

See inside for ways you can support families.

# Buckner

The magazine of Buckner International | SUMMER 2024

## Today

### Not your typical video game

Virtual reality system unlocks  
happy memories for seniors  
with dementia | PAGE 14



# Buckner Today

A publication of Buckner International  
Volume 49, Number 3 • Summer 2024

## Vibrant senior living

Life is what you make it.  
There can always be more  
to experience and learn –  
no matter your age. **pg12**



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**On the cover:** Baptist Retirement Community, Buckner's senior living community in San Angelo, is using virtual reality as a nonmedical option to improve quality of life for seniors in memory care, such as resident Catherine Hohensee. *Photography by Paige Simkins*

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 **BUCKNER.**  
Hope shines here.®





I witnessed storm clouds, sunburns, and skinned knees, and also a lot of fun and opportunities to rest. Like the spring that trickled behind the dining hall, God's good gifts of family and friendships keep flowing, filling us with peace. – Read more about how Camp Buckner provides hope for Buckner families on page 36.

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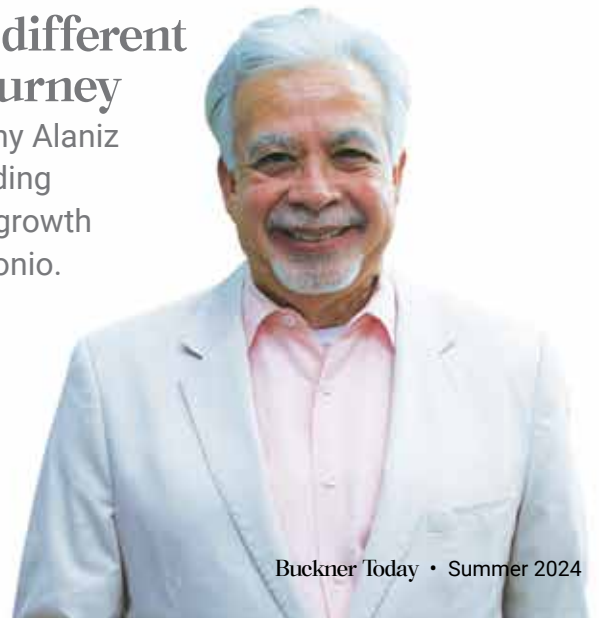
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Camp Buckner gives single-parent families a place of peace to interact with the natural world.





# Future. Growth.

Two brothers in their 80s, dressed in robes and carrying a staff walk into a king's palace.

That may sound like the start of a joke, but it really happened. You can read about it in Exodus. Moses and Aaron, both octogenarians, grabbed their passports and headed to Egypt. Moses was 80 and Aaron was 83. (Exodus 7:7)

Of course, theirs was no ordinary senior adult bus trip. God picked them for a special purpose. I doubt their age mattered to God. He wanted them and they answered. And while they may have tried other excuses to get out of it, they didn't let their age stop them.

While the story of Exodus and the two brothers resonates through the ages for many theological reasons, it also reminds us God uses people of all ages. Age is not an excuse.

## Serving seniors

This year marks the 70th anniversary of Buckner opening our first-ever senior living community. The Trew Home opened in East Dallas on Sept. 19, 1954, followed by the opening of Buckner Baptist Haven in Houston in 1955.

Long before those residential communities for seniors opened, Buckner Orphans Home in Dallas built cottages for the elderly in 1905. The cottages were located far enough from the campus to allow the residents a measure of peace, but near enough for the children, with supervision, to visit the seniors. Among the first to move into a cottage was retired veteran and preacher Elder E.B. Eakin and his wife, both 80.

Ours has always been a James 1:27 ministry, serving the needs of vulnerable children and seniors. In the words of the Apostle James, that is "true and undefiled religion." But as you can imagine, the methods we use in caring for seniors have been completely transformed over the past century. Our mission remains tied to James 1:27 and our Christ-centered commitment to the elderly, but

Father Buckner would scarcely recognize the way we do it today.

## A new age

Back in the mid-1990s, Buckner rejuvenated our senior living ministry, adding communities in Beaumont and Longview, while building a new community in Houston and eventually Dallas. We added San Angelo to our work and completely renovated our campus in Austin. In June of this year, we added The Stayton at Museum Way by Buckner in Fort Worth.

All the increased activity was preparing for the boom, the Baby Boom. Estimates are that 11,200 Americans will turn 65 every day from 2024 to 2027. That equates to 4.1 million a year. Our team at Buckner Retirement Services follows the trends closely and they tell me the Baby Boomers are a different breed, something I already knew, since I am one.

When Buckner was reviving our retirement communities 30 years ago, a lot of the emphasis

in design and construction was on dining. Residents, mostly from the Greatest Generation that survived the Depression and World War II, told us they wanted good food in an inviting atmosphere. So, when Buckner set out building new communities or enhancing existing ones, we put a lot of work into our culinary services.

Fine dining is still an emphasis. Go to any of our seven communities and you'll find residents enjoying delicious food accompanied by relaxing conversations around the meal table.

But in recent years, as Baby Boomers enter our communities, things have begun to change. Boomers want fine food, but they also want activities – a lot of them. The idea of moving to a "rest home" is far from what seniors want today. As a result, we now include state-of-the-art workout rooms and aquatic centers for residents. Life enrichment directors employ creative methodologies that have become the norm in senior living. Rocking chairs have been replaced

**“Our holistic approach of meeting the physical, mental and spiritual needs of seniors sets Buckner apart from many organizations.”**

*The Buckner Orphans Home in Dallas also included cottages (pictured below, far left) for elderly individuals.*



by rock and roll.

This issue of *Buckner Today* explores ways Buckner is inspiring happiness for our residents by offering enriching life experiences. Our communities are places where people come to grow and expand their horizons through an active lifestyle.

## Full and meaningful

Throughout our history, Buckner has sought to do more than just house children. Our focus is on making life better for children and families, while giving them hope for a bright future. There is nothing passive about our work.



But too often our society sees people who have retired as being in a passive stage of life. Even the word “retired” has a passive sound to it. Put out to pasture. Residents living in one of our seven senior living communities are quite the opposite. They are looking for an active lifestyle and expecting to find it when they move into one of our communities. To accommodate those residents, our lifestyles enrichment directors offer innovative options for seniors. In



addition, our teams of fitness specialists tailor physical workouts for residents, meeting them where they are.

We have also increased our focus on delivering spiritual care for residents, adding chaplains to our communities who offer a wide range of opportunities for worship and service to residents. Our holistic approach of meeting the physical, mental and spiritual needs of seniors sets Buckner apart from many organizations.

## The future

We follow trends in senior living closely. One lesson we’ve learned is seniors of different generations want different things. Today the emphasis is on active living. Seniors 50 years from now may well be looking for electronic gaming experiences and artificial intelligence communities.

But one thing that will not change is Buckner’s commitment to fulfilling our biblically based mission of following the example of Christ. Seniors 50 years from now will still need the loving, compassionate care we offer in a faith-based environment that respects and cares for the whole person. **BT**



**Albert Reyes, President and CEO**  
*Buckner International*

Visit my blog at [www.AlbertLReyes.com](http://www.AlbertLReyes.com)



## The keeper

Imagine that ancient time before email, websites, social media, and laptops. Back then, computers were the size of a car and programmers spent hours writing code, coaxing their machines to churn out data on “tapes” only a few could read or understand.

Steve Ingram doesn't have to imagine that time. He was there. Steve retired from Buckner on July 4 – what he called, “My other Independence Day” – after 40 years of running our Information Services Department. When he came to Buckner in 1984, he didn't just join the IS department, he was the department. There was one computer in the entire organization, and it was used for payroll. It had a storage capacity of 147 megabytes (most iPhones today have at least 128 gigabytes).

Guys like Steve are like firefighters. You realize their critical importance when something goes wrong. And something always goes wrong with computers.

But Steve's even-keel and Christlike nature were perfect for his role at Buckner.

One of the first conversations I had with Steve was when we were trying to set up our email. Yes, I also go back to that ancient time too. We needed a URL and were trying secure buckner.com, which wasn't available. Then Steve discovered that as a nonprofit, we could use .org. And the rest is history.

