

See inside for ways you can support families.

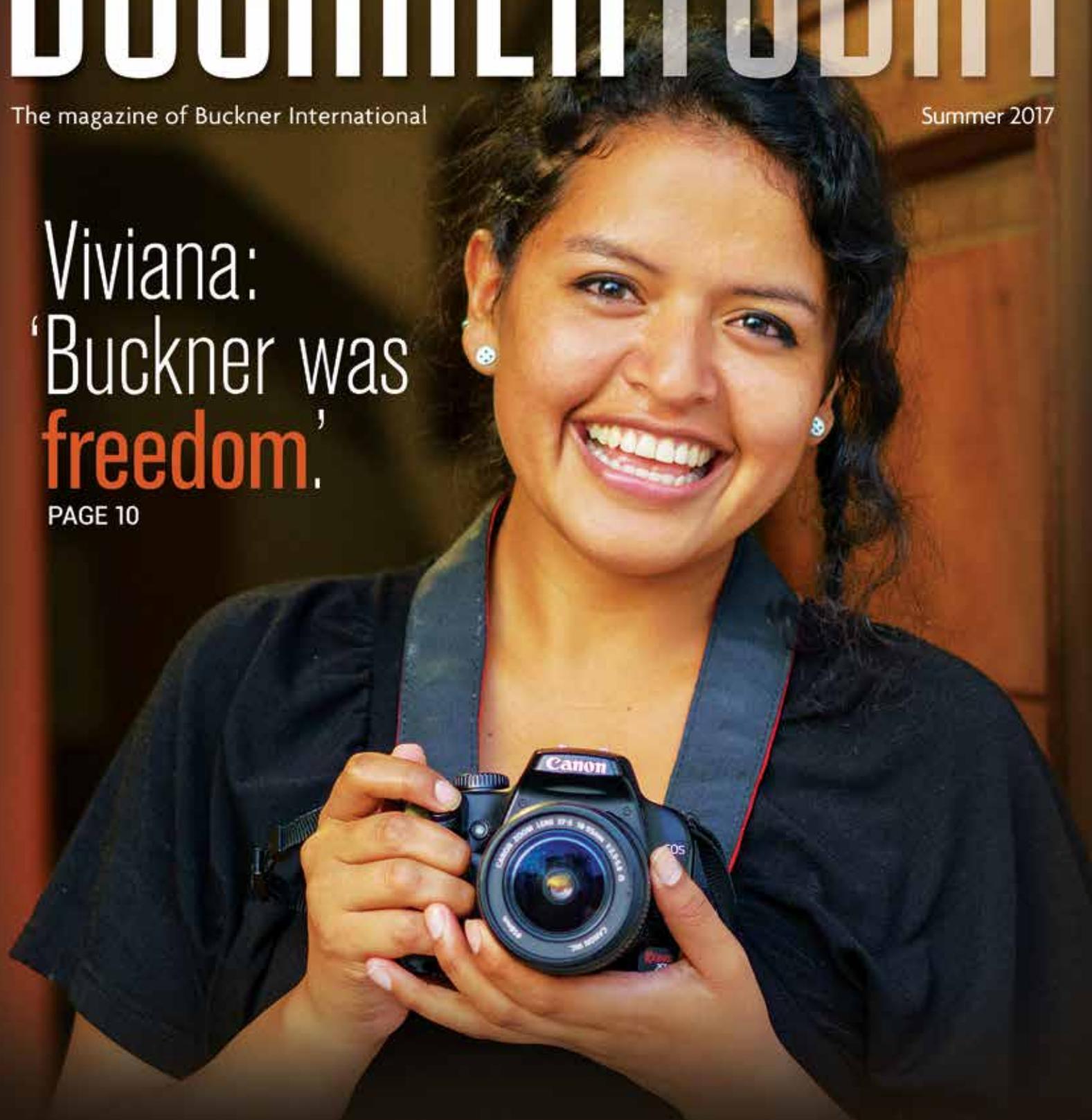
BUCKNER TODAY

The magazine of Buckner International

Summer 2017

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'Buckner was
freedom.'

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LEADERSHIP

PRESIDENT & CEO, BUCKNER INTERNATIONAL
Albert L. Reyes

VICE PRESIDENT OF COMMUNICATIONS
Scott Collins

ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS
Russ Dilday



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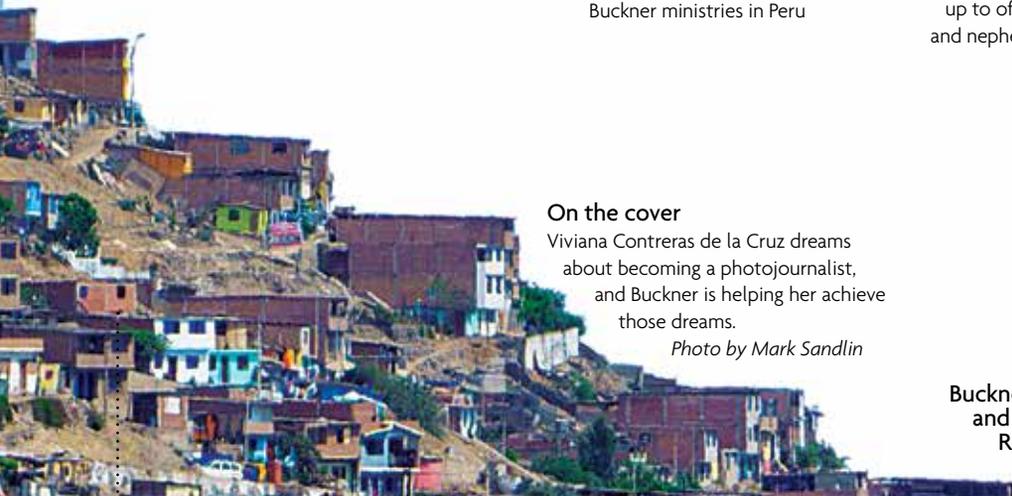
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EDITORIAL STAFF

EDITOR
John Hall

ELECTRONIC MEDIA EDITOR
Aimee Freston

ART DIRECTOR
Alan Paul

GRAPHIC ARTIST
Luis Pérez

CONTRIBUTORS

Elizabeth Arnold
Emma Brezik
Mark Sandlin

WEB/MULTIMEDIA MANAGER
Bradley Vinson • www.buckner.org

EMAIL
bucknercommunications@buckner.org

PHONE
214-758-8000

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Hope shines here.®

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The Buckner Strategic Plan

We all plan, whether intentionally or accidentally. The difference is critical. A plan that is accidental is a reaction. But a plan that is intentional is strategic.

The Buckner Strategic Plan is just that – strategic. This has been in process for more than six years, beginning with a brand study we commissioned from the renowned Richards Group. That study set the baseline for our brand – who we are and how we’re known.

A key outcome of that study led us to focus Buckner on key ministries we do best that would strengthen our ability to fulfill our mission and purpose. Today, we emphasize four key areas of our work:

- **Buckner Family Hope Centers**
- **Buckner Family Pathways**
- **Buckner Foster Care and Adoption**
- **Buckner Retirement Services**

Defining those key areas of ministry then enabled us to focus on seven critical points of alignment, giving us a compass by which to make organizational adjustments and head in the same direction.

Having determined our focus areas of work and outlining the keys points of alignment, we were then ready to sharpen our conversation about strategic planning. The next step was to develop our Vision Framework, which set the stage for this strategic plan. That framework focuses on six very specific areas within Buckner:

- **Family preservation programs**
- **Growth in the Americas**
- **Senior living expansion**
- **Developing more resources for Buckner Children and Family Services**
- **Talent development**
- **Best governance practices**

The Buckner Strategic Plan is built on three key priorities:

- 1. Service excellence**
- 2. Resource excellence**
- 3. Brand excellence**

While the idea of excellence or being excellent is a goal for every organization, it holds special significance at Buckner. The beneficiaries of our organizational excellence are those we serve. Fulfilling our mission and purpose with excellence means the lives of vulnerable children, families and senior adults are eternally enriched, strengthened and transformed.

This Buckner Strategic Plan has been developed from within the organization, involving staff from across the ministry. Its success is also dependent on our team. That’s why I’m confident we will succeed, not just for Buckner, but for those we serve and the glory of God.

As someone who gives financially to support our work or someone who gives of your time, we want you to know about our strategic plan. We want you to know we take seriously the work we do and Buckner is committed to operating at the highest level – a level you should expect from us.

