

See inside for ways you can support families.

# BUCKNER TODAY

The magazine of Buckner International

Spring 2017

## a HEART for the VULNERABLE

Buckner president/CEO  
celebrates 10 years of  
service and leadership

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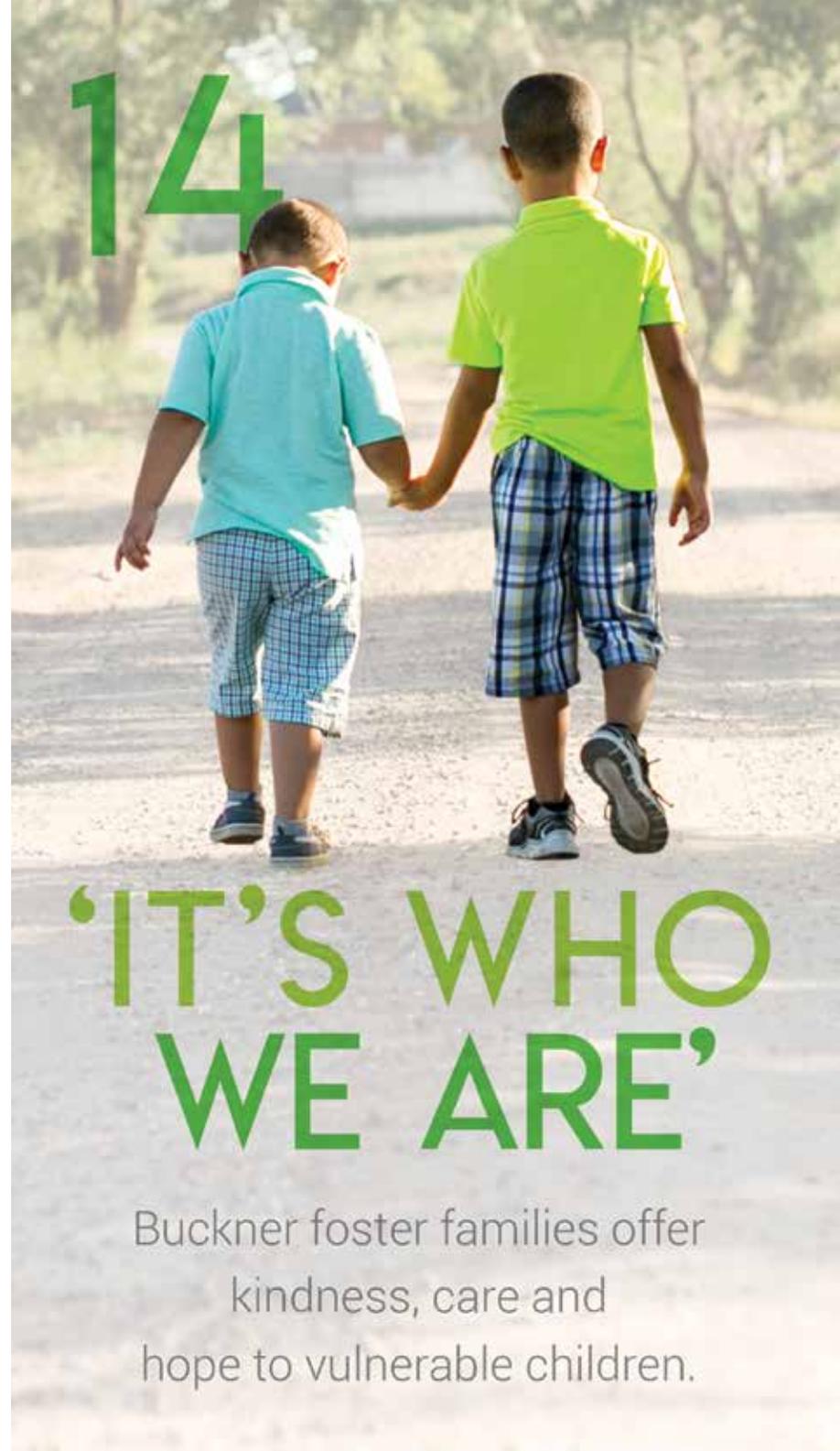
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Buckner foster families offer kindness, care and hope to vulnerable children.

# BUCKNER TODAY

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**LEADERSHIP**

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Albert L. Reyes

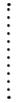
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Buckner President/CEO Albert L. Reyes looks out over impoverished Pamplona, Peru outside Lima. Under his leadership, Buckner International's ministry has expanded significantly in Latin America. | Photo by Mark Sandlin

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Hope shines here.®

www.buckner.org



# A life changed

**2007** – it doesn't seem that long ago. But when you look back over the past decade, we're reminded that a lot can happen in 10 years. In 2007, J.K. Rowling released her seventh and final book in the Harry Potter series and it sold 8.3 million copies in the first 24 hours. I wish my book had done that! Steve Jobs and Apple introduced the iPhone.

The U.S. "housing bubble" burst and a nationwide mortgage crisis gripped the entire country, leading to the crash of the stock market. And on a tragic note, 10 years ago, a deranged man shot and killed 33 students on the campus of Virginia Tech University.

During those same 10 years, it has been my honor and privilege to serve at Buckner, first as president of Buckner Children and Family Services. I became the sixth president of Buckner International in 2010 and five years ago, I became president and CEO.

I came to Buckner, hoping and expecting to "transform lives and change the world," as our brand promise says. Little did I know it was my life that would be transformed and changed. The experiences I've had of getting right into the lives of people and bringing what I believe to be the flesh and blood incarnational presence of Christ has done its work on me as much as it has on others. I look back at the past decade and I am grateful to God for his work in my life, in the life of Buckner and preeminently in the lives of the thousands we, together have served.

When I joined Buckner 10 years ago, I knew it was a social service agency. I was clear about that. What I've tried to do is point our whole energy and our staff toward, yes, social service, but also redemptive activity. I see it as a social service missions agency.

We're on a mission and our mission is to serve children around the world. That's our mission, and we're very focused. We know what we're supposed to do and we do it every day. And that's what Buckner means to me. It's a social service missions agency doing God's redemptive work.

As much as celebrating the past 10 years means to me, looking forward to the next 10 years excites me even more. As we embark

on fulfilling the challenges and opportunities of our new Buckner Strategic Plan, I find myself invigorated and anxious to see the ripples of impact we are going to have for Buckner and for those we serve.

For the longest time, I was a pastor and then became a university president/administrator, but this experience of getting right into the lives of people and bringing what I've always believed into flesh and

blood incarnational presence and activities has really flipped my theology all the way around. I've learned it's as simple as showing up and getting involved and bringing the kingdom of God nearer to people's lives.