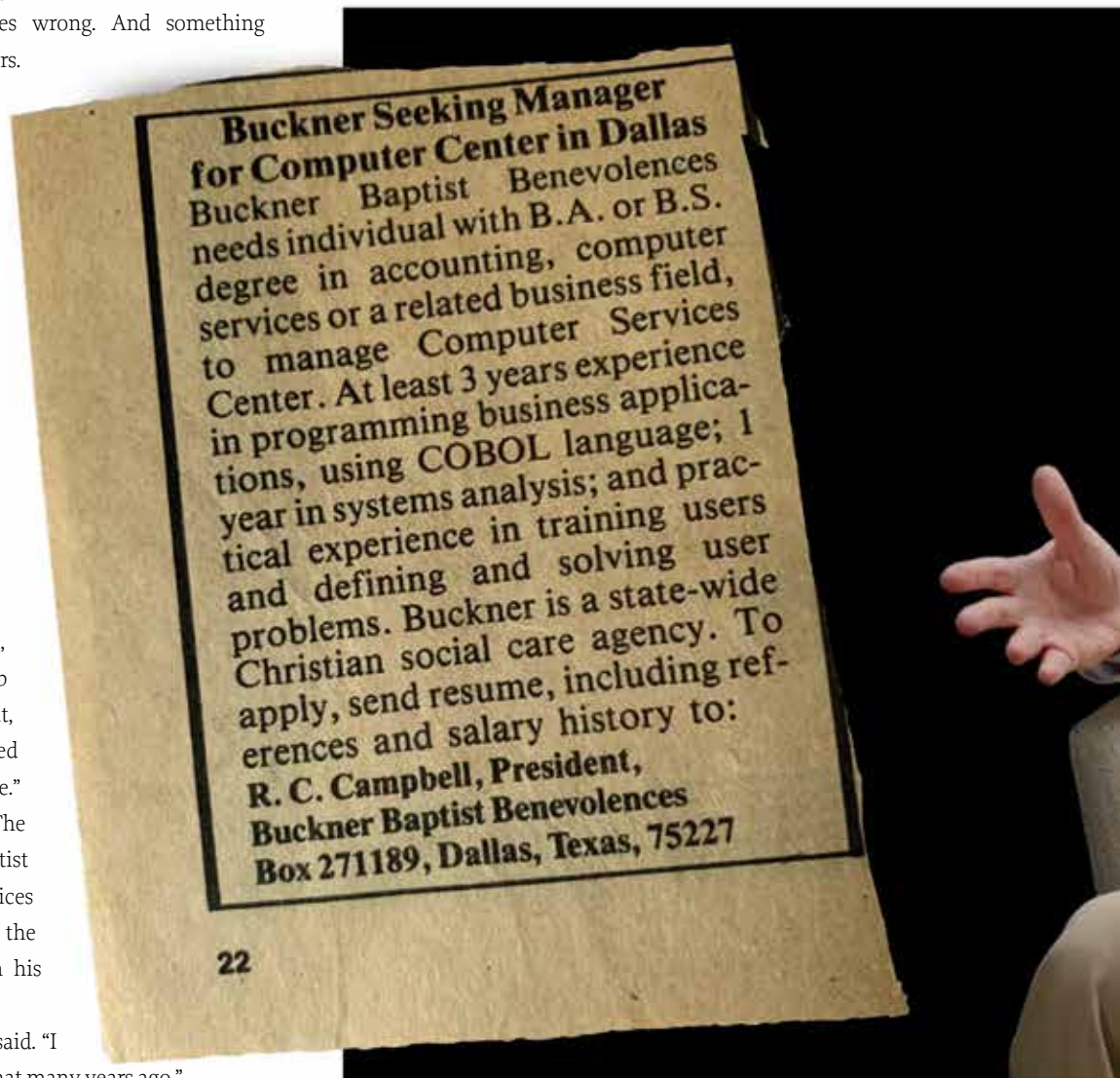
Before joining Buckner, Steve was working as a COBOL programmer for a glass plant in Wichita Falls, Texas. He had looked at other job opportunities, but nothing really fit, so he and his wife Jennifer decided to be “content where we were.” That's when he saw an ad in The Baptist Standard from Buckner Baptist Benevolences for a computer services manager. He clipped the ad from the paper and still has it, along with his offer letter from Buckner.

“That's how it all began,” Steve said. “I just felt a call to come to Buckner that many years ago.”

In 1989, Steve purchased the first-ever personal computer for Buckner at a price tag of \$5,000. Today, the average cost of a PC is around \$630. Armed with a PC and an inkjet printer, he produced reports for board meetings.

Today, Buckner has more than 1,000 PC users now in 31 locations, all connected through a network Steve and his team set up. He has led the organization through transitions, from WordPerfect to Microsoft Word and from GroupWise email to Outlook. “People weren't necessarily happy about that one,” he told me, with a laugh.

With members from his church, Steve has traveled to Guatemala and Honduras on Buckner mission trips, something he said was a



blessing because those trips allowed him to “wear two hats” as a Buckner employee and the missions leader at his church.

“I’ve seen a variety of changes,” he said, “but I still think the main focus has always been caring for people where they’re at (in life) and how you do it, utilizing your resources. The bottom line is, I’ve been able and been privileged to be part of an organization that has probably touched hundreds of thousands of lives in the past 40 years.”

### A personal word for Steve (but you can read it too)

Sorry Steve, but there are things about you that are part of the stereotype of a computer guy. I mean, who keeps a classified ad clipping for 40 years and still has your offer letter? You also blow away the stereotypes, especially with that “Father Buckner” beard you rock.

You’ve always known it’s about more than a machine and that the work of the IS team is not just about computers, but about lives changed. Thanks for a terabyte of memories. **BT**



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

Scan the QR code to hear Steve Ingram explain why he’s retiring from Buckner as a better man.



“You’ve always known it’s about more than a machine and that the work of the Information Services team is not just about computers, but about lives changed.”

# BUCKNER *Journal*

## »» Missouri Rotary Club leads record statewide shoe drive

The Missouri Rotary Club's annual Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® shoe drive in April collected more than 43,000 pairs of new shoes, more than 14,000 pairs of socks, and 29,000 shoelaces for vulnerable children around the world.

The annual drive is usually in coordination with Rotary clubs in north Missouri that make up Rotary District 6040, but this year the Missouri Rotary Club expanded its efforts to a statewide shoe collection.

In addition to thousands of shoes, socks and shoelaces collected, the Rotarians tallied more than \$56,000 in cash donations. Over the past 23 years, Missouri Rotarians have collected over 438,000 pairs of shoes for Buckner and more than \$322,000 in donations.

"We are so grateful for the way our community

came together," said Larry Lunsford, Rotarian and leader of the shoe drive. "Our drive would not be possible without the support of our local businesses, churches, retailers, and civic groups. It's the generosity and love of our state's residents that bring hope to thousands of kids each year."

Rotary District 6040 collected the donations by caravan and shipped them to the Buckner Center of Humanitarian Aid in Dallas where volunteers sorted by size and added notes to remind children of God's love. All donations are then distributed to children in Texas and internationally.

"Thank you to the Rotary Club and everyone in the community who helped meet our goals," said Shawn Spurrier, director of Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls. "Whether you are an individual who donated one or two pairs or a company that donated dozens, you have truly made a difference in a child's life." **BT**

|                          |          |
|--------------------------|----------|
| 2024                     |          |
| MISSOURI ROTARY          |          |
| SHOES FOR ORPHAN SOULS   |          |
| SHOES                    | 44,254   |
| SOCKS                    | 14,494   |
| LACES                    | 1,683    |
| CASH                     | \$55,303 |
| Create Hope in the World |          |



# >> Buckner expands impact with positive parenting programs

**B**uckner Children and Family Services expanded its family support services, formerly classified as prevention and early intervention services, in several Texas counties by securing new state contracts earlier this year.

Buckner will serve as a provider of Fatherhood EFFECT in Gregg County, where Longview is located. In addition, Buckner was selected as the provider of Texas Home Visiting in Jefferson and Lubbock counties. Both programs focus on building strong families and promoting positive outcomes for children, youth, and families.

Gregg County is the second location where Buckner offers Fatherhood EFFECT, having served as the provider in Jefferson County since 2019. Fatherhood EFFECT (Educating Fathers for Empowering Children Tomorrow) is a free program providing parent education and resources to fathers.

The Fatherhood EFFECT curriculum is designed for expectant fathers and fathers with children up to 17 years old. Participants learn how to better support their children and provide the love children need to have a greater chance for success.

