

See inside for ways you can support families.

The magazine of Buckner International | FALL 2022

Buckner Today



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Buckner Today

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“I want to give them a second chance at life. And we prayed about it and it just kept coming up one day after another. And so we put our application in and they called us within a few hours and we went to meet the boys.” –Adoptive parent Armando Silvas. See page 26 for his story.

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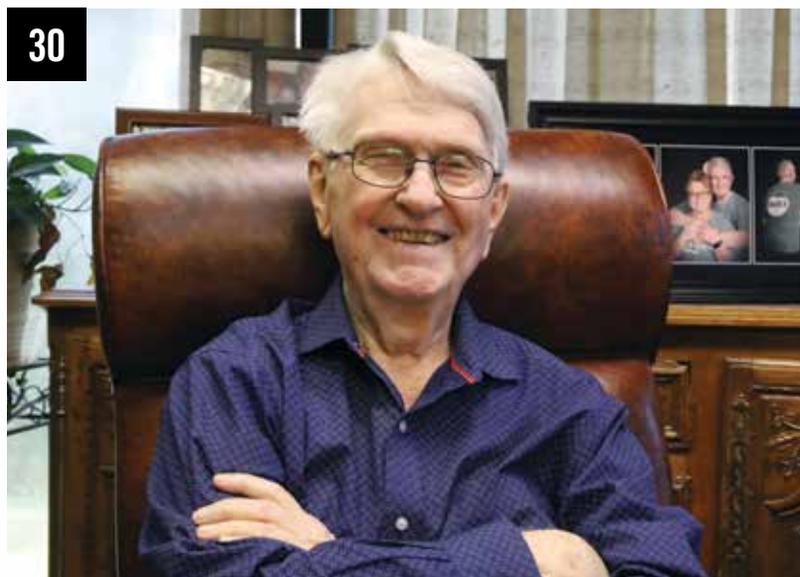
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On the cover: Buckner Guatemala is the birthplace of the Buckner Family Hope Center™. Throughout the pandemic, they have creatively adapted to serve the most vulnerable in the communities of San José Pinula and Jocotenango. *Photography by Russ Dilday.*

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**Looking
ahead >>**
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The light of hope shining in Guatemala

As I stood on the roof of the Buckner Family Hope Center™ in Jocotenango, Guatemala, I was struck by my two views.

Looking up and out, we were surrounded by beautiful green hills cloaked in a vast array of vegetation, a symbol of the strength of Guatemala's soil. Looking down, however, was a completely different view. As beautiful as the natural surroundings are, the Family Hope Center is also surrounded by poverty and desperation.

This was the very first Family Hope Center for Buckner. It was in Jocotenango where the idea germinated into nearly 30 Family Hope Centers internationally and in Texas. These life-changing centers are strengthening families, enabling them to keep children where they belong, in the home. And because of that work, we are transforming countless generations to come, breaking cycles of poor parenting and shining hope into the lives of boys and girls.

As systems change domestically and internationally, it is becoming more apparent family preservation programs like those offered at the Family Hope Center are vital to the future of serving vulnerable children. Our Family Hope Centers offer programs that build on the individual strengths of each family. These are not a "cookie-cutter" approach, but personal, with each family assigned a family coach from Buckner to walk beside them.

During my time in Guatemala, we had the opportunity to visit families being served by Buckner. We walked to their homes, often through devastating poverty. Regardless of the surroundings, we found change and hope inside each home. Undeterred by the challenges facing them, these families, while different, have the same story. Buckner is providing hope and promise for them. In some cases, it's financial training and parenting classes. In other situations, it's a combination of new shoes, food, water filters and family strengthening through trainings.

Valentina is a young girl who frequents the Family Hope Center. Her mother, Sonia, told me she was able to learn healthy communication skills through our programs such as how to talk and reason with her daughter. Valentina has a new mom who supports her dream to become an engineer.

The uniqueness of the Family Hope Center is that while all of them, regardless of location, operate with the same goals of strengthening families, the approach is often different, depending on the location and the needs in each community.

GOOD TO BE BACK

The last time I traveled internationally on behalf of Buckner was in January 2020 with a group of Buckner donors. This year, we traveled to

Guatemala to visit two Family Hope Centers and our foster care ministry. It was my first international trip since the start of the pandemic, and it reminded me how much I missed the opportunity to meet the people we serve and spend time with our teams outside the U.S.

This time I had a group of Texas leaders with me to experience the ministry firsthand. Tony Celessi, president of Stark College and Seminary, Abe Jaquez, president of Baptist University of the Americas, Brian Hill, senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Corpus Christi, Tamiko Jones, executive director of the Woman's Missionary Union of Texas and Irene Gallegos, director of Hunger and Care Ministries, Center for Cultural Engagement for Texas Baptists, accompanied me for a blockbuster week with Buckner staff.

I was reminded again of the scope our work has and the direct impact we're having on the lives of children and families.

I had the privilege of placing shoes on the feet of several children, but I will never forget one little girl and the look on her face when I pulled out a pair of brand-new tennis shoes from her backpack. Her eyes lit up and I could tell she was smiling, even behind her facemask. Your support of Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® makes it possible for children in countries around the world to receive an education and to avoid foot-borne diseases that could make them sick or even cause death.

This time of year, I have the opportunity to talk with friends like you who are part of the work we do. Reflecting on my time in Guatemala, I am encouraged by the impact of our ministries. But I am reminded that everything we do there depends on your faithful support.

As we wind down 2022, my trip to Guatemala reminds me how crucial it is for us to all work together, bringing to the cause whatever gifts and talents God gives us. More than at any time in history, the doors of opportunity are opening.

God bless you and I hope you have a wonderful Christmas season. **BT**



Albert Reyes, President and CEO
Buckner International
Visit my blog at
AlbertLReyes.com



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“Valentina (below, center) is a young girl who frequents the Family Hope Center. Her mother, Sonia, (below, left) told me she was able to learn healthy communication skills through our programs such as how to talk and reason with her daughter. Valentina has a new mom who supports her dream to become an engineer.”

-Albert Reyes



Corner stone

Tom Stone's first memory of Buckner came 85 years ago as a small boy growing up in First Baptist Church of Corsicana, Texas. Like thousands of young Baptists in those days, Stone celebrated his birthdays at Sunday school by giving to the children living at Buckner Orphans Home.

"When you went to Sunday school there, you counted out – if you were 7 years old, you counted out seven nickels or seven pennies," Tom remembered recently during a video interview we had together. After a slight pause, he added that he always "counted out pennies because we were so poor."

