we believe this project to be worthy and right, as laymen and pastors of our Lutheran Churches in the Billings area, we commend this to your earnest and prayerful consideration and action.

All seventeen congregations affirmed the Enabling Resolution. On February 10, 1960, Lutheran Retirement Home Incorporated was formed and began doing business as St. John's Lutheran Home. Thirteen people were elected to serve as the founding Board of Directors. In the face of formidable challenges and cost, they devoted themselves to constructing and operating a home for older adults that would provide living opportunities within a nurturing environment.

The devotion of the founding congregations and elected Board of Directors is to be admired with thanksgiving. The devotion of additional congregations, board leaders, employed staff, volunteers, and donors who have since followed in the wake of those founders is to be admired with thanksgiving also. St. John's United has developed into the treasured provider of human services it is today because of the collective investments of all.

Within this issue of Echoes are stories and photos of devotion. These include the launch of an Assisted Device Library within Chapel Court; the dedication of

volunteers Bryan and Sandy Myers; the St. John's story of Wellness Coordinator, Jan Ostermiller; the love of St. John's employees for resident Chuck Swanson; and reflections from two contemporary board leaders, Paige Spalding and Mike Follett.

Thanks to our St. John's founders past, and stakeholders since, for their abiding missional devotion and capacity to adapt and evolve.

Rev. Dr. Tom Schlotterback
VP of Mission Advancement

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ARE YOU MY FRIEND?

STORIES AROUND AT ST. JOHN'S United. Thousands of stories in St. John's six decades – stories of staff, residents, and families touching each other's lives and leaving an enduring imprint. Chuck Swanson's time at St. John's is one of those stories.

The right living opportunity for Chuck took nearly a full year to reveal itself. Developmentally and physically disabled from birth, he had lived in group home settings in another state as an adult. When the state started to close group homes, Chuck's dad, Tom Danielsen, knew it was time to make a change. Tom's wife, Janie Fitch Danielsen, lobbied to bring Chuck to Billings. "Having spent my career in local health care, I knew that St. John's was extraordinary," recalls Janie, "and all the social workers know it, too." Once the right environment was found for Chuck, a beautiful journey began.

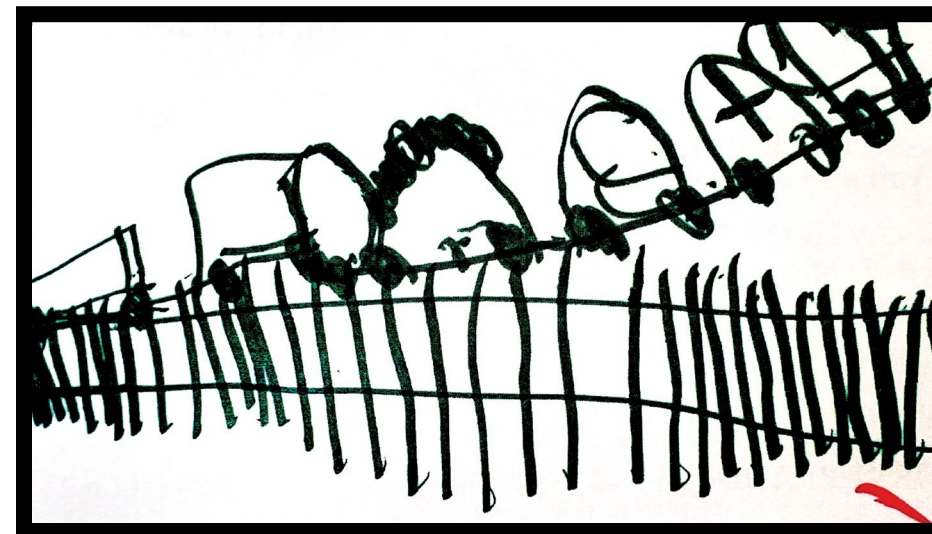
Chuck moved to St. John's in April 2015 and it was not long before he worked his way into the hearts of staff. "Chuck was just so easy to love; he never met a person he didn't like," says Debbie Diercks, social worker for St. John's Rimview Square. Physical therapist Ali Pistora echoes that sentiment, adding that "People sought Chuck out. He always had a 'hello' for others and would always say 'He's my friend.' If someone



was unfamiliar to Chuck, his first question was 'Are you my friend?'"

