

See inside for ways you can support families.

Buckner

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Today

A TEXAS
ORIGINAL



PAGE 24



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11
Every child
deserves a family
Texas foster care by
the numbers.



12
The fighter
The sirens
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LEADERSHIP

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 **BUCKNER**
Hope shines here.®



“ ”

God called us to serve the widows and orphans... While our role is having kids in our home, others have answered the calling by supporting us. We don't feel alone, and that means everything. – Read more about ways to support foster families on page 20.

Departments

04 PERSPECTIVES ON BUCKNER

We are called to foster care

President/CEO Albert L. Reyes

06 IN OTHER WORDS

Encouragement

Scott Collins

08 BUCKNER JOURNAL

22 VOICES

OF BUCKNER

The Foster Care Journey: Opening Your Heart and Your Home

Debbie Sceroler

16



Just for a time

'We're here until the kids don't need us anymore.'

20



Walking alongside foster families

Showing God's love in tangible ways to foster families.

32



A Culture of Giving Back

Family Hope Center® student becomes the teacher.

ORIGINAL A TEXAS



24

Memories of days in the rodeo, under the coliseum lights, down in the arena dust, crowds cheering, bulls huffing and kicking in the pen.





We are called to foster care

As a young man, I felt God’s call into full-time Christian ministry. I thought that meant preaching because that’s the only kind of Christian calling I knew.

In one way, I was right. I did become a pastor. But my years in ministry opened a whole vista of opportunities besides the pulpit I never knew existed. The Bible illustrates God’s calling for people to both be something, but to also do something. And those are usually connected.

Throughout scripture, we see God calling people to be followers, prophets, leaders, disciples, and a host of other titles. But we also see intertwined in the biblical narrative God calling people to do special tasks, often related to what they are called to be.

I believe we are – all of us – called to foster care. Maybe your calling is providing a loving home for foster children as illustrated through stories in this issue of *Buckner Today*. Or maybe your calling is to support foster families and children in foster care through respite care, giving foster parents a night off. You are also fulfilling the call to care for foster children when you financially support children in our care.

The need has never been greater.

The Christian Alliance for Orphans (CAFO), where I am a board member, reports the number of children in foster care nationwide each year is around 392,000. While California, with the largest state population, leads the nation in the number of children in foster care, Texas is second. In 2023, the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services reported 30,739 Texas children were in foster care. The vast majority of those, 21,500, were children under the age of 10 and 14,824 were under 5 years old. As you read this, there are more than 4,700 children in Texas waiting for adoption.

Protect children

At Buckner we emphasize four major “pillars” to explain our ministry goals: protect children, strengthen families, transform generations, and serve seniors.

Protecting children has been the heart of our ministry for 145 years, from our beginnings as an orphanage and the transition into residential children’s homes in the late 20th century. Foster care has emerged as a key component for protecting children because it enables us to place children in a family environment. As successful as residential children’s homes and orphanages were in their day, we

believe children deserve a home and family.

Buckner began foster care work in 1959, while still operating children’s homes across Texas. That first year, we placed 54 children in foster homes, while serving a total of 483 children through all programs. In 2023, we placed 548 children in foster homes, facilitated adoptions for 90 children, and served 16 through our NextStep program for foster children aging out of care. From a purely statistical perspective, foster care enables us to care for and protect more boys and girls than we did during the days of running an orphans’ home.

Ultimately, the goal of foster care is reuniting children with their biological family as often as possible. Nationwide, according to CAFO, fewer than 50% of all foster children are eventually reunified. That means more than half of the foster children in the United States need out-of-home placement.

While the reasons children are removed from their parents varies, neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse are among the primary reasons, according to statistics from 2021. With help, some parents overcome these issues and children can be reunited. But all too often these prove insurmountable issues, leaving children in out-of-home placement.

**“Seek justice,
defend the
oppressed. Take up
the cause of the
fatherless; plead the
case of the widow.”**

–Isaiah 1:17

Our calling

God called the Prophet Isaiah during a particularly trying time for his people. Isaiah (and Micah) showed up during a time of unfaithfulness to God. A series of degenerate leaders had led the people of God away from God.

In this context, Isaiah raised a strong and determined voice, pointing out the people’s shortcomings contrasted with God’s expectations.

Isaiah wasted no time, starting off in chapter one by telling the people God has had enough. “Hear the word of the Lord,” he shouts, and then tells them their celebrations and feasts mean nothing to God. What God wants is for them to “wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from my sight. Cease to do evil.”

It’s one thing to stop doing evil. But what do you do instead? God tells them. The opposite of doing evil is learning to do good (Isaiah 1:17). “Seek justice, defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.”

All of us who call ourselves God’s people have a calling to

care for vulnerable children rooted in the Bible, from the Old Testament texts to the New Testament model of Jesus, who called the children to himself.

We can do more than we're doing now. I believe that. If God's people ban together for the cause of the foster child and the support of foster parents, we can change "the system." But more importantly, we can change the lives of thousands of children.

After all, we are called to foster care. **BT**



A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink.

Albert Reyes, President and CEO
Buckner International

Visit my blog at www.AlbertLReyes.com

Foster.
Babysit.
Cook.
Pray.



Everyone

is called to foster care.
-Isaiah 1:17

How will you answer the call?



Encouraged

Looking ahead, the trip I was about to take sounded like a good idea weeks before. But when the time came to leave for six days, it felt more like a weight tied to my ankle.