While that started Tom's journey with Buckner, it didn't end there. Some 50 years later, he would join the board of trustees and become chair of the board during a crucial time in Buckner's history as the organization transitioned from 33 years with R.C. Campbell at the helm to Ken Hall.



Buckner Family Pathways™ in Longview bears both Tom and Mac's (pictured on left) names due to their strong passion for the project and program.

My personal journey with Tom and Mac (Margaret Ann, as Tom calls her), started in 1999 during the first-ever Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® distribution trip to Russia. We called it Shoes for Russian Souls back then. While we had more than 75 people on the trip, I grew especially close to Tom and Mac, along with trustee Henry Hill and his wife Maggie from Houston, Texas.

Those bonds have grown and persisted through the years. While Henry died a few years ago, Maggie still spearheads the annual shoe drive for South Main Baptist Church in Houston. And although we lost Mac too, Tom is going strong at 91.

Sitting across from Tom for the video interview that day, I found a lump in my throat as I listened to his passion for helping others through Buckner. Maybe it's because Tom knows what it's like to be without.

"My family was poor," Tom told me. "My father sharecropped. We had nothing. I never went hungry. And I never went without clean clothes. But we didn't have much. I found worth for myself as I tried to minister to others in Buckner, and Buckner helped me to feel that worth and to feel that joy of serving."

The generosity of Tom and Mac through the years is driven by their deep desire to serve others, especially children. Today, the Mac and Tom Stone Buckner Family Pathways™ campus in Longview is creating generational transformation for single parents and their children.

"One of the things I found in Buckner when I was active, when I was on the board and chairman of the board and so forth, were the number of children that didn't have a chance until they met Buckner," Tom said. "The world had discarded them, and somehow somebody in Buckner got hold of them and they became happy, useful, joyful Christian people that went out to serve others too."

Sitting there in Tom's office, which he still goes to every day, all I could think about is what an example of humble service to Jesus he is. I want to be like Tom Stone.

As we ended our conversation, though, he forever cemented his place in my heart with these words:

"Back at a time in my life, God gave me money. I've always been a tither and giver, but God gave me money I didn't really need. And he gave it to me. I didn't work to earn it," he shared.

"And I said, 'God, what am I supposed to do with this money?' And just as audibly as God ever said, today in my life, he said, 'Give it away. I gave it to you.' I found out I'm supposed to be a conduit. I'm just a guy that lived and worked in a little old small town, but the joy is being a conduit.

"When you get to be as old as I am, you wish you'd done more of that," he said. "My interest now is not giving less. My interest now is wishing I had given more. In some ways I have things I don't need now, but I need to be able to give to a place like Buckner that takes my money, and God blesses it and I reach people. That's a real joy. Because individually we can't do things.

Collectively, with the leadership of the Holy Spirit, with organizations like Buckner, we can comfort, bring joy, give grace to people everywhere." **BT**

To enjoy a more in-depth look at Tom's story and history with Buckner, check out page 30.

Scan the code at right to watch my conversation with Tom.



Scott Collins is Senior Vice President of Communications at Buckner International.



BUCKNER *on the move*

» Meet children waiting to be adopted in Texas

There are more than 7,000 children currently waiting to be adopted in Texas. If they are never adopted, youth will age out of the system between ages 18 to 21 with no one to support or care for them.

In Texas, more than 1,000 youth age out of foster care each year. Aging out is scary.



▶ Scan the code at left to meet these seven children currently waiting for their forever home here.

» Get a closer look at what it means to serve with a purpose at Buckner Retirement Services

For nearly 70 years, the team at Buckner Retirement Services is driven by one thought, "How may we serve you?" Across our six senior living communities, associates show up and give their best daily.



▶ Scan the code at left to hear from Buckner Retirement Services President Charlie Wilson and associates what showing up and serving with a purpose looks like for them.



» Connie received support through Buckner Family Pathways™ and now supports other single parents

Connie Clement is a graduate of Family Pathways where she learned important life skills such as maintaining a clean, safe home for the sake of her mental health as well as for the benefit of her children and grandchildren. The program supported her dream of attending graduate school.

Today, she works in the Downtown Women's Shelter in Amarillo, Texas, and credits the hand up she received through the program for setting her up for success to be able to serve and love other women facing struggles and challenges.



▶ Scan the code at left to watch Connie's story.



»» Reaching families in Midland in new ways



Buckner Midland is expanding its Permian Basin programs with the addition of the Buckner Family Hope Center™, the first new local program in 19 years.

The family preservation program will be the third program available in Midland, alongside Buckner Family Pathways™ and foster care and adoption.

"This is the first new Buckner program in Midland since 2003. Its inclusion means that all three of our pillars for serving children and families will

now be represented in Midland," shared Dr. Albert Reyes, president and CEO of Buckner International.

"We strengthen families so children are protected and generations of each family are transformed," he continued.

The Family Hope Center will open its doors in 2023. The Midland location will be the ninth Family Hope Center in Texas.



»» These Buckner Family Pathways™ graduates are ready for new adventures



In November, Buckner staff, volunteers, community members and former Buckner Family Pathways™ alumni gathered to celebrate three new graduates from the Dallas Family Pathways program. This was the first in-person graduation celebration since before the pandemic began in 2020.

The Family Pathways program offers single parents safe housing, support and the opportunity to further their education and pursue career goals.

The attendees heard from Family Pathways alumni, Rhonda Lee, where she shared an encouraging testimony about her life since graduating from the program. The three graduates, Marty Jackson, Khadija Young and Wilena "Lena" Duri each shared a special thanks to the program and updates on their upcoming goals since graduating.



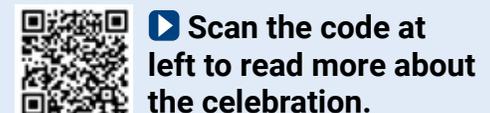
»» Three decades of serving in East Texas

In August, Buckner Longview celebrated 30 years of serving vulnerable children, families and seniors in the area alongside local community members.



Our ministry to vulnerable children, families and seniors focuses on protecting children, strengthening families, transforming generations and serving senior adults. This mission has been carried out in Longview since 1992 when the Buckner Children and Family Services offices opened.

"We are grateful to each of you and to our donors who are making this possible," Reyes shared. "Thanks to the hard work and dedication of our local Buckner team, we look forward to the next 30 years in Longview."





Standing firm

Despite the pandemic, Buckner Guatemala team forges on

Story by Scott Collins • Photography by Russ Dilday

Sounds of laughter

and screeching children playing across the street at the nearby school ricochet off the Buckner Family Hope Center™ walls in Jocotenango, Guatemala.