I love to read books. One of the things I enjoy about reading is the excitement that builds as I near the end of a chapter and turn the page to begin a new one. There is something about turning the pages of a book that draws you back into the book to keep going.

We are closing a chapter at Buckner. But in the words of the New Testament, we "do not consider yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing we do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, we press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us in Christ Jesus."

And as we press on, may we remember the encouragement of the Apostle Paul who said, "Do not weary in doing good." My prayer is

that in the years ahead, we would turn to God and rely on him for our strength.

Wherever Buckner seems to show up through the power and the presence of Christ, that's where hope shines. So I'm thrilled to be a part of what Buckner does and it's not just a slogan, it's a reality.

Hope shines here.



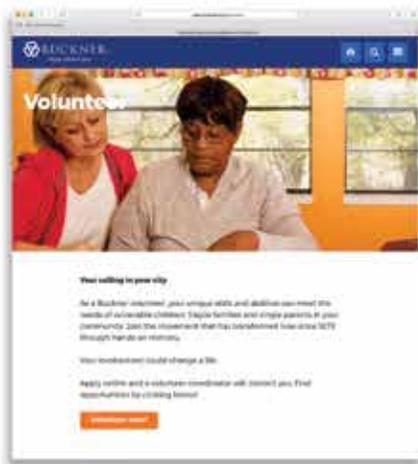
**Albert L. Reyes**, President and CEO  
*Buckner International*  
Visit my blog at [www.bucknerprez.com](http://www.bucknerprez.com)

## FEATURED VIDEO



May is National Foster Care Month and the need for foster parents is great. Even though Buckner has cared for record numbers of children each of the past two years through foster care and adoption, more than 300 children have spent at least two nights in Children Protective Services offices because there isn't a foster home available for them. **Learn more about how you can become a foster parent at [buckner.org/bucknertoday](http://buckner.org/bucknertoday).**

Visit [buckner.org/volunteer](http://buckner.org/volunteer) to find volunteer opportunities in the United States and around the world. Help organize fun activities for foster children, prepare boxes of aid or deliver shoes to orphans and vulnerable children around the world!



### Letters to the Editor

If you have any questions or comments about the articles you've read in *Buckner Today*, e-mail us at [news@buckner.org](mailto:news@buckner.org).

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## Centers of hope

The dusty roads that encircle the Lima, Peru communities of Pamplona and Villa Hermosa are surrounded by desperation.

Spread out below these suburbs (really slums), Lima sits close to the Pacific Ocean, where brilliant sunsets dance on the surface of the water and tease the inhabitants of Pamplona and Villa Hermosa.

Few residents there have access to plumbing. Electricity is often a stretched power cord.

Pamplona and Villa Hermosa are identical twins.



Traveling by bus or van, it's hard to remember which community you're in.

Something else that makes these communities look alike is a center of hope – or as we say here, a Buckner Family Hope Center. In both cases, the Family Hope Center looks almost out of place, sitting in the heart of extreme poverty and despair, the centers stand out as places of refuge and buildings of hope.

Throughout the day, children and adults stream through both centers. They go there for help and respite. Computers offer a future, while games offer joy. Women sit on the “roof” of the center in Pamplona at a long table covered in jewelry as the ladies meticulously connect chains and beads, forming a product they hope to sell.

Residents of Pamplona and Villa Hermosa are drawn to the Family Hope Centers because that's exactly what they are – centers of hope. Here, hope is not a distant dream, but a reality that can come true.



Scott Collins is Vice President of Communications at Buckner International.

# 3 REASONS WE'RE EX

## Ring the school bell for Guatemalan children!



The Buckner family recently ensured 5,000 Guatemalan children will be able to go to school. Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® discovered 5,000 Guatemalan children who were in danger of missing school because they did not have footwear. Buckner supporters rallied around the children, collecting and donating enough shoes for more than 6,100 children in roughly six weeks.

Because of your generosity, these students will be able to grow and learn in the coming school year. Your gift of a pair of shoes made it possible for these young people to continue along their educational journeys.

**Thank you for making the future brighter for vulnerable children. To help other children in need of shoes, visit [buckner.org/shoes](http://buckner.org/shoes) today.**



# CITED AT BUCKNER!

## Construction is underway in Houston!



Last fall, we shared a dream for a new Buckner Family Hope Center and Buckner Family Pathways in Houston as part of the Community of Hope Campus. In February, we took another step toward making that a reality as construction began on the property where Buckner ministries will soon be serving vulnerable families.

The land has been prepared by the construction crew as well as the prayers of the Buckner family. Soon, the facilities will begin taking shape. Buckner is expected to begin serving from the site in 2018, shining hope into lives through a variety of services.

**For more information about Buckner expansion in Houston, including weekly drone video updates of the construction site, visit [buckner.org/Houston](http://buckner.org/Houston).**

## Ventana by Buckner is moving forward quickly!



Excitement and anticipation was in the air as Buckner leaders officially broke ground April 20 on Ventana By Buckner, the newest Buckner senior living community.

Ventana's two 12-story towers will feature 189 independent living apartments, 38 assisted living apartments, 26 specialized memory care suites, 24 rehabilitation accommodations and overlook downtown Dallas. Ventana is scheduled to open in mid-2019.



**For more information about the new senior living community, visit [ventanabybuckner.org](http://ventanabybuckner.org).**

