Melmark through the eyes of others
DEAR FRIENDS,

I had to pinch myself to remember where I was. It happened on a Sunday afternoon this past December. It had been a long hard trip down to Berwyn, Pennsylvania. I was tired but I had made it thus far. I finally settled back wearily in my folding chair.

The house lights dimmed and suddenly I found myself swept away into fairyland. It was only the gymnasium of Melmark and I was just a part of the audience of staff, parents, friends and neighbors, but my feet were lifting off the floor. The magic was there.

I found myself laughing one moment, crying the next, applauding till my hands hurt and finally standing to my feet in an enthusiastic ovation to the Melmark players, all of them young people with mental challenges. And my very own child—albeit limited (or blessed) by Down syndrome—was bouncing all over the stage as she performed in the presentation of, yes, it was Peter Pan no less.

Nobody told them they couldn’t do it.

As thrills went up and down my spine, I marveled at the shortcuts, the improvisations, the ability to adapt when needed and the patience and tenacity of the directing staff. Looking back, over the years, the offerings have always varied, from Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, A Christmas Carol and the demands of the Nutcracker. And not to be denied, the present staff never ever let that vision die. They not only equaled but surpassed many past programs.

It’s called the passing of the baton. We take a firm hold of the rod and pass it off to those waiting for their chance to join the race. To name names would be disastrous, for I would surely miss one. But I must give an honest appraisal and a resounding vote of approval and appreciation. We always knew, “These kids can do anything.”

It’s like that whenever the bell choir performs. Audiences are amazed—and yet, why should they be? We limit ourselves so quickly. The Bible has something to say about that: All things are possible, only believe. And again, the Apostle Paul wrote: I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me.

Moral to this letter? Don’t ever miss out on another “The Melmark Players proudly present.”

Happy New Year, from the mother of Melissa,
DEAR FRIENDS,

I hope you and your families are all well and enjoying the New Year.

It takes many hearts, giving their time, talent and resources to make the expansive home that is Melmark the best it can be. In this Messenger, we look at Melmark through the eyes and hearts of those who give in so many different ways throughout the year.

In this letter, I would like to share with you how I see and experience all of them.

I must start with the joy I experience every day being with the wonderful children and adults we serve. They are so pure in their caring and so grateful for all that is done for them. They are full of life, love and optimism despite their numerous challenges.

When it comes to our staff, one story tells it all. Sadly, we recently lost “Maria,” one of our much-loved residents. The staff in her home at Melmark arranged a memorial service to include Maria’s family and her housemates as well as friends and staff who were close to her. Everyone shared stories of their relationship and experiences with Maria.

I was so moved by the level of caring for Maria and for each other that I thought: isn’t this really what is best in the human heart? How lucky I am to see it everywhere at Melmark, everyday. At the end of the service, we all went outside where staff had attached a card with each memory to a balloon. The balloons were released and flew up into the sky, carrying everyone’s love to, as Maria’s brother said, “God’s newest angel.”

In addition to our staff, volunteers of all kinds give their precious time and talents to Melmark throughout the year. I watch them fix and build things, garden, read to children, put up the Christmas tree and make sure every resident who is at Melmark on Christmas day receives gifts. I think to myself, these wonderful people could be home relaxing, but here they are and isn’t that also illuminating the best of the human spirit?

Our Board members give freely of their time and expertise to assist with the operational aspects of our organization. Whenever I look around the Board table, I am awed by their talent and dedication. And between meetings, they are always available.

Our donors share their financial resources for the benefit of our people, resources that could well be spent elsewhere. Whenever we receive a gift, I always think about that and feel honored that our work at Melmark is seen as worthy by so many. Donor gifts change lives, as highlighted by the new indoor riding arena that allows our students to continue their balance and co-ordination progress by being able to ride therapeutically year round.

Our parents and families are an integral part of our everyday lives here. They are represented in most of the groupings just mentioned. We have asked a few of them to share their view of Melmark, as well. I hope you will enjoy everyone’s stories.

Joanne Gillis-Donovan
President and CEO
Let me begin by saying our son Eric adores many people at Melmark. Mark Streeter, Occupational Therapist, happens to be one of them.

October 13, 2003, was a perfect autumn day for the kids of Classroom 13 to have their OT session take place outdoors, in Center Circle in the front of the Main House. My husband Bill and I were there to see if Mark could persuade Eric to take a ride in a cart pulled by Gilbert, a very patient Shetland pony. Eric would also need to wear a protective helmet while sitting next to Mark.