Staff were devoted to Chuck and he returned their affection in his own ways. An artist at heart, Chuck spent his days drawing pictures, most often of his beloved

trains and railroad tracks, which he would then place along the hallway railings to create his own personal art gallery. He crafted bead necklaces and bestowed them upon his caretakers, therapists, and fellow residents. Chuck's child-



Original artwork by Chuck Swanson

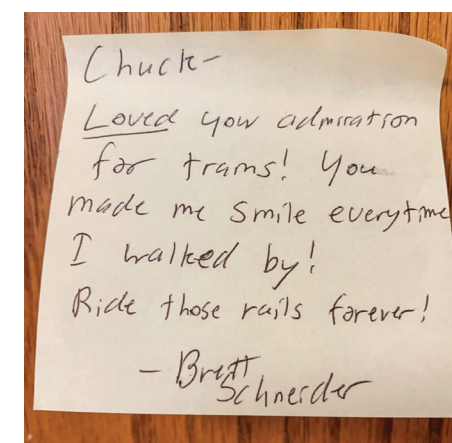
like nature made him the adopted grandson of the elders living at Rimview Square. It also made him an unintentional prankster – if an object caught his attention and he liked it, he would carry it off to his room. If anything ever went missing, it was a running joke among staff to ask, "Did you look in Chuck's room?"

Chuck's St. John's caretakers were diligent about keeping him connected with his family. They readied him for weekly coffee dates with Tom and Sunday dinners at Tom and Janie's home. Physical therapists ensured that he was physically strong enough to go on fishing and camping trips or longer excursions to Denver for baseball games. They worked to increase his stamina enabling a memorable birthday trip across northern Montana on the Amtrak Empire Builder destined for Glacier National Park.

"St. John's is the best place Chuck ever lived," says Tom. "When I took him on outings when he lived in the group homes, often the ride back was very quiet. Chuck wasn't keen on returning. But since coming to Montana, he's always been eager to go 'back to

John's House,' which was how he referred to St. John's."

A very special nurse always took time during her shift to call Tom so that Chuck could talk to him. "Hi My Dad," was his enthusiastic greeting for Tom. Due to Chuck's verbal limitations, their calls were short on actual conversation, but unfailingly ended with the two of them singing three songs together: "I've Been Workin' on the Railroad," "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," and "Jesus Loves Me." The final year of Chuck's life began with the COVID lockdown in skilled care settings. Going out and about ground to a halt. The telephone calls continued, however, and a new tool was introduced – Zoom. Suddenly,



staff could visually connect Chuck with Tom, Janie, and his extended family all at once. An unexpected gift made possible by Chuck's committed caretakers.

Sadly, just as St. John's was welcoming visitors back in late winter 2021, Chuck experienced a fall which led to his death. Staff members, even those not involved with Chuck's primary physical care, placed affectionate notes on his door expressing their love and how they would miss him. Janie conveyed her gratitude to St. John's in the following way: "What touched our hearts the most was how much the staff loved Chuck."

One year later, his room remains unoccupied. At some point, a new resident will come to live in the room by the entrance at Rimview Square. But for now, it's still referred to as Chuck's Room by those who loved him. ♦



Sandy Myers, Kim Kolstad, Bryan Myers



IT'S WHAT WE

WOULD WANT

BRYAN AND SANDY MYERS' St. John's story began many years ago when Sandy's mother lived at Rimview Square in the early 2000s. Sandy recalls how engaged her mom was with life at SJU, and how beloved she was by staff and residents, "When my mom died, the staff cried too. People care about others here," says Sandy. Several years later, Bryan's father moved into Chapel Court and was a resident for five years before his death in 2017. Bryan's dad was equally engaged at St. John's and staff was good about inviting Bryan and Sandy to participate in activities. "My dad was not a big talker, but if I came to bingo, I could be with him." Bryan and Sandy bonded with the residents and staff, and even though their parents are now gone, they keep coming, helping with bingo at Chapel Court.

