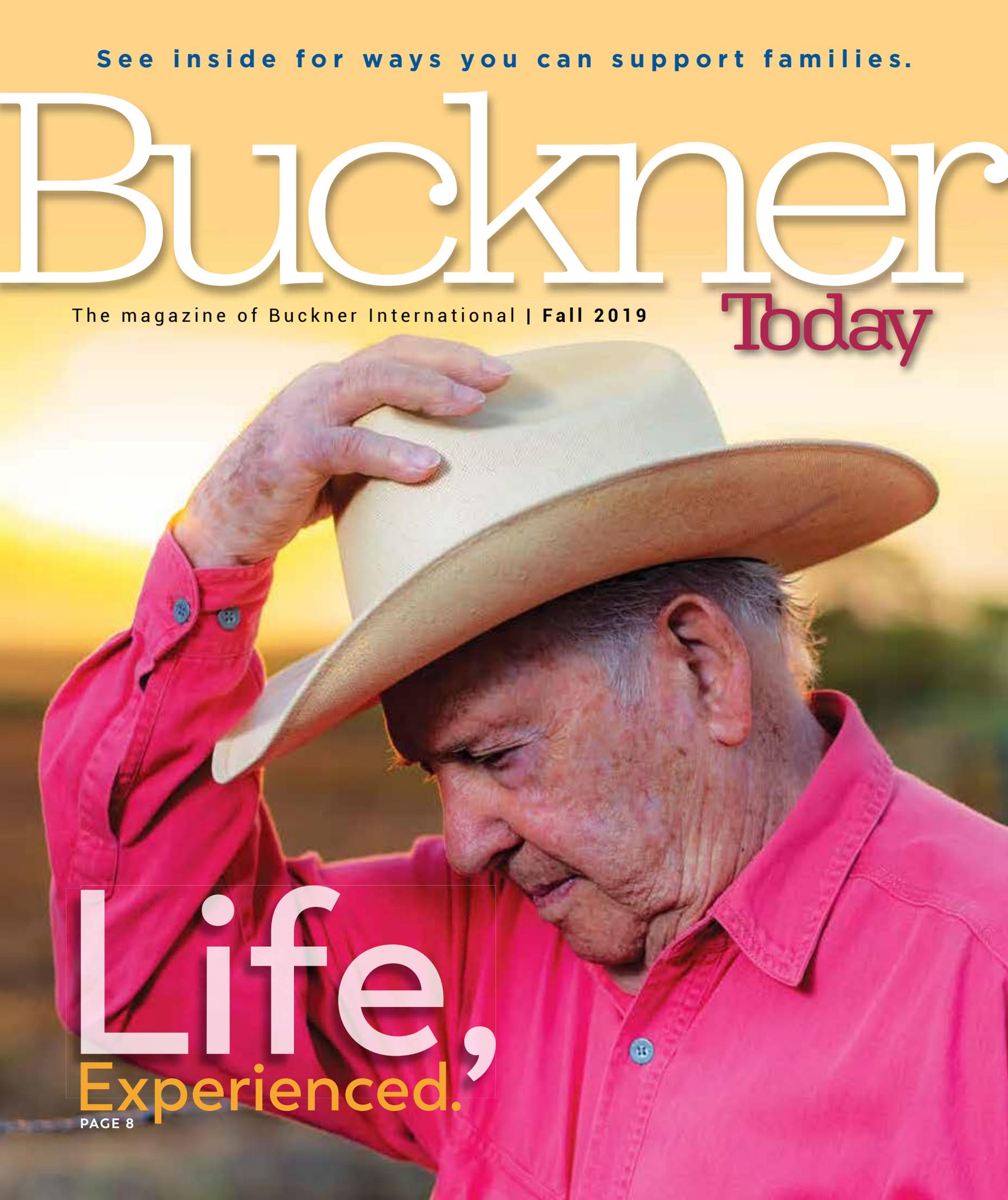


See inside for ways you can support families.

Buckner

The magazine of Buckner International | Fall 2019

Today



Life,
Experienced.

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Buckner

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Hope shines here.®



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Last Look

4 Million Shoes

On the cover: Tom Burke, a resident of Buckner Parkway Place who loves spending time on his cattle farm in Elgin, Texas. Read more about Burke and other Parkway Place residents in Life, Experienced on page 8. Photography by Mark Sandlin.

...And counting

I had a health scare a few weeks ago that was serious, but it could have been much worse. That experience gave me time to reflect. What I realized is how blessed I am.

While the procedure conducted by my doctor restored my health, the spiritual experience was very personal and made me remember everything God has given me. I'm convinced that remembering my blessings was an important part of my healing process.

When our own strength fails us, it's good to remember the words of the Psalmist who wrote, "Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage." [Psalms 84:4-5]

What a joy knowing our strength is in God and because it is, we are blessed. I can think of no better place to dwell than in God's house, to be in his presence.

I love counting the blessings God has given me. I have a wonderful family and a job I truly love. I am surrounded by friends who pray for me and who sincerely care about me. I'm blessed to serve a God who loves me and gave himself for me. But I always remind myself that I'm just a steward of all God gives me. In the end, it all belongs to him.

I hope you'll join me today in giving thanks to God for his blessings. Stop for a moment and count your many blessings and as the old hymn says, "Name them one by one. Count your many blessings. See what God has done."

My experience also reminded me that I am not alone. So many family and friends responded with prayers and well wishes. Knowing we're not alone helps us through difficult times, but it also encourages us in the good times.

It's the same when I think about the work we do at Buckner. I often tell people that given the enormous needs of millions of

children in our world, it would take dozens of organizations like Buckner to solve the problem, and even then, we would still have children who are hurt, lonely, abused and abandoned.

But it's encouraging knowing you work alongside us. Please never discount the impact you have on thousands of children and families we serve every year.

There are times when I feel overwhelmed by the needs we see every day. But then I'm reminded of your support and the impact you're having on the children and families we serve together. We're doing so much together.

During a trip to Mexico, I met Aida Hernandez. She asked me to pass along a message to you. Aida and her family are served by their nearby Buckner Family Hope Center. As we talked, she broke into a wide smile and said, "Because of Buckner, hope shines here. Please thank those who give to make this possible."

On behalf of Aida, her family and more than

76,000 children served so far this year, thank you. As we head toward the end of 2019, there are more children needing help and we plan to be there for them. Unfortunately, we never know what crisis lies ahead. But together, we're responding.

Thank you for the sacrifice you make to help others. Thank you for the hope and encouragement you give.

May God bless you as we celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas. My prayer for you is that you know the peace, love, joy and hope Christ gives to us. And don't forget to count your blessings.



Pictured in yellow, Aida Hernandez, as well as Albert Reyes and community members, celebrated the ribbon cutting of a greenhouse in Zegache, Mexico that has greatly impacted their day-to-day life.



Albert Reyes

Albert Reyes, President and CEO
Buckner International

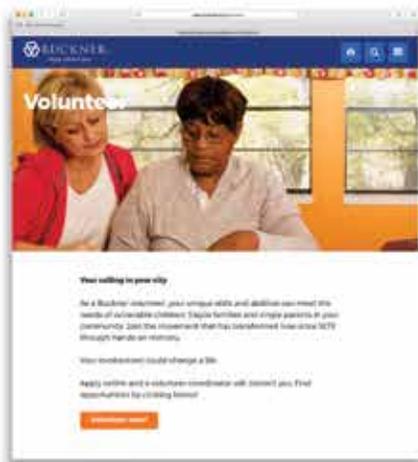
Visit my blog at www.bucknerprez.com

buckner.org



On Oct. 29, Buckner International delivered school supplies and hygiene products to Thomas Edison Middle Learning Center in response to the recent Dallas tornadoes. Buckner has families that were severely affected by the storms and with your generous support, we are able to continue to provide assistance. To read more about the support given, and much more, visit our blog for the latest news and stories in our communities. [Learn more at buckner.org/blog](https://www.buckner.org/blog).