I started in Dallas Sunday afternoon, flew to Houston and then drove to Beaumont. After a video shoot there, I headed back to Houston, spent the night, got up early Tuesday morning and flew to Harlingen, where I drove to Mission for another video shoot on Wednesday. Thursday morning was another flight to Houston on my way to Midland for a Friday morning shoot and finally back to Dallas Friday evening.

Five nights in five different hotel rooms. I traversed Texas from Beaumont to the Rio Grande Valley, to Midland and back to North Texas.

But what started as a discouraging trip because of its length of time and breadth of the travel soon turned into multiple moments of hope.

Sitting with Paul and Daisy Ledet (at right, see story on page 16), I was encouraged by the dedication and love for children that drive them to serve more than 150 children through foster care.

Through tears of grief, Elvira Guana remembered the determination of her son, Bryan, who was killed in a car accident at 21. It was Bryan who pushed Elvira to find the Buckner Family Hope Center® at Peñitas in the Rio Grande Valley.

Priscila and Roman Molinar (pictured below) brought a smile to my face as I listened to a story of love between a mother and her son who struggled until they found Buckner Family Pathways® in Midland.

By the time I boarded the final flight home, I was encouraged. These three stories of hope reminded me this is what it's all about. I can get lost sitting at my computer day after day or in the cycle of

everlasting, never-ending meetings. The push to complete goals and check items off my to-do list can consume me.

But throughout my time at Buckner, I've found the most encouragement when I'm with the people we serve.

Let's be honest. The words "encouragement" or "encouraged" can sound kind of weak or passive. I'd much rather be excited than encouraged. But there is something strong and lasting about encouragement. I love the biblical definition of encouragement that calls it "inspiration to hope and service."

The best New Testament example of that is Barnabas. His real name was Joseph, but he was such an encourager the Apostles nicknamed him Barnabas, meaning "son of encouragement." It stuck. (Acts 4:36-37)

Barnabas pops up throughout the Book of Acts and every time he does, he's encouraging someone or supporting others. The ultimate compliment for Barnabas comes in Acts 11:24 when he is referred to as a "good man and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith."

Our hope as we assemble stories for each issue of *Buckner Today* is that you are encouraged and "inspired to hope and service." Certainly, those of us who interview the subjects and write these stories are encouraged. More than what keeps us going, these stories of encouragement are the reason we're here. **BT**



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



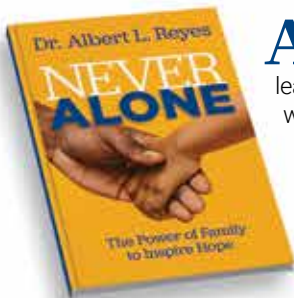


“Throughout my time at Buckner, I’ve found the most encouragement when I’m with the people we serve.”

BUCKNER *Journal*

>> **Never Alone: The Power of Family to Inspire Hope**

Reyes' book explores biblical families and what we can learn for today



Albert L. Reyes is fond of saying “something doesn’t have to be perfect to be good.” He learned more about the truth of those words while researching and writing his newest book.

Never Alone: The Power of Family to Inspire Hope is Reyes’ third book. Like his previous two, *Never Alone* explores a topic relevant to Buckner International, where he serves as the ministry’s president and CEO.

“Family is God’s design,” Reyes writes in the book. “But imagine a world without family. What would it be like? You would never attend a family reunion. You would have no one to invite to your wedding. You would have no spouse to commit your life to. No children or grandchildren. You would not gather with family for special holiday celebrations. You might feel alone. Isolated. As if you didn’t belong. But that isn’t what God had in mind,” Reyes adds. “So, he established the family.”

Reyes explores nine families in the Bible, taking a “microscope to each one” to learn from their stories.

“I thought I knew the stories,” he says.

“But as I took that microscope to examine everything about the family, I was surprised at what I found. I looked at my own family and realized we’re normal after all, because all the families I found in the Bible need help.”

Part of Reyes’ motivation for writing about the importance of family comes from his 17 years at Buckner where he witnessed firsthand the role families play in the lives of children and in society.

“I’ve seen efforts across the years at diminishing the importance of family. But really, at the core of our work is family,” he says. “So, I raised the question, ‘Do we really still need families in the 21st century?’ Of course, the answer is yes. That’s why I wrote *Never Alone*.”

Reyes hopes readers of the book will look at the families he explores and “find that there is power in the family to give hope to its members.” He says, “I hope readers find themselves in the story and can identify with the frailty of human families and the fact that we are dysfunctional, and we need hope. We need a redeemer and a savior to put it back together to help the family be what it can be, what God intended.”

The book, published by Iron Stream Media, released in May and is available on Amazon or from Iron Stream Media. **BT**

»» Buckner to acquire Fort Worth senior living community

Buckner Retirement Services was declared the prevailing party to acquire Fort Worth senior living community, The Stayton at Museum Way. It will be the seventh senior living community in Texas operated by Buckner. The anticipated closing date for the purchase is June 1, 2024.

The 11-story community is located in the heart of the West 7th Cultural District and consists of 188 independent living units, 42 assisted living units, 20 memory care units, and 46 nursing units. It is managed as a not-for-profit community.

"We are proud to welcome The Stayton at Museum Way to the Buckner family," said Charlie Wilson, president of Buckner Retirement Services. "Our top priority is building relationships with The Stayton's team members and residents, welcoming them to Buckner, and helping ensure the transition is a smooth and positive experience."