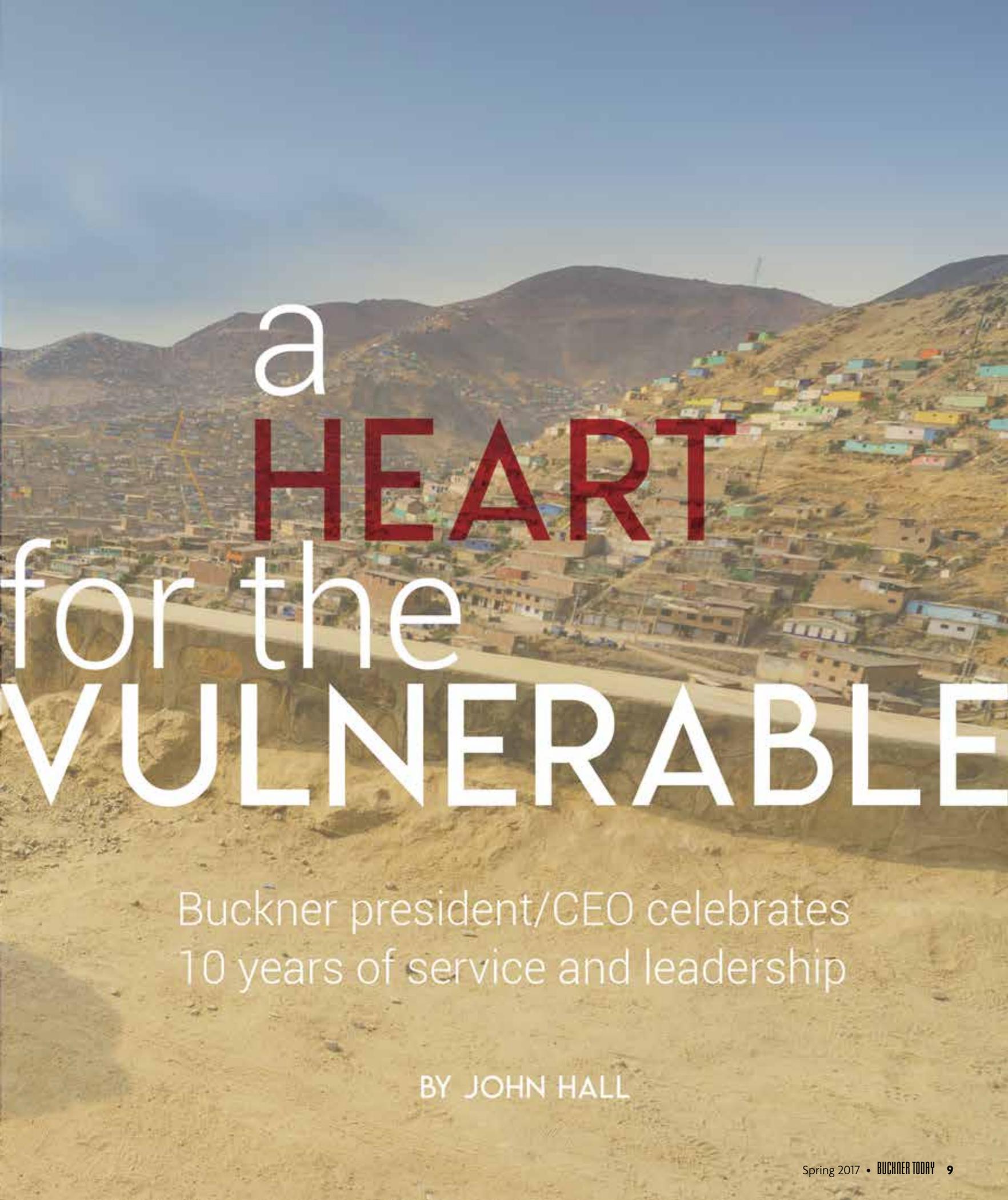
## Want to know the latest news at Buckner?

Go to [buckner.org/blog](http://buckner.org/blog) for the latest news, stories, photos and videos for all Buckner ministries.



## A teaching moment

Buckner President/CEO walks with a young man in Villa Hermosa, Peru, where a Buckner Family Hope Center serves vulnerable children and families. Under Reyes' leadership, Buckner has expanded its ministry in Latin America.



a  
**HEART**  
for the  
**VULNERABLE**

Buckner president/CEO celebrates  
10 years of service and leadership

BY JOHN HALL

**By the time Albert L. Reyes became president of Buckner Children and Family Services in January 2007, he'd already come far from his family's migrant worker roots. But he's never forgotten them. They've shaped who he's become and the ministry he guides.**



His grandparents were migrant workers in the cotton fields of West Texas, trying to make ends meet and provide for their nine children who often found themselves working as well. They struggled, but somehow there was always enough.

In those fields, his grandparents first heard the gospel when an itinerant evangelist shared the good news of Christ. The gospel took root in the family and radically transformed multiple generations in the Reyes clan.

Reyes' parents emphasized the importance of education and the young man followed their lead and encouragement. Several critical people helped support him as he first earned his bachelor's degree from Angelo State University in San Angelo, then a master's degree and the first of his doctoral degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. He became a pastor. Then he

served as the president of Baptist University of the Americas, where the school experienced a 400 percent growth in enrollment under his leadership. Reyes was elected president of Buckner Children and Family Services in 2007, where he led the organization to minister to multitudes of vulnerable children and families.

Reyes believes God saw the potential in his impoverished grandparents when no one else did. Even the itinerant evangelist, Edward P. Gonzalez, likely didn't know what was to happen decades later. Even a poor young man and his wife can live in such a way that leads to the transformation of hundreds of thousands of lives.

That's exactly the potential Reyes sees in every vulnerable child and family served by Buckner.

"At Buckner, I will focus on children at risk," the now Buckner International President/CEO said upon his election as BCFS president. "When I think of the 143 million orphans in the world and their leadership potential, my heart begins to race. It blows my mind. ...What if we were to look at the leadership potential of all those children in those countries? What could be the transformational potential of the gospel in their lives for their communities around the world?"

In the past five years as president of one of the most unique organizations in the world – one that serves vulnerable people from when they are extremely young to when they are much more experienced – Reyes has seen that goal play out over and over again.

When families and individuals put Christ first in their lives and live out their faith through serving the vulnerable, lives change. Children experience God's love when they are embraced by foster and adoptive families. Families encounter God's compassion and strength when they are coached through Buckner Family Hope Centers.

When single parents discover hope for a better life through Buckner Family Pathways, they feel God working in their lives. Senior adults discover what it means to live with purpose as they are served in Buckner retirement communities.

"If I were to come up with just a few words to describe the last 10 years for me personally, I'd have to start with the word incarnational. Ministry of presence. Showing up," Reyes said. "And then it really struck me whenever I started reflecting on previous ministry about the whole concept of redemption that, bad things happen to all of us, and certainly the people that we serve. To be able to see those really tough things get transformed into a better plan for the people we serve, it draws me into the whole work of God's redemptive activity in history, in human history.

"We're finding that people get saved, people get disciplined, people get in church, their lives get transformed, and it's because we show up and offer a cup of water in the name of Jesus. It's probably one of the most powerful things I've ever experienced."