Could Eric tolerate wearing the protective helmet? Did I mention that our son has autism, many behavioral challenges and sensory issues, and remains nonverbal at age thirteen?

I openly made a one dollar bet that I secretly hoped I would lose. I predicted that Mark could prompt Eric to sit next to him, but that Eric would refuse to wear the helmet. The first attempt proved me partially correct. Eric shook his head for “No” and would not comply with either request.

Mark did not give up. About 5 minutes later, he tried again. Using a soothing voice, he successfully coaxed Eric to sit next to him.

We and the staff watched in awe as Mark placed the helmet on Eric’s head and they proceeded to take their ride. Eric was so proud of himself. He had a huge smile the entire time. When asked, “Do you want a second ride,” Eric nodded yes.

We will always cherish this mini-miracle of maturity. Out popped my disposable camera to capture the moment. I’ll long remember the best bet I ever lost.

Let me end by saying how grateful we are to the good people at Melmark who have worked directly with Eric or on his behalf. You have worked together to ensure a safe, enriching, and peaceful world for our child these past two years.

Thanks a million!

Eric and Mark happy to prove Mom wrong.
I was recently honored by an invitation to become a member of Melmark’s Board of Directors, an opportunity I did not hesitate to accept.

During my first visit to the campus in September of 2000, I was struck by the beauty of the place and was deeply touched by the interactions I witnessed between residents and caregivers. To enter Melmark is to awaken to the fact that you have arrived in a special place, that you have found a hidden treasure, that you have entered holy ground.

Since that first experience three years ago, I’ve had the opportunity to meet many of the staff members and the people they serve. I’ve seen firsthand the teaching and therapeutic programs that are awakening minds, strengthening bodies, bestowing hope and changing lives.

I don’t perceive the children and adults served by Melmark as “people with special needs.” We all have special needs: the need to be known as an individual, to be loved for who we are, and to be encouraged to become all we are capable of being. That is what is happening each and every day in “the home that love built.”

My many years of management experience with the National Football League and my role in the creation of the Ronald McDonald Houses, which now number 237 around the world, have taught me the power of professional sports to make a positive impact in charitable endeavors.

I hope and pray that I can bring a little of that same kind of synergistic energy to my work for Melmark, and that together we can realize the full potential of a wonderful mission and ministry.
So many activities and events are a family affair at Melmark—not just for the Melmark community, but also for the extended families of those either living or working here.

For years, one extended Melmark family has watched their daughter’s love and devotion to those she serves broaden and deepen. “Kris has found her life here at Melmark, and it is a good life,” says Nancy Cocke, mother of Melmark staff member Kris Benach.

Kris’s good life includes her work with The Melmark Players, a theatre group of adults with developmental disabilities, who under her direction perform two full-length musical productions each year. For the past six years, Kris has made

*These young men and women are so much more real than those not challenged; I am a better person because of them and the time spent with them. They are family too.*

—Nancy Cocke

Meg as Captain Hook steals the show.
these productions a family affair for her entire family, even enlisting the help of parents Nancy and Jim, who live in Tampa, Florida.

The worst thing Kris ever did, according to her parents, was move from their home in Florida to the Philadelphia area. But they have come to understand her dedication to Melmark, and coming to Melmark to assist with Kris’s productions has become one of their greatest joys. Nancy comes north at least once a month to visit with Kris’s husband and daughter and has become an integral part of each Melmark Players’ production. According to Nancy, “Melmark is a special place. I am continually amazed by how each player has grown and developed over the years. Many have become more outgoing and sure of themselves.”

Nancy and Jim are proud not only of their association with Melmark, but also of their daughter’s dedication and love for her work. They believe Kris is very special and are thrilled with all she has accomplished. This family’s commitment to Melmark has even spread to friends and family in Tampa, who often give Nancy fabric, old dresses, and other things that can be used as costume design for upcoming musicals.

Nancy’s words express so well what her eyes and heart have witnessed over the years. “Coming to help at Melmark is like going on a cruise. It is so much fun and such a break for Jim and I. Often when I am working with the players, I wonder who is really challenged. These wonderful men and women really seem to know what life is all about, and they continue to teach me so much.”