It’s true we don’t pay dividends to our investors. But as a donor, you are a vital part of everything we do. The dividend you receive in return for your faithful giving is the security of knowing Buckner is smart. We maximize every dollar we receive, so you can know your gift is transforming lives.

When something goes wrong, we’re all fond of saying, “Well, accidents happen.” But the reverse is true as well. When things go right, it’s because we planned for success and trusted God to honor and bless our effort.



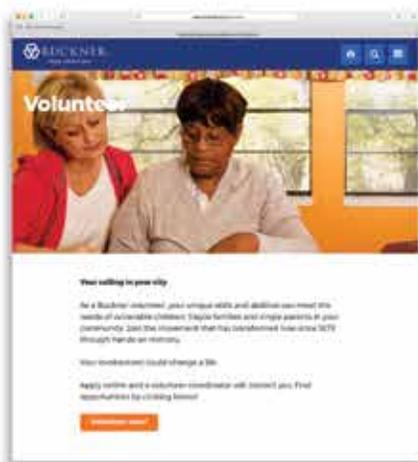
Albert L. Reyes, President and CEO
Buckner International
Visit my blog at www.bucknerprez.com

buckner.org



Children in vulnerable families live fragile lives. They are surrounded by brokenness that weighs on their lives. The first victim of that pressure is hope. See how one young girl in Pamplona, Peru, overcame oppression by embracing hope offered through the local Buckner Family Hope Center. “Thanks to the Family Hope Center, I feel worthy for the first time in my life,” she said. “I feel like I shine.” **Learn more at buckner.org/BucknerToday.**

Visit 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 communications@buckner.org

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IN OTHER WORDS | SCOTT COLLINS

A good fit

If the shoe fits ... I assume you know the rest.

It's one of many (maybe hundreds) of puns we've used around Buckner for the past 18 years, ever since “Shoes for Russian Souls” became part of our ministry, thanks to a gift from Ron Harris and KCBI Radio in Dallas.

We've since renamed it “Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®” and even officially registered it, which is why you see the ®.

KCBI started the program in 1994 and generously handed it over to Buckner in 1999. In 18 years, we've collected and distributed close to 3.2 million new pairs of shoes to children around the world.

I had the privilege of accompanying KCBI on their last shoe trip to Russia in February of 1999 and later that year, being on the first Buckner shoe trip to Russia in November. I'm usually taking pictures or shooting video of other people putting shoes on



children's feet. But occasionally I get to help.

When I first witnessed the process of a volunteer bending down to wash a child's feet and then place new socks and shoes on that child, it was perhaps the

most Christ-like act I'd ever seen. It's also a lot of fun for everyone involved – adult volunteer and child.

I bring it up because late summer is always our busiest time of year for shoe drives, where the process starts. There would be no shoe mission trips if there were no shoe drives. We wouldn't have 5,000 – 6,000 volunteers sorting shoes for shipment if we didn't have people around the country collecting new shoes.

If you've never hosted a Shoes for Orphan Souls shoe drive, let me ask you to jump in with both feet. It's really simple. Our shoe team is ready to help you make it as easy as possible. Go to our website for the details or call us at 1-866-774-SHOE.



Scott Collins is Vice President of Communications at Buckner International.

3 REASONS WE'RE EX

It's time to go - on mission!



Every summer, mission teams elevate Buckner ministry throughout Texas and the seven countries where Buckner serves vulnerable children and families. Because of their willingness to minister, Buckner can accomplish more.

In the past few months, 35 teams have gone on mission trips through Buckner Missions. LeTourneau University nursing students worked with local doctors to hold medical clinics at a Buckner Family Hope Center in the Dominican Republic. A team from First Baptist Church in Lubbock, Texas, led clinics and did construction projects. And multitudes of teams built homes in Peñitas, Texas, for the families Buckner serves. Because of you, **hope shines here.**



CITED AT BUCKNER!



Shoes! Shoes! Shoes!



August means back-to-school shopping and that means shoe shopping, including for vulnerable children around the globe. More shoes are collected through Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® in August than any other month.

Churches like South Main Baptist Church in Houston collected shoes. Radio stations like WNBW in Chattanooga collected shoes. Individuals and families collected shoes. All in the name of helping vulnerable children.

Thank you for blessing the children Buckner serves.

We're taking the NextStep!



Buckner International is piloting a new project for young women who have aged out of foster care. NextStep is a supervised independent living program that provides young adults with the support they need to meet their educational, career and independent living goals and achieve self-sufficiency.

Young adults who age out of foster care often do so with little to no support. As a result, they are alone as they try to figure out how to navigate independent living. NextStep provides training, coaching, personalized service coordination and opportunities for spiritual development so the young women it serves can succeed.

Find out more about NextStep by visiting buckner.org/nextstep.



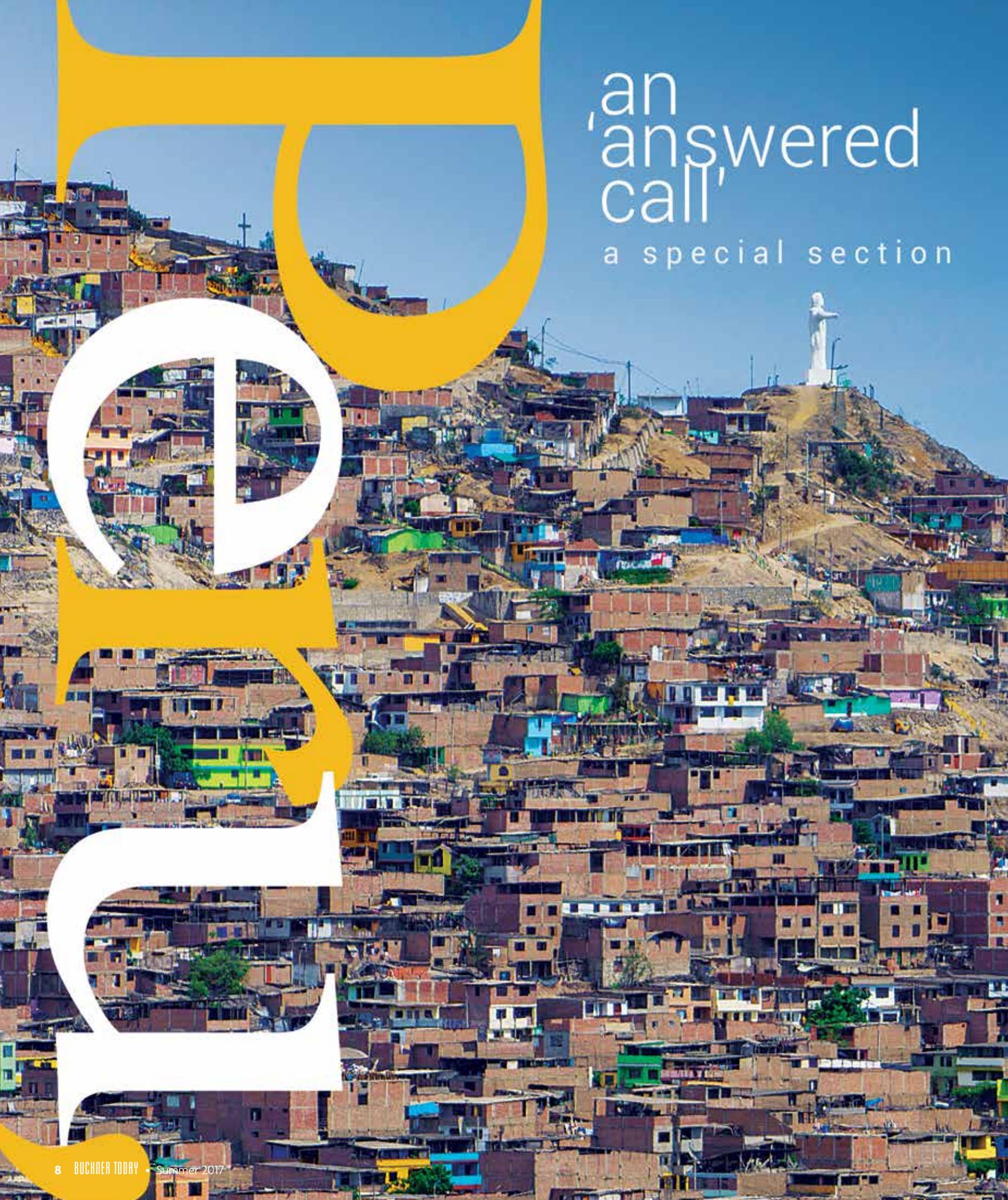
Want to know the latest news at Buckner?