That transformation has taken place in more than 3 million lives since Reyes first came to Buckner. Buckner has expanded its work

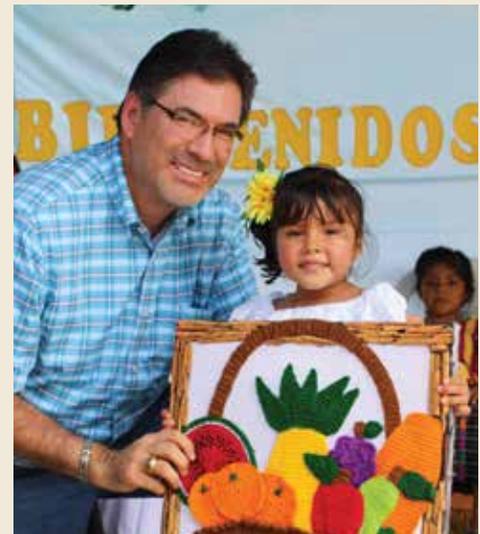
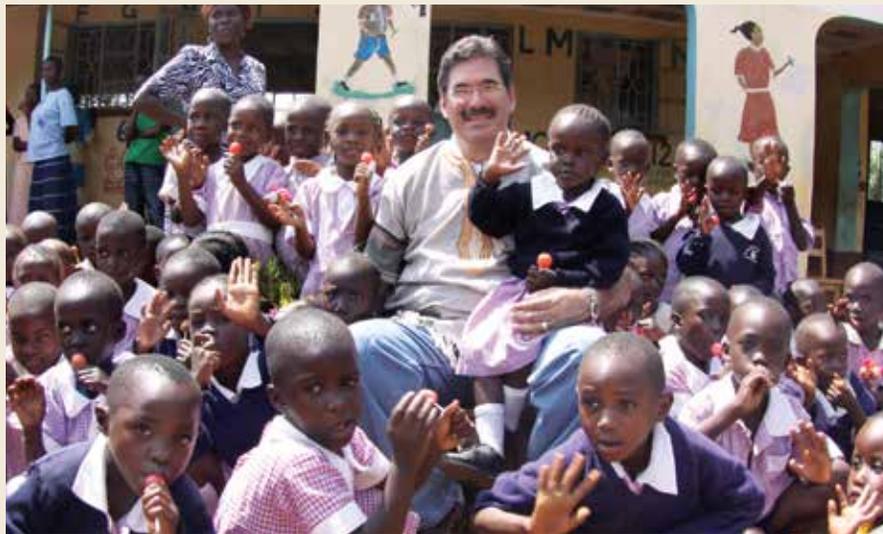
throughout Latin America, including in Mexico, Dominican Republic, Guatemala and Peru. Buckner retirement communities have expanded during Reyes' tenure. In the past two years, Buckner has served a record number of children through foster care and adoption. Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® distributed its 3 millionth shoe in 2014.

In recent years, Buckner has introduced the concept of foster care in several countries and is focused on helping international children find permanent families within their respective countries. The concept is known in social service circles as global permanency solutions.



orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself undefiled from the world," he said. "So while we focus a lot at Buckner with vulnerable children and the families, we're also concerned about senior adults. Those are our grandpas and grandmas, right? And so it's really a reflection of the whole family when the senior gets to the twilight or the sunset of their lives that matters to us too. We think and we believe that they should be able to have that time of their lives and live it in dignity, with respect."

Reyes led Buckner to emphasize intense family case management



More striking than the numeric accomplishments has been the culture shift within the ministry under Reyes. While expanding, Buckner has focused on delving deeper into the lives of those it serves than ever before.

That includes serving seniors. Buckner Retirement Services has become one of the largest non-profit providers of retirement communities in the nation during Reyes' tenure. Each senior living community is a Life Plan Community through which Buckner staff provide the right amount of care needed for each resident, from independent living to assisted living to skilled nursing care and memory care.

"You know, James 1:27 has the two objects of our mission: To visit

that helped clients identify goals, work through root issues in their lives and follow plans to achieve their goals such as self-sufficiency. Through the process, vulnerable children and families uncovered the very potential Reyes believes every person has.

"As I learned more about the founder and more about the ministry, I felt like I wanted to recover something that had always been there, but really wasn't front and center," Reyes said. "And so it was the work of our founder and the fact that he was always trying to help redeem the lives of people that he came in contact with. Sure, he served their needs and he helped them, but he was always interested in the spiritual aspect."

Buckner is more than a social services agency. Its staff members

serve as agents of redemption by addressing spiritual, emotional and physical needs.

“Buckner really is part of God’s redemptive work in history when it comes to individual children and families. So it was a social service agency, but when I thought about this idea, of redemption, I said, ‘You know, it’s really a missions agency too. And our mission is to get involved in what God’s doing and to bring about a redemptive impact, a transformational impact. So really Buckner is a social service missions agency, and our mission is to vulnerable children and families that need help. That’s why we say we shine hope into their lives because we’re about God’s redemptive work,” Reyes said.

We’re on mission in Texas and six countries beyond the United States. That’s what we do. We’re on mission to shine hope into the lives of children and families who really need help.”

With the focus on redemption came a focus on family preservation. Reyes believes families are God’s unit to help each child reach his or her full potential. Thus, Hope Centers and Family Pathways were expanded. More children could be helped if their families were strengthened before issues arose. Fewer children would enter the foster system if their families were healthier.



“We’re opening a new chapter for the history of Buckner. Looking forward, I would say that our mission is still focused on vulnerable children and families, but we’ve discovered that if we can keep children in families, families of origin, their biological families, and strengthen that family, so they’re going to grow up where they belong.”

Whether in Amarillo, Dallas, Beaumont or a foreign country, Reyes’ greatest joy is being with the children, families and seniors Buckner serves. Recently, he visited with a young man in Lima, Peru living with a foster family.

“Right now he’s leading worship as a 20-year-old in his church. And he sees someday he may be a pastor and begin to help children that he also shares that experience with. And so to see a child who really had a very difficult situation come into a foster family, come to know Christ, to have a foster mom who trusts and believes in God and believes that God has a purpose for his life, then to respond to a vocational call to ministry, who will then become an agent of redemption for all the people that his life’s going to touch, that’s the full cycle of what Buckner does. That’s what shining hope is all about.” ■



"At Buckner, I will focus on children at risk ... When I think of the leadership potential of orphans in the world, my heart begins to race. It blows my mind. What if we were to look at the leadership potential of all those children in those countries? What could be the transformational potential of the gospel in their lives for their communities around the world?" —Albert Reyes



Many children in the foster care system have seen pain. They may have been neglected or abused; they are hurting, and they are crying for a stable family to protect them, love them, care for them. They are searching for hope.

Buckner foster families shine that hope. By offering their home to a child in need, foster families provide a safe and loving refuge for children to heal. They offer kindness and care to a child whose world may have been filled with the opposite.

# ‘IT’S WHO

Every child deserves a family and during National Foster Care Month, we recognize all the ways we can play a part to enhance the lives of children and youth in foster care. Whether it's becoming a foster family or supporting one in your community through service or prayer, we can all do something to help.