Visit [buckner.org/volunteer](https://www.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 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 bucknercommunications@buckner.org.

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IN OTHER WORDS | SCOTT COLLINS

“Lemon-Aid”

“When life gives you lemons...” Well, you know the rest. But what if lemonade gives, too?

That’s what Brennon Williams found out. Brennon, 9, lives in my neighborhood and for the second year in a row, he set up a lemonade stand in our community with the proceeds going to help children served by Buckner.



In October, Brennon presented us with a check for \$900. The proceeds came from his lemonade stand, a matching gift from his grandmother Susan Caudle and a GoFundMe account Brennon set up.

Laura Williams, Brennon’s mom, said his desire to do something came after Brennon saw a report on TV about migrant children who have nothing. When he asked about doing something, his parents suggested he could help children locally, too.

Laura, who grew up in Dallas, says she always knew about Buckner, so she suggested Brennon do something to help children served by Buckner. “He decided he wanted to raise money for Buckner to help those children and families,” Laura told me.

With support and encouragement from the whole family, including his dad, Aaron, and little sister, Rylie, Brennon is committed to keeping it going. He’s already thinking of ways he can raise even more money for Buckner next summer.

Laura says Brennon’s passion, dedication and hard work prove there are no excuses. “If a little boy can do something for children, why can’t all of us?”



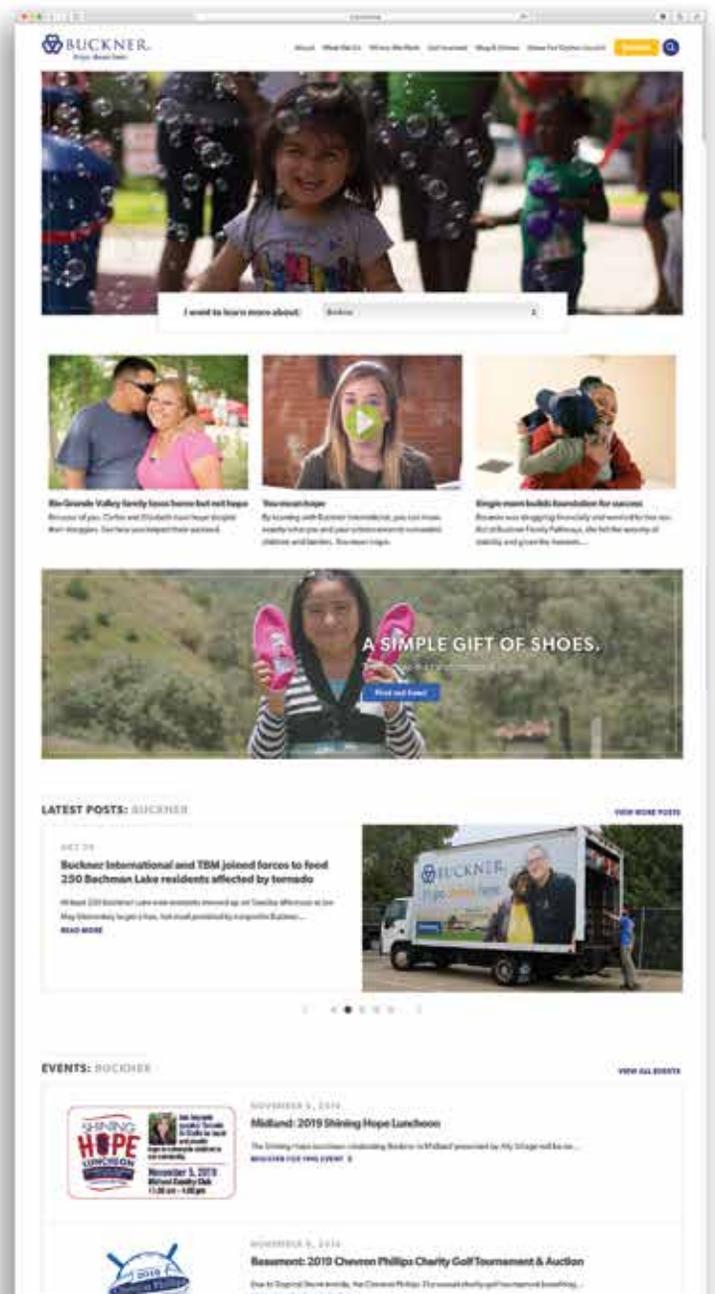
Scott Collins is Vice President of Communications at Buckner International.

3 Reasons we're excited at Buckner!

Buckner.org has a new look!



Last month, buckner.org launched its new design, creating a fresh new look and easier navigation and accessibility to the content that matters most to you. The new homepage allows easy access to events, blog posts, latest news and updates, and gives you the ability to filter content so you see what matters most to you. As always, the top navigation allows you to easily access all of Buckner International's ministries and locations served. We're excited to give you a fresh new design and content and hope you like it too.

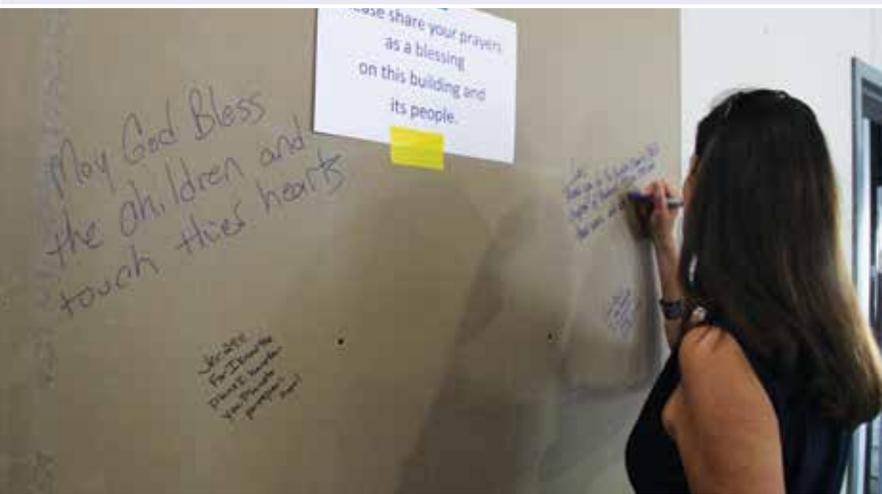


Bachman: Bless the Building



The Buckner Family Hope Center at Bachman Lake is coming along quickly in construction. In September, crews paused allowing Buckner friends and community members to gather and give a special prayer blessing.

Attendees gathered for a time of prayer, as well as took time to write Scripture and encouraging messages on the drywall of the building that will soon serve local community families.



The Family Hope Center will help build strong families in a community where the child removal rate by Child Protective Services is twice the average rate of the rest of Dallas County and 96 percent of students are economically disadvantaged. During the blessing, friends and supporters of Buckner also took the time to pray for the Bachman Lake families currently served in the area while the building is under construction.

Set to open early 2020, the Family Hope Center will be a place of hope for vulnerable families to gather, learn and grow together. The goal is to strengthen families where they can remain together, become self-sustainable and be full of hope to achieve their dreams.



Ventana's grand opening



Ventana by Buckner opened Aug. 19 when the first Members moved in, culminating a 10-year plan by Buckner Retirement Services to open a new senior living community in Dallas. Ventana is the sixth community for

Buckner, which also includes locations in Houston, Beaumont, Longview, Austin and San Angelo.