Guatemala: The birthplace of the Buckner Family Hope Center™ model.

Guatemala is one of the poorest countries in Latin America and has a high number of children involved in sex trafficking. About 75% of the population falls below the poverty line, making it difficult to provide for daily needs.

Buckner Guatemala offers ministry in foster care, preventative health care, child care, residential care and social services.



Since beginning in this Central American country 20 years ago, the Buckner team in Guatemala has shown extraordinary resilience matched only by its creativity and innovation. Those traits have served them well during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It all started here more than 13 years ago. This is the first Family Hope Center, a model now replicated across Buckner International in six countries and throughout Texas. Jocotenango is the birthplace of the family preservation program considered by experts at Buckner and other agencies as a one-of-a-kind model that strengthens families and enables children to stay in their homes rather than face removal. It's from this place Buckner Guatemala exported its most famous product to the U.S.



Receiving new shoes at a Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® distribution transforms a child's life. This distribution was one of the first in-person events since the pandemic began in 2020.

"I'm proud that what we started here in Guatemala is all over [Buckner]," Roberto Tejada, (above) former Buckner staff member shared. "We have gained so much experience, experience that gives us the opportunity to serve families better, experience to share with others, experience to involve others and to engage all the local businesses, local churches, local government, the central government, to provide them the opportunity to work with us and be part of this great concept of the Family Hope Center."

But the other story about the Family Hope Centers and the other Buckner ministries in Guatemala may be the endurance and perseverance needed the past two and a half years.

In a country where still today fewer than 30% of the population has received a COVID-19 vaccine dose, the Buckner team is adapting the way it serves vulnerable children and families. The team's "new normal" has meant finding unusual ways to serve.

Considering virtual approaches such as Zoom and even phone conversations are hindered by the lack of devices like computers and cellphones owned by the families they serve, the team has scrambled to stay in touch with the people they work with.

The team has chosen to adapt to the pandemic. A key word to describe their efforts over the last few years would be creativity.

Buckner Guatemala has been working with other partners to help deliver services to clients. But about six months ago, they started

having activities again in the Family Hope Centers in collaboration with local governments and churches.

Along with operating Family Hope Centers in Jocotenango and San Jose Pinula, Buckner Guatemala is one of only three certified agencies providing foster care in the entire country. The Buckner team has been instrumental in developing standards and protocols for the government, ensuring children are safe in foster homes.

But the concept of foster care is relatively new to Guatemala. The Buckner team is working to create awareness, provide knowledge and advocate where they have opportunities to speak on foster care.

The one-two punch of child permanency through foster care and adoption and family preservation through the Family Hope Center model is the cornerstone of Buckner Guatemala's work. Behind that approach is the belief children are better off in a family environment where they can experience the love and nurture of a home.

"We are preventing kids from being separated from their families, but when that happens, we have the permanency program to help them," Tejada shared. "We believe the best place for a child to be is in a family, where they can be loved and developed. That's a place where they have a name, they have their own room, they have their own space. And what better place for that to be than in a family?"

Case in point

The trek to the Munoz Ortiz's home in San Jose Pinula is circuitous at best. The road turns into a narrow path that ends at the entrance of a series of plywood shacks. The Munoz Ortiz two-room house is at the end of the line.



Inside, the front room serves as a kitchen and dining room and the adjacent room is both living room and bedroom for the family of four, which along with Victor and Milvia includes 6-month-old Kelly Naomi and 8-month-old William Anderson.

The Munoz Ortiz family is a testimony to family preservation. They started working with a case worker at the Family Hope Center in their community in March 2020, just as the pandemic began taking hold.

Milvia's sister-in-law was already in family coaching at the Family Hope Center and recommended it to Milvia and Victor. Overwhelming financial debt was putting stress on the family and



Milvia's kitchen may be small, but it provides delicious meals for their whole family. Through the help of financial education courses at the Buckner Family Hope Center™, Milvia and Victor have strengthened their relationship and no longer face the stress of financial debt.

leading to other issues. Milvia attended financial planning classes at Buckner and Victor attributes what she learned to saving both their relationship and money.

"Before, we used to go out and drive around and end up spending money we didn't have," Victor said. "Buckner has helped us a lot through their programs."

In addition to financial education, the couple took advantage of parenting education classes, which Milvia says taught them how to healthily parent their children.

"Buckner helped my family a lot," Milvia shared. "Because we learned many different things and we learned to lead our children. It has helped us be better parents."

When the couple was ready to purchase the land where their home sits today, they sought help from the team at the Family Hope Center. Through family coaching, Victor and Milvia saved enough money for

the down payment on both the land and the house.

"Thanks to Buckner, my dream has come true of paying for the land," Milvia said. "I have learned how to save to be able to pay for the land through installments and I've learned how to save to be able to make the land legally ours."

"Little by little, we learned how to save our money," she added. "We now feel more comfortable and we are not going through as many other problems as before. We've noticed a big difference."

Now that the family is settled in a safe home and their finances are under control, they are concentrating on the futures of their children. The Buckner team is right beside them, encouraging them and providing family strengthening.

"My dream is that my children always walk in God's path," Victor said. "We are praying for God to give us the strength to help them move forward and graduate from a university and learn English."



Changing the course of the family.

For Milvia and Victor, what they've learned isn't just for them. They have become better parents and pour encouragement, faith and stability into their children.

Milvia echoes Victor about their children.

"I'm asking God to lead them," she shared. "Our dreams for them are what their dreams are. If God gives us strength, we can help them in whatever they choose to study. When they grow up, we need to let them make their own decisions. It's their choice. If God keeps us alive and healthy, we want to help them fulfill their dreams."

"What we do is involve the entire family," Buckner Guatemala staff member confirmed. "There is a family coach who works with the family. By getting everyone involved in different activities we can help the families build a trust relationship with our coach, the Family Hope Center, and with each other."

'Seeing the needs of others'

While the Munoz Ortiz family represents success when a family is strengthened and the children stay put, it's not always that way. That's when the Buckner Guatemala foster care team works alongside government officials to provide a temporary home for children.

"We had to find a way to help," shared Eric Artiga. Eric and Claudia, his wife of 32 years, are Buckner foster parents.

"It is better to give than to receive. This [being foster parents] helps us get out of the habit of thinking that it is just about us or just about our friends," he continued. "We only care about our own needs and I think it would be much better to start caring about the needs of others. What better way than to care for the little ones?"

The Artigas are home for Eduardo*, an infant in foster care because his teenage mother struggles with depression and other issues. The teenage mother lived in a shelter because of her own family's conditions and eventually moved in with a family member. But it was not a safe environment for a pregnant teen or newborn, so authorities intervened just as Eduardo was born.