Wilson added that acquiring The Stayton is an opportunity to support and enhance an already beautiful and culturally rich community with the Buckner mission to follow the example of Jesus through service and its vision of service excellence. "The Stayton is a natural fit with Buckner based on the service we already provide in DFW, and our values of faith, integrity, respect, service, and teamwork," he said. **BT**



Photo courtesy of HKS

»» Buckner Lubbock hosts ribbon cutting ceremony for new office

Buckner Children and Family Services celebrated the grand opening of its new offices in Lubbock with a ribbon cutting ceremony and reception on Thursday, April 11. The new offices house the Buckner Foster Care and Adoption program and the Buckner FYi Center.

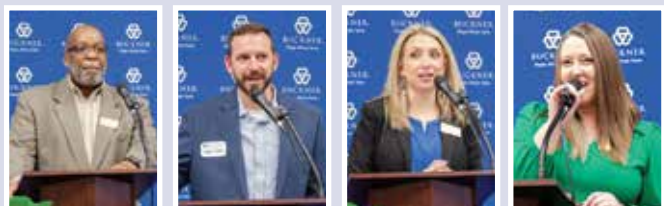
"We believe strong families is one of the ways we protect children, but strong families also make strong communities," said Henry Jackson, president of Buckner Children and Family Services. "The future of the Lubbock community looks bright and full of hope."

The event drew around 50 people including Texas Senator Charles Perry and leaders from local churches, schools, organizations, and businesses. Senator Perry delivered remarks praising the work of Buckner and other nonprofits in protecting Lubbock children.

"The powerful collaborative spirit is one of the things I love about Lubbock. We can do more good in the community when we do it together," added Bekah Coggins, director of transition services for Buckner Children and Family Services. "As we walk along with the children and families we serve, we depend on everyone here to walk alongside us too."

Attendees took tours of the new office space and learned

more about foster care and adoption services offered to Lubbock families by Buckner, and about the Buckner FYi Center, dedicated to serving Lubbock youth aging out of foster care. **BT**



Children Thrive in Loving Homes

A family can be a powerful unit, a cocoon of love and support. That's why foster care is special. It allows vulnerable children to feel secure, loved and protected so they can flourish.

Foster care serves a critical need for children. Neglect and abuse are common reasons why children are removed from their home and enter the foster care system, according to the Department of Family and Protective Services.

The goal of foster care is to remove children from unsafe or unhealthy environments and place them in a safe home while their biological family works toward reunification. When a child is removed from an unsafe or unhealthy environment, foster families provide a stable environment for a child to grow while a permanency plan is made.

Families who open their hearts and homes for foster care provide

more than just a safe environment. Research shows children thrive when placed in loving homes with families.

Creating welcoming homes for a child to experience warmth and attention for a season positively impacts both the foster and biological families for a lifetime.

No matter who you are, you can help children in foster care. From becoming a foster parent, supporting those who become foster families through respite care and other support, or through the gift of your time or finances, it takes a village to support the thousands of children in need. **BT**

**Learn more about Buckner Foster Care
at www.buckner.org/fostercare.**



Every child deserves a family

The primary goal of foster care is reunification with the family of origin. Until that time, foster care provides a safe and nurturing home.

2023 in review:

30,739 → **21,500** → **14,824**
Texas children in foster care are ages 10 and under are under the age of 5

4,711
Texas children waiting for adoption

90
Adoptions through Buckner in Texas

548
Texas children placed in Buckner foster homes

Greatest areas of need in foster care:

Sibling groups | Older children | Children with complex or special needs

Learn more about the different ways you can support foster care, including no-obligation, virtual informational meetings. Visit buckner.org/fostercare.



Sources: Texas Department of Family Protective Services, Buckner International



Answered prayers

Healthy and happy on adoption day, Dezi Briscoe is thriving.

THE Bright

The sirens. Patrick Briscoe remembers the sound vividly. It was the best noise he could have heard, even while being in “the zone” of administrating CPR to the child lying limp in his arms.

er

Story by Scott Collins
Photography by Lindsey Searle
and courtesy of Holly Briscoe

The sirens meant help had arrived. But to Patrick, Holly, and their two teenage daughters, it also meant God had answered their prayers.

Dezi, the Briscoes' infant foster child, was sound asleep in her car seat when Holly arrived home after an appointment in Dallas. Holly knew something wasn't quite right, but she felt like Dezi was just having an off day. Holly watched her closely, knowing from her experience with their oldest daughter Addison that premature babies can experience special issues.

As Addison hovered over Dezi, keeping a close eye on her, she commented that things didn't seem right. When Holly came into the living room and picked Dezi up from the car seat, Dezi went completely limp and didn't seem to be breathing. As Holly patted the child's back, nothing happened.

Patrick, an orthodontist, was in the backyard. Holly instructed Addison to run and find him. All the while, Holly knew that any second Dezi would take a deep breath and everything would be OK. But no breaths came. As Holly prepared herself to start CPR, Patrick rushed into the house. Immediately, his medical training kicked in and he was in the zone.

“You can imagine the scene,” Patrick recalled. “It wasn't necessarily the most controlled environment.”

Patrick started tending to Dezi, holding her limp body in his hands.





Although already wrapped in love, Dezi was surrounded by friends and family on adoption day, Sept. 27, 2023.



Putting her on a hard surface, he checked her airway, breathing, and circulation as he started CPR. Breathing into Dezi, Patrick noticed the air going into her stomach and not her lungs. So he adjusted her body and started over.

“It was a very traumatic experience. But again, you’re in the zone. You know what you (have) to do so you’re just solely focused on that one thing,” he said.

After about five minutes of CPR, Patrick saw milk come from Dezi’s nose and he heard her wheeze. That’s when the family heard the sirens. “That was probably the best noise I could have heard,” he said.

While Patrick was administering CPR, Holly remembered “falling on my knees and crying out to God, ‘God, please save her. Please save her. This can’t be the way her life ends.’”