Ventana is the first and only high-rise senior living community in Dallas and with its opening this year, Ventana immediately becomes the leader. It is not only a one-of-a-kind facility, but a community that offers exemplary service for Members and their families.



This innovative senior living community also features multiple collaborations that feature the best of the best. Master Chef Stephan Pyles provides exquisite culinary consultation; the world-renowned Cooper Clinic directs the wellness program; Texas' largest nonprofit hospital system, Baylor Scott and White, offers medical and spiritual guidance for members; and nearby SMU offers continuing educational opportunities for members.

Members, staff and friends of Buckner celebrated the opening of this new venture Nov. 21. From the purchase of the property in August 2012 to now, we are excited to celebrate Ventana and continue providing excellent care and resources through Buckner Retirement Services. **BT**

Life, Experienced.

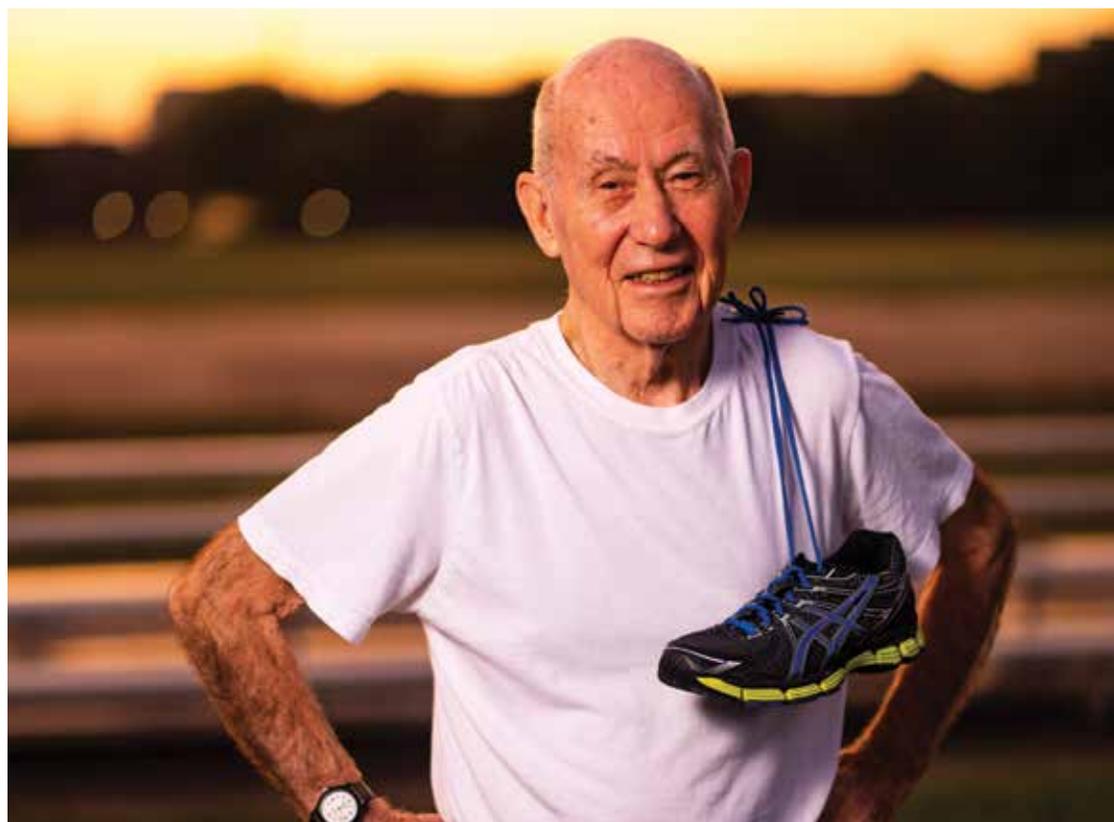
Story by Chris Ruth • Photography by Mark Sandlin

Buckner Parkway Place is a community where senior adults are encouraged to continue finding fulfillment through new experiences, passions and purpose. From the moment they move into their new home, residents are guided toward opportunities to improve themselves physically, mentally and spiritually.

Proverbs 12:24 states, “The hand of the diligent will rule...” while Proverbs 13:4 adds, “the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.” God wants us to do our best in everything we do and every area of our lives.

Whether it’s teaching others to paint, like Eleanor Loose, volunteering at a hospital, like Toshi Hayre, learning Tai Chi, like Noelene Birkelo, or caring for another, like Fred Spence with his dog, Cinnamon, these experiences challenge residents to fully engage themselves, their community and God. It is the pursuit of our passions and self-improvement that is key to enjoying a “Life, Experienced.”

Each year, 84-year-old **Ruger Winchester** runs a 5K race. The former pastor from North Dakota didn’t start running on a regular basis until he was 70. Inspired by his son, who was running races on a regular basis, Ruger made the decision to join him and hasn’t looked back. Every day he runs five kilometers to stay in shape for his annual races, where his best time is 26 minutes. Regardless of the race results, Ruger’s favorite memories of running simply include any opportunity to jog with one of his children. The shared passion and time spent together is what truly makes him happy.





Dee Samford has never been a fan of the water – in fact, she actively tried to avoid it ever since she was a child and had a scare. After moving into Buckner Parkway Place, the 86-year-old decided to push her fears aside and try water aerobics to help with her arthritis. Dee doesn't consider herself an athletic person, but to live a healthier life, she took up Pilates in her 60s. Water aerobics allows her to continue to be active more than 20 years later, and she finds the resistance of the water a welcome challenge. The class is also a great way for Dee to meet people at her new home, and she is thankful for all the warm smiles and friendly conversations.

Once a month, **Tom Burke** travels back to his cattle farm in Elgin, Texas, driving the two hours from Buckner Parkway Place to spend a few days reconnecting with the land. Tom is 94, but he still enjoys walking the land to make sure the fences are in good shape and his tenants are continuing to care for the property as well as he did. Tom was in his 50s when he bought the farm and entered the cattle business, and while he continued to work as an explorationist in the oil and gas industry, the farm gave him something to pass down to future generations of his family – a legacy. Tom believes you live only one life, and if there's something you think will truly make you happy, then do it - even if it's as crazy as becoming a rancher in your 50s.





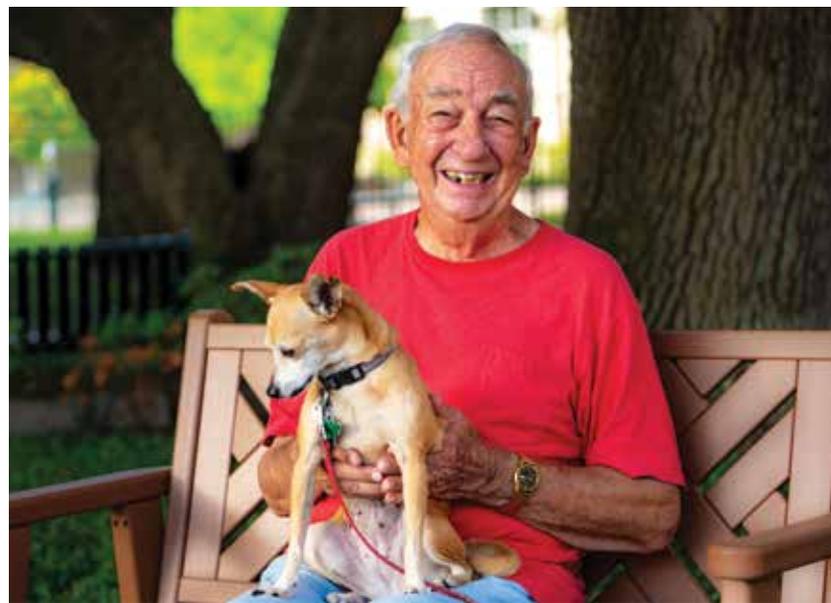
Toshi Hayre is one of the most recognizable people at Houston's Memorial Hermann Hospital, but the 82-year-old is not a doctor or a nurse. Toshi is a volunteer who has amassed more than 20,000 volunteer hours over 23 years. Over the years, she has worked in nearly every part of the hospital, from surgery to radiology and women's health. Toshi says it's the smiles she gets from the patients and families that keep her coming back three times a week – those smiles keep her feeling young.