Go to buckner.org/blog for the latest news, stories, photos and videos for all Buckner ministries.

**BUCKNER®
NEXTSTEP**

Hope shines here.®





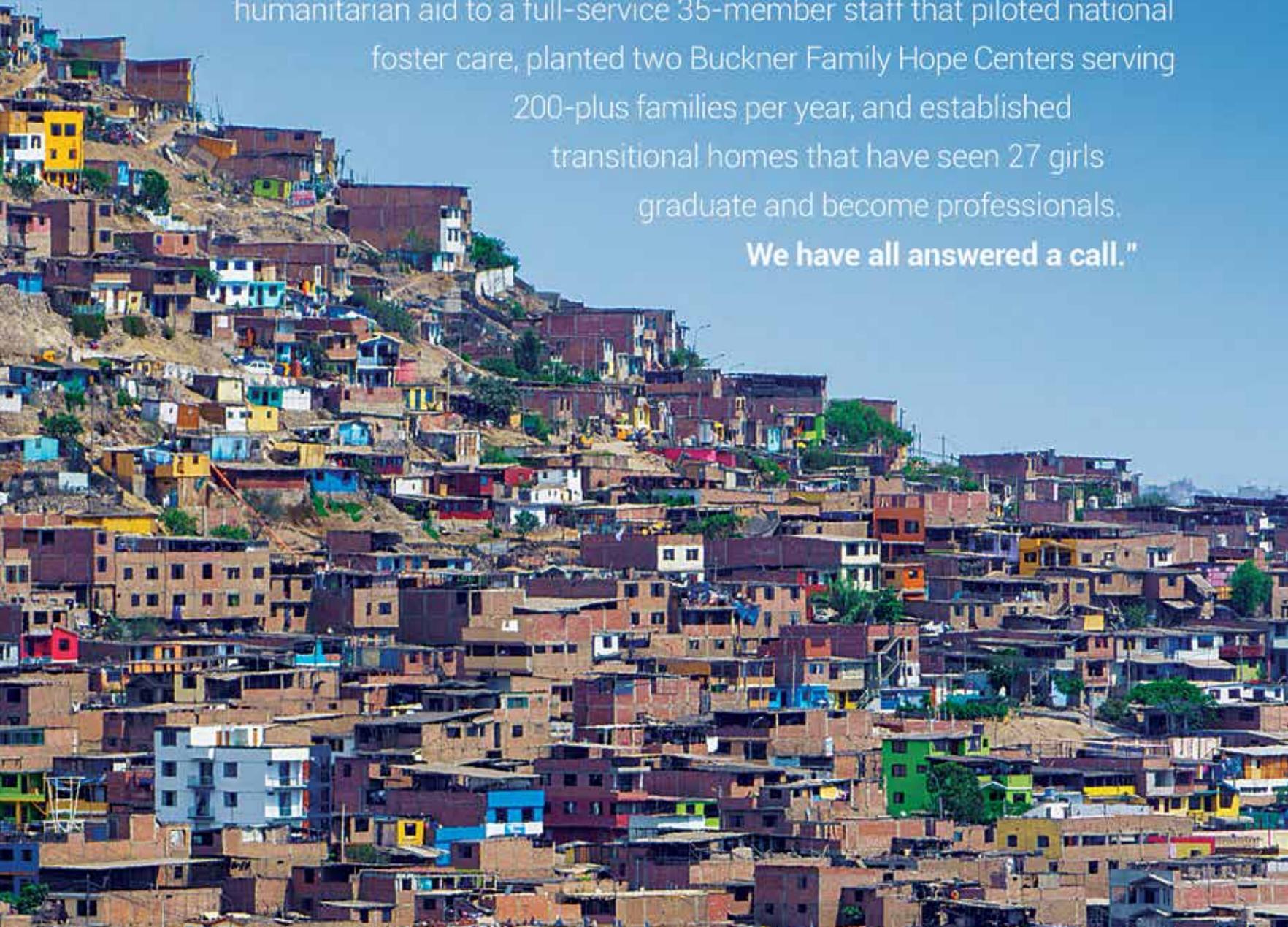
an
'answered
call'
a special section

Peru is a land of contrasts. The capital of Lima is a lush, thriving city of more than 10 million people. But the desert land on the other side of the mountains that surround the capital city is as desperate as the children and families who live there. Makeshift homes are perched on the side of near-vertical cliffs and plumbing is rare. Work is difficult to find.

Here in the shadow of the mountains and in other regions of the country, the hope Buckner offers has shined brightly for 10 years.

Since its inception, said Buckner Peru Executive Director Claudia Leon de Vergara, Buckner Peru has "grown from a small NGO providing mission trips and humanitarian aid to a full-service 35-member staff that piloted national foster care, planted two Buckner Family Hope Centers serving 200-plus families per year, and established transitional homes that have seen 27 girls graduate and become professionals.

We have all answered a call."



Peru transitional home resident: 'Buckner' was freedom

Story by Russ Dilday
Photography by Mark Sandlin

Viviana Contreras de la Cruz's smile could light up a cave. The aspiring photojournalist is bright and talkative — and the recent recipient of a coveted scholarship at her photography school, El Centro de la Imagen in Lima, Peru.

Ask Vivi about her childhood, though, and her mood darkens. She grew up in an orphanage, and the memories of repression, abandonment and pain are still a part of her life. But she also remembers her time at the Buckner Transitional home in Lima, where she says she learned the meaning of the word, "freedom."

As a teenager, she first learned about Buckner when she met Buckner Peru Country Director Claudia Leon de Vergara at a play held by her orphanage. It was then she began to dream of escaping orphanage life. A year later, her dream of a future was rekindled when a Buckner-led mission team from Dallas Baptist University held a sports fundraiser for a gym for her orphanage.

Vivi was chosen to be a part of the exhibition volleyball team and traveled with Leon promoting the event on Lima media. She asked Leon if there was a place for her at the Buckner Transitional Home. There wasn't, but soon a spot opened up, a move that opened up a new world for the then-17-year-old, and just in time. She was about to age out of her orphanage.

"I was desperate," she recalled. "I told Claudia, 'I am so afraid — I'm about to turn 18 and I have nowhere to go. If you accept me, I will never sleep. I will always be studying.'"

The realities of orphanage life — and what is typical after

children age out — is enough to make any child desperate, she said. "In the orphanage, we know we are going to be placed in families, but as maids. When I was 11, I was placed with a family who told me I would be treated like a daughter, but I was a maid. My future would have been going to a home to clean, but I wanted to study."

Leon said the desperation found among older orphanage residents is pervasive because orphanages don't prepare children for adult life and independence.

"The children don't have the capacity to live on their own," Leon said. "They don't have social skills, they are way more vulnerable. Some of the girls get pregnant really fast after leaving because when you are broken, you look for someone as broken as you."

"The majority of my friends in the orphanage now have children," Vivi said. "How many are unhappy? Almost all of them."

As a transitional home resident, she began to see a larger world around her and the opportunities the world presented. She also discovered the moment she wanted to be a photojournalist: "It was the day I discovered photography. I studied communications and had to write a paper, so I traveled to Canta, a small town, and the day I went there was a town festival. I fell in love with the culture, the people and watching the people.

"I thought, as I was in Canta, 'I would love for people to see what I'm seeing.'"