**Because it's who we are.**



WE ARE'

# A community affair:

How a local community helped a foster family in need



Jimmy and Betty Kemp were exhausted. They sat on a bench outside the pediatric intensive care unit at Covenant Children's Hospital in Lubbock, Texas, and kept a watchful eye on their 2-month-old foster son, Matthew.\*

In 14 years of being foster parents, they had never gone through such an extreme medical emergency with one of their children.

Matthew was the Kemp's 27<sup>th</sup> foster child, and after just a few days in their home, Betty and Jimmy realized something was wrong. Jimmy was sitting in his favorite recliner, rocking Matthew when he noticed Matthew struggling to breathe. Suddenly he became lethargic and lifeless. Scared, Jimmy and Betty rushed him to the clinic near their home in Levelland.

The next day, Matthew was admitted to Covenant Children's Hospital in Lubbock where Matthew was diagnosed with RSV and Rhinovirus.

Matthew was incubated, had a breathing tube, a feeding tube and was sedated. The medical staff told the Kemps they expected him to be in the hospital for one month. There wasn't much Jimmy and Betty could do but watch and pray. They didn't want to leave his side. They

knew Matthew had already gone through so much as a foster child being removed from his home, and they wanted to make sure he knew someone cared for him.

**Story and photography  
by Aimee Freston**

But they also were needed at home. Though Jimmy and Betty are both retired, their 12-year-old daughter, who they adopted through the Buckner International foster-to-adopt program, needed to be cared for as well. Some of Betty and Jimmy's adult children lived nearby and helped when they could, but they quickly realized they could not be at Matthew's side 24 hours a day and give proper care for their daughter. They needed help, and Buckner stepped up to support them.

*[Continued on page 20]*



## Wrapped in prayer

When 2-month-old Matthew was rushed to the hospital, the community came together to watch and pray over his care around the clock.

# Be Heroic.

Stand in the gap for children who need a loving home through foster care.



**BUCKNER.**  
Hope shines here.®

**GIVE NOW:**

**\$93**

cares for a child  
for two weeks

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cares for a child  
for a month

**\$1,206**

cares for a child  
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**Give during May, and  
your gift will  
be doubled  
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Buckner arranged to have volunteers sit with Matthew whenever the Kemps could not, ensuring there was someone with Matthew around the clock while he was in the hospital. Jimmy and Betty would sit with Matthew from 8 a.m.-2 p.m. A Buckner volunteer would relieve them until a contracted caretaker showed up at 10 p.m. to watch him.

“We know the Kemps are an older family with a teenager and we knew Matthew needed someone there. We wanted to help out as much as we could,” said Cristian Garcia, Buckner director of foster care and adoption in Lubbock. “We had the community rally, and it was great for Matthew. Children feel presence and knowing somebody from the community is taking time to be with you is amazing. I think he felt it.”

Around the clock, someone was there for Matthew. While Matthew was incubated, the volunteers could not touch him, but they could sit nearby, talk to him and pray. Kylie Zweifel, a college student at Texas Tech University, learned about the opportunity to spend time with Matthew and felt it was something she needed to do.

“When I got the email, I prayed on it and I really felt that it was something I was meant to do,” she said. “I didn’t have anything on the day they needed so I figured I should give that time to someone else.

And it was heartwarming to watch ... because everyone had been there every day and seeing how they and the nurses really cared for him. It was really cool for Matthew to be surrounded by so many godly people.”

After one week, the hospital staff was able to remove the tubes, and the Kemps and volunteers were able to hold and comfort Matthew.

“We’re mighty lucky we had Buckner supporting us,” Betty said. “Anything we’ve ever done, they have supported us, but this really showed you how much they support you. There was some really special people there. I didn’t meet anyone who didn’t act as though they were glad to see us, glad to be there.”

“And we were sure glad to see them,” Jimmy added. “They really helped us a lot and they made a lot of difference. Buckner has been there with Matthew and for him. We’re really proud to be associated with Buckner.”

Even the hospital staff were there to help the Kemps. One nurse, Stephanie Trevino, a graduate of Buckner Family Pathways in Amarillo, was able to help care for Matthew.

“She’s a real special girl,” Betty said about Trevino.

“Matthew really liked her too,” Jimmy added. “She was really good to us and would tell us what was going on and what she was doing. When she was off, we didn’t like it. So we really liked her being there.”





Betty felt the constant care for Matthew truly helped him improve. After three weeks in the hospital, Matthew was released to go home, much earlier than anticipated.

“People don’t realize how much impact they had on Matthew,” Garcia said. “They saw their time there as just time. The reality of it is, it’s not. The community showed that they cared and to me that’s huge and vital to the work we do. And his recovery was supposed to take a month ended up taking a couple of weeks which is incredible.”

Just one month after his hospital stay, Matthew looks like a completely different child. He enthusiastically grabs for his bottle and gives a giant, warm smile at Jimmy as he talks to him from across the room. When on his play mat, he kicks his legs in glee and playfully reaches up to play with the hanging toys.

“At the end of the day, it’s about supporting Matthew and the Kemps,” Garcia said. “We had a whole troop rally around and do what they could for an indefinite amount of time, and it made a big impact for Matthew. Overall, doing things like this for foster families is just something we are meant to do. It’s a part of who we are and who

we want to be. There’s nothing glamorous about it other than just making sure Matthew gets the best care.” ■

\*Name changed to protect privacy.

## Offices aren't homes

More than **300 children** have spent at least two nights sleeping in Child Protective Services offices this year because there aren't enough foster homes. Will you help meet the need of a vulnerable child today?

Visit [buckner.org/fostercare](http://buckner.org/fostercare) now for more information about becoming a foster parent.

## These are heroes

Fighting for the needs of vulnerable children like the Barefoot family does requires bravery and plenty of enthusiasm.



STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY  
BY CHELSEA Q. WHITE

# FOR FIGHTING CHILDREN

Buckner foster families step up to care for children with therapeutic needs

**T**he need for foster families statewide is great. Children are sleeping in Child Protective Services offices because staff can't find available homes for them. Often times, the children who get stuck in the system the most are those who need a home where they can receive steady and specialized care – children with significant physical, medical, psychological and behavioral challenges due, many times, to trauma they experienced in their previous lives.

To care for these children, foster families must go through additional training and certification. While the extra training may seem daunting at first, three foster families in North Texas have found caring for children with more complex needs has brought them more joy

in serving and helping to rehabilitate those children than any other earthly endeavor.

## THE NURTURERS

Nestled in a small suburb outside of Frisco, the Barefoot household is busy and bustling. With three children under the age of five and a teenage foster daughter, many of their days are filled with coordinating chaos – in the best of ways.

Candace and Ryan Barefoot have been married for six years and always knew they would be foster parents. Candace had cousins who were in foster care for a while before their grandparents were granted guardianship. Ryan worked at a group home for teens who aged out



of foster care while he was in school in Florida.

