

See inside for ways you can support families.

The magazine of Buckner International | WINTER 2024

Buckner Today



The
Strength
of Claudia Anguiano

page 12

Buckner Today

A publication of Buckner International
Volume 49, Number 1 • Winter 2024



The impact of hope: How the life of Cynthia Barasa turned to one of JOY

pg
10

12



The Strength of Claudia Anguiano

Remembering the servant heart of
a wife, mother and educator.

16



From Chaos to Success

Single mom finds a future through
Buckner Family Pathways®.

LEADERSHIP

PRESIDENT & CEO, BUCKNER INTERNATIONAL
Albert L. Reyes

SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT OF COMMUNICATIONS
Scott Collins

EDITORIAL STAFF

EDITOR
Isa Torres

SENIOR ART DIRECTOR
Alan Paul

DIRECTOR OF DIGITAL
COMMUNICATIONS
Emily Ahrens

DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC
RELATIONS
Melissa Grych

GRAPHIC ARTIST
Luis Pérez

CONTRIBUTORS
Charlie Wilson
Chris Ruth
Janerose Indah
Jon Mark Beilue
Shaie Williams

CONTACT

EMAIL: bucknercommunications@buckner.org
PHONE: 214-758-8000

Buckner Today is published by the Public Relations
Office of Buckner International. ©2024 Buckner

Postmaster: Send address changes to Buckner
International Public Relations, 700 N. Pearl St, Suite 1200,
Dallas, Texas 75201 • www.buckner.org

 **BUCKNER**
Hope shines here.®


Enhancing Trust

“ ”

The day I moved in... I sat out on my porch and watched my girls playing on the playground. I just knew everything was going to be okay. – Read more about the experience of this Family Pathways® mom on page 16.

Departments

04 PERSPECTIVES ON BUCKNER Five years

President/CEO Albert L. Reyes

06 IN OTHER WORDS Like rain

Scott Collins

08 BUCKNER JOURNAL

20



A Path Called Love

Family finds strength through new experiences.

22



Toward the Finish Line

Daniel and Lauren Johnson waited three years to adopt their son, but it was worth every second.

26



Taking the Challenge

How learning English helped change Griselda Santiago's life and the lives of others.

28



More Than Golf

Memories of the Sewell Golf Classic and its service to those in need.



30



The Long Journey

David Hennessee exits Buckner board after 40 years.

32



Once a Rangerette, Always a Rangerette

Former Rangerettes at Buckner bond over shared history

34 VOICES OF BUCKNER

How to talk to your parents about senior living options

Charlie Wilson, President, Buckner Retirement Services





Five Years

Do you remember 2019? None of us had heard of COVID-19. Notre-Dame suffered a devastating fire. And, the New England Patriots defeated the Los Angeles Rams in the lowest scoring Super Bowl in history.

Why is it when we look back five years it seems as if events happened just yesterday; but when we look forward five years it feels like an eternity away. What does 2029 hold?

For one thing, 2029 marks the 150th anniversary of Buckner International. Don't worry. We haven't started baking the birthday cake yet. But we are thinking about that significant milestone in our ministry and making plans. Those plans include the launch of a five-year campaign to raise funds to support our work. You'll hear more about our plans over the coming months and throughout the next five years.

In the meantime, we are focusing on 2024 and God's plans for this year. Both Buckner Children and Family Services and Buckner Retirement Services have exciting and decisive plans to expand our work this year and beyond. The growing number of senior adults means increased needs for our senior living communities and services. And the success of our Family Hope Center model opens up ongoing and increasing opportunities to serve vulnerable children and families domestically and internationally. Our work to protect vulnerable children through foster care and adoption is a model for every childcare organization.

During our November board meeting, I emphasized to our trustees the changing nature of our work. Referencing Revelation 21:5, we talked about ways God "makes all things new."

As we enter our 145th year of ministry in 2024, it is important that we all understand our roots, so we know what kind of tree Buckner is today. One of the hallmarks of this organization has been our ability to adapt and change with the times. And yet, in doing so, we have never left those first roots which are so deeply connected to our biblical mandate of serving "orphans and widows," as James commands us to do.

Our board, which is tasked with the oversight of Buckner, is comprised of a diverse and talented group of people who serve as volunteers. Since the first Buckner board was appointed in 1877, we have been blessed with faithful stewards of this ministry who have brought an extraordinary wealth of skills in guiding Buckner.

Last year, we experienced the biggest turnover on our board in modern history. Seven trustees left the board, representing more than 120 years of combined experience. You can read about one of those trustees, David Hennessee, who joined the Buckner board

in 1985, in this issue of *Buckner Today*. At the same time, we have welcomed six new board members who bring their own unique skills and passion for our work.

As we transition on our new board members over the coming months, I am excited that we serve a savior who never changes, but who changes everything. I mentioned Revelation 21:5 assuring us we serve a God "who makes all things new." But the context of that verse is so powerful.

If you go back to verses 3 and 4, I love how The Message says it:

"I heard a voice thunder from the Throne: 'Look, look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They're his people, he's their God. He'll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good – tears gone, crying gone, pain gone – all the first order of things gone.' He continued, 'Look, I'm making everything new.'"

In many ways, these verses speak to the kind of transformation we offer those we serve. We want to take away their tears, their crying, their pain. We want to make "all things new" through Christ.

I'm excited to see and experience all the ways God "makes all things new" with our board and with Buckner as we enter a new season. I trust God that when we look back at 2024 five years from now, we will see his faithfulness. As the saying goes, we may not know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future.

For now, our focus is on 2024 and the needs surrounding us. The vulnerable children and families we serve can't wait. They're not interested in our strategic plan or what 2029 holds. They need help now. They need a safe foster family. They need family coaching. They need education and support. They need a new pair of shoes.

And because of their needs, we need you. Will you commit this year to helping us "wipe every tear from their eyes?" Will you help us "take away their pain?"


My prayer is that when the people we serve look back at 2024 five years from now, they will see the hand of God in their lives and know that someone cared. And that someone is you.

God bless. **BT**



Albert Reyes, President and CEO
Buckner International

Visit my blog at www.AlbertLReyes.com

A young girl wearing a white dress with a colorful butterfly pattern is holding a large, shaggy brown teddy bear. The bear is standing upright, and the girl is holding its top arm. The background is a light blue gradient.

“*The vulnerable children and families we serve can't wait. They need help now. They need a safe foster family. They need family coaching. They need education and support. They need a new pair of shoes. And because of their needs, we need you.*

*Will you commit this year to helping us 'wipe every tear from their eyes?' Will you help us 'take away their pain?'"***”**

Like Rain

Botswana is home to the Kalahari Desert, the largest sub-Saharan desert in Africa. It was also my home 40 years ago. It's a dry country and the rainy season is especially welcome there. The most important word in the Setswana language is "pula," which means rain.

The Batswana (plural for people from Botswana) have a saying, "Love is like the rains after a long drought."

Those of us who live in Texas understand the power of that saying, especially in July and August. There is nothing like a deep, soaking rain saturating the ground. It nourishes everything that grows and gives hope. What was dry and parched is transformed almost overnight to lush and green.

Last fall, while filming a video, I saw the power of that kind of love. I witnessed the transformation of a little child who was showered with love from her foster family who became her forever family.

The greatest thing I see in my work is what happens to someone when they are loved. Sometimes that love is expressed through adoption, like what I witnessed. Sometimes it's expressed by a chaplain sitting at the bedside of a dying senior surrounded by family members.

But love impacts people in smaller ways too, such as when an associate at one of our senior living communities takes time to hear the life story of a resident. Or when a family coach pours special attention into the life of a teenager to impact the young person's trajectory.

Sometimes the rain pours. Sometimes it's slow and steady. Sometimes it's a sprinkle. Love is like that. Love is a refreshing sip of hope in the deserts of life. Sometimes it's demonstrated in strong and obvious ways. Sometimes it's a slow and steady rain, the kind of love that keeps a couple married for 50 years. And sometimes love is shown in many little ways that make a big difference.

Some of the greatest work we do at Buckner is busting the drought of love in the lives of those we serve. As you read this issue of Buckner Today, let me ask you to count the ways. **BT**



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

“Love is like the rains after a long drought.”

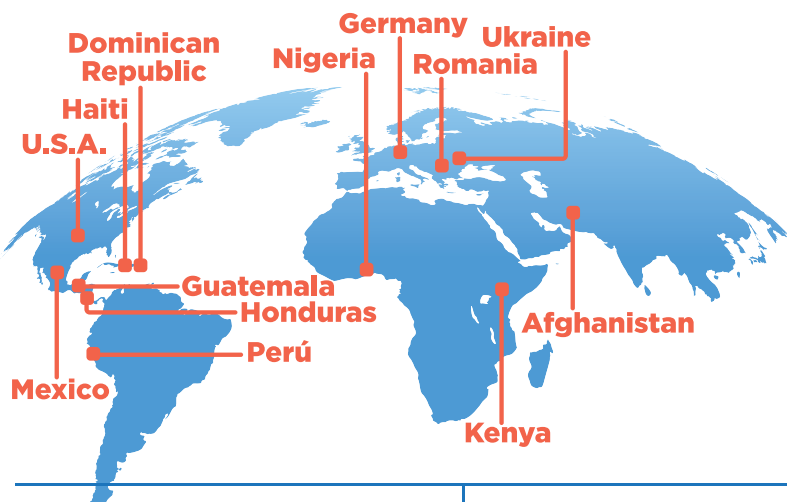
*Botswana
proverb*



It's more than a pair of shoes ... *it's the first step toward transformation.*



Countries that have received new shoes for vulnerable children



Ages of children receiving shoes:



Greatest need for new shoes:
Boys 14 to 18 years old

New shoes collected for vulnerable children since 1999:

5 million



Ways to give shoes?