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For the past two years, a group of professional builders, plumbers and electricians has traveled to Melmark for one week each August to accomplish a number of carpentry and painting projects. These friends, from Tabernacle United Methodist Church in Cape May, New Jersey, learned about Melmark through Shirley Halbruner, grandmother of Melmark resident Kevin.

Wynn Evoy coordinates this group of mostly retired volunteers who enjoy finding ways to give back to others. They include Dennis DeLorenzo, Otis and Amanda McKaig, Bob Myles, Ed Taylor, and Warren Trego. They have given their time and talents to mission projects in Kentucky and are very active in their church.

Last August the group agreed to take on the enormous task of helping Brian Sharkey, Jason Bradford, John Paxton and the rest of Melmark’s maintenance staff construct a cover for our therapeutic riding arena. They not only came to Melmark for one week, but also returned for a second week to assist our carpenters with installing trusses, putting up walls and constructing a roof.

The previous summer, they built soffits in the houses, dry walled a bedroom, and built a wheelchair ramp in the gym and another for the therapeutic riding program. They also assisted with the building of the salt shed and painted the summerhouse.

They work not only with their hands, but also with their hearts. Our volunteers are not only skilled with tools but are great at building relationships with our residents and staff. They work hard, but their great sense of humor makes it fun for everyone!
How do the volunteers feel about their experience at Melmark?

Amanda and Otis McKaig write:

> Any work Otie and I have done at Melmark has been for the Lord and not for our own gratification. We can only give a little back to the Lord in comparison to what He has done for us. We are both grateful that we have good health and are able to contribute a little. We were so happy that we were given the opportunity to help Brian with some of his jobs. He is a hard worker and a pleasure to be around and that goes for all the staff members. I hope we can be of help in the future.

Ed Taylor, who has a grandson with autism, likes to come to Melmark to give back to those less fortunate than him. “The kids really need us!”

The Tabernacle volunteers are glad that Melmark needs their help to improve the quality of life for all the residents. They enjoy helping a worthwhile cause and feel needed and appreciated!
Upon our arrival, the ivory staircase seemed to beckon us to continue onward and upward, where men in black tuxes and women in equally resplendent black dresses appeared everywhere. Painted smiles never disappeared, and bright eyes kept their twinkle as they oohed and ahhed the new museum.

There were no strangers that evening as, cameras in hand, guests collected pictures with Ben Franklin, George Washington, and other bronzed dignitaries. Pure historic fantasia. Gathered on a vast abutting patio, white-coated servers presented an array of shrimp kabobs, crab cakes and vegetable delicacies sure to sabotage any dieter’s resolve. All too soon, the Fife and Drum Corps called 480 dinner guests to gather round the tables for a delightful, deftly served, surf and turf dinner. Conversation flowed easily, smoothly mixing with live music.
Soon the merriment was interrupted. An enthusiastic Joanne Gillis-Donovan, Ph.D., Melmark President and CEO, graciously welcomed guests and introduced the first public showing of a new video entitled *Let Freedom Ring*. This was a creative portrayal of day-to-day activities at Melmark, produced to thank previous generous donors by showing them the fruits and program enhancements their gifts provide. The audience was moved as they witnessed the vital role philanthropy plays in enhancing this community’s quality of life. As in 2001, donors began to fulfill wish after Wishbook wish: locker room renovations, weekend outings, scholarships, classroom enhancements, and new goats for the animal program.

The laughter and music that filled the room was hushed as twelve bell ringers, each accompanied by a black-tied escort, walked cautiously up the stairs to the raised platform. *The Joybells!* They picked up their bronze bells, white-gloved hands in unison, and softly played *You Light Up My Life*. Four ringers in the front of the table signed the words as Janet Benson took the lyrics and made the meaning hers. The message was simple, the delivery disarming. The audience melted. They stood to their feet well before the last note sounded, with tears in their eyes and a new wonder in their hearts. It was a moment of honesty, and then they clapped. And clapped and clapped. The bell ringers smiled, then laughed, then bowed over and over in utter delight. Then, when the accolades had ceased, a medley of patriotic songs – *The Star Spangled Banner, America the Beautiful*, and at the end, a moving display of small American flags raised in salute by twelve ecstatic bell ringers. A message not soon to be forgotten. Marching off to their seats over at one side, the performers hugged one another in celebration.