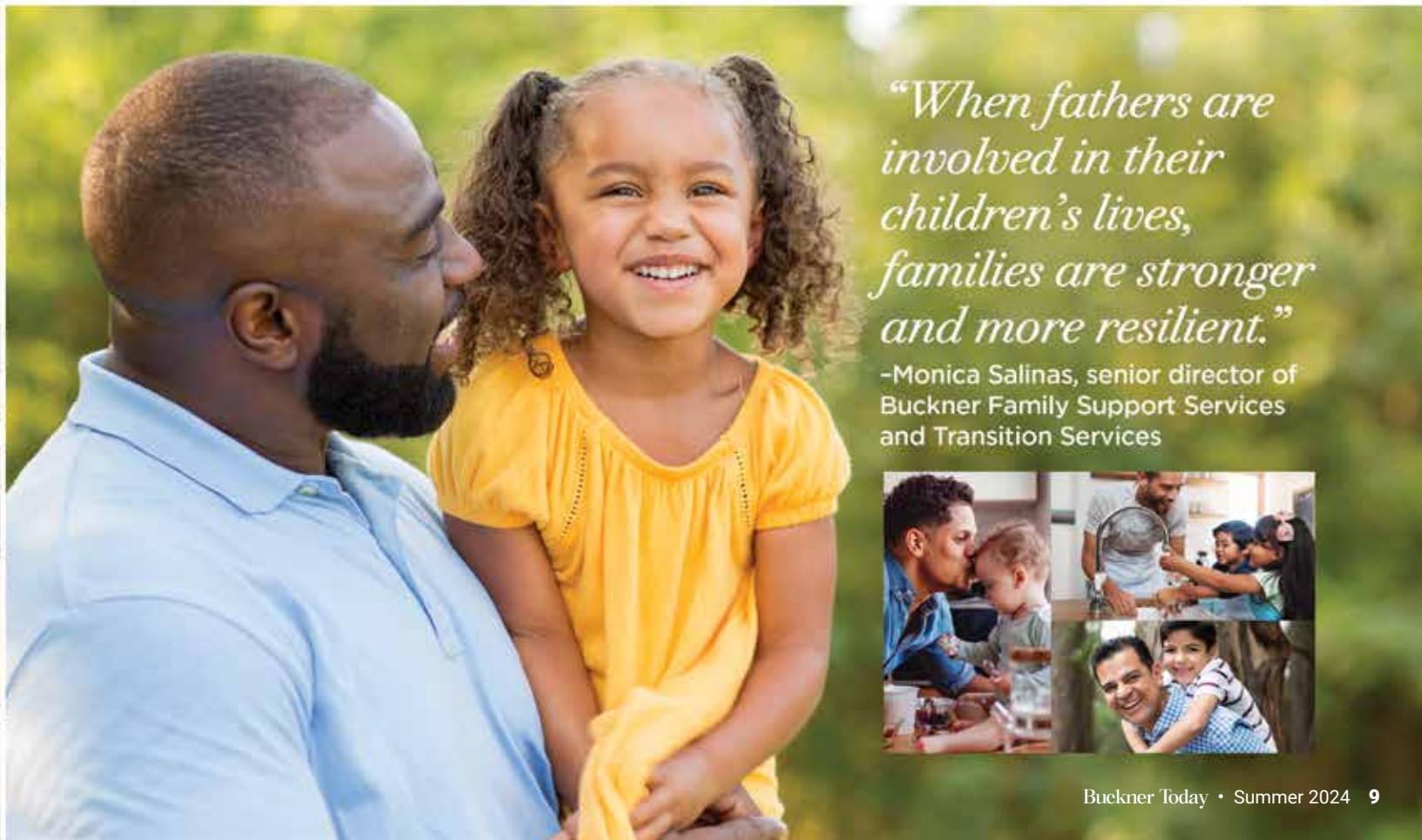
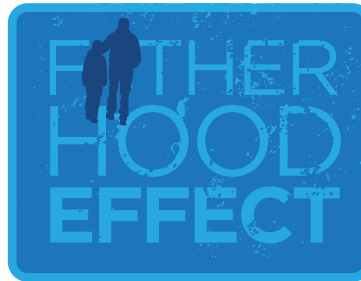
“When fathers are treated with dignity and respect and

invited to participate in family services, they show up,” said Monica Salinas, senior director of Buckner Family Support Services and Transition Services. “When fathers are involved in their children’s lives, families are stronger and more resilient.”

Texas Home Visiting is a new program for Buckner. Using evidence-based models, Texas Home Visiting supports positive child health and development outcomes, increases family self-sufficiency, and creates communities where children and families can thrive. Buckner staff will regularly visit the homes of pregnant women and families with children under six years old who are enrolled in the program.

“Our team will also help connect families to available community resources and services, providing wrap-around support to encourage positive parenting,” said Salinas.

Beginning Sept. 1, 2024, both programs will move from under the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services’ Prevention and Early Intervention division to Health and Human Services Commission’s Family Support Services division. As a contract provider, Buckner expands its ability to protect children and strengthen families. **BT**



*“When fathers are involved in their children’s lives, families are stronger and more resilient.”*

-Monica Salinas, senior director of Buckner Family Support Services and Transition Services



# Buckner Houston team shifts to hurricane recovery

Story by Christopher Ruth • Photography by Tim Miller



Erin Kelly (center) is usually filling the role of volunteer engagement coordinator, but she and the entire Buckner Houston team pivoted to assist with hurricane relief to support their community in a time of need.

**E**ven before its grand opening, the team at the new Buckner Children and Family Services of Houston campus was hard at work serving the community.

Although one week had passed since Houston was slammed by Hurricane Beryl, hundreds of cars lined up on Monday, July 15 to receive much needed food, beverages and supplies from Buckner and other community partners.

When Beryl made landfall on July 8, the hurricane's winds exceeded 80 miles per hour. While the duration of the storm and rain were relatively short, the strong winds damaged power lines and cell towers throwing more than two million residents into darkness for days.

Buckner staff and volunteers loaded cases of water, energy drinks, hygiene kits, and cleaning supplies into the trunks of each car as it drove through the campus.

Families seeking supplies included clients of the Buckner Family Hope Center® at Northside, as well as families with students enrolled

at nearby schools.

Esly Dubon, 31, pregnant with her third child, moved to Houston from California one year ago for her husband's job with an oil refinery. Beryl was their first major hurricane, and Dubon was not prepared to be without electricity for a week and counting.

"It's been hard," she said. "The heat, especially inside a smaller house ... It's hard.

"Seeing the community come together is amazing. Something so small like a case of water is a saving grace."

Buckner has been serving Houston for 12 years in the Aldine and North Houston areas. Most of the parents and children from these neighborhoods were among the Houstonians without electricity for extended periods of time.

At the end of the day, the Buckner team provided hope to more than 2,500 people.

## Community collaborations

Much of the supplies were shuttled from the Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid in Dallas, which maintains the inventory for domestic and international assistance. Generous in-kind donations throughout the year keep the Center stocked.

“Disasters are unpredictable and chaotic, but disaster response and relief efforts need to be extremely well organized and systematic in order to be effective,” said Steve Watson, director of aid and assistance for Buckner International. “The best way to help victims of a disaster, like Hurricane Beryl, is for organizations with various specialties to collaborate in how they support the community.”

Several pallets of water and energy drinks from Southeast Texas companies were also secured by the Buckner team in Beaumont and shipped to Houston, courtesy of U-Haul.

“We are overwhelmed with gratitude to our friends in Beaumont for answering the call and meeting the needs of our clients through their donation of water and sports drinks,” said Dior Burns, executive director of Buckner Children and Family Services of Houston, referencing the donation by Del Papa Distributing Company,



Giglio Distributing Co., and BlueTriton Ozarka Water.

“We serve some of Houston’s most vulnerable families who might already struggle between paying bills, putting food on the table, and purchasing household necessities,” she continued. “This past week has been extremely difficult for them physically and mentally, and now they are looking to the future and worrying about how to account for this unforeseen financial hardship.”

With no power, there was also a need for hot meals. Clients of the Family Hope Center at Reed Road in South Houston were provided with meals prepared by Mercy Chefs, Nova Church and Hope City. The collaborative meal distribution was coordinated by Love Has No Limits.

“It’s truly amazing to be a part of orchestrating so many people and organizations coming together with one goal – the recovery of Houston,” Burns said.

## Dedicated Buckner team

While struggling without power themselves, Buckner Houston team members still showed up in the heat to support fellow Houstonians and Buckner clients in need. One employee drove an hour to purchase a small generator, enough to cool only her bedroom at night. Another took turns with her family members to cool off in their car.

“We had to decide between plugging in our fridge or the air conditioner – and with as hot as it gets in Houston, you don’t really have a choice,” said Ruby Rodriguez, a Buckner employee and Houston resident for 45 years.

Yet the team joined together to haul cases of water and greet the clients and neighbors in need.

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**LEFT: Ruby Rodriguez, office manager at the Buckner Family Hope Center at Northside, loaded water into the cars of thousands impacted by the hurricane despite her own home was still without power.**

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Lora Clack, director of the Buckner Family Hope Center at Reed Road, was proud to work side by side with Rodriguez at the distribution. “I know that all Buckner staff across the state and internationally are just like this,” she said, “and I’m a bit biased, but I’m proud to work alongside this team here in Houston. We support each other.” **BT**



# Vibrant senior living

**Life is what you make it. There can always be more to experience and learn – no matter your age.**

It's important to engage in enriching opportunities for the body and mind, especially for older adults. Well-rounded living moves the body, activates the brain, builds relationships with others, stimulates the senses, and is grounded in faith. Research shows that older adults who engage in meaningful activities with cognitive benefits, such as theater, dance, music, or creative writing, receive multiple positive benefits to their quality of life and well-being, from better memory and self-esteem to reduced stress and increased social interaction. The risk of health complications and infections decreases. Mental health improves. Happiness grows.