How do vulnerable children get connected to new shoes?

- Those receiving a service through one or more Buckner program(s)
- Community outreach events
- School and/or government collaborations

BUCKNER SHOES
 FOR ORPHAN SOULS®

Hope shines here.®

25TH
 ANNIVERSARY
 — 1999-2024 —

BUCKNER *Journal*

»» Foundation's \$115,000 Grant Allows Baptist Retirement Community to Renovate Chapel

Thanks to a \$115,000 grant from the Art and Eva Camunez Tucker Foundation, Baptist Retirement Community was able to renovate its chapel with new flooring, paint, window blinds, lighting, foyer updates and a new AV system.

Residents of the San Angelo senior living community gathered on February 6 to celebrate the renovated chapel with representatives of the foundation, BRC associates, Buckner leadership and leaders from local churches.

Program speakers included Dr. Albert Reyes, president and CEO of Buckner International; Aaron Hargett, senior executive director of BRC; and Chaplain Kevin McSpadden with BRC.

The relationship between the Tucker Foundation and BRC dates back to 1999 when the foundation helped support the construction of Sagecrest, BRC's memory care residences.

"Today we give our deepest thanks to our friends with the Art and Eva Camunez Tucker Foundation who have supported the growth and development of Baptist Retirement Community for 25 years," said Hargett.



To learn more about the celebration of the chapel renovation, use the QR Code.

»» Buckner Purchases Campus in Houston

Buckner purchased a 6.88-acre property in north Houston in December 2023 which will become the Buckner Children and Family Services of Houston campus. Located 6.5 miles southwest of the Buckner Family Hope Center® at Aldine, the new campus includes 37,000 square feet of classroom space and a gymnasium.

The Family Hope Center at Aldine will relocate to the new campus later this year, having outgrown the property where it has resided for nearly 30 years. The Family Hope Center at Aldine was founded by Sylvia Bolling in 1990 as the Aldine Youth Community Center and acquired by Buckner in 2012.

The new campus provides spacious, updated facilities for Family Hope Center programming, allowing Buckner to better serve local children and families. Undeveloped land on the property also provides ample space for additional facilities and programs.

"While our first priority will be moving the Family Hope Center at Aldine to the campus this year, we are already exploring the opportunities the campus offers us for future

growth and expansion of programs in Houston," said Henry Jackson, president of Buckner Children and Family Services.

"There's the potential to have all our core programs operating on the campus, including building beautiful, new residences for single-parent families participating in Buckner Family Pathways®."

A capital campaign will launch this year to implement the long-term vision of Buckner ministries in Houston, and it will take the generous support of Houstonians to bring this vision to reality.



»» Forming champions

Teamwork improves lives in Honduras.

Soccer is the national pastime of Honduras. Many children go to bed dreaming about soccer and wake up with “the beautiful game” still on their mind.

And now thanks to a strategic collaboration with Fundación Diunsa and Fundación Real Madrid, 27 children with the Buckner Family Hope Center® in San Pedro Sula, Honduras are learning to channel their passion for the sport into improved social skills and education.

Formando Campeones, which translates to Forming Champions, is a program created by the foundations for Honduran retail store Diunsa and Real Madrid Club de Fútbol, one of the most popular soccer teams in the world. The program works with established nonprofits like Buckner to reach vulnerable children.

“We create a map and a plan to go in where organizations like Buckner are already present,” said Gladys Ramirez, manager of Fundación Diunsa. “Because the work Buckner is already doing, we knew they would play an important part of the program we have.”

Throughout the school year, children served by Buckner attend Formando Campeones once a week for two hours. There they receive lessons in values and social skills along with computer training. And of course, they get to play soccer, as well as other sports.

“We jumped in to be a part of this collaboration,” said Moritz Hoffman, executive director of Buckner Honduras. “Only by working together can we give families in Honduras a chance to reach the goals they have and stay together.”



Photos provided by Fundación Diunsa



Soccer is a team sport where players must rely on working together to achieve success. In many ways, serving vulnerable children and families also takes a team.

“God has given us this opportunity to work together with other organizations to better help generations of Hondurans find a future here in Honduras,” Hoffman said. “If our children have a future here, if they are taught important values here and they find the opportunities they need here, then another important thing will happen; families will stay together and that is very important.”

»» Five Buckner Senior Communities Ranked Among Best in Nation

U.S. News & World Report and Newsweek recently recognized five Buckner senior living communities as among the best in the country.

Newsweek ranked three Buckner senior communities among the top continuing care retirement communities in Texas. Baptist Retirement Community in San Angelo ranked eighth in Texas, Buckner Parkway Place in Houston ranked ninth in Texas and Buckner Villas in Austin ranked 16th in Texas.

Newsweek magazine annually ranks the top 250 out of 2,000 continuing care retirement communities (CCRCs) across the country to help individuals make informed decisions about care for seniors.

In addition, five Buckner communities were recognized by U.S. News & World Report: Baptist Retirement Community in San Angelo for best short-term rehab, best long-term care, best independent living, best memory care and best CCRC; Buckner Parkway Place in Houston for best short-term rehab and best independent living; Ventana by Buckner in Dallas for best independent living and best short-term rehab; Buckner Villas in Austin for best independent living and best CCRC; and Buckner Westminster Place in Longview for best short-term

rehabilitation care.

U.S. News & World Report ranks senior care communities on a five-star rating for three categories: state-conducted health inspections, how much time nurses spend with residents and the quality of medical care. More than 15,000 facilities were evaluated for the ranking.

For more information about Buckner Retirement Services, please visit bucknerretirement.org.

If you are thinking about starting a conversation with a family member about senior living options, turn to page 34 for advice from Charlie Wilson, president of Buckner Retirement Services. BT



BAPTIST RETIREMENT COMMUNITY IN SAN ANGELO



BUCKNER VILLAS IN AUSTIN



BUCKNER WESTMINSTER PLACE IN LONGVIEW



PARKWAY PLACE IN HOUSTON



VENTANA BY BUCKNER IN DALLAS

The impact of hope: How the life of Cynthia Barasa turned to one of JOY

STORY BY ISA TORRES • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JANEROSE INDAH

Losing both of her parents gave Cynthia Barasa a sense of loneliness and despair. Her future, like the shoes she wore, were hanging by a thread. But little by little hope began shining back in the life of Barasa and now the 12 year old has gone from timid and sad to a joyful leader whose smile shines as bright as her future.

This transformation began taking place after Barasa first connected with Hope Buckner Community School, directed by Buckner Family Hope Center® in Bungoma, Kenya. There, she received a pair of shoes from Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®, which opened the opportunity for Buckner staff to learn more about Barasa and offer her the support she needed.

Barasa's father died in 2017. After the loss, her mother could not afford her education. As the youngest child of six, Barasa's education was put on hold.

Poverty and the lack of education form a vicious circle in Kenya.

School fees and the cost of school supplies are out of reach for many families in Kenya and instead of children getting an education, they are forced to leave school to look for ways to help support the family. This was the case for Barasa's family as well, whose older siblings had left school without finishing.

Her mother could barely keep up with the costs of raising a family, and so Barasa moved to an uncle's house for support. Then the unthinkable happened. Three years after her father's death, Barasa's mother died as well. Barasa felt more alone than ever, and her future looked dimmer.

Shining hope

Buckner's Family Hope Center in Kenya opened Hope Buckner Community School in 2015. The school in Bungoma County was a fresh cup of water for a community that often struggles with poverty and lack of education. "The school came about because people were in need of quality education," said Janerose Indah, family coach and team leader at Buckner Kenya. "Most children in the community were unable to attend school."

Staff at Buckner Family Hope Center in Kenya have expertise in community development, education and other important services to positively impact the community.

"The students and their families work with our social workers,



Cynthia Barasa continues taking advantage of every opportunity she has received through Buckner. And now she hopes to offer support for other people in need.



psychologists and in our mentorship program,” Indah said. Students also receive school supplies as well as shoes provided by Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls.

The school serves the village of Bisunu, as well as some neighboring villages. The new school year began on Jan. 8 in Kenya, and more than 300 students are enrolled in the Buckner school. Even during the school breaks, Buckner supports the families through its youth mentorship programs and student camps.

“There are other public and private schools around, but even the public schools can be expensive for families,” Indah explained. “The difference is the impact Buckner is having by making it easier for families impacted by poverty to attend school.”

Thankfully, Barasa’s uncle knew of Hope Buckner Community School and enrolled her there.

“She had been impacted by the situation she was living in,” Indah noted. “She changed in the ways she related to others, her academic performance went down significantly and she just lacked the will to keep going. She was really down and could not understand why her life had turned out like that.”

Buckner staff noticed her need for better shoes. Her worn out sandals were an indicator to the staff that she needed more support than what she was receiving.