The Barefoots have two biological children – Hunter, 4, and Magdalene, 2, often called “Maggie.” Family members and friends were concerned about how they would be affected by foster care but as it turns out, Hunter and Maggie are just as committed as their parents.

“We let our kiddos, even though they’re young, make the final call and let us know when they’re ready to take in a new placement,” Candace said. “It’s funny because after the last one left, they asked us, ‘When is a new friend coming? When are we going to have a new friend?’ We told them we wanted to wait a little longer but they kept asking. That’s all they know, that we have kids come into our home who don’t have a home who need a loving home.”

The Barefoots were originally licensed for basic foster care but soon realized they would need more training to better help the children coming into their home. Although many children were categorized as “basic needs,” in reality, the abuse and trauma they endured before foster care needed more – and the Barefoots were just the people to step up to the plate.

“THEY NEED YOU. THEY NEED SOMEONE WHO CARES AND CAN BE THEIR ADVOCATE AND CAN FIGHT FOR THEM. THEY NEED YOU NOW AND IF YOU DON’T, THEN WHO WILL? I’VE HONESTLY NEVER MET A KIDDO WITH JUST BASIC NEEDS IF THEY’RE IN FOSTER CARE.”

—Candace Barefoot, foster mom

“They need you. They need someone who cares and can be their advocate and can fight for them. They need you now and if you don’t, then who will?” Candace said. “I’ve honestly never met a kiddo with just basic needs if they’re in foster care.”

Candace and Ryan said the transition from basic needs licensure to therapeutic needs was fairly seamless – it just made sense to continue being educated and trained to help children.

“They’ve all been subject to some type of trauma, otherwise they wouldn’t have been removed,” Ryan said. “You can’t just sit by and watch, knowing there are kids sleeping in CPS offices, that there are kids not being removed because they don’t have anywhere to put them.”

## THE WISE COUNSELORS

Felicia Biles and her husband, Phillip, have been foster parents for the past 11 years while raising their two birth children, Lydia, 16, and Corban, 15. They also care for children classified as having therapeutic needs.

Felicia and Phillip became certified for foster care when Corban turned 2 and after a few years, they started caring for children with more significant emotional and behavioral needs.

“Our heart is really more for the kid in crisis who needs some help, some stability in their lives,” Philip said. “So our call really has been foster only, just coming alongside parents. No matter how poor some of the choices the





moms or dads make, the kids still love their biological parents. They still want that connection and relationship. So over the years, we've really been pursuing that type of stability of a family. OK, mom or dad, you get your life together, as long as it takes. We want you to have your child back. We want them to go home."

Though it's not always easy, Felicia and Philip take the good with the bad. "Your life isn't over just because you decide to do foster care," Philip said. "You can still live your life and accomplish your goals and dreams."

Felicia and Philip have felt most supported by Buckner through prayer, continuing education and training and making their biological children feel included.

"We love that Buckner has that passion for families," Philip said. "Not just the families where kids are coming from but current foster families, current adoptive families. They really are very supportive and caring for this family unit."

Even their now-teenage children have played a part in bringing awareness to foster care and trying to destigmatize it.

Lydia and Corban love having new brothers and sisters come

live with them and have a lot of compassion for children in crisis in general, not just children in foster care. They also have opportunities to tell other students at school about foster care.

"For us, [foster care] is normal," Corban said. "It's not like we went half our lives and then started doing foster care. It's something we've been doing our whole lives."

The Biles family feels equipped to help children who are in serious crisis situations. A child's story might look bad on paper, they said, but they've been pleasantly surprised how much they really can help children and their families make positive changes in their lives.

"It's definitely neat to see a child be reunited but I think one of the joys we get is seeing the moms or the families realize, wow, they were on our side, and they've been able to help me get my kids back," Philip said. "Our satisfaction comes from the design of the family, not just the child, just that whole family unit. Every family goes through crisis and every family has difficult moments. But just knowing that God put that family together is something we've been able to play a small role in at times."

## THE ADVOCATES

Just east of Dallas is the Sorrels family – a gregarious gang of six children all under the age of 12 led by parents Brent and Savannah.

Three years ago, they started their journey into therapeutic foster care with 2-year-old Zach who was "completely nonverbal," according to Savannah.

"This was our first path of having a child need therapies and not having any history to go off of," Savannah said. "He had no expectation that you were supposed to communicate. He didn't know you would respond to him. He had no expectation you would parent him in any way."

Later, they found out Zach essentially had to forage for himself while he was with his birth family, and he had been ingesting large doses of drugs before he was removed, which contributed to his therapeutic needs.

Once they started figuring out Zach's needs, Savannah jumped to action and called her friends who were speech therapists to ask about the best ways to communicate with Zach.

"Zach is pretty much caught up now," Brent said. "He's just like any other 5-year-old boy. He runs circles around our 8- and 9-year-olds. It's really amazing."

While Brent is a quiet advocate and more reserved, Savannah is a passionate fighter for her children. She worked as an attorney in the foster care court system for 10 years before deciding to foster.

"We've learned over the years of fostering that there's not a fix but there's the continual question, 'How do we meet needs?'" Savannah said.

Brent and Savannah have two biological children, Mason, 11, and Lily, 10. They adopted Nathaniel, also 11, as an infant and the adoption was

finalized right before they found out they were pregnant with Mason.

They took a few years to raise their three children who were all so close in age before they decided to become licensed to take in more children.

The Sorrels family adopted Zach on National Adoption Day in November 2016 and plan to adopt their two current foster children, siblings Sonia\* and Jackson\*, both of whom have significant therapeutic needs.

Sonia has vision and sensory issues and was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. Jackson has some sensory issues and has been diagnosed on the autism spectrum but both are smart and growing every day through therapy and their life with the Sorrels family.

"I never thought I would take in children with special needs," Brent said. "But God puts it on your plate and it's certainly biblical to do that. It's been a conviction that we're supposed to do that."

## FAMILIES FOR FAMILIES

Becoming licensed to care for children who have significant emotional, physical and medical needs is certainly not for everyone, Philip Biles said. All of the families recommend starting out slow: begin with respite care and then become licensed for basic. As families start to get more comfortable and figure out foster care, that's when more training and education comes in to help children who otherwise will be stuck in the system.

"Buckner is all about helping to provide resources and tools," Biles said. "They do a great job with respite care and connecting foster families in your area together. As you're driving through this, you really feel like they're with you the whole way. Sometimes they're just there, observing, and other times, they're helping you figure out which way to turn." ■ \*Names changed to protect privacy

"I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD TAKE IN CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS. BUT GOD PUTS IT ON YOUR PLATE AND IT'S CERTAINLY BIBLICAL TO DO THAT. IT'S BEEN A CONVICTION THAT WE'RE SUPPOSED TO DO THAT."