When he arrived in the Artiga home, Eduardo was underweight and had stomach issues. The change in environment led to immediate improvement.

"When he came, he wouldn't let us hug him and he would only clench his fists," Claudia said. "It was a slow process as he began to open up to us. We gave him a lot of love, but we also received a lot of love from him because one receives more than what one gives. He now plays and talks. He is a happy boy. He is very sure of himself."

"We pray every day for him," Eric added. "First, we pray the Lord provides
(continued on page 20)





Buckner Guatemala never closed their doors despite the COVID-19 pandemic, but connecting with families was a challenge. Staff and families are both thankful to safely attend in-person health fairs, courses and programs again.





When it comes to winter, we're reminded of some of our favorite things: special time with family, holiday traditions and often, a much-needed break from our routines. **But it's not that way for everyone.**



For so many vulnerable children and families, the winter days can be some of the hardest. The cold reality of poverty, instability and difficult circumstances still hang heavy in their lives with little hope for a change.

And these children and families desperately want to believe the future could be brighter and warmer.

Thanks to you – it can be.



When you give, families are offered the warmth and comfort of true hope.

With your support today, you will give children and their families a glimmer of hope that becomes a tether to hold onto for their journey ahead.

Any special gift you can give today to help meet the **\$100,000 challenge by Dec. 31** in full will have a powerful effect to give even more vulnerable families hope this winter.



BUCKNER®

Hope shines here.®

**Give today at
buckner.org/christmas-for-children**





Eric and Claudia Artiga brought Eduardo home underweight and shy. Today, Eduardo is flourishing thanks to the love and attention he's received in the Artiga home.*

(continued from page 15)

him with a family that fears God and teaches him to fear the Lord. A family who teaches him he is not alone in this life and that there is an almighty and sovereign God who cares for him. We want him to grow up with these values and this knowledge.

“We want him to have a career and have the opportunity other children don't have,” Eric continued. “We want Eduardo to have the opportunity to have an education, to be a good Christian and to become a good dad when he gets the opportunity.”

Yadiera Florian, Eduardo's Buckner foster care case worker shared the key to his growth and development has been the Artigas' attention and love.

“They have welcomed him with great love and they have been very responsible with each of the stages of development while he has been with them,” she said. “He is a very happy and active boy. One of the things that stands out about him is that he takes care of other children around him. He is very self-sufficient, very determined and very capable.”



“We had to find a way to help. It is better to give than to receive. This [being foster parents] helps us get out of the habit of thinking that it is just about us ... I think it would be much better to start caring about the needs of others. What better way than to care for the little ones?”

*—Eric and Claudia Artiga,
Buckner foster parents in Guatemala*

Sharing hope for the future despite a dark past

A firsthand experience from the *Secretaria de Bienestar Social* orphanage



Written by Tamiko Jones, (top at left) executive director-treasurer of WMU of Texas and Dr. Irene Gallegos, (bottom at left) director of Hunger and Care Ministries at Texas Baptists.



Entering the doors of the orphanage, we knew safety was a concern and security was a priority. We could feel eyes upon us as we imagined the internal struggles

of the girls we were allowed to visit that day.

Would we be welcomed? Would we remember all the tips our guide shared on the bus ride to the orphanage? Would the language barrier prove too great of a challenge for us and for the girls? God had a plan to surprise us all.

The *Secretaria de Bienestar Social*, a state-run orphanage in Guatemala, is a temporary placement for girls who have been sexually abused. Buckner Guatemala staff, Rocio Lopez, senior director of international operations and strategic initiatives for Buckner International, and Dr. Irene Gallegos and I hosted a shoe distribution with the adolescent girls.

The girls placed at the *Secretaria* are vulnerable to their core. They enter placement after being removed from their families, removed from the choice of sexual purity and removed from their innocent childhood. The girls find healing and hope with the guidance of the *Secretaria* agency staff and community collaborations like Buckner.

We were able to greet the girls and connect initially over girly things ... hairstyles, nail color and even attire. This connection helped our initial interaction with the girls as we presented them with new shoes provided through Buckner

(continued on page 23 sidebar)

Self-sufficiency

Like those they care for, the Buckner Guatemala team is moving toward being more self-sufficient and less reliant on Buckner International for financial support.

Since they are moving out of the most severe period of the pandemic, the team's focus is turning toward the future.

"The Guatemala team has done a beautiful job of engaging churches and pastors," said Dr. Albert Reyes, president and CEO of Buckner International.

Reyes met with members of the Evangelical Alliance of Churches and several Baptist pastors from the Baptist World Alliance during a visit to Guatemala in September.

"The team has also engaged the business community, which seems anxious to develop and demonstrate corporate social

responsibility," Reyes added. "We saw that with so many different foundations during our trip."

One of those local groups is Fondazione Aztec, which assisted the Buckner team in raising more than \$86,000 in 2021.

The Buckner Guatemala team works together to strategically bring in more businesses, more companies and more opportunities that can provide more resources for Buckner and the families being served.

Along with businesses, the team also works closely with the government, which creates a relationship where they often look to Buckner for advice.

"What we see in Guatemala is what I want to see across all of Buckner," Reyes said. "We have to find new ways to work. This is the new normal and it calls for the very best of our innovation, creativity, passion and energy." **BT**

*Name has been changed to protect privacy.



“ ”

“We want him to have a career and have the opportunity other children don't have ... the opportunity to have an education, to be a good Christian and to become a good dad when he gets the opportunity.” -Eric Artiga, foster parent



(continued from page 21 sidebar)

Shoes for Orphan Souls®.

We explained, in some cases through a translator, the shoe fitting process and asked permission to remove their old shoes, clean their feet and place new socks and shoes on them.

Each girl was given the option to complete the process on their own, allowing them the opportunity to remain in control. Oftentimes, the girls looked down toward the ground with shrugged shoulders, shy about the process; yet there was a glimmer of hope found in their eyes once they stood proud in their new shoes.

Truth, encouragement, joy and peace were woven into the conversations as we placed shoes on the girls and became acquainted. As the minutes passed, trust was formed. After each interaction, it became a joy for us to receive a hug, always initiated by the girls.

The most unique interaction occurred when the agency staff shared the girls had an activity planned for us as an expression of gratitude.

As we returned to the assembly area, chairs were lined across the front of the classroom with a girl standing behind each chair holding a lime. With scattered emotions and lifted brows in surprise, we sat in the chairs as the girls began to follow the instructions of their leader.

