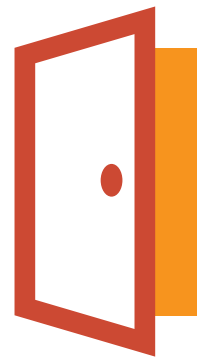


# connection

THE NEWSLETTER OF RUSH HOMES • SUMMER 2023



## Thicker than Water

*“I am convinced life is a pattern and all falls into place in time. And there is a purpose for all things, even though we never know the whys, we have to learn to accept.”*

**A**nne Dawson is 85. She wrote those words in a journal more than 40 years ago as she searched for a way to understand the inexplicable. To find some higher purpose for her beautiful daughter being born with incapacitating mental retardation. Dawson and her daughter have lived apart for most of their lives. If there is a fabric to their relationship, it is like lace, full of empty spaces, but made strong by the nature of the threads. And the design has its own kind of beauty. Suzanne, born in 1952, was Anne and Henry Dawson's third child, their only daughter. “A little girl with eyes like a spring sky and reddish-gold hair,” Dawson wrote of her daughter. Already delighted with their sons and the way their lives were going, Suzanne's future seemed iridescent. “I dreamed of her dainty dresses. Shoes to match. I dreamed of her in dancing school... in high school, her clothes, her formals, her popularity. I saw her in wedding gowns in the windows of the department

stores,” Dawson wrote. Like the shining surface of a bubble, the dreams thinned, and the bubble burst.

When Suzanne was 10 she was admitted to Lynchburg Training School & Hospital. A little girl from Charlottesville who'd never spent a night away from home moved into a world where mental retardation wasn't the exception, but the rule. Where more than 3,100 people lived in 1962 and the state tried to take care of people whose families couldn't. For the Dawsons, the decision was the end of a frayed strand of hopes. Agonizing. Final. Made to save the family. “We had to make a choice among our three children,” said Dawson. “And I hope and pray that I will never again have to make that decision.” Leading up to that choice were years of despair, thoughts of suicide. “I always said that if I did such a thing, I would take Suzanne first.” It was an era of no community

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***This article about Suzanne Dawson and her family was written by Cynthia T. Pegram of The News and Advance in December of 2000. We've learned of the passing of Suzanne, one of our earliest residents and a significant part of our origin story. Time passes, things change—hopefully for the better. This article might be hard to read, but it's important. It illustrates how far we've come in our understanding of the humanity of ALL people, regardless of ability. It's important to realize what YOU'VE made possible for Suzanne, her family, and many, many other families. Please read through to the end. We think you'll be glad you did.***

## Director's Corner

In today's world it is difficult to feel unified on anything. Division and derision seem to be the norm rather than the exception. But I, like Mabel Rush, the founder of Rush Homes, refuse to be part of the norm and embrace being an exception and, if I ventured a guess, I would say that anyone reading this newsletter shares my preference in establishing our own rules. Where others prefer to be divided, we



choose to be unified, sharing the common goal of serving others and concurrently furthering the mission of Rush Homes. And what makes us even more exceptional is our rallying support, whether financial or physical, of a population that many disregard. While I will never discount the clear and evident need of ensuring our children and our animals are loved and cared for, I find that society often overlooks the identical needs of love and care for our impoverished or

disabled adults living right outside our doorstep. It seems as if so many, from our neighbors to our politicians, become embroiled in heated debate as to why these individuals find themselves in these situations, rather than joining forces to address the need. And that is where you and I are the exception to the rule. We choose to act. We rally together in support of lending a helping hand to others, understanding that the "why" matters far less than the "how." How can we collaborate? How can we serve? How can we change the lives of others for generations to come?

It is in asking these questions, and taking these actions, that we become the change we desire to see and demonstrate to others what can be accomplished when we choose to stand unified, embracing our individual differences and championing our collective strengths. This mindset is the foundation on which Rush Homes continues to expand its reach into our community, providing housing that our disabled or low-income neighbors can afford which offers our residents safety, security, and stability.