Several times a year, **Charlene Onstot** travels to The Hobby Center for the Performing Arts in downtown Houston. Each year since 2002, the 88-year-old patron of the arts purchases season tickets for Hobby's lineup of acclaimed musicals. Charlene first fell in love with theater and musicals when she saw actress and singer Ethel Merman in "Call Me Madam" on Broadway. Charlene's passion for theater carried over to her children, as two of her daughters became high school theater teachers.



Joan Haggard devoted much of her life caring for others, first as a school and church secretary, and then caring for her husband for 40 years after he was paralyzed in a plane crash. Now 88 years old, Joan spends her time tending to her garden at Buckner Parkway Place and nurturing her flowers and herbs. She dabbled in gardening for years when she was younger, but now she finds it extremely rewarding to devote extra time to harnessing a slice of the beauty God created. Desiring to improve her skills, she also enjoys studying up on horticulture and learning more about what grows best in the Houston climate.



When **Fred Spence's** wife passed away, his grief consumed him. The only thing keeping the dark thoughts at bay was Cinnamon, a shelter dog his wife picked out a few years earlier. Caring for Cinnamon and the resulting companionship helped Fred begin to smile again. Now Fred and Cinnamon bring smiles to the faces of all their neighbors at Buckner Parkway Place, as the two are inseparable no matter the time of day. Their devotion to each other is inspirational, and while the 85-year-old still looks forward to the day he can hold his wife again, for now, Fred is content to keep Cinnamon in his arms.



Painting has always brought **Eleanor Loose** joy. Four generations of her family, from her parents to her grandchildren, have demonstrated a propensity for art, and Eleanor has always helped encourage each of them. An educator by trade, the 88-year-old Eleanor now teaches classes to aspiring painters from her church, where her paintings and stained glass designs still adorn the walls, and her neighbors at Buckner Parkway Place. Teaching art classes allows Eleanor to continue to develop her own skills while nurturing the talents of others.



Merrel Schilling, 96, used to golf on a regular basis, and he was able to enjoy courses all over the country because his job in the steel industry kept him on the move. Merrel is no longer able to make it out to the golf course, so he took on a new challenge and learned how to use a Nintendo Wii, turning to his grandson for some tips. Playing 18 holes of Wii Golf is something Merrel and his friends at Buckner Parkway Place enjoy doing as often as possible, and they even organize tournaments to spark some friendly competition.



Shirley Clark is nearly 100 years old, but that doesn't stop her from being a superfan of the Houston Astros. She watches as many games as she can, whether at the stadium or on TV, and it's common knowledge around Buckner Parkway Place to come to Shirley for scores and stats from the previous night. Shirley is especially fond of the Venezuelan players, like José Altuve and Robinson Chirinos, because of the 37 years she spent with her husband as missionaries in Venezuela. She's loved baseball since she was a young girl, but her favorite memories of the sport consist of watching children in Venezuela play baseball with a homemade ball and a broomstick in the street. Their passion for the game inspired her, and now her passion inspires others.



Fanny Kjeldsen, 82, is not sure when she learned to dance or why. She says that in Columbia, where she was born, everyone dances. It's as natural as breathing to her. This is likely why whenever music begins to play anywhere in Buckner Parkway Place, Fanny is soon nearby moving her shoulders and swaying her hips. Her favorite styles of dance are cumbia and salsa, and she is happy to teach anyone who would like to learn. For Fanny, dancing makes her happy, and she welcomes the chance to share that happiness.



Noelene Birkelo began practicing Tai Chi at Buckner Parkway Place in 2018 after a series of falls. The 85-year-old former legal assistant finds that the Chinese martial art helps with her balance and strength, thus limiting the chances of future falls. During her weekly classes, Noelene works on slow, flowing movements like Brush the Knee and Part the Horse Mane, which she describes as peaceful to practice and beautiful to watch. She encourages others to join the Tai Chi class, as it's an easy and soothing way to improve one's physical and mental health regardless of age.



The daughter of a Texas preacher, **Lavonia Duck**, 88, grew up surrounded by music, or more specifically, traditional spiritual hymns. She started playing piano long before her family ever owned one. Lavonia still prefers the old hymns even though she has learned all styles of music over the years. Every song she hears or plays stirs up memories, transporting Lavonia back to her childhood, or to her time as a young woman with her husband, Roger, who passed away a few years ago. The hymns also bring back pleasant memories for the other residents, which is why a crowd always gathers when Lavonia sits down to play.



Former pastor and missionary **Paul Smith**, 85, would spend every waking hour in the Buckner Parkway Place wood shop if he could. Woodworking is a skill he learned later in life, but Paul sees it as an extension of a lifetime dedicated to service and ministering to others – after all, Jesus was a carpenter. In the shop, Paul is able to transform a piece of wood into a toy for a child who may have nothing, and while he's rarely on hand to deliver the toy himself, it's easy for him to envision the simple joy it brings to know someone built this just for them. **BT**



THE FUTURE IS WIDE OPEN. COME SEE FOR YOURSELF.

On August 19, Ventana by Buckner opened its doors, initiating a new age of retirement living in the Park Cities.

Happily, for a fortunate few, a limited number of choice residences remain unreserved in Dallas' first and only luxury high-rise Life Care Community. So, if you've been waiting for the right time and place to make your move, wait no more.

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the missing piece of the puzzle

Story and
photography by
Aimee Freston

Katie and Aaron Stephens had a plan: foster young children, adopt, be a forever family. But five years later, they saw six children come and go from their home in Midland, Texas. They began to doubt they would ever have a forever family until they met 16-year-old Christopher.

Katie's first introduction to Christopher was through a Facebook post. Chris was in a group home in Abilene, Texas, and expecting to age out of foster care. His lawyer made a random post asking if anyone could open their home to a young boy who desperately wanted a family.

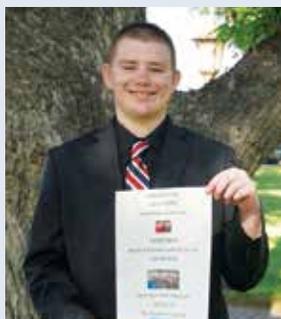
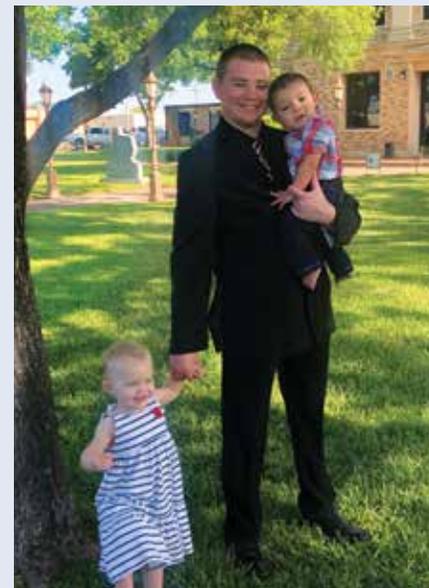
Katie and Aaron were already fostering two young children through Buckner.



BT

The love of a teenager.

"They choose to bond with you," Katie said. "With babies, it's so automatic, but with teenagers, they don't have to, but they choose to."