We were experiencing God's beauty for ashes. In the midst of their own trauma and pain, these girls offered peace and tranquility, providing hope in the presence of despair. Centering us with the aroma of the lime, they gave us shoulder and facial massages rivaling the best spa experience. Beyond an expression of gratitude, the spa activity demonstrated the internal hope still present within each girl and their ability to see past their pain in order to give to another.

As we prepared to leave, one girl approached us with urgency, needing to share a message through the translator.

As she made eye contact, she said she was inspired. She said she had hope. She said she felt love. Then she gave a full hug with a squeeze and would not let go. Language presented no barrier. The love we desired to share was received and surprisingly, returned. We prayed covering over her life. That she would live. That she would have hope and a future. **BT**

'God sent them to me'

Guatemalan third grader receives shoes through Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUSS DILDAY

Jimena Reyes made the long, uncomfortable walk from her home on the outskirts of Jocotenango, Guatemala, to the Buckner Family Hope Center™ with her younger sister, Maria Rene, and her mother.

Every step came with pain in her outside toes because she'd outgrown her only pair of shoes. Her discomfort had risen

little by little over the last few weeks, until each outing had blossomed into a blistering, chafing ordeal. She had stopped wearing socks days ago to make more room for her feet.

But this morning her painful walk came with the hope of receiving a new pair of shoes at the Family Hope Center, where staff on the Buckner Guatemala team had invited families to participate in a fair providing school supplies and educational programming.

In addition to new shoes from Buckner Shoes, each child received a backpack full of school supplies, while parents were treated to cooking classes, parenting skills classes, MannaPak food supplies and a devotional time.

After waiting in the hallway of her school, where the Buckner fair was being held, Reyes finally was chosen to enter. She walked through rows of dual seats, each containing a local church volunteer or Buckner staff member, and a child receiving a foot washing, followed by a new pair of shoes and socks.

Waiting for her in one of the many seats was a Buckner staff member, who gently removed the old, worn shoes from her sockless, road-grimed feet, which he washed with wipes before putting on fresh socks and a new pair of tennis



Jimena Reyes and her mother take a stroll in her brand-new shoes with newfound comfort and hope.



shoes that, thankfully, fit her perfectly.

“What do these new shoes mean to you?” he asked.

“God sent them to me,” she responded, flashing a smile that revealed dimples straight out of Hollywood. “My old shoes don’t fit.”

He continued, “If you hadn’t received these new shoes, what would have happened?”

“My mom would have had to spend a lot of money,” she said. “She doesn’t have a job and has to clean houses and wash clothes.”

“What does your dad do?” he asked.

There is silence, followed by, “I don’t have a dad.”

The staff member changed the subject and with a smile, handed her a new pink backpack filled with school supplies.

“Notebooks, colored paper, glue, a pencil sharpener, pens, scissors, pencils, markers and a ruler!” Reyes exclaimed.

Each find elected a new round of smiles from the third grader, who added her favorite subject is math.

Buckner case worker Ana Pic knows the family’s situation well and hopes they will return to the Family Hope Center for services. While they are not in the program yet, fairs and distributions are often a way to attract new families and assess their needs for help.

“She is a girl who comes from a family in poverty,” Pic said. “She doesn’t have a father, and only has her mother, who has to do a lot of work to be able to give them what they need. They are one of the families who live in the rural part of this municipality. There are families that have a lot of challenges in sending their children to school.”

Because of those challenges, the shoe and supplies distribution “helps the family economically because the schools ask for a lot of school supplies.”

“It saves money for their parents,” Pic continued. “It also helps in their education. And the most important thing is that they see it as an unexpected gift.”

Pic said children like Reyes are at particular risk in several areas.

“Without family counseling, without support, without education, she would most likely drop out of school,” she shared. “She would most likely be a mom at a young age. Most likely she would have to start working to help with her mother’s finances. Most likely she would get involved in gangs and fall into unhealthy vices.”

Seeing her mother at the door, Reyes ran over to show off her new shoes. The pair both grinned, knowing their walk into the future would be a lot less painful. **BT**



On the brink of aging out of care

Two sibling groups in Texas found their forever homes before it was too late

Story by Emily Ahrens • Photos by Russ Dilday

As children in the foster care system get older, it's common for their hope of adoption to fade. In Texas, more than 1,000 youth age out of foster care each year. Aging out of the foster care system as a young adult without a support system can lead to addiction, human trafficking and homelessness.

Another added challenge is finding a home that can take in a group of siblings so they can stay together. According to the Department of Family and Protective Services, more than 6,000 sibling groups are currently in foster care.

On either end of Texas, two groups of siblings found their forever homes before they had to face that harsh reality.

Noah, Daniel and Jacob are three teenage boys that keep Kara and Armando Silvas on their toes. While Kara and Armando may not be much older than them, becoming their parents have been an answered prayer.

"God is everywhere in this story," Kara shared. "From the very beginning, we've based our adoption story on prayer."

Kara was unable to have children and the couple prayed fervently for God to guide their next steps in growing their family. They met the three boys at the Texas Girls & Boys Ranch in Lubbock, Texas, while working as campus parents and Armando knew immediately.

"I told Kara, 'I want to give them a second chance at life,'" he said. "And we prayed about it and it just kept coming up one day after



“ ”

“God is everywhere in this story,” Kara shared. “From the very beginning, we’ve based our adoption story on prayer.” -Kara, adoptive parent



another. And so we put our application in and they called us within a few hours and we went to meet the boys.”

Again, raising teenagers is not an easy task. But it seemed this was a God-designed fit for the Silvas.

“What it’s like to be their dad is amazing,” Armando said. “I never expected it to be this warming, this loving. The boys mean everything to me – with them just being themselves. It doesn’t have to do with, ‘Oh, I have to love him because he adopted me,’ it’s just them being them.

“It’s an amazing feeling that sometimes is hard to explain.”

For Kara, raising three boys keeps her young. She loves the energy and fun they bring to the house. But more than that, she cherishes the special moments they have together.

“I was expecting as a boy mom for it to be wrestling and sports year-round,” she said with a laugh. “And there is that. But there’s also, ‘Hey Mom, I love you,’ and a hug when they come home from school. I love coming home and knowing my boys are going to be there.”

The couple was told by people in their community that adopting three teenage boys was a crazy idea. But they were secure in God’s calling for their life.

“We’re not much older than the boys so a lot of people questioned us being able to do this,” Kara shared. “But together, we feel like we can accomplish anything.”

The boys were living at the Texas Girls & Boys Ranch for nearly four years. Coming from a childhood of instability and addiction, they adapted the best they could and stuck together.

