

Buckner International

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Chat with the Executive Director

Amarillo's generous heart

Every year, we have an event called the "Heart of Amarillo" which displays our programs and gives the community the opportunity to support Buckner through donations, volunteer opportunities and collaborations. However, I have seen Amarillo display their heart of service all year long.



Kathy McGee
Executive Director
Buckner Amarillo

Our single moms participating in the Family Pathways program have seen firsthand the giving heart of Amarillo through churches going outside their doors to serve others. Child care for mothers to attend meetings and have time to themselves was a great need. A former foster mom and single parent became aware of the need and reached out to her church. Hillside mission-minded members accepted the

(continued on inside cover)

ALSO INSIDE:

- Amarillo couple determined to meet needs
- Volunteer opportunities

One mom found purpose through transformation at Family Pathways Amarillo

Story by Emily Keller



Sitting in her favorite coffee shop with her books spread out on the table, many would have no idea what the past four years have been like for Amber Flores. From a life of instability to now consistency for both her and her two children, she will graduate with her nursing degree in May.

Jumping from hotel rooms to friends' couches, she and her two children were living without hope or purpose. Amber was at her wit's end – then she found Buckner Family Pathways in Amarillo, Texas, a place that took them away from the lost life they were currently living and gave her the freedom to chase after her dreams.

"I had always wanted to be a nurse, and I had wanted to get this weight-loss surgery, but when we were hopping from hotel room to hotel room, I started to consider dropping out of school and cancelling my surgery. I just couldn't see another way out," shared Amber.

She had heard of the Family Pathways program before and decided they had nothing left to lose. The call to Family Pathways changed the trajectory of Amber's life – a life of instability to consistency.

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Amarillo's generous heart
(continued)



opportunity to go to Family Pathways on a monthly basis, giving moms two hours of free time while they spend time with the children through fun and educational activities. This is a great benefit to both the moms and children!

This heart-driven volunteer activity is invaluable to the moms to accomplish some of their needed errands or tasks, but also has been a great experience for the children. They have been exposed to great role models and self-empowerment activities. Christ Covenant has connected with Buckner to provide child care while moms meet as a group with the program director. They also provide meals to the mothers and their children during finals. Other churches have wrapped their arms around Family Pathways to provide Christmas gifts, backpacks, school supplies and any other needed items for both moms and children.

Thanks to the heart of the Amarillo community, many single moms have come to Family Pathways, completed their education, strengthened their family and have become independent and self-sufficient.

In May, we had a mom earn a bachelor's degree in engineering and immediately received an offer from a local well-known engineering firm where she continues to blossom as a mom and professional.

We are so grateful for all of our community partners that take the time to invest in a life through supporting the Buckner Amarillo programs that serve children and families through Family Pathways, foster care and adoption and the FYI Center. ■

CoverStoryContinued

"I've lost 115 pounds, and I look at old pictures of me and you can tell, I just had no purpose. I had no joy. I think about how down I was, how unmotivated and I'm just completely different," she said.



Amber and her two children moved into the apartment in December 2016, and she received her weight-loss surgery in March 2017. Her children were only 4 and 2 at the time, but Amber, Jarah and Jonathan found a new support system that would change everything.

The move was a big change for all of them, but because of the positive changes and support they received, she and her children began to evolve mentally, physically and spiritually.

"I just want my kids to dream, and we talk about God so much. We're so involved and attend church regularly," Amber said. "I didn't grow up in church, but while being at Buckner, I got baptized. I help greet, volunteer and get to know new people at our church."

Faith has become a large building block in the Flores' home – even to the point that Amber's daughter will remind them of something they said they would pray about but haven't yet. "I always say I want the roof of my success to be their foundation. I hope instilling this faith in them sparks something in their life down the road – it's something they can count on and go back to."

In her time at Family Pathways, Amber

has not only physically transformed but also spiritually and mentally. Through counseling and continuing in her education, she has found who she always believed she was meant to become.

"I'm like a whole new person. I dream bigger. Back then, I was really timid, and I tried to be so small – which is hard considering I'm six foot. But I just wanted to stay out of the way."

But now, Amber feels more herself than ever. As a key member of the resident council, she has participated in many different roles – spiritual development, events, their brag board and as president. Family Pathways quickly became home and where she felt safe.

"Buckner is my family so I will defend this place forever. Whenever my family had failed me, Buckner was there. Buckner has taught me who I am – and they've encouraged me to keep growing," she said.