Katie and Aaron Stephens have been fostering for five years and on June 5, they adopted 16-year-old Christopher, who Katie calls the missing piece of their puzzle (bottom row). After adopting Christopher, the Stephens also adopted Macy, 2, and Andy, 1, completing their forever family (top row).

They didn't think they were ready for three children, much less a teenager, but Katie could not stop thinking about that post or about Christopher. They decided to meet him.

"We had no idea what to think," Katie said about meeting Christopher for the first time. "And then we met him, and he has the kindest heart I think I've ever seen in my life. He just wants a family."

After their first meeting, they knew he was meant to be a part of their family. From the very beginning, Christopher instantly began calling the couple mom and dad.

Katie and Aaron were concerned they would not be able to bond with him immediately or that they would not get to participate in very many first-time experiences because of his age, but they found neither was true.

Christopher started living with the Stephens family right before Thanksgiving. He had never been to holiday parties or decorated

eggs at Easter. And every day, Katie makes Christopher's lunch to take to school because he never had anyone do that for him before and he likes it.

In his lunch, Katie always slipped in a note to encourage him or remind him he is loved. She didn't realize how much he appreciated those notes until one rushed morning, she forgot to slip one in. He came home from school sad he didn't have a note. Katie never forgot again.

"He's a great kid," Katie said. "And he's very thankful for everything and very appreciative. His story is not pretty, and we didn't know what to expect. He has every reason in the world to hate everybody, but he has such a sweet spirit. Of course, he has his own set of issues we've had to figure out how to handle, but for the most part, he's really easy. I would take another Chris in a heartbeat."

And Christopher is thriving in their home. He came severely

“The bad is bad, and the bad is hard. But there’s so much good. When you get to see the impact you have on the whole family when it’s done correctly, it’s amazing.” –Katie Stephens

behind in school, but he was able to make up credits fast because he’s anxious to learn and is smart. He’s joyful, goofy and loves being part of a family.

He has especially bonded with their youngest foster son – he’s Christopher’s biggest fan, Katie said.

For the Stephenses who once only requested to have young foster children, Christopher has opened their eyes for the need for foster parents for teenagers.

“There’s this whole stigma that comes with teenagers and the fact that they’ve been through so much. There’s so much more questions when it comes to teenagers,” Katie said. “But they choose to bond with you. With babies, it’s so automatic, but with teenagers, they don’t have to, but they choose to. Yes, the babies are so fun, but so are the teenagers.”

On June 5, Katie and Aaron adopted Christopher. He was their first adoption.

“He was the missing piece to our puzzle,” Katie and Aaron said.

And in the fall, the Stephenses also adopted 2-year-old Macy and 1-year-old Andy.

“It truly is amazing,” said Jennifer Bernal, the Stephenses’ case manager through Buckner Foster Care. “They wanted so desperately to have a forever family and once they opened their hearts up to the possibility of older children, that’s when their family began to grow. They are so honest about their journey and are great examples of what fostering can look like.”

Christopher is still finishing up high school, but Katie and Aaron have big plans for him.

“I really just hope and pray for a better sense of normalcy for him,” Aaron said. “He has so much potential.”

“He’s going to Midland College and he’s staying with mama,” Katie added with a laugh. “I didn’t get a lot of years so I want all I can get.”

When it comes to their foster and adoption story, Katie and

Aaron would be the first to tell you it hasn’t been easy.

“The bad is bad, and the bad is hard. But there’s so much good,” Katie said. “When you get to see the impact you have on the whole family when it’s done correctly, it’s amazing. I tell everybody that I don’t personally believe foster care is God’s plan. I think it’s God’s grace. I think his plan is always for children to be raised by their parents. And then his grace comes in for when they can’t be. God just has a big plan we can’t see. Even for Chris, he must have quite the calling on him for God to intervene the way he has. We’re just honored to be a part of that.” **BT**

Macy, 2, was adopted by Katie and Aaron Stephens a few months after they adopted Christopher, 16.



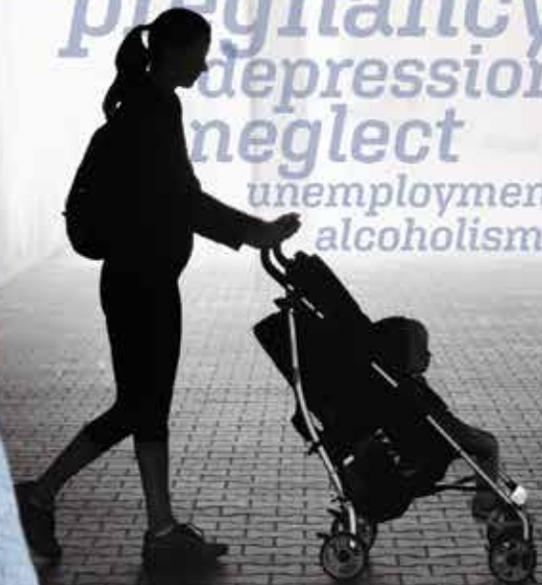
It just goes on, and on, and on...

...or does it?

So many children and families are trapped in a relentless cycle of addiction, poverty and abuse. And all too often, these destructive behaviors are passed down from one generation to the next.

Those entrusted to the care of Buckner International are the most acutely at risk—and without intervention, they have little hope of ever escaping this downward spiral.

poverty
anxiety
abuse
adolescent
pregnancy
depression
neglect
unemployment
alcoholism



44%

of adults enrolled in Buckner Family Pathways were themselves **sexually abused** as children.

Research shows that **deeper poverty** results in **more severe** and **more prolonged** depression and anxiety.

57%

of Buckner Family Pathways participants grew up with a household member who was **addicted** to alcohol or drugs.

The more **adverse** childhood events a person endures, the greater their **risk** of depression, illicit drug use, liver disease, attempted suicide, teen pregnancy and sexual violence.

3 out of **4** Buckner Family Pathways participants came from broken homes.

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Thank you for your generous support.

Turn over to
discover how
you can help
break the
cycle!



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Hope shines here.®

Celebrating National Adoption Month with the Palmers

by Emily Keller



BT

Furry friends

Candy and Michael Palmer, and their five kids, love to house all kinds of animals. Featured here are their three latest furry additions.

This November, we are celebrating National Adoption Month. In Texas, over 1,000 kids age out of foster care each year. There are more than 9,000 kids ages 12 and older in foster care. More than 7,000 sibling groups are currently in care, with up to 35% typically separated while in foster care. Buckner wants to help walk alongside anyone interested in foster care and adoption. We offer many options, as well as offer free information meetings monthly across Texas. For more information, visit buckner.org/fostercareadoption.

Candy and Michael Palmer knew Toby, Caylin, Codi and Shane were theirs at the beginning of the adoption process. Over the course of their adoption journey, they had gone through other files to adopt other sibling groups – but none worked out quite right. And as the Palmers said, “we knew that these were our kids and we were so eager to meet them.”

Candy and Michael met with them in January 2011 with their then foster parents to learn more. Child Protective Services gave them 48 hours to decide – but they didn’t need that time. They knew immediately.

For the four siblings, they had gone from foster home to foster home over the eight years they were in foster care. In that time, they were split up into different homes, shuffled from place to place and reunited.

According to the Texas Department of Family and Protective services, there are more than 7,000 sibling groups in the state of Texas currently in the foster care system. Of those, 34.9% are not placed together. For Caylin, she and her siblings simply lost hope over time of being adopted together.

“We all made a pact that we wouldn’t get adopted if we weren’t all together,” she explained. “I had lost all hope of being adopted. So, we just thought we’d age out of the system together. The fact that we were all adopted together was just incredible.”