Less than two hours later, Holly was on a jet from Children’s Hospital flying to Dallas with a little girl the family had known for just eight days. Dezi survived the ordeal and today the family lives happily ever after.

Not so fast

The Briscoes’ journey into foster parenting started when Addison was born prematurely at 27 weeks, or three months early, and she spent 80 days in the neonatal intensive care unit at Good Shepherd Medical Center. The Briscoes had been in Longview for two days, moving from Kansas City, Mo., where Patrick spent six years in practice. It was a rocky start, but the community rallied around the family.

That experience led Holly to consider involvement in foster care. She started slowly “in a very small way for many years.” The more she did, the more she saw a need for respite care and babysitting.

“Through that, I just felt like God kept speaking to my heart,” she said. “You can do more. There’s more that needs to be done.”

They agreed to start “one kid at a time and we’ll just see where it goes. Before every placement, we talked and prayed,” Holly said.

The Briscoes continued through three placements, including one child arriving from the NICU and another “sweet little baby” withdrawing from drugs.

They decided to take a break - until they received a call. The caseworker said, “We have a baby that needs your family.”

When Holly asked for more information, she was told the child was born at 26 weeks and had spent 80 days in the NICU in Longview. The similarities to their own experience were too much to ignore and the Briscoes, knowing they’d been there before, knew they could care for the little girl. Holly was comfortable with all the medical appointments and issues related to a preemie.

“I want to help all the babies all the time,” she said. But the family agreed to spend time in prayer before committing. “We decided, ‘Yeah, we think this little baby Dezi needs to be in our home.’”

Until Dezi, the family’s longest placement had been three months and initially, the Briscoes thought Dezi might be with them for that same period. The plan was to get her healthy and see what happened next.

Home for good

What happened next took two years and seven days. It was Sept. 27, 2023, and Judge Tim Womack’s 307th District Court in Longview was standing room only, the crowd spilling into the hallway. Dezi was the star of the show. Surrounded by family and friends, including several Buckner employees, Holly, Patrick, Addison, and Landrie welcomed Dezi into their home as the fifth member of the family.

“It was surreal,” Holly said. “To think of all that we had been through and all of a sudden, in an instant, she’s declared ours.”

But that instant was preceded by another miracle for the Briscoes and Dezi. While Holly and Patrick have always served foster children with the intent of reunifying them with their biological family, Dezi's medical complexities were going to be an issue for her biological parents. Those hurdles and the Briscoes' desire to adopt Dezi started a journey that ended with divine intervention.

As proceedings to terminate the parents' rights to Dezi moved forward, her biological father hesitated, wanting to stay involved in her life. After praying about the situation, Holly and Patrick talked to the dad in the hallway outside the courtroom.

We were essentially sharing the gospel," Holly remembered. After describing they felt led by God to provide for Dezi, were a good home, and were going to continue providing the therapies and the support to make sure she reached her full potential, things changed.

"So, in the hallways of the courtroom, we saw Jesus show up that morning," Holly said.

The father had just one request. "I don't want my daughter to feel like I gave up on her," he said. At which point the Briscoes assured him that was not the case. They told him they didn't want Dezi to feel that way either, adding they wanted him there for Dezi to the extent he is able and wants to be there. In the end, the dad voluntarily gave up his rights. The Briscoes' attorney told them, "You witnessed a miracle today."

"I don't think there was a moment, a cut and dry moment, when we said, 'Let's adopt this little girl,'" Holly said. "It was (because) we made a promise to God and to this little girl to take care of her to

the best of our abilities, like we would our biological children, until God asked us not to anymore."

The fighter

Watching Dezi toddle around the hallway outside the courtroom, unaware of what was about to happen, it was clear she knows how to capture and hold an audience. And it's clear she has her own opinions. Holly described her as "strong-willed. She's stubborn, but she's using that to become who she's destined to become."

It's that strength and strong will that led her parents to describe Dezi as a fighter. "She had to be. She has had to overcome seemingly insurmountable things in her two years, so she is a fighter," Holly said.

"I think she's going to be strong," Holly added. "Given the guidance and love and us being able to pour into her, she's going to move mountains."

Reflecting on their journey after the adoption was complete, the Briscoes admit "we feel like we really put Buckner to the test the last two years," Holly said. "But Buckner has been instrumental in walking us through every step of the way."

As for Dezi, Holly and Patrick are sure she is becoming the person God wants her to be and their ultimate hope is "that she comes to know God as her savior," Holly said, "that she has a personal relationship with Jesus, that we are able to teach her about him in our life and being able to be involved in our Christian family. We hope she feels fully loved by us and by God and that she is fully part of the Briscoe family and always will be." **BT**



Dezi's adoption day was celebrated by (from left) Judge Tim Womack, Dezi, and the Briscoe family, Holly, Landrie, Addison, and Patrick.



Just for a Time

'We're here until the kids don't need us anymore.'

Story by Scott Collins • Photography by Scott Collins and Bobby Hester

Let's start with the numbers. 150. 10. 2. We'll come back to that.

Paul Ledet glances away for a split second and then looks back. He's remembering the little girl who came to their home a few years ago. She was a scooter who never crawled. Somehow, somewhere – Paul doesn't remember the details – they managed to get a pair of boots for the little girl. She loved those boots. She wanted to wear them every day.

In no time, the girl started pulling herself up, boots and all, using whatever she could hold on to. A table. A chair. Anything close.



"Before you know it, she took a step," Paul says, with a chuckle. "And then she took another step. She went straight from scooting to walking."