And for this I am proud to be different! I am proud to serve alongside you in blessing the lives of our neighbors. Thank you for your commitment to serve whether financially or physically. Thank you for choosing Rush Homes. I am honored to be the new executive director and excited to further our mission together!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Craig A. Balch".

services, no support groups, no empathy for the imperfect. Mothers were advised to institutionalize children with mental retardation. To walk away, shut the door on the memory, and forget their children existed. Dawson could not do that. She became one of the small and persistent group of parents who kept the door open. Today those parents are seen as people whose voices could not be ignored. "There's no question but that a great debt is owed to them," said Rob Merryman, assistant director, community services, and longtime employee of the Central Virginia Training Center. "They had an incalculable effect on the politicians and society in general in terms of maintaining and improving the conditions in facility and community programs." Dawson tells her story to help others who need to know "that someone else loved, hated, and lived in a state of frustration because of this same problem." She could not love Suzanne the way she loves her sons. "I have a deeper caring and sense of responsibility for her and will as long as I live (and) search for a better life for her—so I suppose this can be called another type of love."

Today Dawson is slender and still a very active woman, with glossy gray and brown hair. She looks to be in her early 70s. When Suzanne was born, Dawson was a pediatric nurse at UVA, and her husband a Charlottesville

craftsman owning his own business in antique restoration and furniture reproduction. Married seven years when their first son was born, their second was born 22 months later. "All we needed was a daughter," she wrote. "And our family would be complete." Chip was 7 and Steve was 5 when Suzanne was born. Dawson tried to suppress what her instincts told her was the truth about Suzanne. "This child has to be normal," Dawson wrote. "I will not let her be retarded. I will make her normal. (How abnormal was I?)" "Out of each inch of progress, I built a mountain." She turned to her medical colleagues, but they seemed oddly unhelpful. Even her pediatrician seemed part of the conspiracy of vagueness: "Her motor is slow," he said. "But I think she will catch up with herself." "Now I realize there was so little known there was little to be offered," Dawson said. She tried day care, only to be told "we can't help you with your problem." Dawson's mother joined the household for five years. Specialists were sought, evaluations done. "I can't tell you the places we carried Suzanne. I went over to what is now Kluge's and asked them if there was anything we could do for Suzanne. And I got a very rough answer, 'We don't take mentally retarded children.' That's a word extremely hard for parents to say. "You don't hear it now, it's handicapped." Dawson underwent cancer surgery for melanoma and was given the uncertain prognosis

of a probable recurrence. Suzanne was enrolled in the first trainable mentally retarded class in a public school in Charlottesville. Yet in the 1950s, research on behavior modification, mental retardation combined with other problems, was still in the future. Suzanne needed little sleep. At home, she would pound on the walls and scream. "Her daddy made her a bed with a rail on the side. A tall rail, like a banister, with a little gate, so we could fasten that and keep her in bed." During the day, she would urinate on herself and giggle. And she began going into the front yard and taking off her clothes. She could also be a mischievous little sister, standing in front of the TV when her brothers were trying to watch a sports event. Always restless and hard to handle, Anne Dawson said her daughter's behavior finally ended any attempts at family outings. One parent stayed home with Suzanne while the other went out with the boys. "She could sleep 20 minutes and stay awake another 24 hours. I was so sleepy during the day that I didn't have good sense half the time." "I thought of suicide many times. The only thing that saved my sanity was who will take care of these children if I do that?" At about 10 years old, Suzanne developed strep throat. Dawson took her to the pediatrician, a family friend who hadn't seen Suzanne for a while. "He was horrified," said Dawson. "You have to do something with Suzanne," he told her. With the

physician's help, Suzanne was accepted in October 1962 as an emergency admission to CVTC. Quiet settled on the household in Charlottesville, but "this began a whole new heartbreak," wrote Dawson.

The Dawsons told no one outside the family that they were going to institutionalize Suzanne. Their bleak journey to Lynchburg was followed by a mandatory six weeks of no communication. As soon as they were allowed, Anne and Henry Dawson went to visit. He never went back. "When we saw her, she was a waif of the person we had taken to Lynchburg." Much of Suzanne's silky hair had been pulled out. She was thin and bedraggled. "Her little arms looked like she didn't have anything but skin over her bones." Instead of the children's ward, she had been placed on a ward of older adult women, where higher functioning mentally retarded residents took care of those of lesser levels. "They wore sack dresses, panties, no bra, no shoes, no stockings." Some were crouched against the walls. Many had rotted teeth. The smell of urine and feces thickened the air. Suzanne's inability to communicate made it even worse for Dawson. For the choice had been made between her children "where one could not speak for herself—could only accept her plight like a puppy abandoned. My life was hell for the next two weeks," wrote Dawson. "And I decided I could not live with the agony of her there. So, I went to Lynchburg with

the intention of bringing her back, whatever the consequences might be." When she got there, she found Suzanne moved to a unit with other children and taken under the wing of a motherly aide. Suzanne seemed better. Plans were for Suzanne to come home one weekend a month. On her visit, Suzanne went immediately into her room and got into her bed. "She lay her head on the rail of her bed and wept and wept," said Dawson. "It broke my heart." "When we would go back on Sunday afternoons, Suzanne would start crying by the time we crossed the Nelson County line. She would cry until we got there." The ordeal of home visits became too much. "So I stopped doing it. Suzanne, now to this day, will not get in the car with me," said Dawson.