"Bryan and Sandy are a dream come true," says Kim Kolstad, Activities Director at St. John's.

"They are happy, they love what they do, and the residents love them too." Unfortunately when COVID struck, Bryan and Sandy's volunteer efforts, along with all visitation and volunteer engagement at St. John's, was halted for nine months.

"The first big opportunity we had to bring volunteers back was as

"When my mom died, the staff cried too. People care about others here."

— Sandy Myers

Visitation Hosts. These volunteers helped facilitate COVID testing for families before visiting their loved

ones," says Carissa Welsh, Director of Volunteer Services. "When I sent out the email, Bryan replied immediately and volunteered to help."

Donned in full PPE - masks, gowns, goggles, and gloves - Bryan and Sandy, along with a dedicated group of additional volunteers, assisted families in filling out forms and transporting their samples to the nursing staff for testing. The Myers' volunteered weekly and often took charge of training the newer hosts. "It was a highly emotional time with families seeing their loved ones for the first time since COVID began. Having the Myers on shift, I knew I could trust that everything would be taken care of," remembers Carissa.

The Myers' dedication to volunteering continued when COVID vaccines became available to the public and the need arose

for help hosting the vaccination clinics. When St. John's finally reopened to volunteers in March 2021. Bryan and Sandy were at the front of the line, ready to return to Chapel Court. Since their return, the pair can be found faithfully hosting Thursday engagements, going door-to-door with treats, facilitating a fun event, or driving a group somewhere like Yellowstone Park, Bryan and Sandy are ever-present, engaging with and loving on the residents. When asked why they keep coming back, even with COVID outbreaks still prevalent in the community, the answer is simple, Bryan and Sandy say, "It's what we would want." ♦



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IT DOES MY HEART GOOD

SINCE ITS FOUNDING IN 1960, St. John's has been blessed with devoted board members who have volunteered their time and skills to lead, govern, and advance the organization in its mission. Two of these people are Paige Spalding and Mike Follett.

Paige and Mike were first introduced to St. John's for differing reasons and during differing decades. For the last ten years, though, they have shared in common service and mutual devotion as leaders within the St. John's Foundation Board and the Missions United Board.

Paige grew up in Billings and became familiar with St. John's at an early age. In 1974, her paternal grandmother became a resident within what was named St. John's Lutheran Home. Her maternal grandmother became a resident there in the late 1990's. More recently, her parents became residents within St. John's United at Mission Ridge.