The oldest son, at 17 years old, had nearly given up on being adopted. But on Nov. 8, 2021, the Silva family grew by three teenage



boys – just before he turned 18 in January and would have aged out of foster care.

“I was thinking about just phasing out and going out on my own,” he said. “But for people my age in the situation I was in, something will happen. Just don’t give up and keep working toward finding your family.”



Carey Augustin in Beaumont, Texas, met Tameco (14), Be’Aja (16) and Damontylynn (13) and knew immediately she wanted to provide a forever home for them. Carey worked at a group home for several years where she met the girls. While there, the four developed a close bond and she decided to open her home to a kinship placement for them.



Carey Augustin knew she wanted to give these three teenage girls a forever home as soon as she started the foster care certification process with Buckner. “I’m big on family and I’ve always wanted to keep a family together,” she shared.



“I’m big on family and I’ve always wanted to keep a family together,” Carey shared. “Adopting a sibling group, I just couldn’t see those girls split up.”

She worked with Buckner Foster Care and Adoption to become licensed as a kinship home, with the goal being adoption.

Carey has four biological children that are already out of the house, but she wasn’t afraid to start over again. For her, adopting the girls was the only option. She wanted to make it official rather than only have them in her care under foster care.

On Nov. 3, 2021, the three teen girls became Augustins.

Raising three teenage girls doesn’t come without its challenges, but for Carey, their smiles, joy and stories make it all worth it.

“They’re wonderful,” she said. “Each one has their own personality. And being a mom all over again was kind of challenging, starting over again with three girls, but it gave me a reason to smile. It gave me something to wake up to. Happy I made a change in someone’s life.”

For the girls, they love their new family. Being older in the foster care system can force children to grow up quickly and learn skills they wouldn’t normally have had to learn. But adjusting to the love and protection of Carey as their mother has helped the three girls grow and learn to lean on her for support.

“It was hard for us because I was like the sister and the mother and the father,” Be’Aja, the oldest sister, said. “It’s actually easier for me because I don’t have to keep watch over them and it’s nice to have someone there, so I don’t have to always be on guard to keep watch.”

While Be’Aja had to shift into a parental role with her sisters throughout their time growing up in foster care, she also knew she didn’t want to be separated from them.

“I probably would’ve dropped out of school or something so I could

take care of them, but I also feel like we probably would’ve been split up because of our ages and I think that would’ve been the hardest thing for me,” she said. “I’m grateful she [Carey] was there. It was really perfect timing.”

Tameco believes that if they hadn’t been adopted, they wouldn’t be who they are today.

“Mom is sweet and very caring, and she loves putting others before herself,” Tameco shared. “She loves taking care of us and she pushes you to do better.”

The love, stability and routine Carey introduced into the girls’ lives has given them the opportunity to thrive.

“Carey brought into each one of these girls’ lives a joy, just like they brought into hers,” shared Annie Flemon, Buckner foster care home developer in Beaumont. “By Carey adopting this sibling group, it allowed them to continue with what we refer to as family continuity.”

According to the Department of Family and Protective Services, for sibling groups placed in foster care, only about 66% are placed together. Losing family continuity and experiencing sibling separation compounds the losses a child faces when entering foster care.

“We know when children are removed from their families, that’s pretty much destroyed the family,” Flemon continued. “They’ve lost their sense of family. They’ve lost where they came from. They’ve lost their neighborhood, friends and family.”

While these girls experienced those losses, they have been able to gain back a sense of family through Carey and even through the extended Augustin family. Carey’s older children spend time with the girls and assist with caring for them.

“They now have somewhere to go once they graduate from high school and when they go off to college,” Flemon said. “They always have somewhere to go back to. That’s their family.” **BT**

Scan the code above to watch these journeys.



A Life of Generosity

By Russ Dilday

Tom Stone sat at his desk in his office in Longview, Texas, reflecting on a lifetime spent in business and accounting. It's a brief conversation. The majority of his reflections focused on his real passion: a life spent in service to God and caring for others.

Tom Stone has lived a life of generosity.

The ornate desk speaks of a life devoted to business, and the accounting calculator is an old-school reminder of the expertise that brought him success. Other items speak about the joys of his life: Photos of his late wife Margaret Ann, their children Karoletha and Tom, and smiling grandchildren. Baylor University paraphernalia is everywhere.

But given his beginnings, Tom Stone's life ledger was a hard-won journey, and one that places God solely in the credits column.

"My family was poor," he recalled. "My father sharecropped. And then to get out of sharecropping, he became the principal and teacher of the fourth, fifth and sixth grade in a rural school.

"It was a humble life," he added. "We had nothing. I never went hungry, and I never went without clean clothes, but we didn't have much. And then I started school early when my dad was a teacher in Groveton, and they let me start when I was 5.

"And later, I moved from a school that was 11 grades to one that was 12 grades, and they tested me and moved me up, and so I went into the sixth grade when I was 9 years old," he said.

And with a grin, he added, "That may have sounded like a great thing then, but when you get to be in high school and you're a sophomore when you're 13 years old with kids that are two and three years older than you are, you don't develop a very good sense of self-worth."

Despite the awkward reality he experienced of being younger and smaller than his classmates, Stone found comfort and a sense of individuality through his faith.

"God has found several ways to tell me, 'Tom, I created a unique Tom Stone for him to be Tom Stone, not for him to be six-foot-four and an All-American basketball player.' I [later] found worth for myself as I tried to minister to others through Buckner, and Buckner helped me to feel that worth and to feel that joy of serving."

Stone's mention of Buckner reminded him of his first encounter with the ministry of Buckner.

"It's a funny thing. I was just thinking about that the other day," he said. "My first memory of Buckner, [was at] the First Baptist Church of Corsicana, and it was either my seventh birthday or my eighth birthday."

He explained how, on their birthdays, children would count out and donate change to help the children served at the Buckner Orphans Home in Dallas.

"On your birthday, when you went to Sunday school there, you counted out – if you were 7 years old, you counted out seven nickels or seven pennies. I can assure you, with the wealth of my family, it was pennies.

"I was thinking about it the other day," he said. "That was my first recollection of Buckner. I knew my gift was for Buckner Orphans Home. And other than that, the only other memory I had of Buckner was driving by, going to Dallas from here and seeing the brick buildings where there were tile roofs."

It's fitting that Tom Stone's initiation to the ministry of Buckner was through his giving. He's spent nine decades finding ways to support others through his church and Buckner.

But his support came into sharper focus through a relationship with a friend he calls "a brother."

While Stone is an only child, he said he's had "four brothers" in his lifetime.

"One of those brothers' name was Chuck Stevenson, Charles Bruce Stevenson," Stone shared. "We knew each other at Baylor, but barely.