Amber will graduate with a degree in nursing this spring and is completing her fourth year of the Family Pathways program. While there is trepidation about this new season, Amber knows Buckner has prepared her well.

"From the start, it's all been God. When I felt I couldn't do something – I'd give it to God. Like, this is yours. And moving out is scary, but I know that living here was temporary. Buckner gave me a hand up, instead of a handout."

Her dreams grow each day – and with graduation around the corner, she has confidence she can do anything she puts her mind to, such as continuing to follow the path to becoming a nurse practitioner. For her children, this journey has taught them the power of sacrifice too. Amber sees that she wasn't the only one walking this path and, with tears, is proud to say she has taught her children the importance of finding and chasing after their purpose and passion.

"There's still a lot of me that needs healing, but I think that will be always. But the changes I've made in just the few years I've been here... I'm so different. I feel whole. I sit here and am so confident. Thanks to Buckner." ■

One couple's determination to meet the needs of Amarillo

David and Sydney Rieff simply wanted to help. They felt a tug on their heart to support the foster care system in Amarillo – but they didn't know where to begin. As their knowledge grew, the Rieffs began supporting Buckner's programs, DFPS and many other agencies in evolving ways.

Fostering Hope, borne out of the Rieffs' desire to answer the call in any way they could, is a faith-based entity seeking to assist all impacted by the foster care system by providing for displaced children; encouraging and sustaining foster families; supporting and reassuring those who have aged out of the foster care system and support foster and adoption agency staff.

"When we first started to gather as a group of six to 10 people, the main thing we thought we could do, not knowing, was respite care. And so that was our main emphasis at first," David Rieff said. "And to my knowledge, after four years, we still have not done one night of respite care. But it has evolved into other things and so many other ways to support the many families going through these journeys."

What started as gathering a few clothes for emergency placements has grown into 10 different rooms offering everything a family could need. Their first priority is for both children and young adults to have food and a safe place to live, then they look to encourage the adoptive and foster families, and lastly, support agencies and staff.

"Clothes, diapers, furniture and beds. We have bedding and pillows to dining tables and chairs – we thought we weren't going to use any of that and now, those are things we can't get enough of," said Sydney Rieff.

Now with more than 80 volunteers on

their team, Fostering Hope works with the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services portal as well as local agencies, including Buckner, to answer each need that arises. They receive requests from case managers to biological families just searching for a way to hold it all together – whether they are needing help keeping their children or getting them back into their home.



"Typically – if someone calls for something, we will always see if there's a way to make it happen," shared David.

The team also provides support to the youth that have aged out of the foster care system. Every semester, they collect, fill and deliver care boxes for college students, as well as provide food and support for the Buckner Amarillo Transitional Home classes and seasonal parties.

"What they do is not just for Buckner – they're serving all foster families throughout Amarillo as needs come up. We just happen to be a big piece. They really go above and beyond for our families," said Becky Robertson, ministry engagement coordinator for West Texas.

Sydney is quick to acknowledge the amount of support they receive from their church, First Baptist Amarillo, and encourages others to work with their church to impact foster care and adoption needs. "We all know there are needs out there and the church is called to stand up and address those."

The large impact Fostering Hope is making throughout Amarillo is possible because of their determination to continue to learn the needs and the avenues of support. They have also worked to create strong connections between volunteerism and agencies – making it simpler to get involved and to fit the right solution to the right need. ■

Buckner Volunteer Opportunities

During this season of uncertainty, many of our volunteer events and opportunities are on hold or have been canceled to maintain healthy social distance to stop the spread of the coronavirus. However, there are still ways you can support Buckner safely from your home, and more coming soon!

Here are a few examples of ways you can support Buckner in this new season:

- Write an encouraging note to a senior adult or a foster family. We are accepting letters both digitally and through email. For information on where to send your note, check out our volunteer page on the Buckner website.
- Pray for the vulnerable children, families and seniors in your community. Pray for health, safety and protection.
- If you are passionate about helping families struggling due to implications of COVID-19, we are accepting financial gifts to support them in this season.

As the situation progresses, we are continuing to update our website with ways you can volunteer and serve throughout this time. To check out the most up-to-date ways we are continuing to serve our Buckner families (and how you can help), visit [buckner.org/volunteer](https://www.buckner.org/volunteer).