In a way, that story is a metaphor for the 150 foster children Paul and Daisy Ledet have served in their home over the past 10 years.

It started when their grandson needed a home. He suffered shaken-baby syndrome and a Texas Child Protective Services caseworker at the hospital looked straight at the couple and asked if they were

willing to take him home and care for him.

For the next seven years, Paul and Daisy cared for their grandson, who required a feeding tube. He was never able to walk or even crawl. After that, Daisy suggested to Paul there were "other kids like him too and I want to help them."

That started a foster care journey that brought them to Buckner after serving with CPS for several years.

It's our passion

Paul was adamant when they started out. "We're not going to adopt any of these kids. We're not going to adopt them. We're not going to do it," he remembers saying over and over. But then a little 15-month-old boy showed up in their home and was soon joined by his sister.

As Paul is fond of saying, "To make a long story short, we adopted them." Now the empty-nest grandparents started all over with two babies. "They keep us young," Paul adds.

Paul is a high school government teacher and Daisy is an elementary school teacher's assistant. Every day, all day long, their lives revolve around helping kids.

"People ask, 'How do you do it?,'" Daisy says. "It's our passion. We love children. We get up in the morning, go to school and work with kids. We come back home, we work with our kids, show them we love them. I'm there to protect them."

"We just like being around kids," Paul adds, "making sure that they can be the best that they can be."

Daisy tells the children who come to their home she's their Harriet Tubman. "I'm there to keep you safe. Whatever it takes, I'm going to do it. That's just what I'm here to do."

Just the right thing

Regardless of how long a child is with the Ledets, the goal is always the same – reunification with the child's biological family if possible.

Everything they do while a child is in their care revolves around that goal. It's the best part of being a foster parent, Daisy says. But it's also the hardest part.

"They come here and you get attached to them. You do," Paul says. "But you have to be able to let go and let them go back home because they're ready to go back home to their mom and dad."

Annie Flemon, Buckner foster care home developer, wishes she could duplicate the Ledets. She sees them as the "perfect mold" for foster parents, adding, "If we could recruit foster parents like Daisy and Paul Ledet, we would be in good shape, because they don't mind putting in the work."

"They do it with passion. It doesn't matter what time we call them. It doesn't matter the age or the race of the children. I can always hear Mr. Ledet say, 'Bring them. Yes, we'll take them.' To me, that is special."

Watching Paul and Daisy interact with children is like watching a maestro conduct a full orchestra. They always know just the right timing for everything happening around them.

"They take everything in stride," Flemon says. "They learn how to deal with it and learn how to handle it."

A whole lot of love

Daisy hopes the example they set for the foster children is something those children take with them the rest of their lives. That includes being emphatic about the plight of others.

"I think if there is one thing I believe is true of all the kids in foster care," Daisy says, "it helps them be able to put themselves in the shoes of another person and say, 'How can I help?' instead of asking, 'Why are they this way?' I would hope that once they are grown, they would also help others."

After 10 years as foster parents, 150 children in their home, and two adoptions, friends and family often ask how much longer they'll do this. But it's not about the years or a timeline for Paul and Daisy. It's about the need.

When people ask how much longer, Daisy gives them an answer both vague and specific.

"Until the kids don't need me anymore," she says. "But for right now, I've got a whole lot of love and a lot of arms of love. So, we're not done until the mission is done." **BT**



Love to share

'I've got a whole lot of love and a lot of arms of love.'



Shine hope into children's lives through Buckner Foster Care

Garrett was just 7 years old when he was placed with foster parents Isaac and Melissa Martin. The couple had fostered for years before Garrett came



into their lives, so they were ready for the unique challenges Garrett brought, including developmental delays and challenges stemming from the trauma and neglect of his past.

But in a loving, stable home with the Martin family, Garrett began to thrive. Isaac and Melissa worked diligently every day to help him learn daily tasks, such as tying shoes, taking a bath and brushing his teeth. Melissa advocated relentlessly for Garrett at school.

A loving support system wrapped around him.

The Martins also had a strong ally in Buckner. The Martins received training on how to assist children with developmental delays like Garrett. Buckner staff made monthly visits to the Martins' home to make sure they were well supported as they took on these challenges.

At Buckner, we believe children belong with a family in a safe and loving home.

With so many children like Garrett, your generosity couldn't be more vital. You can help create the chance to make a forever difference in the lives of more children like Garrett through Buckner Foster Care.

Thank you for helping promote a strong, nurturing, family environment for children through Buckner Foster Care — and shining hope even brighter for the next generation.

Give today: buckner.org/BeAnAlly



Walking alongside foster families

Story by Chris Ruth • Photography by Camryn Hornbrook with New Beginnings

The fact that most foster parents quit within the first year due to a lack of support is a troubling idea to Chelsea Nemati. She and her husband, Sam, were licensed to provide foster care just less than 12 months ago.

“We don’t want that to be our story,” says Chelsea.

The young couple do not have any local family they can call for help with their second placement, an eight-month-old girl – and they also have a lively five-year-old biological daughter, Eden. Even without parents nearby, the Nematis are not short on support. There is a steady stream of warm casseroles and boxes of diapers delivered to their door.

BRIDGING THE GAP

The Nematis are members of New Beginnings Baptist Church, which began a foster care and adoption ministry in early 2023. Since

then, New Beginnings has helped bridge that gap for the Nematis and dozens of other foster and adoptive families in East Texas.

“Our mission statement here at New Beginnings is to be people connecting people to Jesus and his ever-restoring life where we live, work and play,” says Yolanda Robinett, the director of New Beginnings’ fostering and adoption ministry. “So that means we’re to go out. We’re to be involved not just here on Sundays, but in the community where we work, where we have activities.”