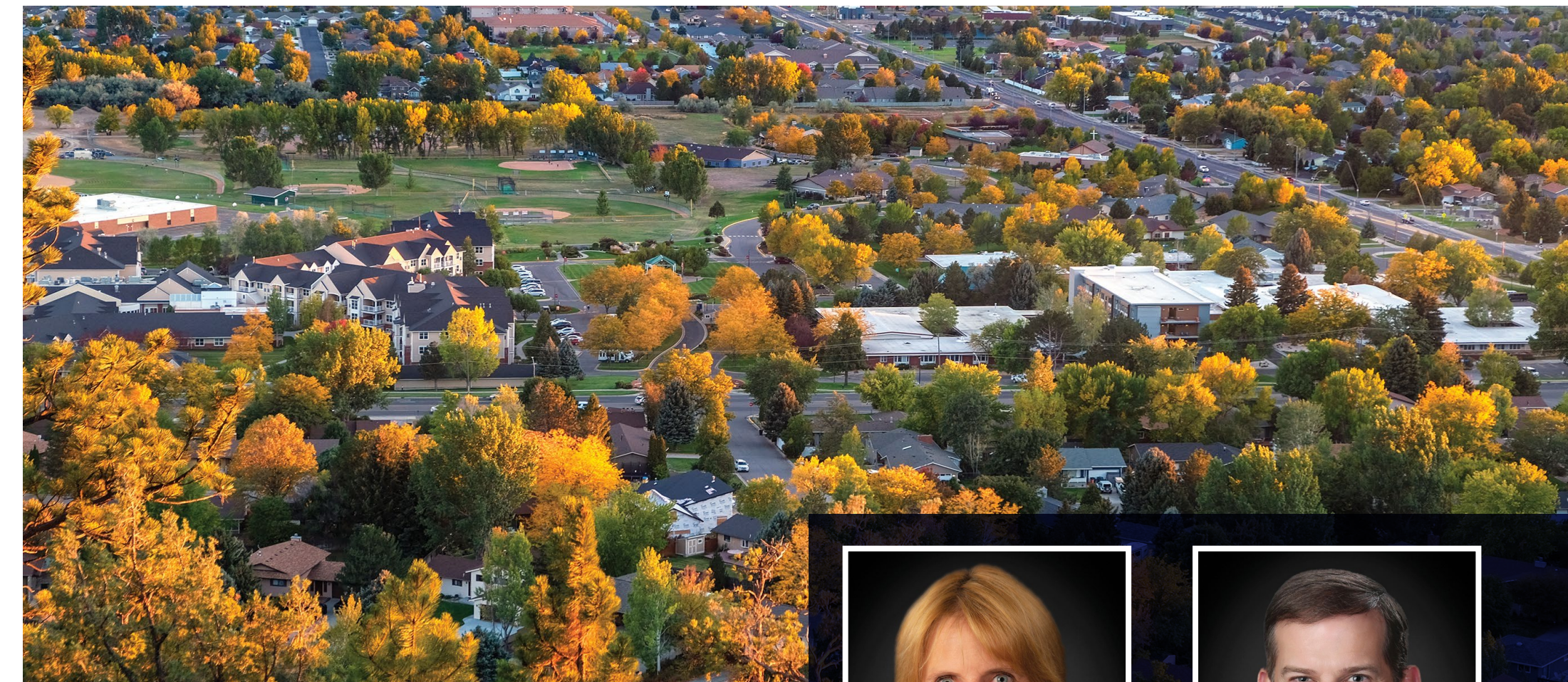
Mike, on the other hand, moved to Billings in 1995 to work for a specialty health care provider named Kindred. He was soon recruited by St. John's to help administrate an evolving array of health care services and join a growing and talented leadership team.

Mike became "hooked" to St.

John's on his very first day in office, recalling that it was not the work responsibilities that initially set his heart ablaze. It was the first early morning devotional service he attended. "People were gathered together to begin the day with a reading, prayer, and mutual support. I had not worked at a place that did that. Nor had I worked at a place that regularly gathered in circles around employees, residents, and patients to lay hands upon and pray for them as they were going through some type of life transition, celebration, honor, need, or even at end of life. These practices became meaningful to me — powerful. I also recognized at that first day of devotions, that even though the Lutherans may have founded St. John's, this was an organization with a mission to welcome and to serve all people. Not just the Lutherans."

Paige agrees that St. John's has historically been a welcoming place. Her favorite example of this has to do with a friend named Laurie Movius*, whom Paige has known since they attended the same Billings elementary school. Paige tells how people have loved Laurie through the years while also admiring her capacities to navigate through life well, in spite of some disabilities.

"I lost track of Laurie for a few years



and wondered about her when I moved to Florida to attend college. But when I came back and became engaged at St. John's with my grandmother living there, I found out that Laurie had a full-time job at St. John's as the hydration specialist. I was so happy for Laurie and I could tell that she was happy and fulfilled by serving the needs of residents. Laurie was capable of doing good work and it was just heartwarming to me that St. John's had given her a place to belong and contribute."

After working at St. John's for a number of years, Mike decided to explore and pursue a new vocational opportunity. It was not long after he resigned as an employee that he was invited to serve as a volunteer leader on the St. John's Foundation Board. Mike recalls, "The chance to come back to the organization that shaped a lot of who I became in my value system was a gift. It was an easy

transition back. The institutional memory was present."