Once labeled retirement homes, today we call them senior living communities for an important reason – the emphasis on a full life that's healthy and active with vibrant experiences, friendships, and fun.

Indeed, on any given day at a Buckner senior living community, residents are active in a wide variety of ways: Bible study, art lessons, volunteerism, tai chi, water aerobics, balance classes, social outings, walks in the park, musical performances and lessons, arts and crafts, and museum tours, among others.

“Inspiring happiness is our goal, and this means we serve and empower those that call

our communities home to live their best lives. This connects with our mission, because we believe everyone is created in the image of God and deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, and this includes helping them live

their best lives,” explains Michael Olmstead, vice president and chief operating officer of Buckner Retirement Services. “At Buckner we want each person to achieve the highest quality of life possible across all dimensions of wellness.”

In the early 1900s, the Buckner Orphans Home not only cared for children but also served seniors and the widowed. Cottages on the outskirts housed seniors who could fill a wise and caring presence for the orphans.

No doubt, the children brought fresh energy to these seniors too.

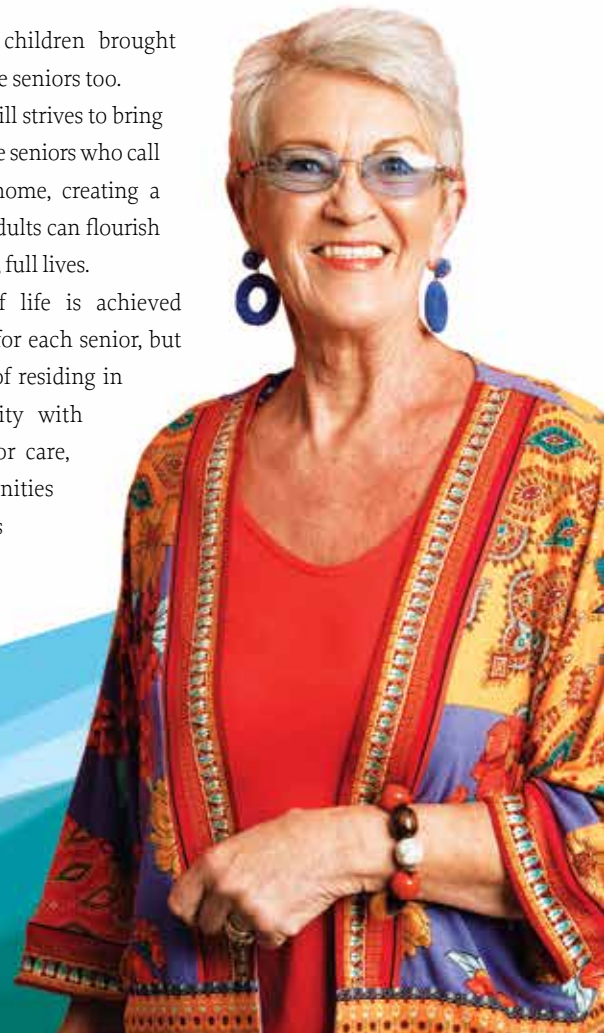
Today, Buckner still strives to bring vibrant energy to the seniors who call our communities home, creating a place where older adults can flourish and continue happy, full lives.

“How quality of life is achieved will look different for each senior, but that is the beauty of residing in a caring community with multiple options for care, and numerous amenities and programs,” adds Olmstead. **BT**

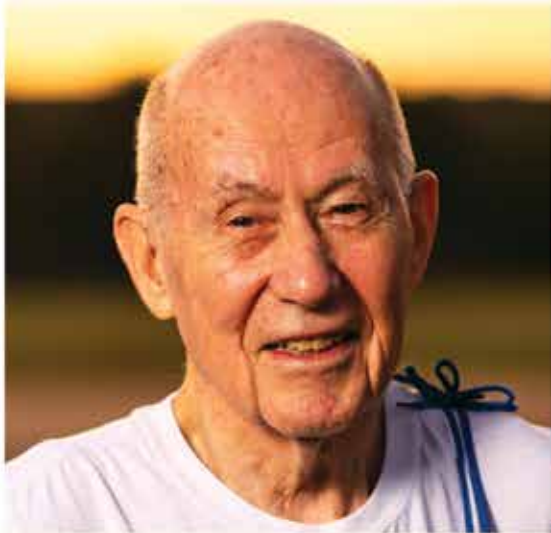
## Tips to boost health as you age

- Get moving
- Eat healthy foods
- Manage stress
- Learn something new
- Visit the doctor regularly
- Connect with family and friends

Source: National Institutes of Health



# Inspiring happiness



Research shows that enriching experiences and activities to help you move, learn and grow are positive for anyone, especially older adults. These opportunities create optimal aging for a vibrant, happy life. For older adults, living in an active and social community surrounded by neighbors and a wide breadth of social activities inspires happiness and health.

## Why keep an active body and mind?

Older adults who spend at least one hour per day reading or participating in hobbies experienced a decreased risk of dementia.

Social isolation can be as detrimental to an older adult's health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

As much as 43% of adults aged 60 and older experience frequent or intense loneliness.

Moving your body is one of the most important ways to maintain health as you age.

Good health preserves independence, security, and happiness when you age.

## Dimensions of Wellness:

**INTELLECTUAL** – KEEPING YOUR MIND ACTIVE AND LEARNING.

**EMOTIONAL** – MAINTAINING A POSITIVE OUTLOOK AND RESPECT FOR YOUR FEELINGS AND THOSE OF OTHERS.

**PHYSICAL** – TAKING CARE OF YOUR BODY.

**SOCIAL** – FOSTERING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY.

**SPIRITUAL** – FINDING PURPOSE, VALUE, AND MEANING IN LIFE.

**FINANCIAL** – LIVING WITHIN YOUR MEANS AND RESOURCES.

**ENVIRONMENTAL** – UNDERSTANDING HOW THE WORLD AROUND YOU AFFECTS YOUR WELL-BEING.



Sources: National Institutes of Health, Rendevar, National Council on Aging

**I**t's a hot summer Friday morning but it feels pleasant in the bright sunlit common space at The Crest, the memory care building at Baptist Retirement Community, the Buckner senior living community in San Angelo. Six seniors who live in the memory care building are sitting in a semicircle with impassive faces behind white headsets covering their eyes, as they get ready to start a virtual reality game together.

# Not your typical video game

Virtual reality system unlocks happy memories for seniors with dementia

Standing in the middle of the semicircle, Michelle Villarreal, house manager of The Crest, holds a tablet computer that controls the system. She announces it's time for a game and the seniors are immediately immersed, seeing a blue sky and floating clouds in front of them. Balloons of every color rise at different intervals and speeds from the ground up into the sky.

Villarreal prompts them to reach up with their hands and pop the balloons. The interactive game creates an audible popping sound when balloons are "hit" by their hands. Two turn their heads in different directions to see the balloons. But only one senior raises her hands and pokes the air reaching for virtual balloons.

The rest don't respond much to the game or Villarreal.

"Just wait. Now it's time for everybody's favorite," smiles Villarreal in anticipation.

## *Baby brought to life*

She quickly navigates through folders on her tablet and selects an immersive video of a baby.

Sounds of a baby's laugh echo across the room as the headsets play the joyous noises for each resident in unison. With their virtual reality headsets on, the baby appears directly in front of the seniors. The baby jumps in his bouncy seat, eats crackers, plays and laughs, and then naps in his crib.

Suddenly, every senior in the circle comes to life. While some responses are not articulate words or not verbal at all, each senior responds in their own way – some laughing and talking to the baby while others make movements and sounds that weren't there before.

Villarreal asks questions to help jog memories and engage the seniors in the activity: What were your kids' favorite snacks? What is the baby doing now? Have you helped care for your grandchildren?

One woman waves her hand and says, "Hi baby!"

Johnny Kouvelis, a 93-year-old Crest resident, claps when the baby jumps and cheers, "He just lights up the room. Come on baby, eat those snacks!"

## *Dementia and virtual reality*

The realities of dementia are hard to understand, and it can be difficult to care for and interact with those who have the condition. The brain disorder can cause a range of symptoms including cognitive decline, physical challenges, and behavioral changes. This can include limited speech and understanding, agitation, and restlessness.

But using the new technology typically reserved for video games is having a remarkable impact for seniors with dementia. In the year since implementing the virtual reality system, the staff at Baptist Retirement Community tell emotional stories about the resounding impact on residents who have used the system, including body movement, cognitive engagement and – most emotional - memories revisited and the resulting happiness.