Since its establishment in Longview, New Beginnings has prioritized mission efforts in the community and internationally, from feeding the homeless to spreading the love of Christ. Their volunteerism has extended to various Buckner programs over the years, including Buckner Family Pathways® and Camp Buckner.

Recently, Pastor Todd Kaunitz and Pastor George Willis noticed

Showing God’s love

Sam and Chelsea Nemati receive a much-needed donation of diapers for their current foster placement from Yolanda Robinett and the New Beginnings congregation.



a growing need within their own congregation. “We’ve always had people in the church who fostered and adopted, but there has been a gap in how we care for them and how we bring awareness about their needs to the community,” says Willis. “We knew we had to do more.”

Recognizing that need led to the development of a new ministry managed by Robinett.

SHOWING GOD’S LOVE IN TANGIBLE WAYS

The New Beginnings Fostering and Adoption Ministry supports more than 40 families caring for vulnerable children through foster care, kinship care, or adoption, including several families certified through Buckner. Many of the families, like the Nematis, are members of New Beginnings, but the ministry also extends beyond the congregation.

In addition to providing these families with meals and parenting essentials when needed, Robinett helps connect them to life groups for support, encouragement, and prayer. “We wrap around them and show them God’s love in tangible ways,” explains Robinett.

She understands that while most people want to help children in need, not everyone feels called or equipped to become a foster parent. That’s why the church provides a variety of ways for its congregation to get involved.

To date, the church has helped train 14 people as respite care providers who are certified to temporarily provide relief for foster parents by watching their children for short periods of time.

New Beginnings also hosts regular respite nights at the church for three hours to provide a childcare option for foster families. “It’s a chance for foster parents to take a much-needed break, have a date night, soak in the tub, or whatever they like for a few hours knowing their children are having a great time and are well cared for,” says Robinett.

WE DON’T FEEL ALONE

Nearly 200 members of New Beginnings are involved in various aspects of its foster care and adoption ministry. For Chelsea and Sam Nemati, each of those volunteers is a reminder that the body of Christ is not always abstract but can be a literal manifestation.

“God called us to serve the widows and orphans,” says Chelsea. “While our role is having kids in our home, others have answered the calling by supporting us. We don’t feel alone, and that means everything.” **BT**

Eden embraces the role of big sister to the children fostered by her parents.



Become a foster-friendly church

Learn about how your church can provide support for foster care families. From diapers to support groups, there are multiple ways your church can help.

The foster care journey: Opening your heart and your home

BY DEBBIE SCEROLER

SENIOR DIRECTOR OF FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION SERVICES

Foster care is a journey of the heart. It is one of great love, sacrifice, and resilience, both for the children in need and the foster parents who open their homes and lives to the most vulnerable. From the initial decision to become a foster parent to the bittersweet farewells, the journey is filled with triumphs and trials, but also marked by moments of profound relationships and transformation.

Sadly, there are more children entering foster care than there are foster families to meet the overwhelming needs of the more than 30,000 children in care in Texas.

The good news is there is a place for everyone who wants to make a difference in children's lives. Whether you are already on a foster journey or just learning about it, I want to share five important things to know that people often ask me about becoming a foster parent.

Who should foster?

For many foster parents, the journey begins with a calling to foster as a ministry. They desire to make a difference in the lives of children who have unfortunately been separated from their family of origin due to abuse and/or neglect. One thing common with foster families is that they have a strong, heartfelt desire to provide a safe, nurturing, loving environment where children can heal from the effects of abuse and neglect while developing healthy attachments to a family.

Prepare and train

Preparing for the foster care journey involves, first and foremost, seeking knowledge about foster care and the steps required to become a licensed foster home so you and your family can make an informed decision. Becoming a foster parent involves home assessments, rigorous training, and preparation, as you learn about trauma-informed care, behavioral management, and the intricacies of the foster care system.

The good news is you are not alone on the journey. There are professionals equipped to walk through the steps with you and help with guidance along the way.

Managing the emotions

Welcoming a foster child into the home is a momentous occasion, filled with anticipation, excitement, and nervousness. As you open

your doors as a foster parent, you are met with a whirlwind of emotions. Every child comes with their own unique story and needs, and foster parents must adapt their parenting approach accordingly to create a safe and nurturing environment where the child can heal and thrive.

The journey of foster care is not without its challenges. Foster parents often face logistical hurdles, such as coordinating visits with biological families, attending court hearings, and navigating the child welfare system.

Emotions abound as foster parents witness the impact of trauma on children and grapple with feelings of helplessness and frustration. Yet, amidst these difficulties, they find strength in the bonds they form with children in their care and the support networks they cultivate within the foster care community.

One of the most poignant moments in the foster parent journey is saying goodbye. Whether it's reuniting with biological family members or transitioning to a permanent placement, parting ways with a child can be hard. Foster parents must navigate a complex array of emotions from sadness to pride as they bid farewell to a child they have come to love as their own. Despite the pain of separation, foster parents take comfort in knowing they have played a crucial role in the child's journey toward healing.

Pray, be patient, and expect challenges. As you support the children's healing, it's important for you and your family to seek support and commit to ongoing education on the needs of children and youth who have experienced trauma.

A life-changing calling

Despite the challenges and emotions, the journey of foster care is also one of joy and fulfillment. Foster parents bear witness to the resilience of the human spirit as they watch children overcome adversity and flourish in their care. They celebrate milestones, big and small, and cherish the memories they create together as a family. Through it all, foster parents are guided by a deep sense of compassion and commitment, knowing that they are making a difference in the lives of children who need it most.