Mike faithfully served for nine years as a member of the Foundation Board, including a year as board chair. He is gratified by the Foundation's advances in supporting and strengthening St. John's United. "To see the progress of the Foundation in recent years with lofty goals and relatively swift growth created excitement and passion within me to serve."

Paige, who also served for nine years as a member of the Foundation Board, including two years as board chair, agrees with Mike. "We made great progress. Not without challenge, but we kept moving forward. It does my heart good."

"The secret sauce of St. John's is difficult to describe," says Mike. "It's a spiritually grounded place that seeks to offer the highest level of human



Paige Spalding



Mike Follett

care possible. It seeks to lift the lowly high." "It is a Christ-centered place," adds Paige. "It's about Christ setting the tone of each day and calling others to participate in the works of God in the world."

Even when term limitations required Paige and Mike to conclude their service on the St. John's Foundation Board, their devotion to the mission of St. John's stirred each to accept new callings as members of the Missions United Board, which provides governance over the St. John's communities of Mission Ridge and WyndStone.

St. John's United is grateful for the devotion of Paige, Mike, and all who have served on the St. John's Board of Directors, the St. John's Foundation Board, and the Missions United Board. Their collective leadership contributions have helped to ensure that St. John's United will continue to provide living opportunities within nurturing environments of hope, dignity, and love for generations to come. ♦

*Read Laurie's story, "Work That Matters," in the Summer 2018 issue of *Echoes* at stjohnsunited.org/about/echoes/

CARING FOR THE CAREGIVERS

JAN OSTERMILLER IS ONE OF THOSE people who just can't stay away from St. John's United. Now serving as St. John's Wellness Coordinator, Jan is back for her third career opportunity focusing on employee wellness, for which she is a passionate advocate. We asked Jan to share her journey and what compels her dedication to St. John's.

On a long and varied history with St. John's:

My first job was in the kitchen at the original Chapel Court at St. John's. The day I graduated from high school, I enrolled in the CNA class which led me to work for St. John's as well as for another organization as an aide while I was attending college. When I changed my major to accounting, St. John's welcomed me back in the business office processing payroll.

I married and moved out of state for a period of time. When we returned to Montana, I ran into the former St. John's CEO who invited me back to St. John's in a business planning role. Finally, I realized that my calling was in health care and I returned to school to become a nurse practitioner. After working in both clinical and hospital settings, I jumped at the opportunity to return once again to St. John's as the Wellness Coordinator.

What keeps you coming back to St. John's?

It would seem that every time I left, there was a reason I needed to grow. I felt like St. John's was my family, and to grow, I needed to leave home to have new experiences, much like a young adult leaving home for college. I've had all of these rich experiences and now it's time to come back home and use them for

the benefit of the people here. It's like I've come home to help my family.

What excites you about your role as St. John's Wellness Coordinator?

I see the big picture: It is our duty at SJU to take care of the community – the greater Billings community and our internal St. John's community. We have a *duty* to the people who rely on SJU to care for their family members and we have a *duty* to attract and retain fantastic caregivers for those families. It is my great joy to develop a program that strives to care for our caregivers.

Health care is at a crossroads in our country and here in Montana. There is a shortage of employees and we have a wage problem in the positions that don't require higher education. This is true in every health care organization, from primary and acute care to long-term skilled care, and it has an impact on St. John's. These health care workers fuel our St. John's organization – they are the front-line, hands-on people who are devoted to our residents. It is vital that we take care of our employees because if we don't, the employment pool is becoming all too shallow.

On the practical one-on-one level, I facilitate the employee health clinic. Because physical ailments are often more than just physical, I take a holistic approach to finding solutions for better health. On an organizational level, that looks like an interface with behavioral health services such as our Employee Assistance Program (EAP). It also means creating fun and innovative programs that will equip our staff with tools and skills to make better choices when it comes to their health.