"We were in our last quarter at Baylor University. We were in a class together, for some reason - business law. And he told me he was going to get married, and I was getting married in August."

Stone proudly told Stevenson about his fiancée, Margaret Ann, who he called "Mac."

Later, Stone was only 19 years old when he graduated from Baylor.

"I found out you couldn't get a real decent job when you're 19, even if you're a college graduate, so I stayed in Waco working for some people until I was approaching my 21st birthday. I started looking for real jobs and came to Longview and found out Chuck and his wife were already here. He was a schoolteacher."

The meeting of old friends seemed to be more than chance.

"I had a real experience with the Lord," Stone shared. "I accepted Christ as my Savior when I was 8 years old, but in a revival here with Howard Butt, I decided it was time for me to stop playing church, and start being [the] church. Chuck was already being [the] church. He and his wife and my wife and I became great friends."

'Kicking and screaming'

During that time, Stevenson felt God's call to vocational ministry and became minister of education at First Baptist Church of Grand Prairie. While serving there, Stone said Stevenson "called me and said, 'I've been put on a committee of the BGCT (Baptist General Convention of Texas), to nominate trustees for certain things, and one of them is Buckner.'"



Stone continued his memory of the conversation, saying Stevenson told him he had "talked to Dr. R.C. Campbell (above, left), and he wanted somebody that had a financial background, so I'm nominating you as a trustee for Buckner."

Stone's mental response was instant.

"I didn't want to do it," he said. "I didn't know that much about

Buckner. I thought I was busy. I was two years away from leaving my partnership and going out on my own, and I just didn't want to do it.

"But it's hard to tell your brother no, so I just kept putting off telling him no until it was too late to tell him no," he said with a laugh. "And so, I went kicking and screaming onto the board of Buckner."

He attended his first meeting as a trustee in 1979, the year Buckner celebrated its 100th anniversary. At the close of the meeting, he was asked to pray.

"In my prayer, I said, 'God, one more time, you bless me in spite of myself, not because of myself because already I can feel this is exactly where you wanted me to be.' And Buckner became one of the more vital parts of my life."

When he began his board service in his late 40s, he said he was still "the baby of the board," but the baby had found family.

"I had the joy of meeting some of the people that were just super, super, super. Dr. Pickett was the president when I went on the board, and Jim Thurman and his wife welcomed me and my wife like we were long lost kids of theirs or something. That was just such a fantastic experience for me."

Eventually, as his experience and love for the ministry grew, he became the board chairman. He recalled every board meeting was like a revival.

"I started off every board meeting with somebody giving a testimony."

There were also monumental business decisions during his time of service: The decision whether to keep domestic adoption programs active and the growth of Buckner Retirement Services are two he remembers as "classic memories."

His wife Mac also became invested in the Buckner ministry. Once

when the couple was touring a Buckner ministry in San Antonio, Mac told him, "Will we ever meet anybody from Buckner that's just not special?"

"And I said, 'I hope not.' And we didn't."

"Buckner was something special to Margaret Ann - to everybody else she's Mac - but to me she's Margaret Ann. Margaret Ann and I did everything together."



There were other memories made. His favorite, he said, was a 1997 trip to Russia, a time he remembers as "one of the great moments in my life with Buckner."

During the trip, volunteers brought new shoes and coats to children living in orphanages in the St. Petersburg area.



Tom and Mac (pictured third and fourth from right) both had a strong passion for Buckner ministries, especially Buckner Family Pathways™. The program in Longview, Texas, bears their name as a reflection of their dedication and generosity.

“It was tough,” he said. “Those people up there didn’t have anything. And snow was on the ground. I remember I put a jacket on a kid, and it was three times too big.”

Stone said changing the lives of children was among his chief motivators as a Buckner leader.

“I would meet children, and sometimes they would come and speak to us at the board meetings,” he shared. “They shared some terrible stories with us. They didn’t have a chance. They were nothing. The world had discarded them, and somehow, somebody at Buckner got hold of them and they became happy, useful, joyful Christian people that went out to serve others too.”

“There’s nothing in the world that thrills me more than to see a young life changed,” he said. “And what they’re going to do not just for that life, what they’re going to do for all the lives they come in contact with.”

‘Feed my sheep’

That moment also summed up his personal philosophy of caring for others.

“I usually come back to the story of when Jesus appeared to Peter after his resurrection, and he asked him, ‘Do you love me?’ Three times Peter responded each time that he loved him, and each time Jesus said, ‘Feed my sheep.’”

“If you love Jesus, you feed his sheep,” Stone shared. “Buckner loves Jesus, and Buckner feeds his sheep. And that’s what I’ve told to many, many people, because that is, to me, the whole thing about Buckner; if you love, you serve those that cannot in many instances serve themselves. And that’s what Buckner does. And everything that they do, whether it’s with children, or families or older people, or what, you’re showing them the love of Jesus by helping them do what they can’t do by themselves.”

Buckner records show Mac and Tom Stone have generously given more than \$1.3 million to Buckner ministries, caring for the most vulnerable, for more than 42 years.

Arnie Adkison, Buckner senior vice president and chief development officer, said the breadth and impact of the Stones’ generosity has changed the course of “thousands of lives.”

“Mac and Tom’s giving doesn’t just reflect a heart for a specific cause or group served by Buckner, it reflects almost all of our ministries,” Adkison said.

“The Stones have given to our work in five countries, volunteered for and given to mission trips, funded endowments, given to Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®, provided hope through Senior Care and Assistance, supported our humanitarian aid efforts. They’ve impacted just about every ministry we’ve been involved in.”

Stone has always maintained a faith-based concept of giving to help others.

“Back at a time in my life, God gave me money. I’ve always been a tither and a giver, but God gave me money I didn’t really need.

“I’ll never forget I was on a Buckner trip in Peru, and our days were so busy we didn’t have time to have a devotional, so we did it on the bus.”

“The first morning, Ken Hall is standing in the middle of the bus giving a devotional,” he continued. “I heard the first few words, but something he said triggered me. And I said, ‘God, what am I supposed to do with this money?’”

“And just as audibly as God ever said in my life, he said, ‘Give it away. I gave it to you.’ I found out I’m supposed to be a conduit. Just a guy that lived and worked in a little old small town, but the joy is being a conduit. I’m influencing lives that I can’t touch.”



While the Stones’ touch has reached across the globe and throughout Texas, they also gave to the community they called home: Longview.

Locally, Mac and Tom have protected children through Buckner Foster Care and Adoption, provided help to single parents through Buckner Family Pathways™, given to client assistance events and counseling.