"My orphanage home was like a jail," she emphasized. "The transitional home was freedom. In the orphanage you are so repressed you can't say anything. You can't express yourself or they will punish you. When I came to Buckner, I felt I belonged. I belonged to a family." ■

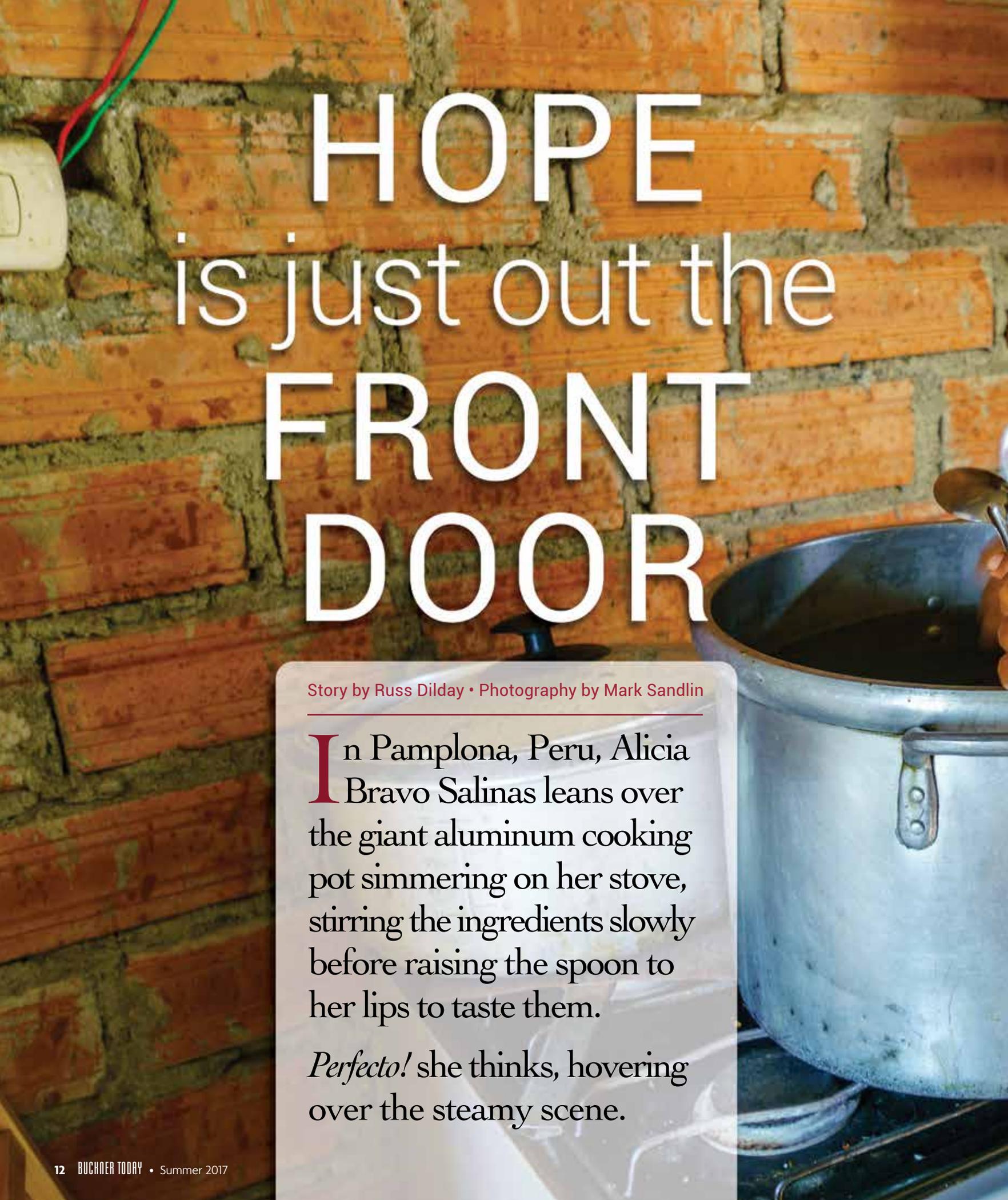




Hanging tough

Each of the teenage girls in the Buckner Transitional Home in Lima, Peru, have pasts that include abuse and neglect. The Buckner program helps them heal, grow and thrive by providing counseling, a safe place to live and the tools to succeed as adults.



A photograph of a brick wall with a white light switch on the left and a large aluminum cooking pot on a stove on the right. The text is overlaid on the brick wall.

HOPE is just out the FRONT DOOR

Story by Russ Dilday • Photography by Mark Sandlin

In Pamplona, Peru, Alicia Bravo Salinas leans over the giant aluminum cooking pot simmering on her stove, stirring the ingredients slowly before raising the spoon to her lips to taste them.

Perfecto! she thinks, hovering over the steamy scene.



Food is love

Alicia Bravo is most at home in her kitchen, cooking for family, friends and neighbors in their community of Pamplona, Peru. She and her family live just across the street from the Buckner Family Hope Center, a ministry she actively promotes. "Without Buckner, this community wouldn't look the same."



No longer afraid

Alicia Bravo Salinas, a housecleaner, and her husband Tito Carpio (opposite page), a taxi driver, initially came to the Buckner Family Hope Center in Pamploña, Peru, to seek counseling after the death of one of their children. “I was always afraid something was going to happen to one of my children,” Bravo said. “With the help I received from Buckner, I learned to stop being afraid.”

Her kitchen is perched on the unfinished second floor of her family’s concrete and cinder block home, clinging to the side of a steep hill in the Pamploña area of Extension 6, a crowded working-class development of similar homes on the dusty mountainsides outside of Lima.

The mother of three cleans homes for a living. Her husband, Tito Carpio, drives a taxi. The couple lives in a modest home built block-by-cinder-block by Carpio, as are most of the homes in this community, which is poor, but not as poor as nearby communities that are newer. While they have basic services like water and electricity here, Bravo said the area is still “dangerous.”

The dish she is working on, pachamanca, is a mix of spicy potatoes, peppers and chicken and often is served as a hearty comfort food. Its intent fits well with Bravo’s hospitable personality. For her, food is love.

But it wasn’t always so. Following the death of a child several years ago, Bravo and Carpio were hurting emotionally.

“It left a big scar on my life,” Bravo said. “It left me introverted, negative, hard to communicate with. I was hard on myself.”

Likewise, Carpio became emotionally walled off, investing in his job but not his family. The couple’s inability to deal with their emotions in a healthy way began to affect their daughters and son. But then Buckner opened the Family Hope Center – just outside the family’s front door. Hope had come to their family. Hope had come to Pamploña.

Bravo immediately became involved in the Family Hope Center’s resources, seeking counseling to help her through her pain.

“Before Buckner I was emotionally closed off. My problems were mine and mine alone. I lost a baby and my life was a torment because of it. I was always afraid something was going to happen to one of my children.

“With the help I received from Buckner, I learned to stop being afraid,” she said. “Now I understand my children better and I’m no longer a jealous wife ... or at least not that much,” she added with a smile. “Now there’s better communication between us.”

Carpio has also embraced the Family Hope Center’s message. Yesterday, he attended “The Journey,” a one-day men’s workshop held at the Family Hope Center in nearby Villa Hermosa, which encouraged participants to be better fathers, husbands and community members.

Giuliana Mendoza, who leads Buckner’s spiritual development and missions initiatives in Peru, led the workshop. “We want men to express their emotions. In this culture, they don’t express themselves. They don’t cry. We want them to connect to their families. We want them to communicate.

“The purpose of The Journey was to make them aware of how important and unique they are and how much dignity they have,” she said. “They go to extremes in their feelings: ‘I’m macho’ to ‘I don’t

matter.' In some ways it's poverty related, but the biggest weight they carry is bitterness from their childhood ... they don't forgive their parents or themselves [for past wrongs]."

Like many who have come to the Family Hope Center seeking and finding the hope its name promises, Bravo and Carpio have moved from clients to community leaders to promoters.

"Buckner brings many things to our community," Bravo said. "It brings psychological and emotional help, parenting classes, healthy living, language skills, math tutors and more. There are many families that don't take advantage of this help.

"As a leader, I see a lot of people participating, but I would like to see more people attending the Family Hope Center," Bravo said. "I pray that more and more come, so they can benefit from it just as I have. I want to see not only the kids participating at the center, but I want to see their parents as well."

Bravo and Carpio now feel equipped to provide for their family as they have learned a multitude of skills and trades that may even help them open their own business someday.

"[Alicia's] a community leader," acknowledged Ana Patricia Navarro, coordinator of Peru's Buckner Family Hope Centers. "It's a commitment for Alicia to promote the Family Hope Center. It motivates her. The rest of her family has changed. Her husband's family ties are stronger.

Because of Buckner's [business development] classes, her daughters got a job through the "Tequenos" [food product] company.

"A big part of the Family Hope Center model is prevention," Navarro said. "We're preventing these kids from ending up institutionalized. This area is quite dangerous, so there are teenagers active with drugs.

"When we started the Family Hope Center in Pamplona, we discovered four teenagers pregnant and the school drop-out rate was high. Now, 99 percent of the children who come to the program pass their school year and are not dropping out.