Jan Ostermiller, FNP-BC
Employee Health and Wellness
Coordinator

When staff are healthy and happy, it is exemplified in their work. I've been one of them on the frontlines here at St. John's and I care deeply about them. In fact, a number of the people who trained me as a CNA are still here. These are individuals who take such pride in their work and my admiration for them has no end. It is a privilege to return to care for them.

Why do you have such affection for St. John's?

St. John's is seen within the Billings community as a premier place to work and I can only point to one reason: It's the mission. It's in the heart of everyone who works here. I've worked for lots of different organizations and I'm sure they have all had mission statements, but St. John's mission statement is the only one I can recite on demand. I am dedicated to making St. John's a nurturing environment of hope, dignity, and love not only for our residents, but for our employees as well. ✦

ASSISTIVE DEVICE LIBRARY

WE ARE LIVING IN A FUTURE FAR beyond the greatest generation’s wildest Star Trek-inspired dreams – all the knowledge in the world fits inside a pocket. We have watches that make phone calls and track vital signs, voice enabled computers the size of an apple, and accurate-to-the-foot GPS that makes navigation possible for everyone. Technology has the potential to improve lives in countless ways, especially for those in need of assistance due to a disability. However, the latest and

greatest gadgets are often out of reach for older adults. Research has shown that older adults experience multiple barriers to effectively utilizing technology and tele-health engagement. Barriers range from a lack of self-efficacy and knowledge, to support and access.

Many older adults desire to age in place, and access to assistive devices may extend the time an adult is able to live independently. “When we opened the new Chapel Court Apartments, we were able to offer

many of our existing residents larger apartments at a significantly lower monthly cost,” says Karna Rhodes, Administrator for St. John’s. “A concurrent goal is to keep the services that maintain independence as affordable as possible. We know there are supportive devices that can help to maintain their independence, but those are also difficult to obtain.” A second barrier is that many residents don’t have family close by to help them learn how to use a device.

“We know there are supportive devices that can help to maintain their independence, but those are also difficult to obtain.”

– Karna Rhodes,
St. John’s Administrator

Staff wondered, “What if older adults had the ability try out a new device and also had a trained occupational therapist help them to learn?” And so was born St. John’s Assistive Device Library. Modeled after a similar program in Georgia, the Assistive Device

Library will provide older adults the ability to trial technology-based assistive devices that can help them to safely age in place. Staff occupational therapists and social workers will recommend devices for the residents to try, and teach the residents how to use the equipment. The library will include over twenty different types of equipment such as electronic pill dispensers, voice enabled devices for the vision impaired, and reading devices for the hearing impaired.

“Creating this library is really exciting. It will change the way I practice,” says Mary Emmett, SJU occupational therapist. “So often we know there is equipment that can make a huge impact on someone’s daily life, but people are hesitant to make an investment, especially if it’s a device they’ve never heard of and don’t understand.”

In addition to the library, an ADA-compliant computer will be purchased to enable residents to pay bills, participate in tele-health appointments, and complete required state applications online. Older adults who income qualify may then be able to purchase the equipment at a discount or obtain the item free of charge through community assistance programs.

Thanks to a generous \$5,000 grant from American Lutheran Church in Billings and donations over the holiday season, St. John’s is almost halfway to our funding goal for the library. To make an impact in the lives of others and help us complete the library, please make a contribution at www.stjohnsunitied.org/donate



American Lutheran check presentation with Patrick Klugman

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What Happens
When Residents at
St. John's Exhaust
Their Resources?

**THEY STAY
THANKS TO YOUR
GENEROSITY**

We're rounding third, at the two-minute warning, coming down the home stretch... Whatever your favorite sports idiom, the Campaign for Resident Care is nearly complete.

As of February 28, our kind and generous donors have offered gifts and gift commitments of \$7.85 million toward the \$8,000,000 campaign goal. That is amazing progress!

Our remaining gap to goal is \$150,000 and we need your help.

Would you consider a making a gift or documenting your estate gift intent to help us get across the finish line before April 1, 2022?

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We're here to answer questions about the campaign and ways to make a meaningful gift that makes a difference in the lives of others.



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