Not all adoptive journeys are ones that embark on adoption of a large sibling group, but for Candy and Michael, family is paramount. Both coming from large families, and 17 years of marriage, they both felt like something was missing. God began moving their hearts toward the idea of growing their family through adoption.

Candy started to notice the topic of adoption all around her, confirmation of what God was doing. “Four or five times in one week, I’m meeting somebody. And I’m not asking about it, but it keeps

presenting itself. So when I came home and told him [Michael] that, each story, it was pretty clear that was where God was leading us, if we’d stop and listen to him.”

For Michael, it took a little bit of time to come around to the idea. But he couldn’t deny God’s direction toward adoption. “I just ultimately decided to not get in God’s way.”

In August 2011, Toby, Caylin, Codi and Shane were adopted by Candy and Michael. The four children are each thriving as a member of this family – all in their own ways. But the story doesn’t end there. The Palmers continued their adoption journey.

In April 2019, Joe joined the family just before turning 18. When he came to the Palmer house, it was something refreshing from what he had experienced throughout foster care.

“It’s a lot different than what I’m used to. It’s really good, because it’s focused around God. It means a lot to come into a family and they accept you like you are,” Joe said.

“We all love each other and have the same feelings toward each other. It’s good to have people that care about you.”

While not everyone may have the ability to take in five kids at once, the Palmers believe everyone can do something. Whether you are equipped to foster and adopt, or to support these families in a different way, Michael stressed the importance of following God’s will and determining what he is telling you each day.

“We’ve given them a future and something to look forward to. They have something to come home to, holidays, birthdays – those kinds of things. That’s hope when you have something to look forward to,” Michael said.

For each of these kids, they have found a safe place to call home. They have found hope. **BT**



Buck and Stephanie Baskin and their children Niki, James and Selah.



FAITH FOSTERS *Texas*

Texas Baptists focus on fixing an ailing system, responding to children in need

Many families today are noticing the great need throughout the foster care and adoption system. According to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 62% of children are removed from their homes due to neglect in Texas and more than 1,000 age out of the foster care system each year. With more than 7,000 children in Texas waiting to be adopted, responding to this call is more pertinent than ever.

A coalition of Texas Baptist institutions is seeking to answer the foster care crisis, one that has nagged the state for years, but recently reached a crescendo. Coalition members represent the Baylor University Diana R. Garland School of Social Work, Buckner International, George W. Truett Theological Seminary, STARRY, STCH Ministries and Texas Baptists, working with the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.

That answer, said group members, can happen through a new initiative called "Faith Fosters Texas," which seeks to engage every Texas Baptist church in solving the foster care crisis in Texas.

"What we're trying to do is, in effect, solve one of the biggest crises in the state of Texas," said David Ummel, a coalition member and church engagement officer for Buckner International. "The foster care crisis is leaving thousands of the most vulnerable of our Texas children unparented and uncared for. That is unacceptable and should be a burden on the radar of every church in the state."

David Hardage, Texas Baptists executive director, agreed. "Faith Fosters Texas is the place where Texas Baptists can change the future of our most vulnerable children and provide homes for every abandoned, neglected or abused child in the child welfare system."

Coalition member Kyle Luke, vice president of development and communications for STCH Ministries, said Faith Fosters Texas will engage churches through its website (faithfostertexas.org) to "connect, coach and build the capacity of churches to effectively minister to vulnerable children and their families."

"But we need churches willing to commit to a multi-year effort

to educate and equip members to fulfill the biblical mandate of caring for vulnerable children and families by embracing and supporting children in foster care," Luke added, "as well as leveraging church resources to make a positive impact on foster care."

Ummel said Texas Baptist churches and members don't have to commit to a large-scale effort, especially if a majority of churches answer the call. "Every Texas Baptist Church needs to be involved in supporting foster families, kinship families and bio families – churches that care for vulnerable children need to build a culture that is pro-foster care and adoption."

He pointed to the difference made by Buck and Stephanie Baskin of Mesquite, who adopted their children Niki and James after fostering through Buckner Foster Care and Adoption for four years. The couple continues to foster children.

For the Baskins, members of Lakepointe Church in Rockwall, foster care and adoption is a spiritual response to a societal issue.

"Scripture is very clear about it," Stephanie said. "Everyone has to help somehow. The idea of kids not having a home didn't settle well."

Though slightly younger than James, Niki was placed in the Baskin home first in May 2013. James joined her two weeks later. While Buck and Stephanie previously only did foster care, with Niki and James, they were open to adoption.



"When we first got in, we learned that 60% of the kids went back home to their parents, and we realized that the goal is actually to get the families back together. So we made that our goal," Buck said. "But the big thing is being open to the process because we also realized that once that doesn't happen, you're kind of the last option in a way whether those kids may or may not be in the system for a while. So we realized we need to be open to the idea of adoption as well."

After the Baskins adopted Niki in November 2013 and James in May 2014, they thought they might continue to do foster care, but then Stephanie found out she was pregnant and decided to take a temporary break and focus on their family. That brought little Selah into their home.

Because of their calling to parent through foster care and adoption, "messy" is the new normal for Buck and Stephanie Baskin – full of tickle monsters and musical jam sessions. Marathon sessions of playing Hungry, Hungry Hippos. They watch the pet turtle swim in his aquarium, and they laugh with each other.

"We're a mess," Stephanie observed with a laugh. "We're never on time, and I've learned that's OK. And nothing's ever clean, and that's OK too." **BT**

Faith Fosters Texas: Where to begin

David Ummel, a Faith Fosters Texas coalition member and church engagement officer for Buckner International, said churches that want to answer the statewide foster care crisis through foster care and adoption can find resources at faithfostertexas.org. Churches can register at the website, where they will find a church engagement toolkit that will walk them through the engagement process.



He also pointed out that churches that support foster care and adoption tend to do the following:

- 1. Recognize** the biblical mandate to stand in the gap for the vulnerable and that God's intent is for the family to be a place where children are safe and given an opportunity to reach their full potential.
- 2. Pray** for and preach about foster care and adoption from the pulpit.
- 3. Take** the ministry outside of the church walls and collaborate with other churches, agencies or ministries in your community.
- 4. Imagine** ways for how everyone can help support foster and adoptive families, beyond becoming foster or adoptive families themselves.
- 5. Encourage** and support those already engaged in foster care or adoption such as families, judges, child placing agencies or CPS. **BT**

'Buckner is still a part of my life today – even though I'm out of care'

Growing up, Cindy experienced multiple Buckner programs – and now finds hope in working with Buckner and with kids walking the same journey she did.

Story by Emily Keller • Photography by Russ Dilday

At 7 years old, Cindy Garza's life changed. Whisked away from her home and surrounded by strangers, her life became enveloped in uncertainty. "I remember being told I was going to be removed for a short time," she said. "The case worker told me it would be two weeks and I'd be back home with my mom. It wasn't two weeks. I ended up never going home."

Garza spent time with three foster families in the next 10 years. She admittedly struggled in different ways in each of the settings, including finding her place in the world.

"Going through these three homes, it did make me feel a little bit out of place, like I didn't have the attachments I needed as a kid or a teenager," she said. "I feel like I did struggle a lot as far as things that a lot of kids in foster care struggle with as far as depression and going around with medications and trying to figure out if I needed medications."

Through all the uncertainty and issues, Garza strove to succeed. She did well academically and found ways where she could have common experiences with other young people.

"I enjoyed school," she said. "It was the one thing that kept me going. I was in band. I feel like that really helped me. I was doing things as kids my age were doing. I did track, cross country."

When Garza turned 17, she chose to leave her foster home and instead move to a shelter, where she turned 18 and aged out of the program.