“We do an assessment for every child receiving a pair of shoes and



Hope Buckner Community School gives children in Bisunu, Kenya, the education they need to transform their lives.

when we do this, we open the door to learning more about a child,” said Indah, who has been working with Barasa since the beginning. “We get to understand how the child woke up that morning, how they came to school, what means they have access to and how they are doing at home.”

“Because we noticed the torn shoes she was wearing, we got to learn how all of the difficulties she was dealing with affected her,” Indah explained.

A promising future

As Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls continues distributing shoes to children in need, many Kenyan families have connected with Buckner.

“These shoe distributions have become a point of contact for us,” Indah added. “Through them we are introduced to the families and it enables us to interact with them.”

For Barasa, receiving a new pair of shoes was the key for her to experience a transformation. “Her self-confidence and self-esteem have improved significantly,” Indah highlighted. “Her performance in school has been impressive and now she loves to play football and volleyball. She is excelling in many areas now because she just needed some support.”

This year Barasa began seventh grade and her school performance shows a lot of promise. “We know that if we keep encouraging Cynthia and providing her with whatever support she needs, she will continue to achieve new things,” Indah said in excitement. “We thought she was an introvert and we could see she didn’t really trust anyone, but now we have seen her real personality. She is an extrovert and very outgoing. She’s good at organizing groups, dancing and she even recently decided to run for school deputy president.”

“When she came to tell me she wanted to run for the position I was very surprised,” Indah recalled. “I had already seen a social and jovial child, but now I was seeing that child with goals and dreams.”

“She easily won the position of school deputy president by a landslide,” added Indah. “We have seen how she is ready to lead.”

Barasa plans to attend university and become a lawyer. “I hope these steps will enable me to champion the rights of the vulnerable population in my community,” she said.

“There are many other children with a story similar to Cynthia’s,” Indah added. “The work we have done with Cynthia is also needed in the lives of other children here and in other communities.” **BT**

In her own words, Cynthia Barasa shares her gratitude for Buckner and how her experience is shaping her future.

My name is Cynthia. I am 12 years old and I learn in Hope Buckner Community School. I just completed sixth grade and currently I am the deputy president at my school. I enjoy singing, playing volleyball and football.

I would like to thank Buckner in Bungoma for the support they have given me. The teachers and family coaches have walked with me and they have encouraged me throughout the process. I have a future because of Buckner and now I can work towards my dreams. For now, I will work towards getting good grades and becoming someone who can also help others.

Thank you for the support, Buckner. I pray you will continue doing this for many others as well.



The Strength

of Claudia Anguiano

Remembering the servant heart of a wife, mother and educator.

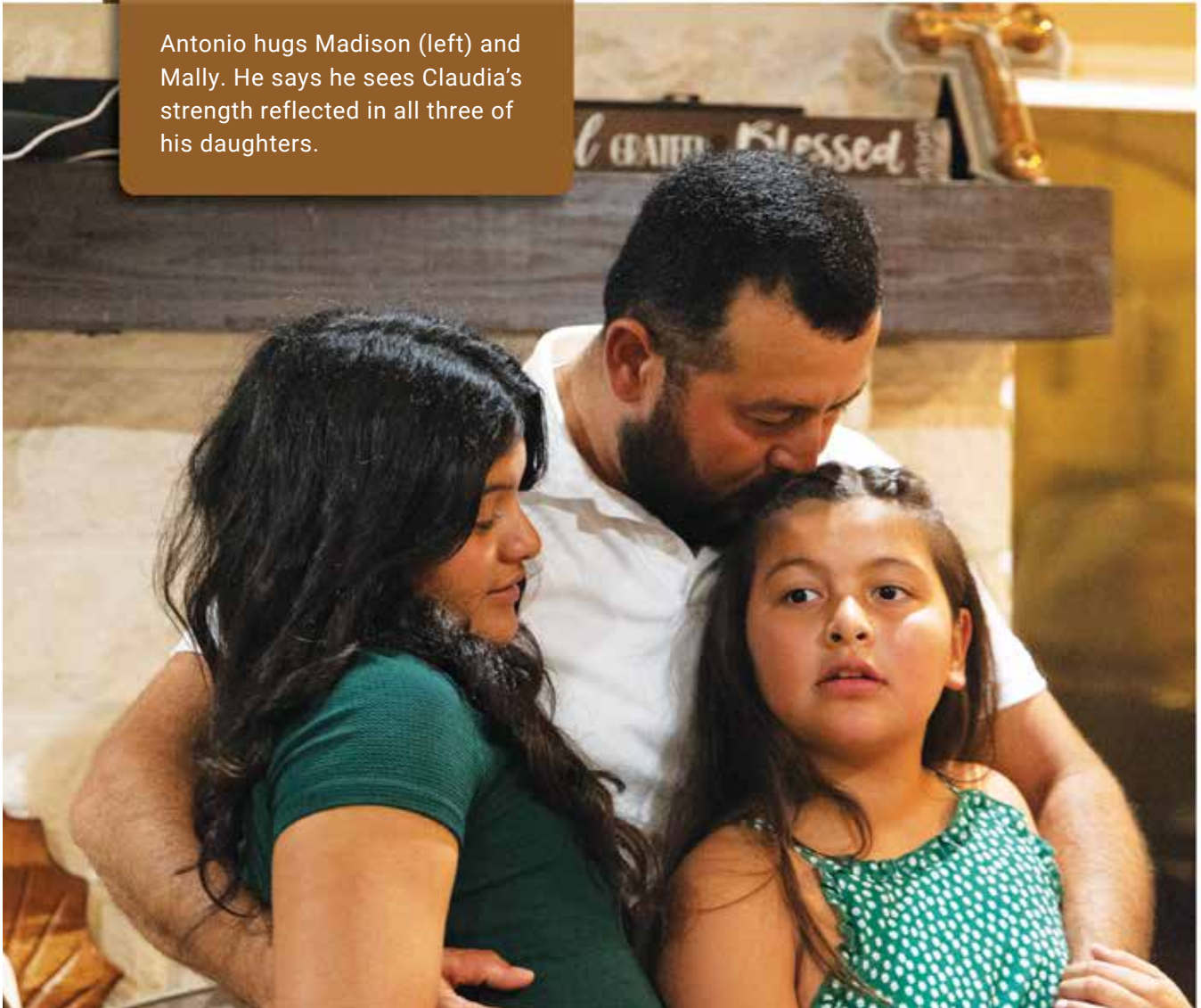
Story by Chris Ruth • Photography by Scott Collins

Claudia Anguiano Cedillo's three daughters sit together at the dining room table of their Kilgore, Texas home: Carol, 17; Madison, 15 and Mally, nine.



The Anguiano family displays one of the many framed photos of Claudia that adorn their home. From left is Madison, Antonio, Mally, and Carol.

Antonio hugs Madison (left) and Mally. He says he sees Claudia's strength reflected in all three of his daughters.



The table is meticulously set with an autumn centerpiece and seasonal napkins in preparation for Thanksgiving.

Since their mother's death, Carol and Madison have increased their domestic responsibilities, which they juggle with school and extracurriculars. Tasks like setting the table and serving dinner seem like a welcome distraction for them, while also a way to honor their mother's desire for a well-kept household.

Clues to Claudia's personality are all around the home, which her husband, Antonio Anguiano, built for the family. Inspirational plaques adorn every wall with reminders about love, gratitude and blessings. Wood crosses reflect her strong faith. Claudia's smile radiates from family photos – a smile replicated in each of her daughters.

In between bites of pasta and breadsticks, the girls talk about their mother. Antonio sits quietly listening to his daughters. His eyes occasionally close like he's trying hard to visualize Claudia and savor each shared memory.

Mally's stories are sweet – light moments in time. She grins as she recalls dancing for her mother in the kitchen to their favorite Alicia

Keys song, "Girl on Fire." Mally loved to make her mother laugh.

The older girls are more introspective with their memories. Madison, the most reserved of the three, mentions how supportive Claudia was of the girls' many activities, including soccer, band and Girl Scouts – "She was always there for us." Carol says her mother pushed each of the girls to be better in everything they did and achieve their goals.

It has only been several months since Claudia died unexpectedly on July 30, 2023, and her daughters are each trying their best to carry on with the humor, kindness and determination she instilled in them.

Cheryl Lawson-Hall sits at the dining room table sharing stories about Claudia as well. She first met Claudia in 2015.

Only a few months into her job as a parent educator for Buckner HOPES (Healthy Outcomes through Prevention and Early Support), Lawson-Hall found herself passing out program flyers at Sabine Elementary School parents' night.

Claudia stopped by the HOPES booth with two-year-old Mally in

Antonio Anguiano laughs as his daughters, from left, Carol, Madison, and Mally, share their favorite memories of their mother, Claudia.



tow. “Claudia never met a stranger,” recalls Lawson-Hall. “And I can speak with anyone too, so we hit it off right away.”

The education goals of HOPES appealed to Claudia, who previously worked as a substitute teacher and with another prevention and early intervention program. Claudia felt the “play is learning” style could help with engaging Mally, who was already extremely spirited.

Claudia enrolled in HOPES as a client shortly after that first meeting.

The first time Lawson-Hall visited the Anguiano home, she noted how immaculate it was. Nothing was out of place, and it certainly did not seem like three young girls lived there. “I could see the stress Claudia was inflicting on herself to keep everything clean,” says Lawson-Hall. “She loved organization and presenting a tidy home for guests, but anyone with young children knows it can be a struggle.”