In the early days, said Dawson, "no one knew about Lynchburg Training School and Hospital. It was like being

in another world." There were countless changes in the first 10 years, she said. "There never ceased to be problems and worries." "For what they had to deal with, it was pretty orderly," she said. But she didn't like the use of sedation, which was a hallmark of those years and of custodial care in institutions. "They couldn't care for them in any other way." Institutions had little money. Dawson was appalled at the state of essentials like soap, shampoo, and dental care. Suzanne's teeth began to decay, and Dawson fought to get her daughter care. She's never found out how Suzanne lost one of her front teeth. There was no damaged area to her mouth. But the tooth was gone. "They waited four days to tell me," she said. "When I got there, no one could tell me anything." Although residents weren't supposed to be left alone, no one could answer Dawson's questions as to what happened to her daughter.





"I was furious... How could a tooth be knocked out and there be no bruise?" During the late 1970s the state's mental retardation system was rocked by controversy over decades of involuntary sterilization of residents. Suzanne was among them. "I'm sure if Suzanne had stayed home, I would have had it done," she said. "I would have had a lot of opposition." But Dawson got good at handling opposition. At first, parents had to get permission and passes to visit children. Dawson did that for a while, but worried she wasn't getting the true picture. She started dropping in. And she usually found the staff helpful, and Suzanne doing OK. If she wasn't, Dawson followed through. "Hopefully my efforts have made it better for others," she said, adding that she had much help, as well as silent encouragement from many people. Dawson reached out to others for help. She is a founding and lifetime member of the ARC in Charlottesville, and a member of Parents and Friends of Central Virginia Training Center; of PAIR (Parents of Institutionalized Residents), which is made up of parents from the state's five training centers, and Voice of the Retarded, a national organization. In nearly 40 years, CVTC had improved dramatically from a place Dawson once described as having no human rights—but she was always watchful. It always bothered Dawson that her daughter's living area was continuously moved within

the Training Center. One of those units was called Social Skills, said Dawson, for people with behavior problems. If you ask Suzanne about Social Skills, said Dawson, her daughter answers "Throw you down. Beat you A..." And although Suzanne never indicated fear of anyone, over the years, administrators notified Dawson of several abuse investigations started because of unexplained bruises. "She doesn't have the mentality to be afraid of people," said Dawson, who still feels fault that harm of any kind has come to her daughter. With the growth of the Community Services Board system, which seeks to provide care outside of institutions, efforts were made to get Suzanne into a group home of 10 or 12 people. Dawson resisted because she thought Suzanne was safer at CVTC. "I was hounded to put Suzanne in a group home in Charlottesville. I don't like group homes," said Dawson. "She takes too much attention and too much constant care." In the early 1990s Dawson learned that a state-funded plan would allow her daughter—because she was institutionalized with mental retardation—the option of living in a house in the community with two or three house mates, 24-hour care and a case manager. What she heard sounded wonderful. Dawson was nearing her 80s. She wanted Suzanne as protected as possible and did not relent. "I will seek out every resource,

regardless of where it takes me," she wrote. "Nothing will stop my persistence to get whatever she needs for the rest of her life." In 1999, Suzanne moved into the community. "I firmly believe as with everything else with Suzanne, if I had not been persistent, and kept after it, so much would never have been done," she said. "You can't give up."

Suzanne has flourished in her new setting in Lynchburg. "It's been amazing to me what she's been able to do since she's been out... She'll go to the kitchen and make herself a cup of coffee. She'll make a peanut butter sandwich. She'll wash the dishes if you keep after her. She loves the shredding machine." Her bedroom is filled with furniture supplied by her mother. Next year she will move into a house constructed by Heritage High School's Building Trades class. The handicapped-accessible home will be purchased by Rush Lifetime Homes with some help from Dawson. Suzanne will make it her home, with one or two others, from now on. Those years of living here and there in CVTC are ended. "I have prayed so long for a solution to this," said Dawson, whose sons will take her role as guardian someday. It is the best Dawson can do for Suzanne, whose deteriorating hip will mean a wheelchair in the not-too-distant future. At 48, Suzanne is a stocky woman with unusual red-blond hair, clear blue eyes and fine-grained complexion.