## *Time travel*

The virtual reality system can provide many types of immersive entertainment including interactive games, educational classes, worship, mindfulness and meditation sessions, and walks in nature, among other activities.

Most helpful for memory care residents has been its ability to time travel. The virtual reality system uses Google maps to transport users to a 360-degree, three-dimensional street-level view of any location, giving the seniors the experience of actually being there. Google has even saved older maps so seniors can visit places as they looked in earlier times gone by.

Kouvelis was born and raised in San Angelo. One of four children

*“You can pretty much go to  
any place in the world  
with virtual reality goggles and Google maps.”*



## Time travelers

Seniors at Baptist Retirement Community are using the latest craze in video games to travel back in time.



*"Holy moly!" exclaims Johnny Kouvelis (left), moving his head around in all directions as the seniors float over a field in a hot air balloon.*

born to Greek immigrants, Johnny and his brother, Chris, operated local supermarkets called C&J Drive In Grocery for some 40 years. Pictures around his apartment show how important family is to him.

Through use of the virtual reality system and Villarreal's help, Kouvelis visited the grocery store he owned with his brother and the church he attended while growing up.

He says using the virtual reality system brings joy with it.

"I am blessed to be 93 years old. We have got to keep our minds and bodies going. Most everything of mine is still working. I even still have some hair on top," he jokes.

## **Unlocking memories**

Unlocking thoughts of the past and spending time with them are important for seniors with dementia, particularly those within a senior living community. While what is happening today may not remain vivid in their minds, memories of the past are usually fresh and vibrant, explains Tanya Solsbery, director of assisted living at Baptist Retirement Community.

In particular, the virtual reality system helps with what's called sundowning, when irritable, restless, or aggressive behavior can peak in the late afternoon or evening hours, according to Solsbery.

Taking trips to places of the past provides a calming effect for these

seniors, adds Villarreal. She recalls when one resident wanted to go to the Chinatown area of New York City. While visiting through the virtual reality goggles, she shared stories about her trips with family and shopping in the area. Sadly, she passed away a week after her virtual trip.

"It feels good to know that I could do that for her," Villarreal says, tearing up. "It gets me emotional because it's a beautiful thing to watch."

Another resident was very agitated and begging to go home. She desperately needed to get home to take care of her family. She remembered her former address and Villarreal virtually took her home to see the house and the neighborhood and talk about memories along the way.

"She forgot about the need to go home and the urgency to do so because we took her home," Villarreal recalls. "Sometimes they have good days and sometimes they have not so good days. You have to have patience. You have to have empathy. And we care."

## **Google, find Lazbuddie, Texas**

Baptist Retirement Community is the only senior living community in San Angelo to use such a virtual reality system with its seniors. And it is the first Buckner senior living community to pilot the system.

Across the country, senior living communities are just starting to explore virtual reality as a nonmedical option to improve quality of life for seniors. Research shows that some 40% of people over the age of 60 experience loneliness and social isolation, which can increase the risk of health complications, infections, and premature cognitive decline.

A solution? Virtual reality can inspire happiness, creating fun opportunities for social interaction and cognitive engagement.

The first time using the system was personally impactful for each Buckner leader who tested it before launching at Baptist Retirement Community, says Aaron Hargett, senior executive director of Buckner Retirement Services.

“We were just blown away,” he says. “What really made a big impact for us, which is one of bigger impacts for our residents, was that you can pretty much go to any place in the world with the virtual reality goggles and Google maps. You can experience any environment just as you remember it.”

Thinking he could probably trip the system up, Hargett requested a visit to Lazbuddie, Texas, his small hometown about 90 miles northwest of Lubbock.

“It dropped me in the front parking lot of the church I



*“It gets me emotional because it’s a beautiful thing to watch,” says Michelle Villarreal of helping seniors visit places from their past.*

grew up in,” Hargett recalls. “We were wowed. That sold us on its value. It is so great for reminiscing experiences. You can swim with dolphins, tour the Louvre, visit the Sistine Chapel or ride through the Grand Canyon on a donkey.”

“The opportunity for resident engagement is unlimited. We can’t wait to have it at more Buckner communities,” he adds.

A generous anonymous donor helped acquire the system for Baptist Retirement Community. While the system’s use at the San Angelo community was a pilot program, based on the feedback and positive impact, Buckner is planning to keep the devices for the long term and eventually expand to its other senior living communities, Hargett says.

They are also exploring other ways to use the system, such as training simulations for staff to practice patient care techniques such as properly donning gloves and changing dressings for a wound.

“It’s exciting to be an early adopter so we can trial it, test it out and be on forefront of using this technology for the good of residents and our community,” Hargett adds.

Seniors with cognitive decline can be vulnerable to a life with limited inspiration. Instead, virtual reality helps seniors to rediscover joy, experience sites unseen, and transport them back to the home where comforting memories still live. **BT**



A group of residents in health care listen intently as Patricia Bramer Russell Richard reads to them during one of her regular visits.

# Birthdays, family, and aging: Processing life through poetry

Story by Christopher Ruth • Photography by Brandon Gouthier

When God gives you the words, you better have your pencil ready. This is the advice of Patricia Bramer Russell Richard, who has scribbled down poems on dozens of notepads and hundreds of scraps of paper for the past six decades.

Proving her point are the paper and writing utensils accessible throughout Richard's apartment at Calder Woods, the senior living community operated by Buckner Retirement Services in Beaumont, Texas.

Poetry is how the 89-year-old, known affectionately as Pat to her friends and Oma to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, has processed all of life's moments. Many of these poems are collected in her self-published book, "Pat's Poetry," which was released in 2016 on Amazon.

Her poems are often whimsical and sweet. They celebrate graduations, marriages, holidays, and birthdays, such as "For Julie – Surprise Happy Birthday." When you have four daughters, there are many such occasions to document.

The fun-loving nature of her poems does not come as a surprise to anyone who ever met Richard. She frequently has a sly smile on her face, like she has a secret she is considering sharing.

Poems are also a way she shares advice with her daughters – advice on love, happiness, dreams, and disappointment. "Tomi, listen to my message. It comes right from my heart," reads the first two lines of "Life's Chapter."

Richard uses verse to process heavier topics as well, including the death of her father, divorce from her first husband (the father of her children), and the Alzheimer's diagnosis and death of her second husband.

Her reflections on aging, which are woven throughout her book, are both lighthearted and deep. Across the six stanzas of her poem "Wrinkles," Richard comes to terms with the inevitability of growing older.

*The lines are getting deeper  
As I get on in my years  
Some are there from laughter  
And others there from tears*

*Although they seem quite faint now  
I know they'll never fade  
They've made a way into my skin  
And on my face they're made*

"Life has been good," says Richard when asked about influences on her poetry. "A lot of sorrow but also a lot of happiness and joy... my life is full."

Poetry wasn't always a passion for Richard. The first poem she recalled writing was in the 1960s when her second daughter, Amy, was sick. Richard titled it, "Mumps." Now a 65-year-old professor of nutrition and dietetics at Lamar University in Beaumont, Amy R.

Shows, Ph.D., said she was in elementary school when her mother began writing poems.

“She has written poems for so many people over the years,” says Shows, “on special occasions or just because that person was on her heart.

“I remember one of my close childhood friends was relocating in middle school, and I wanted Mom to write a poem for her ... and she did. It was special to me that she could do that.”

Shows, her husband, and one of her daughters helped Richard publish the collection of poems. “This book is something I will always cherish, along with the memory of seeing her look at the book for the first time,” says Shows.

All of Richard’s daughters received copies of the book, as did their children. Shows says even the great-grandchildren were in awe looking at the cover of the book and seeing Oma. “They open it up and are able to read a story of someone they know. It’s a poem, but there is a lot of heritage there that is just beautiful.”

*I've heard some called worry lines  
And some are feet of crows  
When I'm sad these lines are deep  
But gladness makes them glow*

*There are lines that cross my forehead  
From eyes that lift quite high  
When no word comes from my lips  
But I know the reason why*

Richard never intended her poems to serve as her legacy. Each poem simply helped her fill a need in the moment.

“I wrote them just for my children at first. Then for some friends. And soon, people started to say they were good and ask me to write something for them,” Richard says.

Her advice to other senior adults thinking of writing about their lives: “Always have your pencil and paper ready, share your heart, and be open to all the ideas you think others would like as well as yourself.”

Richard admits the rhymes don’t come to her as easily as she ages. Her daughter, Shows, agrees her mother is not writing as frequently but she believes Richard is not done – “She still has the writing bug.”

The ideas used to rush into Richard’s mind and then she would list out synonyms until she found the right words to end each line. The process was like solving a jigsaw puzzle – trying out different pieces until the right ones fit together.

This similarity might be why Richard spends so much time in the Calder Woods puzzle room located next to her apartment. “Sometimes when I can’t sleep, I leave my apartment to go add a few new pieces to the puzzle our group is working on,” she admits.