Some of the first activities Lawson-Hall implemented with Claudia and her daughters was block play. “The idea of having blocks all over the floor gave Claudia anxiety, and as a result, she started to store the blocks up high so Mally couldn’t reach them.”

As the regular HOPES meetings progressed, Lawson-Hall saw a change in Claudia. She relaxed and was more comfortable not needing to clean up right away. Claudia was more present in the moment and open to new ideas on play, activities and learning. She also began storing Mally’s blocks where she could reach them.

Mally points out that her mom still couldn’t stand a mess in the kitchen. The girls keep photos of elaborate cakes Claudia baked and decorated – multiple layers with flowers and other frosted decorations. “She loved to bake but hated how messy it got,” says Mally through giggles.

In 2017, the HOPES team identified a growing need for a bilingual educator. Claudia’s commitment to the program and success during her two years made her the perfect candidate. With Mally starting school, it was the perfect time to return to work, and almost immediately Claudia had a full caseload and a growing waiting list.

As a former HOPES client, Claudia was able to easily relate to the families. Her fluency in Spanish and her strong community ties in Kilgore allowed the program to quickly expand. And Claudia was a relentless champion of HOPES and Buckner, having no issue approaching families at church or the local grocery store.

“She brought people together,” says Carol. Claudia’s job allowed her to help families in her community, and she realized it in turn continued to help her be better for her own family.

The families Claudia worked with weren’t just names on a list. The mothers and fathers were engaged. They rarely missed visits because they wanted to spend time with her and learn from her. They attended HOPES Group Connect meetings and got involved with

other programs, like the Linda and Kenneth Hall Buckner Family Hope Center® in Longview.

That genuine bond meant the news of Claudia's death devastated her clients and colleagues.

"I will always regret not having my phone turned on that night," says Lawson-Hall, who woke up on July 31 to several missed messages from Carol and Madison. After calling Madison back immediately when she heard the voicemails, Lawson-Hall drove straight to the Anguiano home to be with the girls.

A few days earlier, Claudia and Antonio took Mally with them to Guanajuato, Mexico, for a wedding and a birthday party. The older girls stayed back in Kilgore with their grandparents due to athletic and academic conflicts. While at the birthday party, Claudia collapsed and was unresponsive. She was later pronounced dead at the local hospital. She was 39.

Carol and Madison excuse themselves from the table briefly and return with a pair of boxes. When they remove the lids, a cardboard flower blooms with photos of the girls on each of the petals. Claudia made these memory boxes for their 15th birthdays—their quinceañeras.

As the girls show off different photos of vacations, parties and intricate birthday cakes baked by their mother, Antonio dabs the corner of his eyes with a napkin.



Mally looks at the photo boxes with keen interest. She is still three and a half years away from her 15th birthday, but now the task of creating her box will fall on her sisters. Carol will be in college then, having recently received her acceptance letter from Texas A&M University.

Antonio says that when he looks at his daughters, he sees Claudia's strength in them. Lawson-Hall sees Claudia's servant heart reflected in the girls' actions and compassion. And even though they still bicker and tease each other, as siblings are prone to do, the three girls are supporting each other the way their mother always did for each of them and so many other East Texas families. **BT**

Carol (left) and Madison sort through the hundreds of family photos that comprise the elaborate gifts their mother gave each on their 15th birthdays. Antonio dabs his eyes while trying to keep his emotions in check.



From chaos to success

Single mom finds a future through
Buckner Family Pathways®.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ISA TORRES


Telling her story means Christina Bunge must relive hard truths about her past. She remembers the moments that brought happiness, those that made her feel cared for and loved. But she also remembers somber moments.

Bunge knew the key to overcoming those hard times would be in how she responded. Today, Bunge focuses on shaping the future she wants for her daughters.

“Looking back at my life, I feel that as soon as I was born my life was going to be chaotic,” she mused.

Bunge’s birthparents suffered from addiction. A military family became her forever home when she was just 3 months old. Her parents already had some experience with adoption since they had previously adopted a son and a daughter.

Bunge’s parents loved her and her



Christina Bunge looks toward a happy future for her and her daughters, Emmalynn and Jaelynn. She knows getting there will require her to “work hard and never give up.”

siblings. But sadly, the family dynamic later changed. Bunge said that after turning 4 years old she experienced abuse by a family member.

“From that day forward life as everyone knew it changed and my family completely fell apart,” Bunge recalled. “There were days I thought death was better than living life at home. A few years later my parents divorced, and my dad moved away.”

Instability became a part of Bunge’s life.

Becoming a survivor

“Before coming here (to Buckner Family Pathways®), I was just trying to survive,” Bunge said. “When you’re trying to just survive, then stability is not really an option.”

Bunge moved from place to place trying to figure out what she would do. She tried college a few times, but nothing seemed to drive her to finish. And then she got the news in 2014 that she was expecting twins.

Bunge kept analyzing her life, looking at the choices she and others made that affected her. She knew then she had to choose something better for herself and her daughters, Emmalynn and Jaelynn. Those first steps involved going back to college, moving closer to her father in Lufkin, Texas, and finding a place to live with support for single mothers.

“I was fed up with not having a (college) degree and not being able to take myself further,” she said. “I had my daughters, and we had bills that we had a hard time with, so I knew I needed to look for other options.”

A Google search brought hope and a new direction. Bunge searched for “single mom housing in Lufkin” and found Buckner Family Pathways.

Buckner Family Pathways supports single parents by offering support that includes affordable housing, childcare, parenting

classes, counseling and family coaching, as well as money management training and conflict resolution tools.

“The day I moved in... I sat out on my porch and watched my girls playing on the playground. I just knew everything was going to be okay,” Bunge said.

Building stability

With the help of Buckner, Bunge found the stability she needed to start building a bright future for her family. With support and guidance from Buckner, Bunge finished her college degree in hospitality administration and management with a focus on lodging.

Her own experiences and her time with Buckner Family Pathways allows Bunge to help other single mothers as well. Now working at Angelina College as an academic advisor, Bunge helps the Family Pathways staff navigate college degree plans for other clients of Buckner Family Pathways.

The future will always bring challenges and choices, but now Bunge feels prepared to handle them as she continues to build a happy and vibrant life for herself and her two daughters.

“Buckner has been the structure and safe space I needed to succeed. They have been by my side for the last four and a half years to guide me and teach me to work hard and never give up,” Bunge said. “There are no words to express my gratitude for everything the Buckner staff have done for me and my girls. I know that I can be successful in the future thanks to the staff at Buckner.” **BT**



“The day I moved in [to a Buckner Family Pathways® home] ... I sat out on my porch and watched my girls playing on the playground. I just knew everything was going to be okay.” *—Christina Bunge*

Not long ago,
9-year-old Kate was
trapped in a situation
of abuse and neglect.





But thanks to generous partners like you, she was rescued from that darkness and



welcomed into a stable and loving forever home through Buckner Foster Care and Adoption. Now she's discovering her worth.

Join us to continue helping young people like Kate through our **Next Generation campaign**. The purpose of the campaign is to transform more young lives with the power of hope in 2024.

Sometimes hope looks like an impossible task. But we know there's more to every person's story. **And, there is always hope because of the generosity of people like you.**

Because of you, Buckner International can serve more vulnerable children, families and communities around the world. That's why it's vital the Next Generation campaign gets off to the strongest possible start, so vulnerable children like Kate aren't kept waiting.

Consider giving a special gift to help transform lives. **Together, we can show compassion to those in deep need.**

Give today:

buckner.org/NextGeneration



BUCKNER[®]
Hope shines here.[®]



A path called love

STORY BY MELISSA GRYCH · PHOTOGRAPHY BY ISA TORRES

Nayeli Sanchez and her four children found themselves lost in the wilderness. As the sunlight faded, they were surrounded by only the thorny brush and low-growing cedar trees of central Texas.

“I was lost - with all my kids. We kept walking deeper into the woods trying to find our way back,” she remembers.

The family intended to take a short hike together. But what started as an obvious well-worn trail, changed to sand and then to rocks. Her 14-year-old daughter Valeria Gonzalez, the oldest, picked up a sibling while Sanchez carried another as well as a stroller over the rocks.

Then her son Emmanuel yelled, “Mom!” and froze in his tracks. A rattlesnake lay in his path. Terrified, Sanchez helped him navigate around the snake.

“I prayed to God: please give me a little more light,” she recalls. “I don’t know how the sun stayed there just a little longer, but it did.”

Scared of being lost in the dark, Sanchez called the person who had helped the family in many ways. She rang Shirley Hernandez, case manager with Buckner Children and Family Services in Beaumont. While talking to Hernandez on the phone, the family kept walking and eventually found their way back to the Camp Buckner campground where they were staying.

Once realizing they were in a safe place, the family noticed the name of the path they traveled: Love Trail.

Indeed, the power of love has kept the family together on the path toward a strong and happy future thanks to ongoing support from Buckner. During the hot summer of 2023, 300 miles away from their home in Beaumont, the family’s experience at Camp Buckner in Burnet, Texas, turned out to be exactly what they needed, especially for Valeria.

WHAT’S SPECIAL ABOUT ME

Earlier in the year, an anonymous call to the Texas Department of

Family and Protective Services resulted in a visit to the family home. The evaluation determined that Valeria, the oldest, would benefit from counseling. She was referred to Buckner Family and Youth Success (FAYS), a program offering counseling, coaching and other support services for children 6 through 17 years old.