"Now, we have six teens who have finished high school and are studying to be professionals," she continued. "One is studying nursing. One is studying in law school. Another is studying to be an architect – that is Julio, who was in a gang and into drugs."

Bravo, looking up from her steaming pot of pachamanca, looks over her rooftop kitchen and toward the Family Hope Center, mere feet from her front door.

"Without Buckner, this community wouldn't look the same," she said. "Our community has come a long way, but it is because of Buckner and all the help we receive from mission groups and the staff that works at the center.

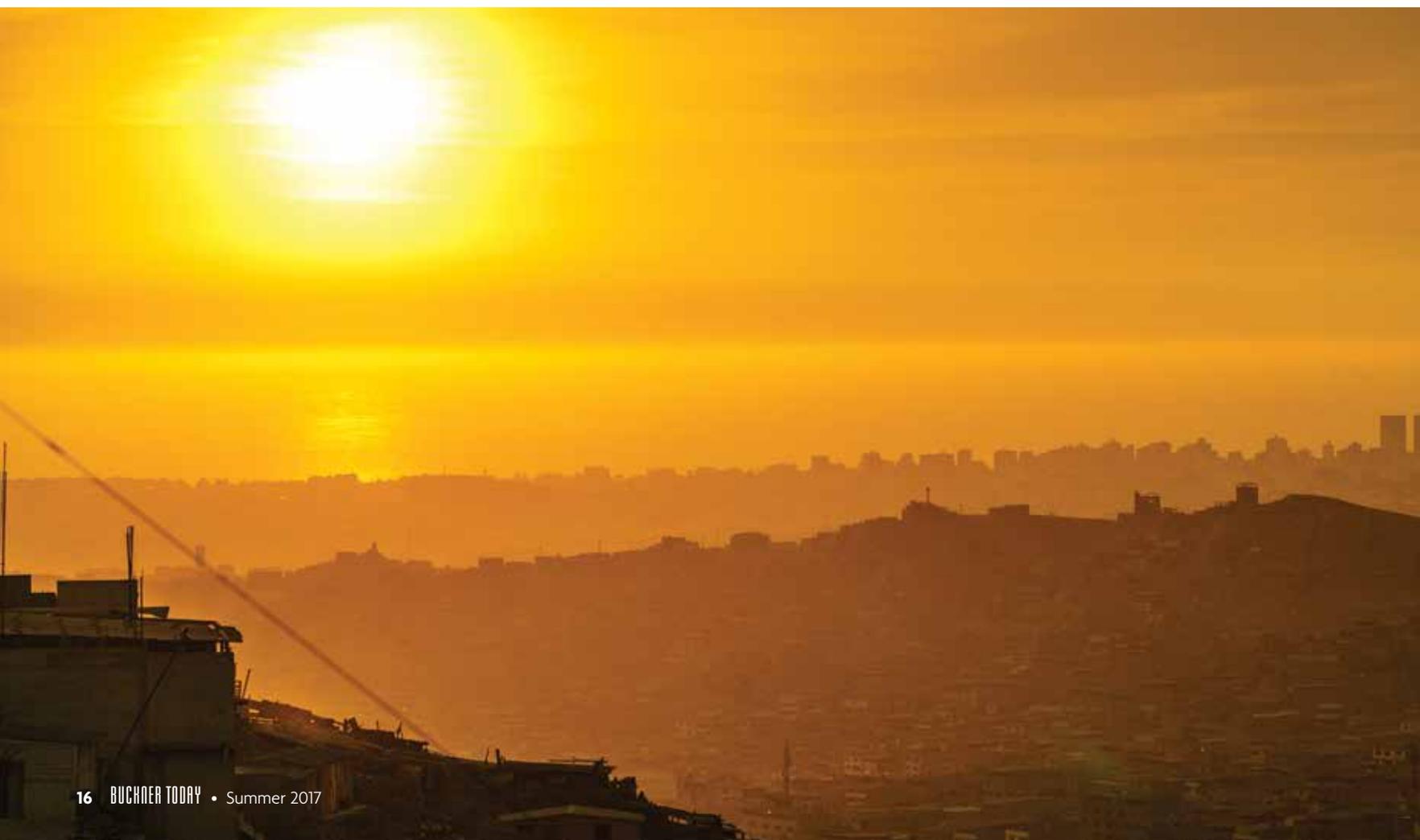
"The value Buckner has brought to us? I am with Jesus. God is first and with God I wake up every day. God is always first." ■

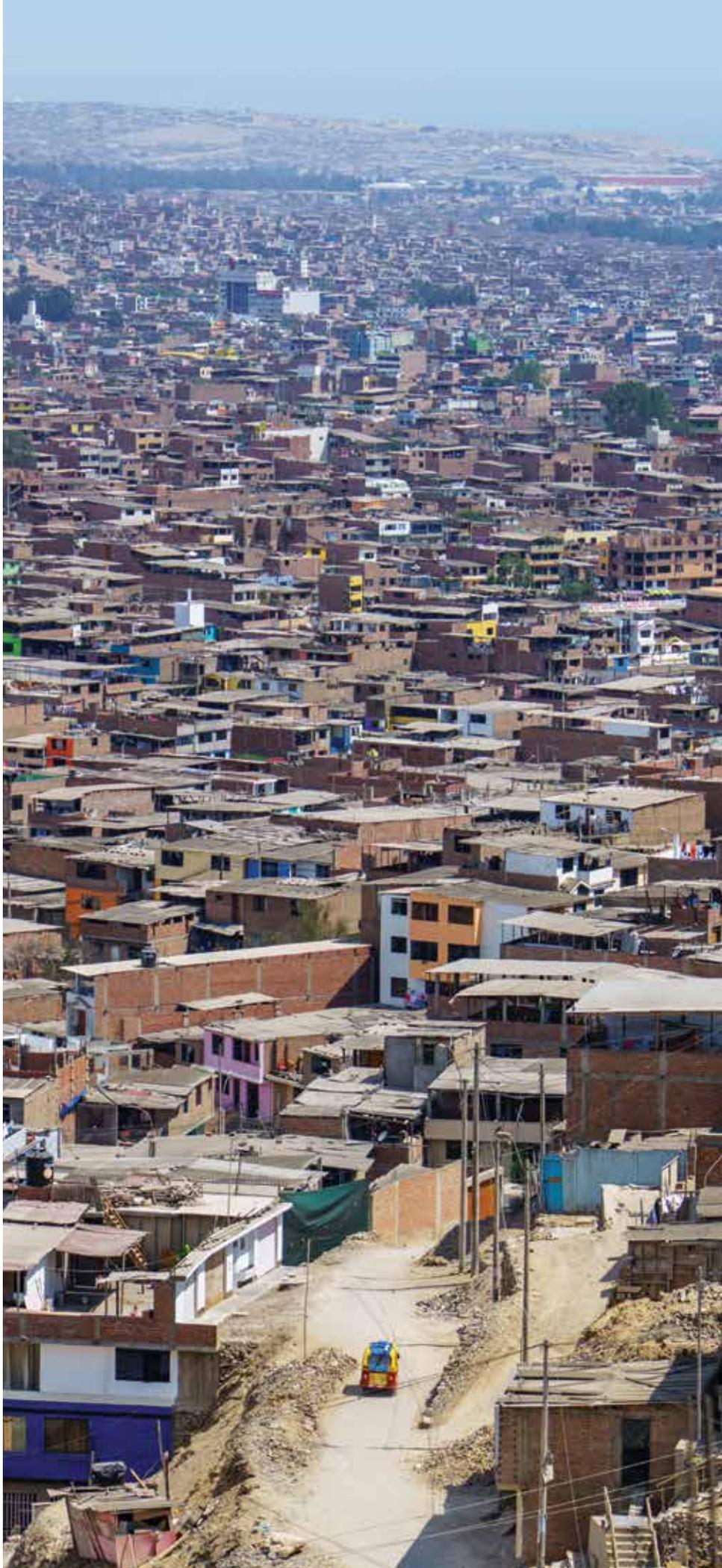




Peru: A land of contrasts

A PHOTO ESSAY BY MARK SANDLIN





They come for opportunity

Many of the people served by Buckner Family Hope Centers in Pamplona and Villa Hermosa come to the outskirts of Lima to seek financial opportunity in low-paying jobs in the city. The influx of people has created giant suburban communities, but with little to no utilities or support.



‘Because my parents rejected me, I learned to reject myself.’