Another passion Richard developed at Calder Woods is volunteering once a week to read to residents in health care units. She says the stories are usually spiritual. “They just fill me up with being there and listening.”

In all her visits to health care, the modest Richard never brings her own book, figuring the group would prefer other authors. It did not occur to Richard how relatable they might find her poems.

*I think my face will never be  
One so solemn or so like stone  
I'm proud of every line I have  
And I've built them on my own*

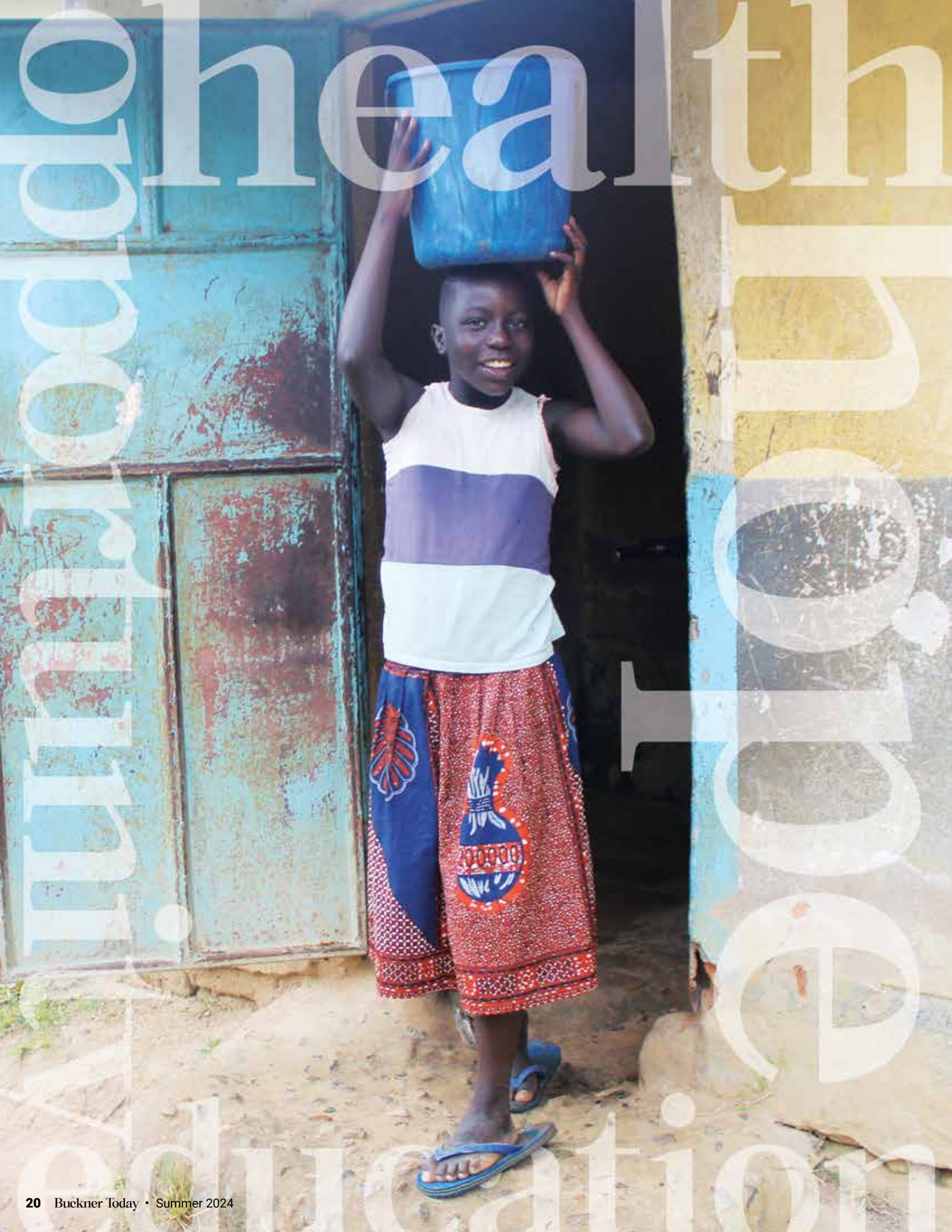
*All these lines reflect composure  
Whatever it may be  
But each is special in its way  
Together they make up me*

Most of the people she reads to each week are in wheelchairs and require a higher level of care offered by the senior living community. Richard hopes she can be gracious “when it’s my time to not be able to walk or my AFib kicks in.

“I want to be ready and strong enough to be ready for what’s waiting me.”

Her poems are a testament to the fact she can handle anything that comes her way. **BT**





# The path to a brighter future



This year marks the 25th anniversary of Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®, a transformative ministry that has provided more than five million pairs of shoes and socks to help change the lives of vulnerable children around the world.

Children like 12-year-old Cynthia from Kenya. After losing her parents, Cynthia was sent to live with family, but they were unable to afford school fees, supplies - and shoes. Cynthia became quiet and withdrawn.

Buckner teams in Kenya found out about Cynthia's situation and offered the help, education, and support she needed -

starting with a new pair of shoes.

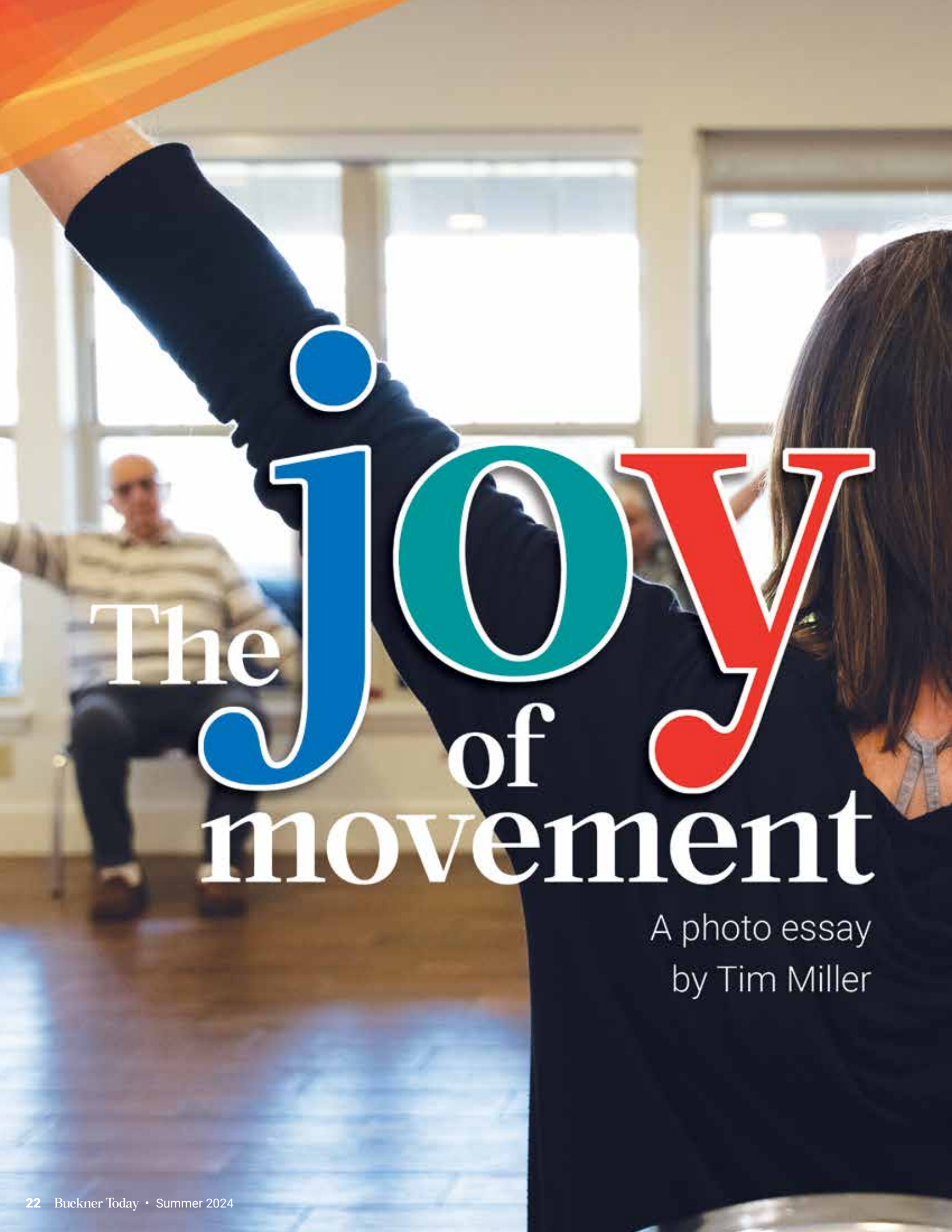
Today, Cynthia is a different child. She's growing in confidence, progressing well, and dreaming big for the future with plans to attend college and study to be a lawyer.