Her mother did not need to be convinced, having first connected with Buckner’s maternity support services while expecting a child a few years earlier. Sanchez knew firsthand the positive impact of Buckner. She wanted that for Valeria too.

Growing into a teenager can be challenging and the family had recently suffered a loss. Valeria was withdrawing from others, spending less time with friends and caring less about her appearance. Valeria remembers it as a hard time. But as part of Buckner FAYS, Shirley Hernandez regularly visited Valeria one-on-one at school and visited the family at home.

“She talked to me about self-esteem and what’s special about me. We worked through some issues,” Valeria says.



Nayeli Sanchez (left) wants the best for her daughter Valeria, including the support and love from Buckner that she experienced too.

CAMP BUCKNER

But it was attending Camp Buckner that was a pivotal moment for Valeria and a wonderful bonding experience for the family, explains Hernandez.

Camp Buckner gives kids the joys of a safe place to try new activities they may not normally be able to access. It allows families to build bonds away from the demands and stressors of everyday life.

When attending Camp Buckner, families engage in activities and experiences that foster self-reliance, build confidence, and strengthen relationships – fishing, canoeing, swimming, campfires with smores and songs, games, crafts, a ropes course, a climbing wall and a zip line.

Valeria grins when talking about her experiences at Camp Buckner. Known for her artistic talents, she created a flower out of craft materials. On each leaf she wrote special words about her mother. Valeria says she also made new friends, whose families, as it turns out, live close to home in Beaumont. They've kept in touch since arriving back home.

RHINESTONE BOOTS

Hernandez is floored at the progress Valeria has made in building back up her self-confidence. In just a few months and what turned out to be a life-changing trip to Camp Buckner, a new girl emerged, Hernandez says.



"We have seen such a change in her. She continues to help others the way she was helped," she adds.

Valeria now volunteers with a local organization to help teach painting and crafts and finds time to spend with friends. Her favorite subject at school? Lunch because that's when she can be with friends, she says with a smile.

Today, Valeria has a renewed interest in the arts that she once loved. She paints and shares handmade bracelets with others. She wears her mom's boots adorned with rhinestones and sometimes switches from sneakers to heels. She's planning ahead too, designing a dress for her quinceañera, a traditional 15th birthday celebration.

"Ms. Shirley has helped me a lot. We talked about things and now I feel a lot better. I want to look pretty and celebrate me too," Valeria says.

Her mom puts an arm around Valeria when explaining how much she's grown. "I have seen her self-esteem improving. I want her to keep improving."

GROWING WITH BUCKNER

Although Valeria has officially exited the Buckner FAYS program, Buckner is still a part of the family's journey.

"We've learned to communicate more with Shirley's help. We're learning how to communicate more with each other and be more patient with each other as well," Sanchez says. "That's what I love



about Buckner."

The family hopes to go back to camp. Daughters Josefina, 4, and Itzayana, 2, are part of Buckner's Healthy Outcomes through Prevention and Early Support (HOPES) for children up to 5 years old. Eight-year-old Emmanuel is now part of the FAYS program, supported by Shirley Hernandez as Valeria was.

"All he talks about is Camp Buckner! If we see a deer or a swimming pool, he asks 'When can we go back? I want smores! When can I go to Camp Buckner?'" Sanchez cheerfully adds.

LOVE, NOT LOST

The family now laughs about the day they were lost in the Texas Hill Country, recalling how Valeria even warned her mother about getting lost. But together, they kept walking.

"I don't know how we ended up on the Love Trail, but God gave me light," Sanchez says.

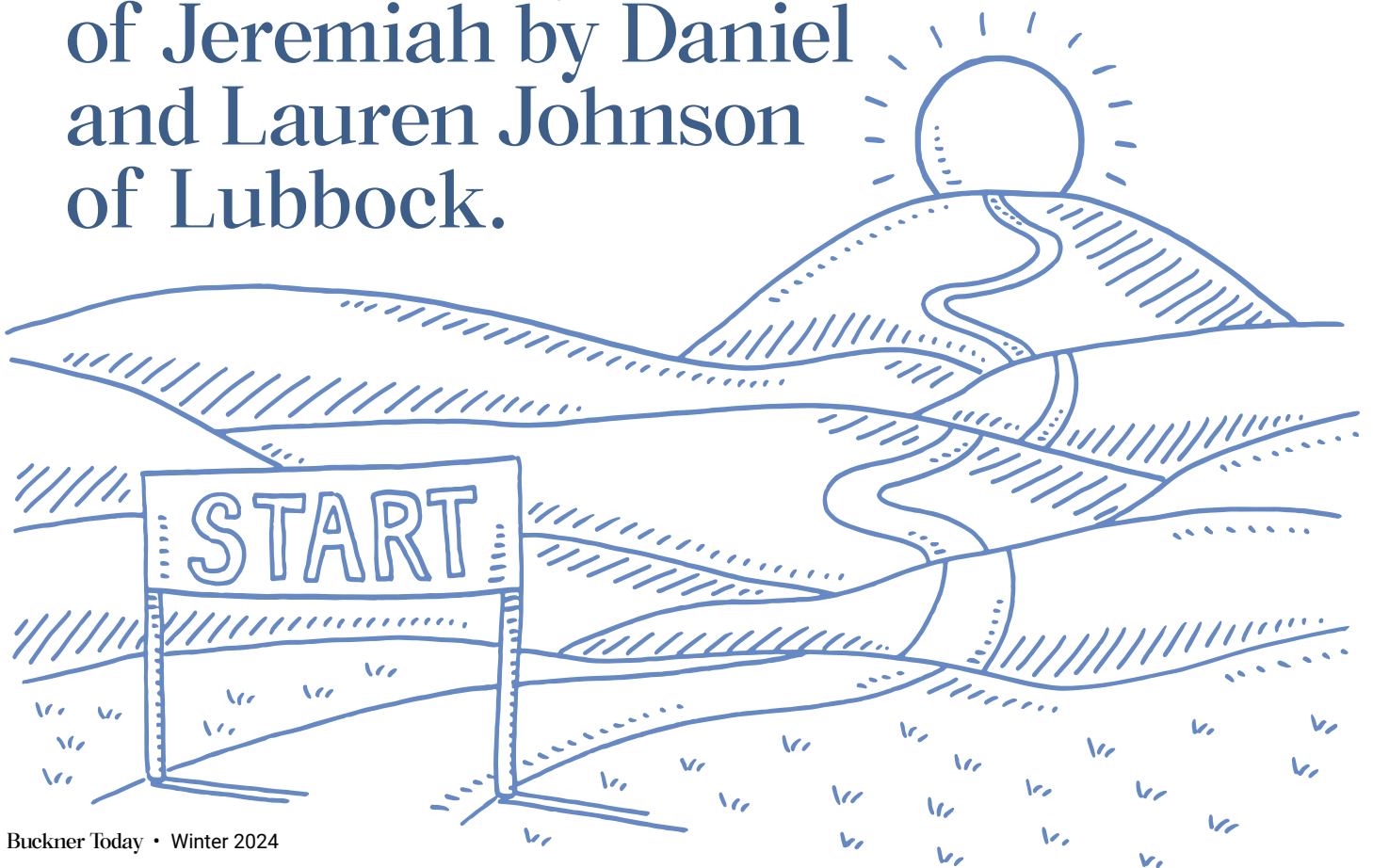
In the end, it was a path called love that guided the family home. **BT**



Toward the finish line

Daniel and Lauren Johnson waited three years to adopt their son, but it was worth every second. Story by Jon Mark Beilue • Photography by Shaie Williams

Days turned into weeks. Weeks turned into months. Seasons went from one to another to another. Yet there was no movement in almost three years in the adoption of Jeremiah by Daniel and Lauren Johnson of Lubbock.





It was an up-and-down journey for nearly three years for Daniel (middle) and Lauren (left) Johnson, but Aug. 25, 2023, was worth the emotional roller coaster when Jeremiah (right) legally became their son.

They tried not to think about the uncertain future, but instead, live in the moment. But it was not easy.

“One of the hardest things was people would ask, ‘How are things going? Is it finalized?’” Lauren said. “We were like, ‘No, we don’t know much.’ Having that answer on repeat, we felt crazy not being able to say anything because we also didn’t know.”

When the Johnsons took custody of Jeremiah in 2020, he was 18 months old. As Jeremiah neared 5 years of age, the road to adoption was proving to be long and at times rocky.

“It was like a roller coaster. We were up and down,” Lauren said. “I found myself preparing for if a decision were made and we had to give him up the next day, what do I pack up and what do we say?”

“We worried. We prayed. We stayed to ourselves because we wanted every moment together just in case. We had some friends who had gone through this before, and their advice was to keep things as normal as possible should that time come when he does have to go. We did our best.”

The Johnsons were adamant they wanted, above all, what was best for Jeremiah. They felt what the court decided would be the Lord’s direction. Still, deep down, they wanted Jeremiah as their forever child. Yet, uncertainty remained.

Family was always a constant

Lauren and Daniel grew up in West Texas. They found that even though 300 miles separated their hometowns, their upbringing in Amarillo and Monahans, Texas included an important appreciation for family.

Lauren’s immediate family was small. It was just her and T.J., her

older brother. Her father, Jesse Bustos worked for Ward County. Her mother Delma was a teacher’s aide at an alternative school. Yet, her extended family played an important role as she grew up surrounded by her cousins.