Sara grew up in Pamplona, Peru, where she watched her stepfather physically abuse her mother and her siblings abused alcohol and drugs. In this toxic environment, she struggled.

She began cutting her wrists and even tried to kill herself.

“Instead of love and praise from my parents, all I ever got were insults,” she said. “I felt lonely and misunderstood.”

Then she came to the Buckner Family Hope Center. For the first time in her life, she smiles.

“Thanks to the Family Hope Center, I feel worthy for the first time in my life,” she said. “I feel like I shine.”

See Sara’s amazing transformation and give to change lives of young women like her.

buckner.org/sara



GIVE NOW:

\$118

Empowers a family for a year

\$1,180

Empowers 10 families for a year

\$29,500

Empowers 250 families for a year

Please give today using this envelope and change a life like Sara's!









The center of hope

(Clockwise from bottom left) In Villa Hermosa, signs of poverty and family stress are common. Many come to the Buckner Family Hope Center seeking educational help for themselves or their children or business development opportunities such as jewelry-making. Often, the stress of poverty leads to spiritual and emotional issues among families. (Center right) Buckner Peru spiritual development and missions specialist Giuliana Mendoza comforts a distressed attendee of “The Journey,” a men’s spiritual retreat at the Family Hope Center. Later, Buckner psychologist Gary Rivera provided him counseling.



LOVING with 'Jesus in my heart'

Story by Russ Dilday • Photography by Mark Sandlin

Met Maria Lucila Valentino de Cabezas: Animated. Bubbly. Expressive. Energetic. Devout. Joyous.

"God has given me the gift of being joyful," she said. "Happiness is within my heart. We have to be jubilant even through hardships. Life was made to smile, regardless of the troubles we encounter."



And it was joy and love of life that led this mom to become a Buckner foster parent to Williams Obregon.

Meet Williams: Quiet. Introspective. Musical. Evangelistic. Loves worship. Loves God.

"I'm 20 years old. I've finished high school and I love music. I like to go out. I'm going to be a psychologist," he said. "My Aunt Luci loves me, feeds me and gives me the best advice ever. She takes care of me. She loves me."

Valentino has a lot of love to share, she confirmed. "Home is an important part of my life. I love my children, my husband and everything inside my home is treasured. That's how I see my home."

She connects her love of home and her children to a "sacred" calling. "I foster with love.



A mother's heart

Maria Lucila Valentino doesn't always use the term "foster mother" when describing her love for foster son Williams Obregon, at right, preferring to call him "one more of my children."

I respect my home and my home is the most sacred thing to me. Jesus is in my heart. Because of Jesus, I have become a foster parent to Williams. Nobody is like Jesus."

And Williams? She beams when she speaks about him, his life and his future. "Williams is very special. My family, my husband and children didn't imagine this could happen, but God teaches us to foster with love. I praise the Lord for teaching us to love and to give warmth. We are not wealthy, but we have a wealthy heart."

When the family made the decision to foster and were matched with Williams, Valentino knew it was the right match.

"I felt it in my heart. I felt the need to open my home. I spoke to my husband, and we decided we couldn't leave him alone. I want to see him attain his goals. I want him to value the love and the warmth we provide. I want him to have good moral values."

Working with Buckner, she said, also was a good match.

"They have been my right hand. They have taught me a lot of things. They've been very attentive and have been really special in our lives."

Since coming into the family, Williams, who was removed from his home because of family issues, has experienced a number of positive life changes. While he sees himself as a future psychologist, he is open to becoming a pastor and worship leader in adulthood.

"When I met my foster parents, they motivated me to go to church, and the pastor chose me [to lead worship] right away and that confirmed God was calling me," he said. "Music is a great instrument for soul salvation. We use it to worship and spread the Word. I like to use music as a way to worship God

because I love music. It makes me feel good, and I know God is using me as an instrument to help others. I play music not only for the people, but really I play music for him. God is everything to me. He is first."

Williams' future goals are fine with Valentino. "I want him to set himself big goals and overcome any obstacle to obtain them. I see him as a professional. He is one more of my children. I'm always taking care of him, and just like with any other of my children I always make sure he is OK. I don't know how to express myself, but he is something special in my life."

"This home means a lot to me, because they have given me love, they have raised me, they nurture me," Williams acknowledged. "I know I misbehave sometimes, but yet, they continue to love me." ■



Time to MAN UP

Story by Emma Brezik
Photography by Aimee Freston

Dequante "DQ" Thomas couldn't have imagined as a single, 27-year-old man, he'd know all the words to "Let It Go" from Disney's *Frozen*.

But when his four-year-old niece, Ashton, asks to watch it just one more time, he can't say no. He sheepishly admits she has him wrapped around her little finger.

Thomas isn't like many of his peers. He's driven. He's hardworking. He's a family man. He's mature beyond his years, and his tough demeanor seems to fade when Ashton and his nephew Katavian, 8, walk into the room.





A new normal

When Dequante “DQ” Thomas’ niece and nephew needed a home, Thomas didn’t think twice - he gladly gave up his single life and became a father. “If it were my kids, I would have wanted my brothers or sisters to do it for me,” he said.

Thomas' life was turned upside down a year and a half ago when he found out his sister's two children were being taken into Child Protective Services custody. He immediately knew what he had to do – “man up.”

“If it were my kids, I would have wanted my brothers or sisters to do it for me.”

He called his local CPS office to find out what he needed to do to bring Ashton and Katavian home with him. They referred him to Buckner.

“We had literally just started this kinship care program here in Longview when he called, and he was one of my first cases,” shares Linda Womack, his Buckner home developer and case worker. “To see a single uncle – a single, 25-year-old uncle – who wanted to do what he was doing was something I didn't expect.”

Kinship care is a type of foster care that supports relatives or fictive kin – unrelated individuals who have emotionally significant relationships – of children taken into CPS custody. Studies have shown that kinship care helps minimize the trauma experienced by children who are removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect.

Kinship families have to meet the same requirements as any other foster family, such as attending trainings, passing a home study and receiving a license. But oftentimes, it can be financially difficult for these families quickly to meet all the rules and standards of the state. That's where Buckner steps in – supporting families by providing case

management, financial support and connections to needed resources.

“I have to be honest, when Linda came to me and said, ‘He's 25 and wants to take in his niece and nephew,’ I thought, ‘I need to meet this man,’” Debbie Sceroler, director of foster care and adoption at Buckner in Longview, says. “You really don't hear about this kind of thing happening in our day and time.”

Despite his willingness to jump right in and welcome his niece and nephew into his home, Thomas admits it hasn't always been easy. “It's kind of been like a roller coaster,” he says, as he looks over his shoulder to see Ashton and Katavian skipping into the backyard.

“I mean, it was difficult at first, because I really didn't know anything about kids. Nothing at all. I'm just glad they didn't come when they were in diapers,” he says with a grin.

But now, the family has settled into their routine. After the children came to live with him, Thomas found a new job as a maintenance worker for their school district, which allows him to take them to school, pick them up and be with them during the summer. They eat dinner, do homework and watch cartoons or play outside every night together.

Giggly, affectionate Ashton is energetic and talkative. Big brother Katavian is much quieter, and he's excelling in school, where his favorite subject is math. “I'm ready to go back,” he says, smiling and looking up at his uncle. “I'll be in second grade.”

“It means a lot to me to be able to be a father figure to them,”





Thomas says, as Ashton wanders over and wraps herself around his leg. “Every child needs a father figure in their life. There’s some things a mother can’t do that a father can. They all need a mother and a father figure in their life.”

As their father figure, Thomas sets a great example of hard work and perseverance for Ashton and Katavian. After a long application and selection process, Thomas learned that their family was chosen to receive a new home from Habitat for Humanity.

“I was always told when I was young that if you’re going to pay for something, you gotta try to buy it,” he says, standing inside his new home, which is still under construction. Bible verses dot the beams near the front door. “I’m tired of living in an apartment and paying rent when I can pay a mortgage and own the place one day.”

Katavian runs in from outside, pointing out the bedroom that will be his. He looks at his uncle and smiles.

“And plus, they can have a backyard, and I can get a trampoline for them to jump on,” Thomas continues. “I worry about them. I want them to be supervised and not running the streets with other kids.”

Ashton gets excited talking about her new bedroom. What does she want it to look like? Her face lights up. “Pink with bunnies!”