—BRENT SORRELS, FOSTER DAD



## The most vulnerable of the vulnerable

Children in the foster care system with therapeutic needs have **developmental, physical, medical or behavioral** challenges that are compounded by the trauma of being removed from their biological families. They are often the hardest children to place, but the rewards are great.

Visit [buckner.org/fostercare](https://buckner.org/fostercare) now for more information about becoming a foster parent.

# A LASTING IMPACT

— Story by Elizabeth Arnold • Photography by Darby Askew



# THE NAME “JOHN HENRY” IS FAMOUS AT BUCKNER PARKWAY PLACE, AND THE RED-HEADED BOY BEHIND IT MORE FAMOUS STILL.

John Henry Donnelly, now 15 years old, began volunteering at the Houston senior living community when he was just 2. He came once a week with his mom and younger brother, carrying a roll of stickers and a fist full of tiny toy cars. Each day little John Henry was scheduled to visit, residents packed the doorway, eagerly awaiting their young friend's arrival.

More than 10 years and several growth spurts later, the teenager still holds a unique soft spot for senior adults. A soft spot he says will stay with him for the rest of his life.

“I wanted John Henry to experience that key interaction with the elderly the way I had growing up,” explained his mom, Jessica Donnelly, who initiated her family's involvement with Parkway Place in 2004 as a way to give back during Lent. “This population has so much to offer, especially to young people.”

John Henry's visits to Parkway Place became less regular when he started school full time, but his appreciation for senior adults grew strong as he and his family maintained their relationship with the senior community. The boys didn't get to know their grandparents well, so the residents at Parkway Place largely filled the role of elderly relatives.

One particular resident, Lynn Mathews, has watched John Henry grow up with a grandmotherly pride. Her late husband, David, lived in skilled nursing when John Henry first started visiting Parkway Place, and the families now consider each other close friends.

“The kind of person John Henry has become is just amazing to me,” Mathews said. “Some teens are self-centered, but he's not. Being with older people has really made a difference with him.”

“I visited Mr. Mathews every time I went to Parkway Place,” John Henry said. “I'd go in and roll my toy cars on his bed. When he passed away, Mrs. Mathews gave me one of her husband's books about cars because she remembered cars were something special we shared.”

Last summer, just before starting high school at Strake Jesuit, John Henry returned to Parkway Place to lead activities like Bingo and chair volleyball as part of his school's initiatives to encourage freshmen to



complete service hours with senior adults.

When John Henry walked through the doors again, Jackie Pigott, who's worked in Parkway Place skilled nursing for 15 years, could hardly believe her eyes.

"I just remembered this tiny red-headed kid, kind of shy. So when he came back this summer, I was so amazed at how he had grown up," she laughed. "I felt old!"

Pigott has seen firsthand the palpable impact children have on senior adults during her years at Parkway Place. Whether it's a school choir singing at Christmas time or a consistent presence like John Henry, any interaction with children brings joy to residents.

"Any time the residents see children, they show this feeling of love," Pigott said. "It's this reminiscing of when they were children themselves. Seeing the intergenerational dynamic of young people interacting with the old is powerful. They connect almost on the same level."

Jessica Donnelly feels proud her son has upheld an admiration for senior adults.

"John Henry, largely due to our visits to Parkway Place, is comfortable, respectful and appreciative of the elderly," she said. "I love that, because of course I'll be one of them one day! Volunteering at a senior living community like Buckner is easy because they're so welcoming. It's important for kids to develop a comfort with all generations, instead of just kids their own age. Sharing different kinds

of experiences like these with your children is really special, and it brings you out of your own little world."

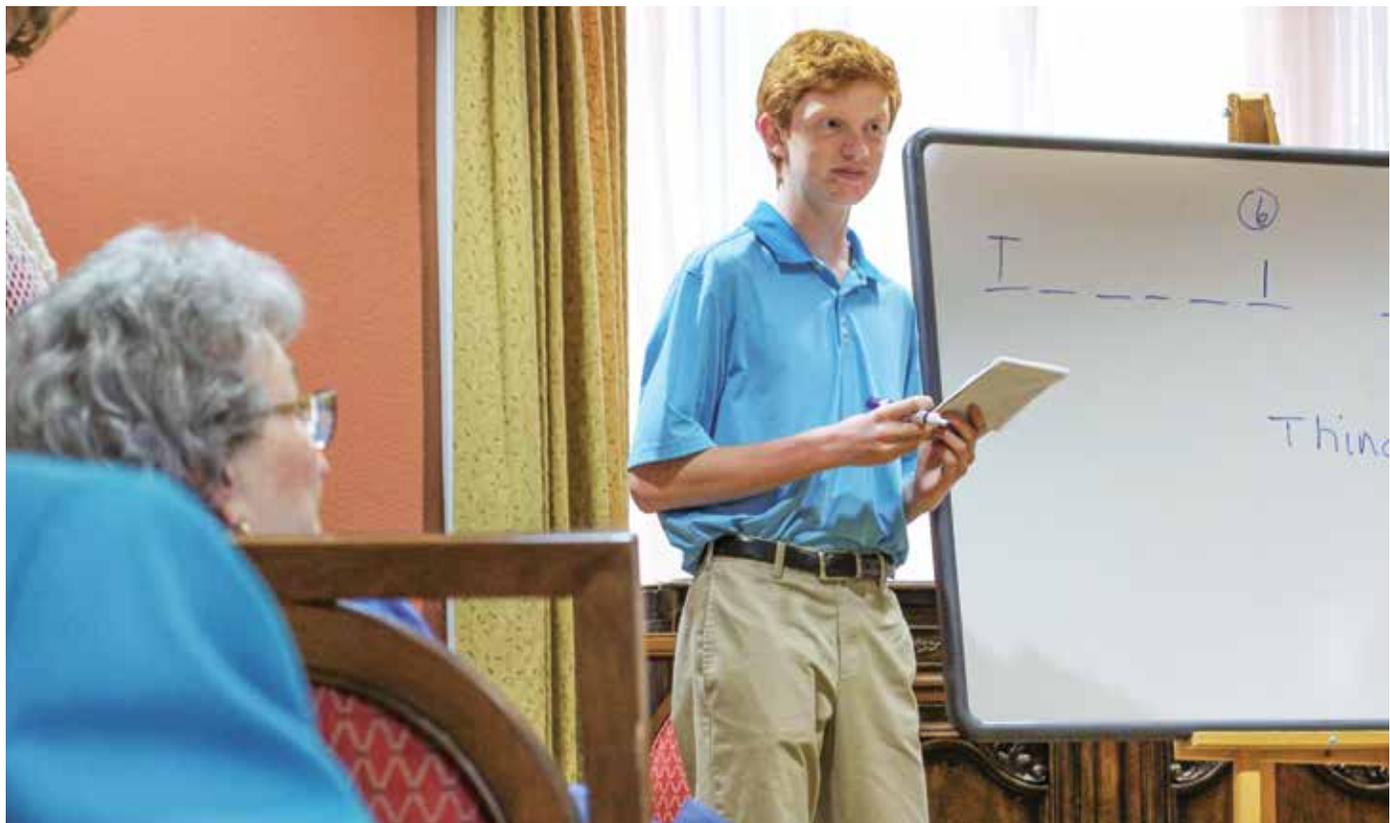
In addition to his coursework, John Henry is heavily involved in Boy Scouts, runs track and hopes to earn his Eagle Scout badge soon. He's not sure yet what he wants to do with his future, but he's sure his time at Parkway Place will impact his life for years to come.