"I have a future because of Buckner. Now I can work towards my dreams. I hope these steps will enable me to champion the rights of the vulnerable population in my community," she says.

A simple pair of shoes can give children like Cynthia access to education so they can be released from the cycle of poverty.

**Set more children on the path to a hope-filled future by providing them with new shoes.**





The **J** **O** **Y** of movement

A photo essay  
by Tim Miller



## Arabesque, pas de deux, and adagio.

"I've got some residents that don't want to come out for exercise, but they will come out for the Joy of Movement and a lot of it has to do with the music. It's music from their times," says Michelle Villarreal with Baptist Retirement Community.



**G**athered in a circle with their instructor, seniors of all abilities gracefully wave their arms, point their toes, and create rhythmic patterns in the air with ribbons.

Called the Joy of Movement, the class uses classical dance movements to explore different ways to move the body and exercise.



For the past six years, Ballet San Angelo has partnered with the Crest, the memory care community at Baptist Retirement Community, to bring the benefits of movement and music to seniors who live there.

Indeed, the dancers are rewarded with joy – and much more. The program helps improve mobility, health and well-being, mental sharpness, and quality of movement, according to the Buckner team.

The combination of familiar music and hymns helps remove the drudgery of exercise or physical therapy, making movement uplifting - good for the body and soul. **BT**



*“The combination of familiar music and hymns helps remove the drudgery of exercise or physical therapy, making movement uplifting – good for the body and soul.”*



Watch the movement in action and learn about how the joy spreads to others.





# Strumming

## Familiar music, new friendships

New friendships inspired Kathryn Bryan to dust off her ukulele again.



# up happiness

## Ukulele ensemble shares music, stirs memories

Story by Linda Goelzer • Photography by Bobby Frank

The happy foot-tapping and hand-clapping music welcomes those who pass through the lobby of The Stayton at Museum Way by Buckner, the newly acquired senior living community in Fort Worth. The irresistible melodies originate from the Stayton Strummers, an 18-member ukulele ensemble including strummers, singers, and a couple of percussionists. Represented among them: a retired realtor and minister's wife, a lifelong church choir member, a professional theatrical performer, and others.

Smiles, music, and memories fill the room weekly at the scheduled time. Anyone who enters is challenged to sit still while enjoying the beats from these familiar, traditional American folk, jazz, and pop tunes as well as hymns. The Strummers have inspired audiences continually since 2014.

Wini Klein, one of four group leaders, is a charter member. She was eager to strum again after she and her husband retired from dedicated careers in real estate and ministry.



"I played as a kid – I'm almost 90 – and when they mentioned strumming, I was eager to join," said Klein.

What did she remember about playing the ukulele when she dusted hers off ten years ago? "I could remember three chords: C, G7 and F. Came to me naturally," said Klein. "I also played banjo, and still have it, but this is easier on your fingers because the strings are plastic instead of metal. They're easier to press."

## THE FORMATIVE YEARS

In the beginning, Klein recalled, the troupe practiced one hour a week. The musicians now rehearse for an hour each Tuesday and Thursday before their one-hour Saturday performances. That's three hours a week dedicated to fingering frets and making music. The time invested is about more than performing, though. When asked why she does it, one member stated that joining the ukulele group has brought people together, and that she has gotten to know these people much better than others because of the regularity of their friendship.

"As the years have gone by, we just built our song list and the group got bigger and better," said Klein. "We don't play any of the songs from memory. We need the music since we don't remember the chords well enough to play from memory."

The chords may not be memorized, but the Strummers' memories can recall life events connected to many of the tunes they play. Band members choose 10 songs a month, some of them new, and they practice all month until they can perform them well. A learned song is added into the weekly playlist. An additional sing-along list of hymns often makes up the entire performance on the first Saturday of the month. Old favorites like: "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and "When the Saints Go Marching In."

## VOCAL ACCOMPANIMENT

Phyllis Johnson, 96 years young, is one of the singers—a three-year participant with at least 50 years of church choir experience.

"I'm the only one that sings the harmony. The others all sing the melody. I'm used to singing alto in church choir," she said. "I love to sing, and I love what the Strummers do. In the audience, we usually have people from the second and third floors from assisted living and full care. They love to come down and hear these old songs we sing, and they try to sing along with us," said Johnson.

One popular number on the ukulele ensemble's playlist is a rendition of "Happy Birthday," with new lyrics written by Dr. John O'Rear in 2018 and performed to the tune of "Battle Hymn of the Republic." The words include apt advice for any of us.

*Count your garden by its flowers*

*Never by the leaves that fall.*

*Count your days by golden hours*

*Don't remember clouds at all.*

*Count your nights by stars not shadows*

*Count your years by smiles not tears.*

*And on this, your special birthday,*

*Count your age by friends, not years.*



## A SEASON OF JOY

Learning a new instrument, craft, or other skill is fun and has the added benefit of helping slow memory loss as you age. Research shows that older adults who choose cognitive or new activities show enhanced memory function.

Participation in the ukulele ensemble combines music and rhythm, mental stimulation, physical coordination, and socialization among community. In addition, the ukulele is a cheerful instrument. Can anyone not smile at the sound of the ukulele? At a recent Saturday performance, grins mixed with giggles when the band played and sang “Itsy Bitsy, Teenie Weenie, Yellow Polka Dot Bikini.”

Moving into The Stayton signaled a fresh season for Maggie Crawford. She just settled in last February and is one of the newest members of the ukulele band. Crawford is a talented live-theater performer who sings and acts in English and French, with bonus experience as director and producer. She was quickly recruited to help direct the Strummers when she expressed interest in the group.

Crawford is still learning the ukulele, but strings are no stranger to her. “We’re going to be good at having fun. That’s what we’re going to be good at. The better we can be, the more fun you’re going to have, but if we make mistakes, we need to laugh at it and let the audience laugh at it.

“The main thing is I want joy. I don’t care if we do it exactly right. All I care about is that we’re happy while we’re doing it and the people who listen to us are happy when they’re hearing it,” said Crawford.

## MAKING A COMEBACK

Everything old is new again and the ukulele – once popular in 1920s America – is experiencing a revival. For the record, the Stayton Strummers were ahead of the trend, making them relevant among casual enthusiasts and celebrity entertainers, too. Even Taylor Swift periodically trades her guitar for a ukulele on stage now. Then, there is Grace VanderWaal who launched her career in 2016 at age 12 by winning “America’s Got Talent” while singing an original song with her ukulele. The victory came with a \$1 million prize.

The Stayton Strummers play ukuleles for pleasure instead of prize money, and their music brings immeasurable joy to listeners. The joy is likely felt in equal amounts among the participants, whether seasoned performers or strumming novices. As one of the songs says, “If You’re Happy and You Know it, Clap Your Hands,” then turn it up a bit with some ukulele accompaniment. **BT**



# Looking forward to a long and fulfilling life requires intentionality

By Amy Hays

*Lifestyles Director, The Stayton at Museum Way by Buckner*



My career in senior living communities and my experience when my late mother was in a memory care center have informed me of what I believe can positively impact quality of life for older adults. In my role as lifestyles director at a senior living community, I strive to create programming that engages as many people as possible and brings happiness to their lives. In return, I experience genuine joy from those I serve. The following is a little of what I have learned.



## MENTAL STIMULATION

Our minds require stimulation. It is certainly not too late to learn an additional language or reveal your inner Picasso, as did an 80-year-old senior I met. At The Stayton, for example, we offer weekly French language classes, painting lessons, and even drama club.

If you evaluate a new activity and determine it is not for you, your brain will still benefit from having tried it. Our brains generate neural pathways when we try new things. We gain confidence by adding a skill or feeling excitement from an adventure, even if that means attending our first modern art exhibit or hearing a lecture on a previously unknown subject. And when an experience is for pure enjoyment or intrigue, it can also reduce stress in your life. Retirement years are a time to make new friends and explore activities and interests.



## PHYSICAL MOVEMENT

It is a fact that we might move differently as we age. Avoid the temptation to give up when movement gets tough. If you can move your entire body upright on two feet, or if you require chair exercises or medical therapy, there are a variety of ways to keep active. Exercising stimulates our

blood flow, maintaining heart and lung function, and sharpening our mind.

Group exercise, whether unstructured or a class, brings people together. It can enhance our sense of community and encourage us when we want to quit. Residents of The Stayton community can participate in a broad scope of activities from water fitness, daily walks, or a chair exercise class. We have a group that regularly bicycles together. For the boldest among us, there is even kickboxing.

## SOCIAL CONNECTION

If you are married to someone for many years and your spouse dies, it is common to withdraw from other people, especially other couples. If this continues over a long period of time, though, you can find yourself not interacting with anyone. You are no longer boosting your brain through conversation and perhaps not seeking new opportunities.