The Buckner Family Pathways™ campus in Longview bears their name. It’s a ministry that Mac and Tom both felt fiercely about.

“I remember going to the one in Lufkin, and I came away from there and I said, ‘We don’t do anything any better than this,’” he said.

“You’re breaking that cycle of families that have been down. I mean, it’s just amazing that they’ve gone from being on relief to being not only self-sufficient, but their families become self-sufficient. Oh, it’s wonderful.”

Having his family’s name associated with the Family Pathways ministry in Longview is a fond memory for Tom.

“I’ll never forget it. We were a part of the [capital] campaign and everything and [Shining Hope Longview campaign co-chairs] Rodney and Susan [Henry] called and asked, ‘Can you and Mac come to a planning session at Pincrest Country Club?’”

“Rodney said, ‘Well we’ve been working on a change in plans [for the Family Pathways capital project].’”

“My first reaction was, ‘Rodney, I love you, but I’m fixing to hit you. I mean all this work, and we designed this thing and what change could you possibly make?’

“And he said, ‘The change we’re going to make is it’s going to be

called the Mac and Tom Stone Buckner Family Pathways.”

The Stone legacy

Stone’s influence has extended past his family’s giving. He was on the Buckner board of trustees when the board and Buckner Retirement Services made the decision to build Buckner Westminster Place, one of six Buckner senior living communities, in Longview.

He also introduced Buckner to Kenneth Hall, fifth president and CEO of Buckner International. Hall had been Stone’s pastor at First Baptist Church of Longview.

“I praise the Lord that he let me introduce Buckner and Ken together,” he said. “My first year I was chairman of the board, I asked Ken to speak at Founder’s Day. And Dr. Campbell fell in love with him.”

Hall became president and CEO of Buckner in 1994, serving as president for 16 years and as CEO for an additional two years.

Stone’s legacy continues, and he credits Buckner with keeping his

interest in the world high.

“Buckner helps me feel like I’m a part of what’s going on,” he shared. “I don’t do a lot, but I’m going to tell you, the publications that Buckner puts out are the best. And I love to read it, cover to cover, and somewhere around here I have most of them. It just invigorates me to see everything that Buckner’s still doing. It invigorates me to see everything Buckner is doing in Northeast Texas.”

Still sitting at his desk, Stone delivered a final thought on his life of generosity with a piercing gaze: “When you get to be as old as I am, you wish you’d done more of that. My interest now is not giving less. My interest now is wishing I had given more.

“I need to be able to give to a place like Buckner that takes my money, and God blesses it and I reach people,” he finished. “That’s a real joy. Because individually we can’t do things. Collectively, with the leadership of the Holy Spirit, with organizations like Buckner, we can comfort, bring joy and give grace to people everywhere.” **BT**

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Walking into the future

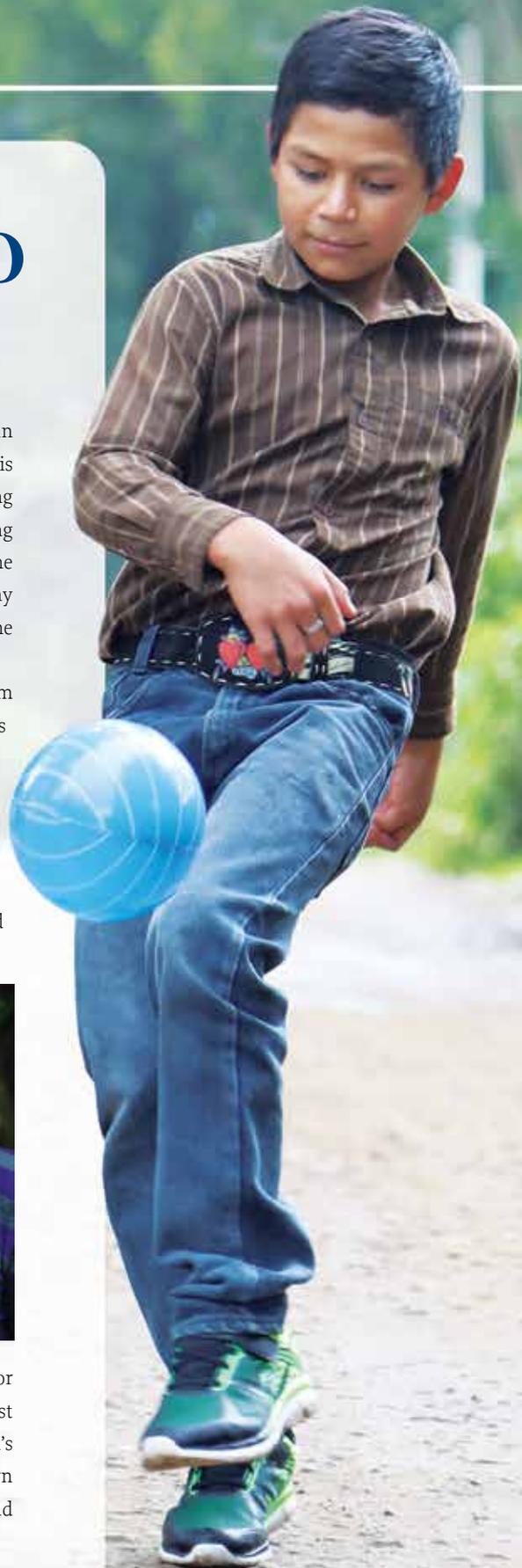
It's Tuesday, Aug. 31 at the Buckner Family Hope Center™ in San José Pinula, just outside Guatemala City. In many ways, this was a new beginning for Buckner Guatemala and the surrounding community at San José Pinula. The Buckner team hosted a daylong event for children and families from the community for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic began more than two years ago. Many new families arrived who were just getting to know Buckner and the team and getting a new look at a brighter future for their children.

It was also the first time in almost three years Buckner team members, local volunteers and a small group of U.S. volunteers were able to put new shoes and socks on boys and girls as part of the Buckner Shoes for Orphans Souls® ministry.

Among them was Juan Miguel Santos, who came to the Family Hope Center with his mother (inset). Juan Miguel smiled and chatted the entire time as Buckner President and CEO Albert Reyes took off his old, worn work boots and socks and put a new pair of two-tone green running shoes on his feet.



While Juan Miguel smiled when he tried out his new shoes for Reyes, there was sadness, too. Juan Miguel and his mom almost didn't come to the event Tuesday because her mother, Juan Miguel's grandmother, had died the previous day. But his mother felt drawn to the Family Hope Center event, saying she believed she would receive a blessing and that she intends to return. **BT**



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