“I was fortunate enough to have large family gatherings on both sides,” Lauren said. “Big Christmases. Big gatherings at church. In big families, even extended family, I saw lots of examples of everyone taking care of each other.”

Daniel was one of four children of David and Diana Johnson. He had two younger sisters and an older brother by one year. Like Lauren, there was no shortage of extended family.

“We always had enough too,” he said. “It was close-knit, especially with immediate family. It was a loving house. They supported us. They pushed us to get a degree and have a career.”

The two met in Lubbock in 2009. Lauren went to Lubbock Christian University for her undergraduate degree. Daniel went first to University of North Texas to study graphic design, and finished an advertising degree at Texas Tech University in 2009.

The couple moved to Midland for a few years and then returned to Lubbock in 2014. Daniel took a position with the Texas Tech Health University Sciences Center and Lauren got a teaching job. Now, they were ready to start a family.

“I always knew I wanted to adopt a child, even if we had our own children,” Daniel said. “That was something I thought about even as a youngster. I liked having a big family. I always wanted my parents to adopt so there would be more of us. It was something I knew I’d eventually do in my life.”



Jeremiah was 18 months old when the Johnsons received custody in 2020. Now he's nearly 5, ready for pre-k and all that goes into being a little boy.

Twice as long, but worth the wait

Cassandra Esparza, an adoption specialist with Buckner Children and Family Services in Lubbock, called the Johnsons one day in September of 2020. An 18-month-old boy in Midland was in need of placement.

“The Johnsons are just super sweet kind-hearted and down-to-earth people,” Esparza said. “Lauren is very honest and I love that about her. Daniel is more quiet and laid back. He’s definitely very involved though. He listened and asked questions.”

The Johnsons, who had been licensed for six months, received the call two days before taking in Jeremiah. Questions ran through their minds – Does he take solid food? Does he take a bottle? Is he in diapers?

“There was fear at first,” Lauren said. “This is a whole new world, and this little boy is entrusted to our care. Some of it just naturally happened as we began to care for him. For Jeremiah, I can’t imagine going to a stranger’s house and being left there. We were afraid and excited.”

Jeremiah was with a grandmother in kinship care. The Johnsons were his fourth placement that included a foster home, maternal aunt and uncle and maternal grandmother.

“All we ever asked for was what was best for Jeremiah. That was always our prayer,” Daniel said.



A court date was set approximately a month later at which the Johnsons were told the parents’ rights would be terminated. The feedback they got from those who were familiar with similar cases was this would not take long.

“It was supposed to happen quickly,” Daniel recalled.

Until it didn’t. Parental rights were terminated in May 2021, but that decision was appealed. It took a year to get an initial court date.

“We were really in limbo,” Daniel said. “A lot of that was due to COVID because the court system was backed up.”

To alleviate case load, the appeal was moved to another district court and the date was continually pushed back more than once.

“We were put on the backburner, and we understood that to a degree,” said Lauren. “At the same time, we wanted closure. He’s very smart and aware and it was getting to the point we were going to have to answer some questions.”

Finally, their court date was scheduled for March 2023. A judge denied the appeal. It was a big hurdle to be sure, but there was still the matter of adoption.

“There was some relief,” Lauren said, “but there was still so much

uncertainty. We were not celebrating until we had a date at the courthouse for adoption day.”

Finally, on Aug. 25, 2023, adoption day arrived. The court room was full with the Bustos and Johnson families, friends and the entire local staff of Buckner. Most wore yellow, Jeremiah's favorite color.

When the judge made the adoption official, a journey of nearly three years was complete. Jeremiah, now in pre-K, was the Johnsons' son.

“Every adoption is beautiful,” Esparza said, “and maybe I'm biased because I worked with them so closely, but this was so special. There was not a dry eye there. It was beautiful.”

More than three months later, in early December, Jeremiah was

playing in a corner of the living room. He wore Christmas socks and counted the days until Christmas on his movable Christmas calendar.

Just above him on the top shelf sits a framed art piece: “The Johnson family” is written in cursive. Below it reads:

Daniel, Lauren, Jeremiah

Est. August 25, 2023

“Our relationship has grown in different ways that maybe other couples have not had to experience,” Daniel said. “We had to trust the process and trust each other. It was hard to reach the finish line, but we'd do it over again in a heartbeat. Jeremiah has been worth every second of this.” **BT**



Taking the

How learning English helped change Griselda Santiago's life and the lives of others.

It was a hot summer afternoon in the Piney Woods of Texas in 2009. The lunch rush was dwindling down that day at a barbecue restaurant in Pittsburg, Texas, but Griselda Santiago's work as a dishwasher was far from over. As she worked hard to keep clean dishes moving to the service line, the owner of the restaurant suddenly approached her and asked her, "And what about you? Are you always going to be here washing dishes?"

Moving to the land of opportunity

Santiago left Mexico to come to the United States in 2005. Her dreams, as the dreams of many immigrants, involved finding better education and work opportunities. But not everything would come her way as quickly as she planned.

Santiago hoped to earn a high school equivalency degree and learn English at the same time. However, the fastest route to a high school equivalency diploma were classes taught in Spanish. Her initial plan to learn English would not happen just yet, but she continued her journey. Santiago found job opportunities, but those were limited because she did not speak English.

Landing the dishwasher job was a good experience for Santiago. She liked the team as well as her boss. But there was more she could do besides washing dishes; she just needed someone to give her a gentle nudge forward.

The pivotal question

"I always tell this story to my ESL (English as a second language) students, because I want them to be inspired by it," Santiago shared. "I felt a little attacked when my boss asked me that question, so my response to him was, 'Sure! What's wrong with that?'"

"He told me, 'There's nothing wrong with you doing this, but you could also be at the front welcoming our customers,'" Santiago recalled. "He knew I could do more than what I was doing there and wanted me to see that too."

Little by little, she started expanding both her job skills and English while working at the restaurant. Coworkers would teach her the names of objects, how to ask certain questions and how to respond to those questions. With their help, Santiago gained the confidence to



Griselda Santiago moved to the U.S. looking for a better future. But after arriving in Longview, she found hope and a new family at the Linda and Kenneth Hall Buckner Family Hope Center®.

challenge

Story by Isa Torres • Photography by Isa Torres and Susan Simmons

move from the back of the restaurant to being the first person hungry customers met behind the counter.

"I began learning how to say 'Hi' in English, how to count money, give back change and take orders. I learned the English needed for the restaurant," she explained.

Santiago loved being the face of the restaurant and building relationships with customers, but her journey with English was far from over. Soon she would be the one nudging others to learn English, toward a path of hope.

Giving hope

After several years, Santiago moved to Longview, Texas and had her first child. Because she was a new mother, a friend of hers suggested Santiago check out a place ready to offer her the support she needed.

"My friend told me to find a community so that I wouldn't be alone after having my baby," Santiago said. "She told me about the Linda and Kenneth Hall Buckner Family Hope Center® in Longview and the different types of classes I could find there."

With excitement, Santiago learned she could continue taking ESL classes at the Buckner Family Hope Center® in Longview. She signed up right away and started classes at level two, because she already knew some English from her job. Eventually, Santiago completed levels three and four.

And then another pivotal opportunity came her way.

"We graduated and became the first class to finish the ESL program here," Santiago said. "After spending years with other people in your class, you become friends with them. They become a part of your family. None of us wanted this to be over. That

is when staff here at Buckner asked me to come back and teach what I have learned."

Now Santiago teaches the first level of ESL at Buckner's Family Hope Center in Longview. She wrestled with insecurities at first.

"Who am I to do something like this? There are other people more qualified than me who could do this instead," Santiago recalled thinking at the time. "But then my husband told me, 'This is absolutely something you can do. Think about the other people who are here and are

just starting to learn what you have learned."

"Right away I saw how much I liked it," she added. "You can see the need people have and the desire to learn the language. I knew I needed to be a part of this and share what I had learned because I had gone through something similar."

The Family Hope Center offers childcare during class times. Santiago herself completed her courses thanks to the care volunteers provided for her children. Now, she has four children ranging from ages 8 years to 8 months old. "The ladies who have taken care of my children truly love them. They have given my children a lot of love, as if my children were theirs," Santiago said.

Buckner has also provided a loving support system, years after she left her family in Mexico.

"We are a family here," Santiago said. "We start classes with a devotional. There, we get to hear a message of hope that applies to all of us, even though we may all be facing different situations."

Besides the desire to help and give other women the same opportunity she received, Santiago's biggest purpose is showing her students that God loves them and that they are not alone. "Scripture says it, 'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me,'" Santiago said, quoting Revelation 3:20. "We are here, hearing his voice and we must open the door."

Buckner helped her find that door to love, hope and a bright future helping others who were once in her shoes.

"Buckner is a place where many people can receive help. People come here and become a community," Santiago affirmed. "It is always easier to learn when you have a community with you... And we have a bigger push to learn when we know this will impact our families as well. We truly are a community of families." **BT**



Buckner offers ESL classes to help individuals learn essential English, allowing them to better navigate everyday life and open new opportunities. Volunteers like Griselda Santiago help make these classes possible.

You can also meet Debi Nugent, another volunteer who teaches ESL classes, by scanning the QR code at right.

If you are interested in teaching ESL or other volunteer opportunities, please visit buckner.org/volunteer.