The party went on, the orchestra sounded forth, and the dancing began. The sounds were happy sounds, the sounds of people having fun. The night wore on. What a fabulous evening and a tribute to all those whose support and commitment to Melmark’s mission allow each child and adult served the opportunity for a life of limitless possibilities.
If you visit Disney World’s website, you will see phrases such as *Where Magic Lives* or *Discover the Wonder*. For three ladies who reside in one of Melmark’s community homes, discovering the magic and wonder meant the vacation of a lifetime.

For more than 40 years, Ruth, Gloria and Peggy lived in various Pennsylvania State Facilities. In these facilities, residents lived in large dormitory-style wards in buildings located on a sprawling campus; most of their needs were met within the confines of the campus and trips into community were rare. Recreational time off campus was limited and usually occurred when staff members took residents during non-work hours.

But in late spring of 2001, the worlds of Ruth, Gloria, and Peggy widened forever when they moved to Melmark’s Valley View home in Springfield, Delaware County: first Ruth in May, then Gloria and Peggy in June. Mike Gimbel, Melmark’s Waiver Program Director, vividly remembers Gloria’s adjustment to her new home. “From the moment I met her at the state center, it was clear that she understood about moving to the community. Many of her friends had already been placed. She couldn’t wait to go herself!”

While the ladies were excited about each having a private bedroom, they never thought about being involved in a community or taking a vacation beyond a local mini mart. As Valley View House Supervisor Bertha Rodgers points out, “The ladies love living at Valley View. They have so many opportunities to do things they never dreamed of doing. They have become active members of their community. They frequent many places, including restaurants, movies, malls, churches, parks, plays and stores. They love to go to the senior center on their time off from Day Program. They have made many new friends there.”

And then last fall, after they had clearly adjusted very well to living in a special community, the ladies began to discuss with staff where they might want to go on vacation. Although considering a vacation farther then the boundaries of home was a new concept for them, they were given the opportunity to listen to staff ideas and choose from the possibilities. Working with Special Vacations, an organization that plans vacations for people with disabilities, the ladies chose their destination and set off on planning.
In November 2002, Ruth, Gloria, and Peggy accompanied Melmark’s Bertha Rodgers and Artrice Macon on a weeklong trip to Disney World, Florida. What an event for them! They had never even been on an airplane before. When they arrived at the airport, Ruth was even afraid to get out of the van. What was this big scary place? What a noisy and busy spot! But with encouragement from Bertha and Artrice, they made their way inside. They then “took off” on the adventure of their lifetime.

The week was full of awe and wonder for them. They loved the shows, the rides, the rooms and especially the food! They enjoyed their adventure and the “magic” of Disney World. Mike met them upon their return. He comments, “I will never forget going to meet them and finding Gloria in her mouse ears and Artrice looking like the Cat in the Hat!"

The ladies had so much fun at Disney World that a few months later in spring 2003, the world travelers—who just a few years back had never traveled more than a few miles to a mini mart—were able to take another trip. This time, to Las Vegas! They particularly enjoyed the lights of the casinos, and the stage shows. But I think that Gloria’s most special moment was meeting Elvis!

As Executive Director of Community Programs Christopher H. White points out, “Here at Melmark, we are blessed to see lives changed positively. We consider ourselves fortunate to have been given the opportunity to assist these special ladies in expanding their options in life.”

And where are the Valley View ladies off to next? Stay tuned.

**Charitable Gift Annuity**

Melmark is partnering with Chester County Community Foundation to offer our Charitable Gift Annuity Program. A Charitable Gift Annuity is an extraordinary way to make a gift to Melmark to preserve its future, retain income today for yourself, and enjoy tax savings...all in one transaction. For more information, contact Jim Foley, Vice President for Advancement, at 610-325-4996.
The Story of Lisa

When Lisa was born, and it was suspected that she had Down syndrome, my world started to tilt and lose its perfect balance. I had wonderful support from my husband, and our three-year-old son knew only an adoring love for his baby sister. But the unknown of raising a child with a disability scared me to death. What did her future hold? Would she have friends? Would people stare and laugh at her? Would she be happy?

I began gathering information about programs and schools and learned a little about Melmark, but it was still overwhelming to me.

Early one evening, when Lisa was two months old, my mother and I were out driving and found ourselves on a beautiful country road outside of Newtown Square. The road led us to Melmark. At 7:30pm, there was no activity outdoors, and we were able to drive around and admire the beautiful setting. As we came around to the back of a building, a door opened, and an adorable little girl, dressed in an adorable fluffy pink bathrobe, with adorable pink slippers, stared at us intently. I knew immediately that she had Down syndrome. Her face broke into a radiant smile as she waved at us. I knew at that moment that everything would be okay - I’d be okay. Lisa would be okay, our lives would be just fine!