She speaks a few words, but still has high energy. She has a job. A non-reader, she shreds confidential papers for CVTC for recycling. Dawson visits every month or six weeks. On this day their greeting is casual, and not entwined. Suzanne watches her mother with a kind of alertness for a while, then begins to shred paper. "In all the years," said Dawson, "there was never any affection from Suzanne. In a way, I'm glad." On this visit, Dawson brought a present to Suzanne, a prayer she had stitched and framed to hang on her daughter's wall. She began the needlework more than 25 years ago, but only finished it recently. Somehow it speaks to their relationship. "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. Thy love stay by me through the night, and wake me with the morning light."

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*We remember Anne and Suzanne Dawson with admiration and affection. If another article were to be written today, we trust the joys of the last 20+ years for the Dawson family would help distance the memories recounted here. What an advocate Anne was for her daughter. Rush Homes' vision is that everyone, regardless of income and disability lives in homes and communities where they can thrive. It is through the support of the community that Rush Homes is able to be a part of the solution for families like the Dawsons.*

## Former Executive Director Honored



Virginia Housing Alliance held their annual Awards Luncheon in Richmond July 21, 2023. It was a time to honor leaders, innovators, and changemakers who are making a difference in affordable housing, homelessness prevention, and the provision of services that support Virginians who are experiencing housing insecurity in our Commonwealth. VHA recognized

Virginia colleagues and friends who have demonstrated both distinction in their professional accomplishments and dedication to their communities. Our own Jeff Smith was one of three inducted into the Hall of Fame which recognizes Virginia's housing leaders who have demonstrated outstanding career performance in the homeless-services or affordable housing fields in the Commonwealth.

Joining the staff in attending the celebration were community housing professionals Mary Mayrose of the Lynchburg Redevelopment and Housing Authority, Donna Vincent of Greater Lynchburg Habitat for Humanity, and Sarah Quarantotto of Miriam's House.

Congratulations, Jeff, and thank you for your service to our community!



Susan Dewey (VHDA), Jeff Smith, Brian Koziol (VHA)



Sarah Quarantotto, Mary Mayrose, Jeff Smith, Donna Vincent, Mary Janick-Smith



L-R Tracey Ballagh, Hannah Yarosh, Board Member Jacquie Glanz, Kathryn Graham, Kate Goodman, Jeff Smith, Eden Eldredge, Morgan Holt



**Want to make sure your legacy endures by leaving a gift to Rush Homes? We'd be honored and you have our word that we'll be good stewards of your generosity. Feel free to call us with any questions.**

## August is National Make-A-Will Month!

Writing your will is an opportunity to think about how you'd like people to remember you when you're gone. For lots of families, that means choosing guardians and providing for children in the will. Another way to keep your legacy alive? Donating to charity

Whether you call it a bequest, an endowment, a legacy, or simply a gift, money or assets you leave to charity can be a meaningful part of your final plans. No matter how large or small your estate is, there's a way to leave a legacy to a cause you care about.

Here are a few of the emotional benefits of leaving money to charity:

- **Care for others.** Part of your estate can provide food, shelter, medicine or other critical resources for people or animals in need.
- **Support a cause you believe in.** Many charities rely on donations as an important source of funding.
- **Choose a beneficiary you feel connected to.** You might decide that it'd be more meaningful to leave money to an organization you care about, rather than a distant relative you barely know.
- **Leave a legacy for your name.** Even if you have close family and friends, you might feel that leaving a gift with a broad reach is important to you.



Coming Soon —

# Parade of Playhouses!

Mark your calendars for Saturday, April 27, 2024. You'll want to be at Armstrong Place for our first ever Parade of Playhouses and Spring Fling. We're recruiting builders and designers from across the area to design and build playhouses (including many features of accessibility) which will be displayed across Lynchburg and then raffled at our 2024 Spring Fling!

The Spring Fling will be a family-friendly community event including things like face-painting, a caricature artist, games, food trucks, bouncy houses, a live band, and other fun activities.

Are you a **builder** who would like to be involved? Are you a **vendor** who would like to be involved? Are you a **volunteer** who would like to be involved? Are you a business or individual who would like to be a **sponsor**? **Scan the QR code** for more information. Come one, come ALL!!!

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## In Memoriam

Since the publication of our last issue of *connection*, Rush Homes has mourned the passing of **Danny Rice** and **Claudia Hicks**.

We are thankful to have known and served them and extend our heartfelt condolences to their loved ones.