"Volunteering with senior adults is a great experience," John Henry said. "These people are fun, nice and they have a good sense of humor. I hope my time with them impacted their lives as much as it's impacted mine." ■

## Welcome home

All Buckner senior living communities are Life Plan Communities, meaning they always offer the proper amount of care that you need — from independent living to assisted living to skilled nursing to memory care.

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# Buckner Family Pathways: A road to a better life

Story and photography by John Hall

**T**iara Johnson was going to go to college. Nothing was going to stop her – not the long hours, not having to balance a full-time job with a heavy course load, not even being a single mother juggling a full plate.

Some might even say she was determined to go precisely for the last reason. When she looked into her 2-year-old daughter's eyes, Johnson knew she had to do something to improve her earning possibilities to give her daughter the life she wanted.

That life was far from what she leading. She was stressed by having to balance school, work and being a mother. When school lasts from 8 a.m.-4 p.m. four days a week and work is 40 hours on top of that, time and energy are difficult to find to be the mother your daughter deserves.



Johnson stumbled upon help when she saw an ad for Buckner Family Pathways in Lufkin on the Angelina College website.

“I knew I was going to have to move here to finish the pharmacy tech program,” she said. “I did some research and I called. Sure enough, I got an application, and it worked out.”

The program, which provides affordable housing for single parents while they pursue their higher education goals, alleviated the stresses of commuting, working full time and daycare for her daughter while

she attended school.

As a result, Johnson has been able to concentrate on her classes and raising her daughter, Kailyn, now 4. With Buckner's help, she is growing in knowledge and as a person.

“The program is amazing,” she said. “They just do so much here. Not only do they allow you to go to school and get a career path lined out, they also focus on teaching you how to be a self-sufficient adult after Buckner. They do workshops geared toward helping us become better parents, how to cook, self-defense courses. We even attended a coupon seminar, teaching us how to budget.”

Johnson earned her pharmacy tech certificate and has transferred to Stephen F. Austin State University, where she is in the pre-pharmacy program focusing on allied health occupations with a minor in public administration. After graduating next spring with her bachelor's degree, she plans on working toward her master's degree so she can become a pharmacist.

“Tiara has grown into an exceptionally gifted student and mother who is driven to succeed at whatever she sets her mind to,” said Buckner Family Coach Amanda Mott. “She is now better able to balance life and ensure her daughter is well provided for. She is currently pursuing her bachelor's degree and plans to become a pharmaceutical representative. This is perfect for her, especially with her high spirited, enthusiastic personality. She will be fantastic at any future goal she sets for herself.”

Along the way, Kailyn is seeing her mom succeed. She's learning that college is important by seeing how hard her mother is working. Johnson believes that will help Kailyn understand what she needs to do to succeed later in life.

Buckner Family Pathways has changed both of their lives.

“I really feel like Buckner Family Pathways is more of a hand up than a hand out,” Johnson said. “They do everything they can in their power for you to be successful. If you need help with anything, you can come to them and rely on them to give you the help you need. They help you realize the opportunities that are in front of you and help you accomplish the goals you've set out.” ■



# Buckner sends food, aid to flood victims in Peru

**B**uckner International shipped more than 500,000 meals and 400 water filters to help the more than 630,000 people who have been affected by the worst floods in Peru in the past 20 years.

The international humanitarian aid arm of the ministry has sent more than 272,000 meals donated by Feed My Starving Children and 400 water filters to Lima. In addition, Buckner has wired funds to Buckner Peru for use in immediate relief efforts and another shipment of more than 272,000 meals will be sent shortly.

In March, nearly 80 people died and over 200,000 homes were

destroyed in the arid landscape of coastal Peru, leaving more than 630,000 people displaced as the flooding raged through rural and urban areas.

Story by  
Aimee Freston

Buckner operates two Family Hope Centers – one in Pamplona, and one in Villa Hermosa, impoverished communities just outside Lima, two transitional home programs for young women in Lima and Cusco as well as offering foster care services. Most of the families Buckner serves in Buckner programs have not been directly affected

“Because of this tragic devastation in Peru, thousands have lost all of their material possessions and dozens have lost their lives,” said Dexton Shores, Buckner senior executive director of Latin American programs. “Even though most of the families we serve in Buckner programs were not directly affected, our natural compassion for the most vulnerable, call us to pray and actively respond to the needs of these suffering multitudes nearby.”

A state of emergency has been declared for half of Peru and the need for food and clean water is immense as stores are limiting the sale of water to only two small bottles per individual.

Buckner staff have been able to distribute food, mattresses, water, clothes and water filters to over 700 families who have lost everything in the flood. ■



Staff photo

## Thank you Buckner supporters

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## Jobs For Life

**B**uckner President/CEO Albert L. Reyes shared his family testimony last month during the new Jobs For Life class led by the Buckner Family Hope Center at Bachman Lake in Dallas. Part of his testimony is the role his parents played in encouraging him in school and in growing in his faith. They always have been there for him.

Near the end of his time, Reyes teared up slightly when he mentioned that his father recently died. It set off a chain reaction of class members sharing their experiences with losing their loved

ones. Napkins were passed around to dry the tears that dotted faces around the room. One young mother thanked Reyes for sharing his story and asked how he had the strength to continue working as he is.

He paused in a moment of reflection, then responded. He pushes forward because that's what his father would want him to do. His father would want him to continue serving the vulnerable. Then Reyes continued: "I have the strength to do this because of a relationship with Christ. Christ gives all of us strength and hope." ■

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