In the end, the journey of foster care is a testament to the power of love and resilience. Foster parents may not always have all the answers, and they may have a few struggles along the way, but their

unwavering dedication to the well-being of the children in their care is what truly defines their journey. Foster parents shine hope and provide a beacon of light for children who have known only darkness. The reward of making an impact on a child's life is immeasurable.

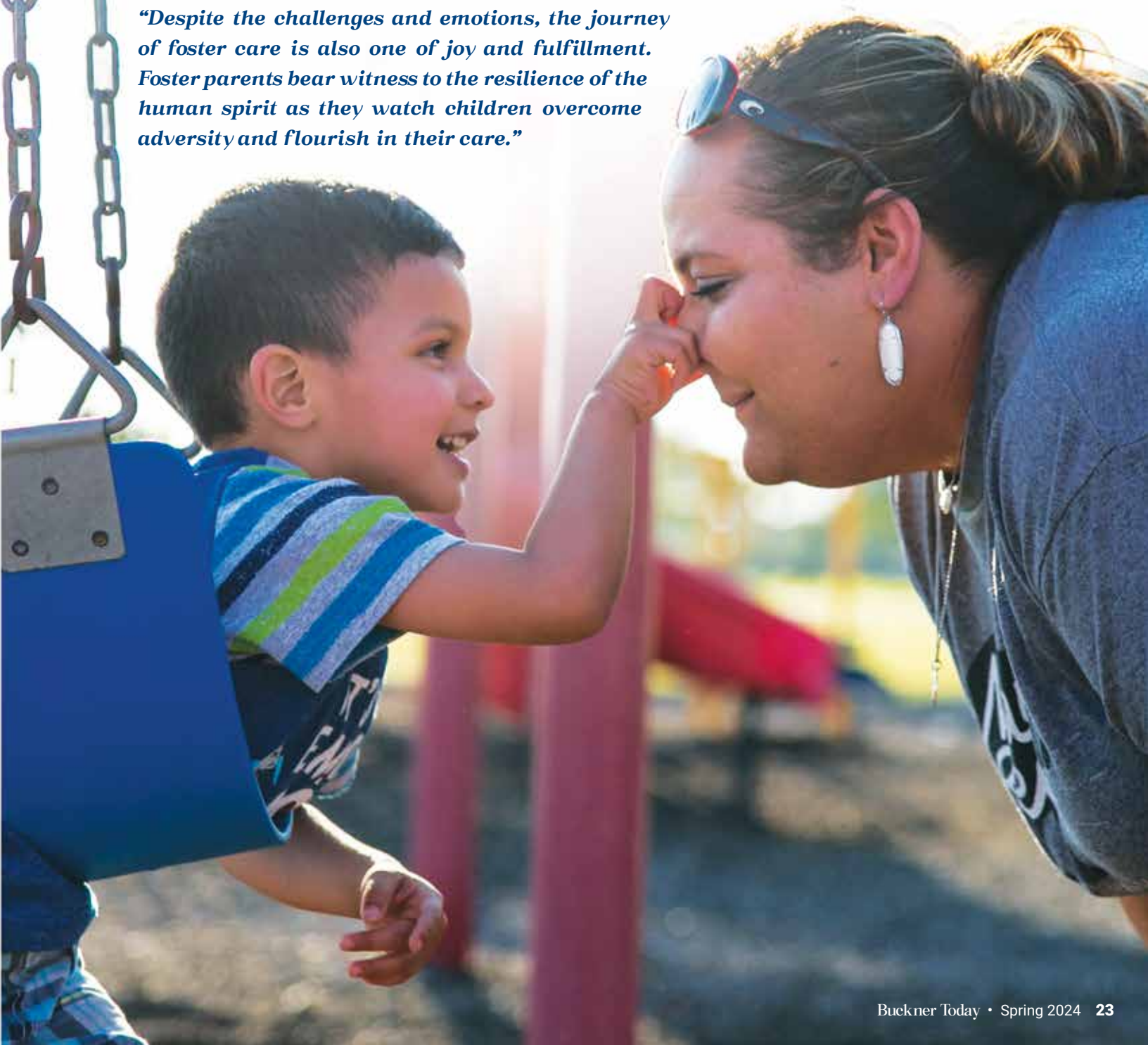
We need you

There is a need for families to provide foster care for any child entering care, however, the greatest need is for older children,

sibling groups, and children with complex needs such as medical needs, developmental, and intellectual differences.

There is also a great need for more people who can support foster families and walk alongside them in the journey. This can be in the form of respite care, babysitters, and individuals who will build a community of support around foster families as they seek to provide stability and nurturing to children who have experienced adversity. Together, we can make a difference. **BT**

“Despite the challenges and emotions, the journey of foster care is also one of joy and fulfillment. Foster parents bear witness to the resilience of the human spirit as they watch children overcome adversity and flourish in their care.”



*A photo essay by
Tim Miller*

ORIGINAL A TEXAS



Don Patton planned on being a cowboy in the rodeo since he was a kid. Or since he was just tall enough to look a rattler in the eye, as they say in Texas.

He made it to the rodeo alright, starting with bucking broncs. Eventually Patton found a different path with purpose and importance – a rodeo clown. Although often known for their antics, rodeo clowns serve a noble and life-saving purpose, distracting the bull or bronc so a cowboy can scramble to safety.