More than golf: Memories of the Sewell Golf Classic and its service to those in need

Story by Emily Ahrens • Photography by Buckner Staff

Golf has a special way of bringing people together. And the Sewell Golf Classic, benefitting Buckner, gave golf a larger purpose than fellowship on the links. The tournament created a special opportunity to collaborate, celebrate and impact the lives of vulnerable families across North Texas.

A small start

In 1995, Buckner began a small golf tournament to create an opportunity for fellowship and support of Buckner programs in North Texas. Since then, the tournament raised more than \$3 million and served almost 10,000 children and families of North Texas.

“When it started, it was mostly Buckner employees playing the first year or two and then we expanded it,” shared Scott Collins, senior vice president of communications for Buckner International. “The golf committee grew and took ownership of the tournament. They

have been a special group to work with over the years because of their tireless dedication to the tournament’s purpose.”

Serving a purpose

Most of the committee members have been a part of the tournament for more than 20 years. Many of the sponsors like Sewell, TexCap Insurance, AmWins, PPG Paint and JP Morgan have continued their support throughout the years.

Gaylon Brown, CEO and managing partner of TexCap Insurance, has been the committee chair for the life of the tournament. Gaylon’s son, Drew, joined the committee in 2009. Working on the golf tournament was more than a volunteer opportunity for the father-son duo. It’s about family.

“We engage with Buckner in so many different facets of our lives from family and friendships to church. Buckner is just a part of our



What began as a small tournament in 1995 grew into a purposeful community coming together to impact vulnerable families in North Texas. The tournament raised more than \$3 million in its lifetime.

While those who attended the Sewell Golf Classic clearly had a love of golf, they also found community and purpose in serving a greater mission. Nearly 10,000 children and families in North Texas felt the impact of their participation and contributions.



lives,” Drew shared. “The fact that it’s an organization doing Kingdom-furthering work gives an important purpose to being a part of the tournament too.”

Helping the tournament expand over the past 28 years has been a gift for the Browns.

“To see the change, how many people were served more than 25 years ago to how many are served today... and for us to be able to help in a real small part of that is gratifying,” Gaylon said.

Fellowship and fun

The team enjoyed quite a few laughs and lots of fun throughout their time together.

“The committee has had some interesting ideas over the years - always focused on how the tournament could raise more money to further the ministry,” Collins shared. “My favorite idea as a fundraiser was to have a mariachi band follow golfers on the course, playing as they hit. The only way to rid yourself of them would be to pay for them to go follow another group. We never did it, but in hindsight, I wish we had.”

The resounding answer to the most memorable moments together?

Coming together to select each year’s golf shirt.

“The most important planning meeting of the year became the day they pick that year’s shirt,” Collins shared. “It’s a big deal and we have a lot of fashion opinions.”

For Gaylon and Drew Brown, one year in particular was most memorable.

“We had a shirt probably about 10 or 12 years ago that didn’t quite turn out like we expected. It was a brown golf shirt and had a metal emblem on the sleeve,” Drew said with a laugh. “So not only was it horribly ugly, but when you put it in the dryer, it would toss around loudly and scratch the inside.”

Unwavering commitment

Ultimately, the bond shared for all involved - the committee, sponsors and donors, as well as the volunteers and golfers - was a unified commitment to serve those in need in the North Texas community. That annual day of golf had a purpose.

“A major byproduct of this tournament has been the ability to introduce Buckner to people who either didn’t know us or didn’t know the kind of ministry we have become over the years,” Collins said. “So the tournament provided an educational component for volunteers and players. It’s also helped us connect with current donors who became invested in the tournament and, in turn, developed a deeper connection with Buckner.”

Through the thousands who supported, planned and participated in the Sewell Golf Classic, vulnerable children and families in North Texas felt your impact.

From entire families receiving life-changing services at a Buckner Family Hope Center® to single mothers receiving support as they finish school and take care of their families, and to the children who found safe, loving forever homes, it was never just about playing golf. **BT**

The long journey

David Hennessee exits Buckner board after 40 years.

Story by Scott Collins • Photography by Tim Miller

David Hennessee reached into the big round glass jar one of his nurses had given him at the start of his health journey. The jar contained hundreds of Bible promises. Rather than digging around inside the jar, he simply took the first one his hand touched. It became his constant companion in the coming months at every doctor visit, chemotherapy treatment and radiation session.

Recounting his journey through cancer, he recalled the severe pain that knifed him every day. As he rose out of bed each morning and felt the pain, he reminded himself, "This is the day the Lord has made and I will rejoice and be glad in it, come what may."

Months after the rhythm

of his cancer treatments has faded, Hennessee recalls lessons he learned during those uncertain days. For nearly 40 years, Buckner has been his second family. Elected to the board of trustees in 1985, Hennessee carries a vast amount of knowledge gleaned from hundreds of meetings spanning three of the six presidents in the organization's history. His business and financial acumen contributed to shaping Buckner over the past four decades as much as any non-employee.

But he admits now he learned more about Buckner during his cancer journey than even he knew.

"I learned about the Buckner family in ways I never expected," he says. Through the prayers of staff and fellow trustees, through cards and letters, emails and text messages, he feels as if the entire Buckner universe walked through his journey by his side.

Even a text message from a fellow trustee encouraged him to remember "the Lord will use your journey to bless others. It will be a part of your testimony," the board member wrote.

"I did not know what she was saying to me at the time," Hennessee says. "It was early in my journey. I do now. I understand."

STARTING LINE

Hennessee refers to his election as a Buckner trustee in 1985 as "the hand of God." It started when the associate pastor at his church asked if he'd be interested in learning about Buckner and being on the board. He said yes and asked what he needed to do next.

Growing up the son of a bi-vocational Baptist pastor in Texas, Hennessee was familiar with Buckner. He recalls putting his pennies and nickels in the birthday jar for Buckner Orphans Home as a child.

His background working at Holt Caterpillar would prove instrumental in Hennessee's years on the board. He retired as CFO of the company and used his business knowledge throughout his time on the Buckner board, serving as chair of the Finance Committee, board vice chair and board chair.

He was officially elected as a trustee and joined the Buckner board, never dreaming it was the start of a 40-year journey. In those days, Buckner operated three senior living communities in Texas and served children around the state. But the center of the Buckner world was the campus on Buckner Boulevard in Dallas. Hennessee remembers the campus "in full bloom and full blossom." Children lived in dormitories and ate together in the historic Manna Hall. The home included a school, infirmary and even a farm. "It was a small city with hundreds of children," he remembers.

R.C. Campbell was president when Hennessee joined the board, followed by Ken Hall and today, Albert Reyes, giving Hennessee the distinction of serving with half of Buckner's presidents.

ALONG THE WAY

Hennessee describes his tenure as a trustee fondly, referring to board meetings as "a revival personally" because of the inspiration he received over the years hearing about Buckner's ministries and learning "about the impact of Buckner and what it has meant on the lives of children, families and senior adults. Goodness. It's just

rewarding," he says.

But he also recalls times when the board disagreed. Those were "healthy times of discussion and growth for the board." A byproduct of that board development, he believes, is a board culture that has become more open through the years compared to his first days.

"We've learned more about best practices for boards. We've learned more about the importance of being able to express our insights and our wisdom related to certain issues we have come in contact with."

Throughout his 40 years with Buckner, Hennessee says he worked with other board members to "do what is right and do the right thing and do it in a way that is loving and kind. This board is a family."

Giving his time, knowledge and guidance to Buckner brought rewards in return, he believes. Among those are his spiritual and professional growth. But just as important has been his growing understanding about the needs "for those who are not as fortunate as myself and many of our board members. Buckner continues to be an eye opener for me."

"It shocks me into reality," he adds. "It provides me a source of enthusiasm knowing that God's work is being done in an excellent manner and to be associated with Buckner and its excellence. It's a godsend. It's biblical. It is what we are called to do."

Blending his public accounting expertise with the ministry of Buckner has been a constant blessing, he says. Knowing the Lord used a "finance guy" to serve Buckner is a reward he thinks about often.

And while Hennessee believes Buckner's approach to business and finance, its adaptability over the decades and its willingness to change are keys to the organization's success, he acknowledges the most important factor is God's blessings.

"The big thing is that the Lord has continued to have his hand (on Buckner) and we acknowledge that. We don't step away from it. We step into the Lord's leadership. We step into the way Jesus ministered. We step into the way he cared."

THE JAR

When he pulled his hand out of the jar that day, Hennessee looked at the slip of paper and knew things were OK no matter how things turned out. Today, months later, he carries the Bible verse with him on that folded piece of paper.

He recites the verse with the cadence of an excited child and the intensity of an Old Testament prophet. The verse is more than words. It is a promise and the words penetrate the air.

The verse is Isaiah 41:10 and even though he is holding the slip of paper, it's obvious he's quoting the verse from memory.

"Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my righteous hand."

With a slight glance up, he recites it again, this time making it personal.

"I am with you, Buckner. God says I am with you. Buckner, do not be dismayed. Buckner, I am your God. Buckner, I will strengthen you. Buckner, I will help you. Buckner, I will uphold you with my righteous hand. Amen." BT

Once a Rangerette, always a Rangerette

Former Rangerettes at
Buckner bond over shared history

Story by Melissa Grych • Photography by Tim Miller

The iconic white boots and hats of the Kilgore College Rangerettes remain the same as when Mae Horn, 99, Grace Raney, 97, and Frances Hall, 90, were members of the world-famous drill team.