"I honestly didn't know what I was going to do when I aged out of care."

After aging out, she made plans to attend South Plains College in Levelland, Texas. Those plans quickly fell apart when she couldn't afford to pay for books, classes, work and live at the same time. She earned one F and dropped the rest of her classes.

She dropped out of school and shortly thereafter suffered some medical issues, which forced her to stop working. Garza was forced to move in with her mom, mom's boyfriend and Garza's brother in a one-bedroom apartment.

"I realized I'd hit some sort of rock bottom," she said. "I had no idea what to do."







Cindy Garza loves working with clients at Buckner FYi Center in Lubbock, Texas.

While this may have been her lowest point, inspiration and passion were birthed in her heart through the journey of aging out of the foster care system. "Something sparked in my mind: I don't think this is right. I want to change this when I'm older. I even told my case worker, 'I want to change this someday.'"

According to the Christian Alliance for Orphans, more than 1,000 kids age out of the foster care system in Texas each year. As Garza explained, "A lot of the negative research shows that foster youth will become homeless when they age out. A lot of them will be incarcerated. They experience a lot of negative effects such as depression, suicide, just low self-esteem and low education. Just everything showed it was all negative."

Garza was introduced to Buckner by her second foster home, where she spent nearly two years. "I was first in Lubbock, then moved to Idalou, Texas. These foster parents went with Buckner to be foster parents – and in that time, I remember that's when I first met a case worker from Buckner that came out to meet us that were living in that home. I believe I was about 10 or 11, somewhere in there."

She strove to not become another statistic of the foster system – and had a passion to learn how to help others from becoming another negative number in the stats. "I was willing to try anything, so that I wouldn't be stuck."

Garza continued to break from the mold and began engaging in Buckner Aftercare. The after care program acts as a support system for young people that have aged out of foster care. Participants of this program meet with their case managers regularly to talk about

both their lives, and goals for the future. After care also provides help with emergency assistance in situations like unexpected car repairs or providing new clothes or school supplies.

After some time, there was an opening at Buckner Family Pathways and her case worker gave her the information to apply for the program. While traditionally the Family Pathways program is geared toward single parents, Garza was identified as someone who would benefit greatly from this resource. "Back then, they were making exceptions for single women who wanted to go to school and better themselves. I wasn't receiving services from the after care program like I had before."

Through the help of this program, Garza had the opportunity to go back to school. She earned her associate degree in child development, transferred to Texas Tech where she completed both her bachelor and master's degrees in human development and family studies.

"I really believe [Family Pathways] was the changing point in my life. Before that, I didn't think I could really get anywhere – get back into school, get back on my feet. I never thought I was going to be able to do that and Family Pathways really helped me learn how to do those things like pay rent."

As she learned more about child development and families, she became more passionate about working with the kids in care.

"I didn't know what I was going to do. I honestly didn't, and through Buckner and through going through the programs and getting the help myself that I needed as an aging-out foster youth, I figured out

Working at the FYi Center gives Cindy the opportunity to share her story with those that have aged out of foster care.



I wanted to help foster youth specifically who had aged out.”

With completion of her education, Garza began to dive deep into the research of what was truly happening in foster care. She started to see that being on the other side of going through the programs was very different than what she had thought she knew.

“I wanted to be able to say to folks, ‘I know what you’re going through, but there are resources out there to help you,’” Garza shared. “I felt like Buckner has been around for a long time – they help people, and they helped me. I have used the services Buckner offers. So, I know how much it means to have somebody to be that support through Buckner for you.”

Following college, Garza found an open position with Buckner – bringing it full circle, with nearly 20 years of being impacted by Buckner and the programs.

“It’s crazy to think I could be a part of something for the majority of my life. It is crazy to think about and look back and think of all the things and how Buckner is still part of my life today even though I’m out of care.”

She currently works in Lubbock as an after care case manager with Buckner Children and Family Services. Today, she knows this position is where she was always meant to be. She had dreamed of one day being able to help others that are facing the same situations she once did.

“Being able to change my situation made me feel like I could help other people to change their situation,” she said. “And being with the kids is my favorite – being able to help them. I realized this is where I need to be. And it’s cool when they ask why I do this – it really is meaningful for me, it’s not just a job. It’s really close to my heart.”

While Garza’s story may not match the stories of those she works with every day, she just hopes that they can find some semblance of encouragement and support in it. “Everyone’s story looks different.” **BT**

AT RIGHT: Cindy and husband, Eric.



When she didn't know what was next, NextStep was there for her

Story by John Hall • Photography by Aimee Freston

When she was 17, Destiny and her brother were removed from their home by Child Protective Services. The move was sudden and left Destiny trying to figure out what was next.

“It feels like you have no say in anything,” she said. “I felt like my life was going to be completely different in a sad way. **You feel lost.**”

Destiny aged out of foster care shortly after. She examined a number of options moving forward, but quickly honed in on Buckner NextStep in Dallas, a supervised independent living program that provides young women, ages 18-24, the support they need to meet their educational and independent living goals and achieve self-sufficiency.

“There’s not many programs like this,” she said. “You won’t find this anywhere else, honestly.”

Through training, coaching, personalized service coordination and opportunities for spiritual development, Destiny learned how to: build supportive relationships with others; go back to school at Eastfield College, where she is studying business; manage her finances; and take steps to embrace her God-given potential.

The experience has changed Destiny’s life. She connected with the other young ladies in the program as well as Buckner staff members to become a part of a meaningful community of women who help each other. She worked hard and laid a firm foundation that will serve as a springboard for the rest of her life.

“Destiny entered the NextStep Program as a shy and immature young lady that didn’t trust others,” said Leticia Gerard, director

of NextStep. “Over the past two years, she has developed into a mature and responsible young adult. The most impressive thing about Destiny is her determination, motivation and dedication to becoming an active and successful part of the community. She is determined not to be a product of her past and instead uses her past as a stepping stone for a better life.”

“I knew I was going to be more independent when I moved here,” Destiny said. “I knew they were going to be watching us and helping us. If I needed anything, I knew they would be there for us. It’s been everything I wanted and more. I feel like it’s a lifelong relationship that will last well beyond when I leave.”

Destiny is optimistic about her future. She’s considering buying a house or condominium. She’ll transfer soon to the University of Texas at Arlington, where she’ll work toward her bachelor’s degree. Each decision she makes, each step she takes brings her closer to the life she envisions.

“What motivates me is my future, being successful and having a different life than my mom,” she said. “I want to be as successful as I can to give my future children a better life.” **BT**



BT

Learning independence.

Thanks to Buckner NextStep, Destiny is learning the many skills it takes to live on her own successfully.

'A force to be reckoned with'

Story by John Hall • Photography by Russ Dilday



Jasmine Noble smiles as her son, Jaxson, plays with toys in their home.

As 4-year-old Jaxson plays with toys on the floor, his mom watches on with a smile. Jaxson warms her heart. She loves him dearly and seeing him happy makes her feel things that are hard for her to put into words.

"For my child, I knew I needed to have the absolute best," Jasmine Noble says. "And if I had to work and go to school to make sure he had the absolute best, then I was going to do it. So, when my Aunt Lace told me about Buckner Family Pathways, I was like, that's the best way for me to give that to him."

Noble's upbringing sounds like it came straight out of a John Mellencamp song: "I didn't have a horrible childhood growing up.

It was, you know, basic, Middle American type of thing where we struggled a little bit, but it wasn't horrible."

As grateful as she is for her family, she wants more from life – for her and her son. She knows precisely what she wants.

"My main 20-year goal would be to be a published writer," Noble rattles off. "I want to create books and things like that. My five-year goal, I want to have a career in technical writing, to have a home and have Jaxson in a stable place and the same position."