Now retired and living at Buckner Baptist Retirement Community in San Angelo, Patton fondly recalls his days in the rodeo, under the coliseum lights, down in the arena dust, crowds cheering, bulls huffing and kicking in the pen. The buzzer sounds and the gate swings open. Patton is ready. **BT**







Guaranteed payment

Patton and his wife Pat (pictured at right) spent 65 wonderful years together before Pat died in 2019. How did Patton's wife feel about his life in the rodeo? "She didn't particularly like the opportunity to get hurt seeing me out there with a bull hitting you where you sit down. But the kids liked it, and the kids always wanted to go... And I didn't have sense enough to refuse," he said. The job guaranteed payment at a time when so many were struggling, and that's an argument that Pat couldn't argue with.

*The buzzer sounds and
the gate swings open.*



Memories

OF DAYS IN THE RODEO, UNDER THE COLIS
ARENA DUST, CROWDS CHEERING, BULLS HUF



Women

EUM LIGHTS, DOWN IN THE
FING AND KICKING IN THE PEN.



Cowboy camaraderie

"I rodeoed for 30 years... And it gets in your blood. You have such camaraderie with your fellow men who you travel with, you eat with, you sleep with. And then when you get married and have kids, they want to go do the same thing," Patton said. "Cowboys have a personality. Their personality is not always the best, but they stick together. Whether you like him or not, he's your brother." *Photo above courtesy of Peggy Creel*



Between his 30-year career as a rodeo clown and his service in the U.S. Air Force, Patton traveled across the U.S. He joined the Rodeo Cowboys Association which brought rules to follow when you were in "town." No sneakers, caps, or short-sleeved shirts allowed. The dress code required only boots, cowboy hat and long-sleeved shirts, a rule still ingrained in Patton today.

From the photographer

Originally from the northern U.S., my closest interaction with a western hero was what I saw on TV or the local rodeo I once attended with my father. So, when given the chance to meet an actual cowboy living at Buckner Baptist Retirement Community in San Angelo, I jumped at the opportunity. As we waited outside Don Patton's apartment, I knew it was him before I met him. Down the hallway came a tall slender man approaching with purpose - bright pink western shirt, worn-in cowboy boots, and a black cowboy hat. If Hollywood has taught me anything, it was the "bad guys" always wore black cowboy hats, but Patton is far from that. He's been wearing a cowboy hat for nearly 90 years along with wearing many others - cowboy, bronco rider, rodeo clown, U.S. Air Force Staff Sergeant, husband, dad, friend - and legend.

Tim Miller

*Director of Video Production
Buckner International*





A culture of giving back

Buckner Family Hope Center® student becomes the teacher

*Story by Chris Ruth
Photography by Scott Collins*

Amelia Lopez's eyes occasionally wander to the large pot of boiling water and macaroni on the stove. She sits in the kitchen of the Buckner Family Hope Center® at Aldine dividing her time between cooking a pasta salad and discussing her position on the Family Hope Center's advisory council.

Even 25 years after moving to Houston from Mexico, Lopez can still be self-conscious about her English. She is calculated with her words to avoid mistakes. But what she doesn't realize is her English is perfect even when she's multitasking, deftly measuring ingredients while sharing her life story.

It started with ESL

It was the opportunity to enlist in free ESL (English as a second language) classes that first drew Lopez to the Family Hope Center in 2000, when it was still named the Aldine Youth Center.

"I moved to Houston a year earlier and was embarrassed not to be able to speak English well," admits Lopez. "I had a great teacher at the center, Mr. Billy, who encouraged us to keep learning outside class by listening to English music, watching English television shows, and reading books in English."

After Buckner acquired the center in 2012, Lopez saw the amount of educational opportunities grow. She became more involved in the Family Hope Center taking classes like Jobs for Life and Nurturing Parenting.

The latter class Lopez credits for helping her relationship with her 10-year-old



From client to volunteer

Once a client of the Family Hope Center, Amelia Lopez volunteers her time and talents at the center, making sure others are nourished, body and soul.



son, Ilian. “I’ve learned how to talk with him and be more patient,” she says. “And I hope I can be a better example for him as he grows up.”

Eager to give back

Lopez’s confidence grows with each new class completed and skill learned.

“I’m really impressed with how well she speaks English and how serious she takes each of the classes she is enrolled in,” says Vilma Nolasco, Lopez’s former Buckner family coach. “She is so professional and positive with everything she does.”

That positivity extends to volunteerism, as Lopez is a staple at Buckner events. “Amelia always volunteers to prepare or serve food at our events,” says Nolasco. “She is also eager to assist in any other area we may need her and to help other clients at the Family Hope Center.”

This is part of the culture Nolasco and other Family Hope Center team members hope to encourage – a culture of giving back.

“Whenever they need help, I’m here,” adds Lopez with pride.



For the last year, Amelia has been a member of the advisory council for the Family Hope Center at Aldine in Houston. Her guidance helps ensure the center’s services support the community, just as it did for her.



That attitude is why Nolasco recommended Lopez to serve as a member of the Family Hope Center's advisory council. Consisting of a combination of program participants and community leaders, the advisory council helps ensure the Family Hope Center continues to meet current community needs and concerns.

From student to teacher

The pasta salad Lopez prepares is for two of her fellow council members, Isaura Arellano and Marisol Mendiola. The trio of women,

along with Nolasco, meet to recap a recent council meeting – and of course, Lopez wants to make sure everyone leaves with a full stomach.

Nolasco uses the meeting to surprise Lopez with some news. She would like Lopez to become certified to teach some of the classes she's already completed at the Family Hope Center, like Jobs for Life.

"It would be wonderful to teach," says Lopez, not shying away from another way to invest back into the community... or to teach classes in English. **BT**

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