And now, 21 years later. Lisa is attending Melmark's Meadows program. She is ringing bells with the Joybells, traveling to performances, stenciling note cards, weaving fabrics, and arranging dried flowers. But, most importantly, she is making lots of new friends. Her life couldn’t be happier and neither could mine. Melmark opened my eyes and my heart to the joy of having Lisa.

Melmark opened my eyes and my heart to the joy of having Lisa.
Ellen Battersby has learned many life lessons in her seven years of working at Melmark. Chief among them is an appreciation for the things in life that tend to be taken for granted.

After earning a bachelor’s degree in Social Work from Cabrini College in 1996, Ellen began work at Melmark as a residential aid. She has since held a number of positions, including residential teacher for CFIL women, teaching assistant for the Schoemaker adult day workshop, teaching assistant for Melmark’s first autistic classroom, and Enrichment department supervisor. She recently returned to the classroom as a teaching assistant for Liz Jurus’ classroom.

The family atmosphere is what she likes about working at Melmark, for she sees the residents as family. She enjoys working with both adults and children and appreciates getting to know Melmark families.

The residents have taught Ellen an appreciation for the little things in life. She marvels at the reaction of residents when they taste something new, experience an event for the first time, or receive a simple hug. She believes the children and adults have taught her to be patient and appreciate the simpler things in life.

Ellen finds great rewards from appreciative parents who are grateful to staff for the things they teach residents and day program participants.

As for the future, Ellen has, because of her experience at Melmark, thought about going into nursing.

Ellen believes the children and adults have taught her to be patient and appreciate the simpler things in life.
Victoria Herd first learned about Melmark more than 15 years ago, when then-Director of Development Nawal Abou Rahme wrote her a letter seeking support. Being a generous, caring, thoughtful woman, Ms. Herd responded to Nawal's request by visiting Melmark and convincing her family to endorse a grant through their association with the Constans Culver Foundation of New York. Today, despite health issues that necessitate nursing assistance – and related transportation issues – Ms. Herd continues to support Melmark, through charity and through deed: writing letters, advocating for grants, spreading the word to friends, and last fall, making the trip from Doylestown to Philadelphia to support Melmark's 2003 Gala.

Within the Melmark community, we have grown accustomed to meeting people who can be described as extraordinary. We watch first-hand as students struggle to overcome the challenges of their disabilities, as they learn to stand, walk, gesture, or propel their wheelchairs independently; or as adults learn to knit and sew. We know the dedication of staff members who motivate, teach, nurture, and care for the every need of the children and adults who call Melmark home. And we eagerly communicate with parents and siblings who take part in the teamwork required to promote and sustain health and wellness.

So when a mature woman with health complications exerts remarkable efforts, we might underestimate the significance of these acts. In the case of Vicki Herd, to do so is to miss out on an inspiration.

Miss Herd, or Vicki to her friends, has served as Trustee to the Constans Culver Foundation since its early days. The Foundation, which was established with Ms. Herd's father's assistance in 1965, grew out of holdings placed in Trust by a company run by Erne Constans Culver. Mr. Herd worked for this company. Managed by Miss Herd's family and the J.P. Morgan Bank, the Foundation supports civic, cultural, and health organizations throughout New York and Pennsylvania.

Melmark Benefactor Victoria Herd, An Extraordinary Woman!
As a proud sponsor of Melmark’s Gala Let Freedom Ring we salute the staff of Melmark for their unselfish devotion and love.  

Schering-Plough is committed to the discovery, development, manufacturing and marketing of new medicines that improve people’s health and extend lives. 

Making Medicine is Just the Beginning
At Melmark, there will always be a world of possibilities for Missy.

We were proud to be Melmark’s All American Sponsor for Let Freedom Ring!

Audrey Flack and Robert Marcus
Commerce Bank is honored to have been the Presenting Sponsor for Melmark’s Gala

*Let Freedom Ring.*

Commerce bank supports the Melmark staff who strive each day to provide compassionate, effective, research-based services for those entrusted to their care.
Katie Trainor’s family wishes to thank their friends and family who have continuously supported Melmark in keeping the memory of Katie alive.