Buckner Family Pathways provides a clear path to accomplish her goals. The program allows Noble and Jaxson to grow together in a safe environment, while empowering Noble to gain

the education she needs for a secure future.

"I am a force to be reckoned with. I knew once I got into this program I was going to finish, and I was wanting to do really well. I wasn't just going to be bottom line skating through. And so that's why I do so well with my grades, and I study so hard and Jaxson's like, 'Mom's on the computer, she's doing homework.' He knows I'm studying and I'm doing really well."

The journey through the program has transformed Noble. She's more relaxed now because she knows she has the support she needs. She trusts Buckner, and Buckner has empowered the family to thrive.

"She's grown into a different person," says Buckner Family Coach Amanda Mott. "She already has the job interview, already has all the things that she'll need from being in our program to now living on her own. And that took time. Time to grow, as we all do."

Noble has always been a caring mother, but she's learned sometimes taking care of Jaxson means taking care of herself.

"I can't take care of him until I'm able to take care of myself first. I have to be good to be able to make sure he is. Buckner provides that for both of us. They make sure I'm able to be the mother I need to be for him, and he is able to go to the day care and I can watch him outside of my window and know he's safe. I can pop up anytime and just be like, 'Are you OK?' He has that sense of safety, of routine structure and he gets the good mom who's not stressed, who gets to come and do everything I'm supposed to do."



The family's future looks bright. Noble has graduated with her bachelor's degree from Stephen F. Austin University and already has job offers to choose from. Lufkin has become home, where both Noble and Jaxson can continue to succeed.

"Now that I have Jaxson playing tee ball and he's in school and he starts 'school-school' in August, Lufkin is the best place, the safest place for him to be," Noble says. "And it's the best place for me to stay around people I know are safe and I trust." **BT**



BT

The future is bright for this family.

Through the support of Buckner, Jasmine Noble and Jaxson can continue to succeed.

‘They’re like family to me’

Story by John Hall • Photography by Janet Roe

Jilberto Rivera shuffled up to Mary Rangel as she worked in the Buckner Family Hope Center at Aldine in Houston. “He was real shy,” she remembered. “He wouldn’t look up at you. I started asking questions. He wouldn’t even look me in the eye. He was just looking at the ground.”

Rivera was struggling. He was hungry. He had no money. More than that, he had no hope.

supporting himself. He just wanted some food.

After they finished what they needed to do, Rangel gave him some food. She invited Rivera to Jobs for Life, a series of classes that empowers individuals with job and life skills. It could help him with his job search, Rangel suggested.

Rivera came to the class. Then the one after that and the one after that. In fact, he rarely missed a class. The group wrapped



LEFT: Jilberto Rivera has found hope at the Buckner Family Hope Center at Aldine in Houston through classes, work and community. **RIGHT:** Through participating in programs and classes like Jobs for Life, Rivera has gained valuable new skills.

Rangel, at the Buckner Family Hope Center, put him to work. She needed help getting tasks done, and he could help. As they worked, she got to know him.

Rivera recently was released from prison after serving a 20-year sentence and was figuring out a world that had changed so much. His only local family was his ex-wife and a 20-year-old son he barely knew. He was having trouble getting a job and

its arms around Rivera, encouraging throughout the process.

Upon graduation, Buckner gave him a backpack as well as a variety of items.

“I never thought I was going to complete [the class] because in my life I’ve never completed anything,” Rivera said. “When I completed this class, I felt good. I actually succeeded in doing something in life. I never graduated high school. I never got a

GED. I actually succeeded in doing something."

The change that happened on the inside was reflected outwardly as well. As he walks around the Family Hope Center, everyone knows his name. He talks to everyone. The ministry is a place he loves to be.

"It was a total transformation," Rangel said. "By the second or third class, he was looking you in the eye. Now, he speaks to everybody."

With newfound confidence and support, Rivera is determined to start his life anew. He's reconnecting with his son. He's learning how to communicate his emotions. He's even got a job, and Rangel found him a place to live.

"They're like family to me," Rivera said. "They treat me kind. They respect me. When I need food, I do my volunteering and get my food." **BT**



BT

A new man, with new hope.

After working with Buckner, Jilverto Rivera found new confidence and a fresh start to life.

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The foster families of Rio Grande Children's Home experienced joy, fun and hope at camp this summer

Story by Emily Keller

Going to camp can be a special experience and families of the Rio Grande Children's Home experienced camp in every facet of the word. From water slides and rope courses to zip lining and more, the children of the Rio Grande Children's Home experienced all camp had to offer at Camp Buckner in Burnet, Texas.



"Every foster parent engaged in the activities, created memories, and supported each child as they tried new activities," said Lori Alvarado, case manager at the Rio Grande Children's Home. "Being able to share this experience with our foster children and give them a vacation that most of them have never experienced is a sight to see."

The families had four days of vacation at camp and for many, this was the farthest they had ever traveled. For the Esquivel family, going to

Camp Buckner was their first vacation as a family.

"We've traveled as a family, but it was always with a purpose – like for work, or doctor's appointments. This was the first time our family really got to go and do the whole vacation thing," Veronica Esquivel said.

For the Rodriguez family, this is their second year fostering. The couple had been married for 30 years, and had raised three biological children, but after meeting three foster children through Belinda's work at a day care, they felt called to become foster parents.

"There was nowhere the children could go, so I took it upon myself," Rodriguez explained.

They were not with an agency and spent four months on their own, not knowing what foster care support was available. A volunteer for CASA introduced them to Buckner where they explained they have found exponential support and care.

"You have to have a heart for [foster care]. It's something you have to want because you have to have patience," she shared. "The best thing to me is when they smile, and I see happiness on their faces."

The opportunity for families at the Rio Grande Children's Home to attend Camp Buckner provided the chance for the whole family to get a breath of fresh air and enjoy quality time together – without the worries of day-to-day, sometimes hectic, schedules. And now, each foster family has memories together to look back upon fondly as their life together continues to grow and evolve.

"Each of them explaining their stories about what they enjoyed the most, and the way they would look at their foster parents with amazement at the different activities and watching all the children interact is a memory that we will never forget," Alvarado said. **BT**

4 million!

Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® presented the 4 millionth pair of shoes collected to a 7-year-old girl in the Bachman Lake area in Dallas.

Samantha Polanco-Calvary and her family first heard about Buckner through the shoe program. The new shoes she and her brother received several years ago were a stepping stone for their parents to dive deeper into the many programs and services Buckner offers, such as family counseling and financial classes that helped save Gabriel and Viviana Polanco-Calvary's marriage.

The 4 millionth pair was collected in August, when two large community drives occurred simultaneously in Dallas and Houston. The 4 millionth-and-first and-second pairs were also presented to 5-year-old twin boys, Qualen and Quince Shepherd, in Houston.

"Buckner has changed my life," said Julia Johnson, mother to Qualen and Quince. "I'm very grateful for these shoes from Buckner for my children. I know it will bring them great joy. To receive these shoes from Buckner is a great honor for them and me. Hope really does shine here."



All three pairs were designed by Houston shoe artist, Eddie B. The designs were inspired by each child – Samantha's shoes featuring her favorite pop star, JoJo Siwa, while the boys' shoes show off their love for their favorite superheroes, Batman and Spider-Man.

The Dallas shoes represent Buckner's 140-year history, which began in Dallas. The Houston shoes represent the future and Buckner's growth across Texas. **BT**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Samantha's shoes feature both her name and JoJo Siwa's, her favorite pop star.

Samantha was all smiles once she had her new shoes on.

Qualen and Quince Johnson, with mother, Julia, were ecstatic to receive their new shoes with Buckner staff and community by their side.

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