Some of the first members, the three women now live together at Buckner Westminster Place in Longview, Texas, just a short 30-minute drive from the home of the Rangerettes at Kilgore College in Kilgore, Texas.

They are warm and welcoming, true southern kindness and hospitality. But as they begin to share memories, you quickly learn there's more to the story. Like any girl from Texas, they're also made of grit and a little sass. Who else in their 90s would ask to show you her high kick? A Kilgore College Rangerette.

Animated and lively, the ladies tell stories that go beyond the





Times have changed since, from left, Frances Hall, Grace Raney and Mae Horn were Kilgore College Rangerettes, but what remains the same is the laughter and memories of their remarkable experiences with the world-famous team.

football field. From the stage of the Ed Sullivan Show to military bases across Texas and Soldier Field in Chicago, the women tell the story of rich, vibrant lives.

True to Texas roots, these ladies are pioneers. And like any Texas story, when you meet them, you won't forget it.

Texas traditions

Born as halftime entertainment during football games, the Kilgore College Rangerettes changed history. They were the very first drill team, combining dance and high kicks precisely choreographed to music. The iconic red and blue uniforms with white cowboy hats and tasseled boots remain exactly as they did when worn by Horn, Raney and Hall.

Well, almost the same. The skirts today are quite a bit shorter, the three ladies agree. And dancing before the addition of modern hosiery made winter performances especially cold, added Hall.

Horn, who turned 99 in August, was a member of the second and third lines in 1941 and 1942.

"I thought it'd be fun. I had seen the Rangerettes and I liked it. And I had been dancing for a good while, so I thought, well, I'll try out. So I did and I got in. That was a thrill when your name was called," Horn recalled.

Raney was a member in 1944 and 1945. "When I became a Rangerette, it was the only thing to do. It was World War II," she explained.

Hall was a member in 1950 and 1951. By then, the Rangerettes were becoming a phenomenon.

"When I became a Rangerette, it's what every girl wanted to be," she said.

Hard times, good times

Like much of life, the war impacted the Rangerettes. There was no football team for a period of time because so many young men joined the military, recalled Raney.

Although the team was created to perform on football fields, the Rangerettes evolved during the war years, performing at military bases and serving as the goodwill ambassadors that they are known as today.

"Even though it was a depressing time with the war years, we had a

good time," Raney said.

Her favorite routine was to the 1944 chart-topping song "Pistol Packin' Mama" by Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters. She laughed remembering a comedy of errors and their director's exasperation.

"We each had two cap pistols in our pockets and we did the routine. And then at the end, we were supposed to come down on our right knee, have pistols out and shoot them," she laughed. "I had mine turned around the wrong way. There'd be a pop here, a pop there and a pop hit. None of them worked...We were hysterical."

Today the Rangerettes make special appearances all over the world, from the White House to the annual Cotton Bowl Classic in Dallas to parades in New York and as far as Paris, France.

Family and fellowship

Even though these ladies' time with the team did not overlap, their shared history and experience connects them. They have more than talent and fame. They are part of a fellowship connecting women across generations.

And that's what makes life rich – connection, friendship and fellowship, said David Ummel, executive director of Buckner Westminster Place.

"I love hearing their stories. There's so much wisdom," he said. "My work is incredibly enriching here. I love having relationships with our residents and getting to know them and to know their story and getting to walk with them during this time."

Rangerettes to come

On Dec. 29, the current line of Rangerettes marched onto the field for their annual performance at the Cotton Bowl Classic football game between the Missouri Tigers and the Ohio State Buckeyes.

Indeed, today's drill teams and dance squads are as American as football. Horn, Raney and Hall helped create that legacy for many Rangerettes and drills teams who have followed in their footsteps - and high kicks. **BT**

How to talk to your parents about senior living options

BY CHARLIE WILSON
PRESIDENT, BUCKNER RETIREMENT SERVICES

Life has a funny way of coming full circle. There are plenty of uncomfortable conversations we all remember our parents having with us when we were children, such as death, the birds and the bees, and Santa Claus. Eventually, we hit the age when we must initiate tough conversations with our parents – the primary one being senior living care. And from experience, I can tell you that even for me, as president of Buckner Retirement Services, this was challenging. But I can give you some advice to make this easier for you and your parents.

Here are six tips to help you talk with your parents about senior living:

Test the Waters – This is an important conversation that could lead to significant changes, so it's best to check in with your parents about how they are doing and what challenges they're needing help with. Do

research about how those challenges can be addressed and who offers the support they need.

Lead with Empathy – Try to put yourself in their shoes and approach the conversation with their feelings in mind. Starting the conversation with a listening ear and empathy for their thoughts and concerns will help build trust.

Focus on the Benefits – A perceived loss of independence is often the driving resistance towards various forms of care and living alternatives. However, senior living communities offer numerous benefits unavailable to most in a standard house or apartment. Talk to your parents about the social opportunities, as well as the amenities and service options available. Identify what their typical day looks like



currently, how has it changed positively or negatively, and what would an ideal “typical day” look like to them now.

It’s a Marathon – Have you ever heard the phrase, “It’s a marathon, not a sprint?” Well, that’s true of this particular conversation. Start talking with your parents about senior living options well before a change or move is necessary. Change becomes harder as we get older, and the best change occurs when your parents are in the driver’s seat of the decision making.



Strength in Numbers – You don’t have to have this conversation with your parents on your own. Seek help from your relatives and their friends, physician and faith leader. Each person can bring their unique perspective to the conversation. There are abundant resources available when it comes to making the right choice to “right size” living accommodations, moving to a new home and assuring legal affairs are in order.

Provide Options – Giving your parents a single option can seem like a demand, while talking with them about various senior living options will allow them to make a choice. Some of these options include part-time or full-time in-home care, 55+ active adult communities, independent living and assisted living communities. Continuing care communities like Buckner allow seniors to age in place with all levels of care provided in one campus setting.

It’s important for you to be patient when talking with your parents about a big change like this, but if you follow the above tips, it will be obvious you are coming from a place of love. Visit BucknerRetirement.org for more advice about senior living and our Buckner communities. **BT**

Because of your generosity, lives are being **TRANSFORMED**

Buckner wishes to thank the following individuals, corporations, foundations and other organizations for their charitable contributions of \$1,000 or more during the third quarter of 2023.

Abell-Hanger Foundation, Inc.
Acme Truck Line, Inc.
ADG Concepts
AEP Swepco
Aggreko Rental
American Endowment Foundation
AmWins Group, Inc.
Ann and Wellford Tabor FCF Fund
Apache Industrial Services
B C Ziegler & Company
Baker Drywall Management, LLC
Brock Group
C.J. Thomsen Marital Trust
Chaparral Foundation
Charities Aid Foundation America
Chevron Phillips Chem Co LP
Christus Health
Community National Bank
Headquarters
CSW Industrials
Dr. Kent Roberts & Ilene Roberts
Balliett Foundation
Dugan Charitable Trust

Ecolab-Nalco Water
Edward Jones
Enterprise Holdings, LLC
Garvey Texas Foundation
Gil and Brenda Gillam Charitable Fund
Greenbrier Development
H. H. and Edna Houseman
Charitable Trust
Hanover Insurance Group
HDS Foundation
Heard Family Trust
Helen Irwin Littauer Educational Trust
Jane E. and Les Campbell
Charitable Fund
John R. McCune Charitable Trust
Ken W. Davis Foundation
Kent Companies
Kimble Foundation Trust
KVNE Studios
Landmark Resources, Inc.
Longview Regional Hospital Auxiliary
MedPro Group
Merrick Foundation

Mildren Family Foundation
Motiva Enterprises, LLC
National Christian Foundation Texas
National Financial Services, LLC
Nell McCallum & Associates, Inc.
Olson Engineering
Pinon Foundation
Quiet Zone Auto Care
Refined Technologies
Resnick Foundation
Robert W. Knox & Pearl Wallis Knox
Charitable Foundation
Shell Oil Company Foundation
Matching Gifts C/O Cyber Grants
Sid W. Richardson Foundation
Single Source, Inc.
SmallwoodHome.com, LLC
State Fair of Texas
Texas Mutual Worker’s
Compensation Insurance
Texas Women’s Foundation
The Beaumont Foundation of America
The Crystal Charity Ball

The Hoglund Foundation
The J. E. and L. E. Mabee
Foundation, Inc.
The Jeanne R. Johnson Foundation
The National Christian Foundation
Houston
The Ryan Foundation
The Westbrooks Family
Charitable Fund
The Yarborough Foundation
Total Energies
Univar USA, Inc
Vapor Point
Wayne and Jo Ann Moore
Charitable Foundation
Wells Fargo Foundation
WISP, Inc.
Xcel Energy Foundation
Young Learners School
Zachry Group

Buckner International

700 N. Pearl, Suite 1200, Dallas, TX 75201

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Dallas, TX
Permit No. 530

Foster care fosters **LOVE.** Foster care fosters **HOPE.**

There are **30,000 Texas children** in foster care and not enough licensed families to provide them with love and hope.

We need more families willing to open their hearts and homes.

To learn more about becoming a foster family for children in need, **scan the QR code or visit Buckner.org/foster-care-adoption.**



BUCKNER
Hope shines here.®