“DQ is very laid back and goofy,” Womack shares, as he shifts his gaze to Ashton, who has once again wrapped herself around his leg. “He’s very go-with-the-flow. Really, whatever I ask him to do, he does it and he does it quickly. He’s incredibly dedicated to these children, and there’s not a hurdle he won’t jump. He’s shown that time and time again through the CPS process, the Buckner kinship care process and now through the Habitat for Humanity process. All he does is for the wellbeing of these children.”

“It means a lot to me to be able to care for

them,” Thomas adds. “Even if I wasn’t their uncle, I would still have the heart to take them in. They’re good kids.”

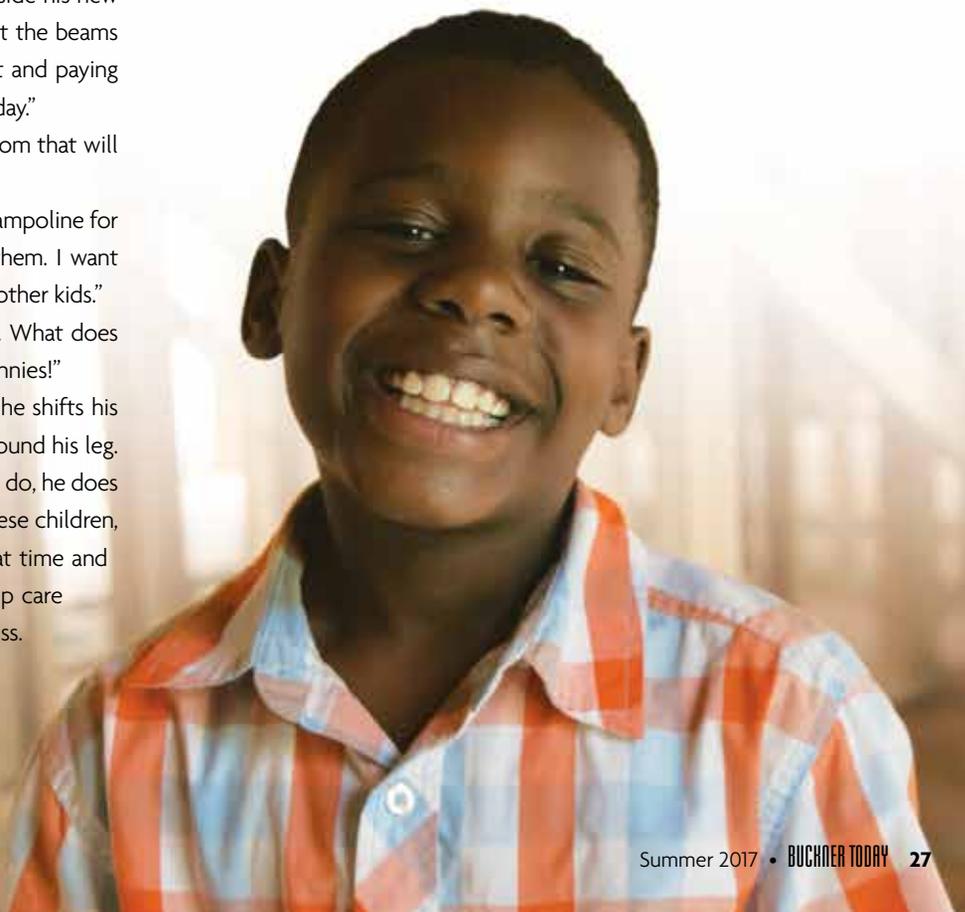
“He’s such an inspirational role model, and I’m extremely proud of him,” Sceroler says. “From day one, it has amazed me to see how he has stepped up to do whatever it necessary. It’s like a breath of fresh air to see a young man step up and take that responsibility, and for these children to have that in their lives. As DQ says, all children need a father and a mother, and he’s stepped up to fill that role.”

Thomas has been granted permanent managing conservatorship, which means he will be Ashton and Katavian’s legal guardian, and they’ll no longer be in CPS custody.

“They’re spoiled rotten, honestly,” Womack says with a laugh. “Here with their uncle, they have everything they could ever want and more.” ■

Home

More than 2.5 million U.S. children live in kinship care, one of the fastest growing forms of foster care. Close friends and family members step up to care for children, making the transition to foster care easier for them. **For more information about kinship care, visit buckner.org/fostercare.**



Dallas family declares 'This is our time' to

The right stuff

The Buckner Family Hope Center at Bachman Lake in Dallas is the latest Buckner ministry location. Hundreds of vulnerable children already are involved in the program. **Help change the life of a family for a year for as little as \$118.**

Succeed

Story by John Hall • Photography by Mark Sandlin

Tilia Sanchez volunteers at Burnet Elementary School in Dallas whenever she can. She wants to make the school the best it can be for every student, including her children. So it was no surprise she was part of a special event at the school. What was surprising was encountering someone new.

He was standing next to a small table smiling politely, shaking hands and handing out brochures. Tilia accepted one of his brochures, which detailed the launching of a new Buckner Family Hope Center in the area to strengthen families. The center would offer job skills, parenting, Bible study and entrepreneurial classes.

Tilia was intrigued. Maybe she'd check it out, she thought.

Then her world imploded.

"When I was 14, I was diagnosed with a polycystic kidney disease," she said. "This disease took my mother and my grandmother. This year, I was diagnosed as being in stage 5, final renal disease. As you can imagine it was very big news for me."

During the next few weeks, Tilia tried to hide from the rest of the world. Often sitting in the dark, she avoided her friends and found herself spiraling in despair.

"I just wanted to be at home crying, asking myself why," she said. "All the memories of my mom going through this disease came to me. I didn't want to do anything with the outside world, to be honest. But I had great friends who lifted me up and practically dragged me to the first class. I enjoyed it. I could see [the teacher] helping me psychologically, coping with it."

The same man who was passing out brochures led her first class. He was Ricardo Brambila, director of the Family Hope Center at Bachman Lake. The class was full of energy and encouragement. She enjoyed it, and she wanted more.

Eventually, Tilia was taking three different classes at the Family Hope Center. Buckner staff invested in her, helping her look for the positive aspects of her life. They prayed for and with her. They even gave her a Bible.

"Tilia came in right after incredibly difficult news about her illness," Brambila said. "She's so smart and such a hard worker. She just needed some encouragement to get through a tough time."

Tilia's spirit was returning. Despite her medical situation, she was pushing forward. When she began taking a class about how to start a business, she knew she found what she and her husband, Ricardo, were missing.

The couple had talked about starting a company for years. Ricardo has been part of home construction teams for years. He is an expert in the field and wanted to start his own business with his wife, but they never quite knew how.

"The opportunities for financial information got me," Tilia said. "My daughters are growing. They need more space. We need more space. Sometimes, we're in a financial bind where we can't afford something better."

Tilia sensed now was the time for her family to start a business. For three weeks, they cut every expense they could, even going to a church food pantry for food, so they could save enough money to purchase the tools Ricardo would need for a construction business.

The family was buoyed in the efforts by knowing Buckner staff believed in them. With the help of Buckner, the family knew they would succeed.

"We needed somebody to believe in us," Tilia said. "We needed somebody to push us. When I went to that class, [Brambila] told me what I needed to hear. I came home and told my husband, this is our time. In three weeks, we started our own business."

The business is growing each day as Ricardo has found work in the far northern suburbs of Dallas. He and his staff work from sunrise to sunset each day constructing homes.

The business' success has alleviated the financial stress upon the family.

"I can finally say we can pay our rent and not have to worry about stretching \$100 a week," Tilia said. "I can finally tell my girls it's Saturday, and I can take them somewhere. That means a lot to me."

The story of the Sanchez family is exactly what the Family Hope Center is trying to do across the Bachman Lake area of Dallas.

"Tilia and Ricardo have worked hard, learned new skills and applied them well," Brambila said. "Their future is bright. Their children's futures are bright. Hope truly shines here."

Tilia still struggles with her illness. She's waiting on a kidney transplant and takes 20 pills a day. But she looks forward to each new day with a new belief in herself.

"I can now set goals for myself that I know I can accomplish because I have great people that help me with them," she said. "Before that, even though I can do things for myself, sometimes you need that guidance." ■



Dancing through life

Story and photography by Elizabeth Arnold

It's 10:15 on Monday morning in Beaumont, Texas. The air inside the Calder Woods auditorium is almost as thick as the Southeast Texas humidity outside. Nearly 20 senior adults are scattered throughout the space, some sitting, others standing.

Music blaring. Sweat pouring. Toes tapping. Faces beaming.

This is Tricia Deland's Zumba class, a twice-weekly ritual that has grown to be a highlight at the senior living community.

"I feel like I get to watch miracles right before my eyes," said Deland, who's been leading Zumba classes at Calder Woods since 2015. "They leave feeling looser and more flexible, and they always leave so happy!"

Deland comes every Monday and Thursday to teach the 35-minute class. Each time, she arrives early to help residents in assisted living, memory care and skilled nursing make their way to class. She ensures each session includes modifications so every participant, no matter their physical ability, can feel successful.

"Some seniors tell me this is better than their physical therapy," Deland said. "It stimulates their minds, plus they get their cardio in and exercise their lungs. It's really a workout from top to bottom."

Wanda Simar, who lives with Parkinson's disease, almost never misses a class. She says Zumba gives her something to look forward to and leaves her feeling strong.

"Zumba helps me, it really does," Simar said. "My Parkinson's doctors told me to exaggerate all my movements, so I go real big in those Zumba motions. Plus, with the lively music, we make a lot of

noise which is fun. There's nothing boring about Calder Woods!"

Many who regularly attend the Zumba class are in their 90s. According to Deland, Zumba helps improve balance, reduce stress and build strength for every age.

"One man is 90 years old and can kick higher than me," she said. "He was an athlete, so he's just going to keep going."

Zumba Gold®, the type of Zumba specifically designed for older adults, has one goal: get seniors moving in a fun, lighthearted way. With the upbeat music and easy-to-follow choreography, many participants forget they're even working out during the class.

"I would describe Zumba as plain fun," Deland said. "Dancing and music just make people happy. But you don't even need to know how to dance. If you can walk, you can Zumba."

Deland herself started doing Zumba in her 40s to combat her own changing health. Now 55, she's dropped four sizes and increased her bone strength by 20 years.

"Teaching Zumba, especially with senior adults, has been the biggest blessing," Deland said. "It's the first time in my life I feel like God has led me to where I needed to be."

"Seeing these residents participate in Tricia's Zumba class each week is truly powerful," said Dianne Christian, life enrichment coordinator at Calder Woods. "Every time they leave class, they're standing taller, walking stronger and smiling brighter. They make me want to jump in and join the fun." ■



Step by step

Zumba is just one of many activities offered as part of the active lifestyle of Buckner senior living communities. Residents enjoy Wii bowling, Bible studies, water volleyball, bridge, Bunco, golf, chair aerobics and outings to local restaurants and events.

Did you know?

The Buckner Family Pathways program in Longview is the ministry's newest location. It opened last fall and is already serving 14 single-parent families. Stephanie Fletcher is the first program resident to earn a college degree.





From grief to graduation

Story and photography by John Hall

Stephanie Fletcher's best friend was her grandmother. She could tell the family matriarch anything and receive wise council. Her grandmother was always there for her.

That's why Fletcher needed to be there for her grandmother in her time of need.

In 2011, Fletcher's grandmother was diagnosed with congestive heart failure. That led to a 5-year string of heart-related health issues. She struggled with blood pressure issues. Then diabetes. Finally, she had open heart surgery.

Through it all, Fletcher was there for her grandmother, often living with her so she could take care of her around the clock.

"She had to have somebody there at all times to help her," Fletcher said. "She got to the point that she had so many medications she couldn't remember which ones she took. Then she got to the point she needed help getting around at all times."

Taking care of her grandmother meant putting some dreams on the back burner. She wanted to go to college but between working full time, raising her son and caring for her grandmother, Fletcher had little time. She squeezed in online courses when she could, but her son and her grandmother were her priorities.

In January 2016, her grandmother died.

"My grandmother and I were really close to each other," Fletcher said. "I could tell her anything. I have my mom. I have my son. They mean the world to me. But my grandmother was the glue that held the family together. She even gave my son his middle name. It was a very difficult time."

In the aftermath of her passing, Fletcher was determined to continue her education. Her grandmother encouraged her to keep working at it, and Fletcher wanted to honor her grandmother as well do something for herself and her son.

She discovered a new program in Longview – Buckner Family Pathways, a residential program for single-parent families that provided housing and child care assistance so single parents would be empowered to attain their educational goals. It was everything Fletcher wanted, and she was one of the first women selected for the program.

"That was a blessing," Fletcher said. "It was meant for me."

She continued working hard and increased her course load. The academic hours she'd already earned put her ahead of the other women in the program. On May 12, she walked across the stage of Kilgore College, the first Buckner Family Pathways resident in Longview to earn a college degree.

"I enjoyed it so much," Fletcher said. "It was overwhelming. I was really in shock that I got to that point. I had a good time. It was so much fun. I've gotten my degree. I'm ready to move on to the next part of my life. I'll never forget it."

In a celebration of her accomplishment, several Family Pathways mothers shared that Stephanie was an inspiration to each of them. They've seen the hard work she put in to make this happen. They know they can do it as well.

"She's been an inspiration to the other ladies," said Kimberly Clough, program director for Family Pathways in Longview. "She encourages others when they go through tough times. She picks them up and helps them keep going. She's always the encourager and the motivator. She's a leader in general."

Hearing their words was moving.

"It means a lot to me," Fletcher said. "I didn't shed any tears in front

of y'all, but I did when I got back home. "

Clough said Fletcher is the ideal resident to earn the first degree through the program. Her hard work and positive attitude set the standard for other residents.

"Stephanie has been amazing," Clough said. "She came in very focused, very dedicated. She's always the first one to register for classes and take care of her schedule. She's doing what she needs to do. She's very focused on her goals."

Her influence goes beyond the classroom.

"She's always there for her son, DeVondre," Clough said. "She's always there for his events. She volunteers at his school. That's very important to her. She wants to be there for him."

With her associate's degree in criminal justice in hand, Fletcher has already enrolled at the University of Texas at Tyler, where she's seeking a bachelor's degree in the same field. She continues in the Family Pathways program.

She hopes to continue inspiring single mothers along the next steps of her journey.

"It means a lot that I'm a single mother who did it," Fletcher said. "I can show other single mothers they can do it." ■

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A 'high-five' for Buckner Peru by Albert Reyes

Earlier this year I visited Peru to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Buckner Peru as an NGO. During that visit, I had the privilege of visiting the Cruz family in their home in Villa Hermosa, an area outside of Lima known for its poverty and lack of resources.

The star of my visit – and a newfound friend – was one of the Cruz children, Dennis, 10. He is a frequent visitor to our Buckner Family Hope Center near his home. And, as I talked to this amazing young man, I realized, Buckner has truly helped transform his life.

“I enjoy going to the Family Hope Center because they teach me many things, like math, like how to relax, how to be a good student, and how to control my body so I’m not stressed out,” he told me.

Stress was a big part of the family’s life. The stress of his sister’s speech and emotional issues. His mother’s stress responding to them. “To be fair, my sister is the one that has gotten the most help. She now speaks better. My mom used to be very stressed out and because of it, I would be stressed out as well,” he said.

There was also the stress of living in a small home, hand-built of found materials by his father. The Family Hope Center again stepped in and volunteers refurbished their home, which made Dennis “extremely happy. Many people helped with my new house. It used to be plain and white, but now there’s color and we

even have curtains. I now have a bed and a mattress and I’m really happy. Thank God we received this help. It really helped my family.”

But what has made the biggest impact in Dennis’s life is the spiritual lessons he’s learned at the center. “Through the AMO [spiritual development curriculum] classes, I learned that you shouldn’t betray a friend. I also learned that if you make a promise you should keep it, and you should always help, even if the person is not your friend.

“Buckner has helped me to be a better older brother,” he added. “Sometimes I need to take care of my siblings. Buckner has helped me to be more responsible. It has taught me to protect them and also to teach them about God.”

Realizing Dennis’s successes and his joy as he told his story, I did what came natural to him and to me: I gave him a big high-five!

Dennis’s story would be so different without Buckner’s work in his life. For 10 years – the length of Dennis’s life – Buckner Peru has been changing families, serving the most vulnerable children. There is so much to celebrate as we look back through these 10 years. And there is much to anticipate as we look forward.

What Buckner is doing there, and in all of the places we serve, has eternal worth and value. It transforms. It uplifts. It brings hope.

I think that deserves a high-five. ■



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