If you live alone, make a routine to share a meal with others in the same situation. It may mean inviting friends over to your place and asking them to bring something from their refrigerator to complete a meal. Meeting a friend out for breakfast or a cup of coffee is something to look forward to and helps create a change of atmosphere. Breaking bread with your besties or inviting yourself to sit with a different crowd in the dining area can be a significant and beneficial social experience.

I have observed the strength that comes from a group of ladies who set aside time to support each other in the aftermath of an unsettling health issue. There is also laughter among strangers (who become

friends) when a session of bingo gets underway. During the holidays, a bow-making class is more than a useful skill, but it is mostly about the enjoyment of doing it with others.

Additionally, seniors can seek social connection through volunteering. You can appreciate intergenerational connections while reading books to elementary school students. We also have seniors from independent living who voluntarily make social visits to those in assisted living and memory care. Giving yourself to others is an important aspect of social connection, especially for seniors.

### SUPPORT FOR DAILY LIVING

When a person is driving less frequently or not at all, it is possible for their quality of life to decline. Grocery shopping, doctor appointments, picking up prescriptions, and even visits to the hair or nail salon become inconvenient without reliable transportation. Inconsistency with any of these activities can lead to negative consequences. Nutrition, medical adherence, and personal appearance can be affected. Additionally, these errands are a way to interact with the outside world.

If someone is not fortunate to live in a senior living community in which daily support services are readily available, it is essential that we look out for our vulnerable neighbors who might need assistance with activities of daily living. You can help maintain, if not improve, someone's quality of life.

### FAITH PRACTICE

Having a regular faith practice can help us find a sense of purpose, develop supportive relationships, and foster hope. The Stayton offers personal and group opportunities for spiritual growth. Stayton



residents include people who sang in church choir, led music ministry, and pastored churches. One retired minister was asked to lead a group Bible study and he is now like an unofficial chaplain here.

Singing hymns is important for those who are no longer able to attend a worship service, especially for residents in assisted living and memory care. Memories rush in when a person hears a familiar song.

When we engage in life using all our senses, it reduces cognitive decline. That is one of the best arguments for staying active, mentally stimulated, and intentionally connected to others. This is my goal for the seniors I serve. Even for residents in memory care, I have observed how kind greetings and simple acknowledgements can trigger reactions when the person has not spoken for days. At the end of the day, if we can make one person happy, we have changed their life. **BT**



# The gift of giving

By Melissa Grych

It's not always easy for a child to forgo birthday presents. But for the last three birthdays at the Neill household, Madeleine and Joseph have collected socks and shoes in lieu of their own gifts.

Both children are members of the Buckner Shoes Birthday Club. Instead of seeking gifts for themselves on their birthday, the 9- and 7-year-old siblings asked friends and family to donate new shoes to Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®.

Shoes for Orphan Souls is a transformative ministry of Buckner International, sharing new shoes and socks with vulnerable children around the world.

In fact, this March marked the second year in a row that Madeleine took advantage of her special day to help other children in need by collecting shoe donations.



"When you already have a lot, you should share with kids who don't," explains Madeleine.

"She's a deep thinker and thinks about the world around her," adds her mother, Libby Neill. "I suggested to her that she look in her bedroom at all the toys. We don't really need more stuff. I always explain to my children that they are incredibly blessed. Not all children have the same advantages and toys that they have."



Younger brother Joseph had already watched his sister collect shoes for two years in a row and so he already understood the purpose of the Buckner Shoes Birthday Club.

But then he connected the dots between Shoes for Orphan Souls and his baseball coach who works at Buckner and, in turn, helps many children around the world. Coach Randy Daniels is also known as Buckner's vice president of business and government development.

"I will note that Joseph was still a little hesitant to do it this year until he realized helping kids through Buckner is

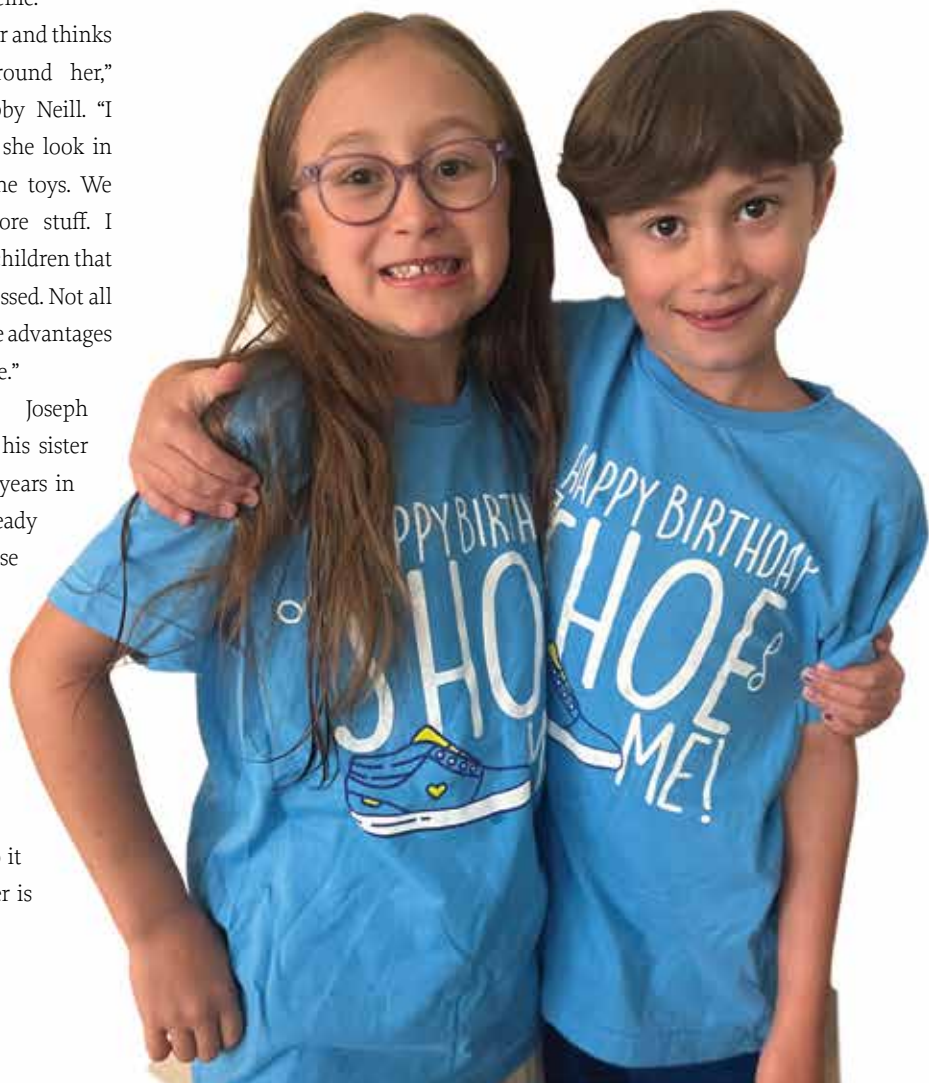
what Coach Randy does. Then he was very much on board. Thanks, Randy," Libby adds. "Joseph is naturally an empathetic kid. When we explained Shoes Birthday Club, he liked the idea."

"It's kind to help people," Joseph adds.

## Lessons of giving

The impact of Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls is important, but so is the importance of learning to help others, Neill explains.

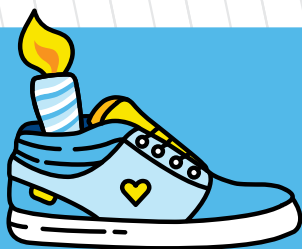
"We want our kids to see that what they have - a house and toys - isn't the same for everybody. We're trying to instill in them that some kids don't have the same things, for instance, some kids are only fed when they go to school. What they have is not just blessed but beyond blessed. It's important to keep that perspective and want to give back and want to help others," she says. **BT**



# Celebrate Your Birthday with Purpose

While celebrating your birthday, add a meaningful purpose to gifts from friends and family by asking them to give you a pair of children's shoes.

Your generosity will help Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® provide shoes and socks to orphans and vulnerable children in the U.S. and throughout the world.



## Birthday Club

### Join the Buckner Shoes Birthday Club!

It's easy to join the club:

1. Register for the Birthday Club by scanning the QR code below.
2. Buckner will send all the party supplies – confetti, T-shirt, invitations, and more.
3. Gather shoes for vulnerable children around the world.

Thanks for taking time on your special day to care for children in need.

 **BUCKNER SHOES**  
FOR ORPHAN SOULS®

Hope shines here.®



# Thirty-five years later, Monica Salinas is still at her first job

By Kayla Salzman

Monica Salinas knew without a doubt that she wanted to spend her life helping children. What she didn't know was that her first job out of college would lead to a 35-year career with Buckner Children and Family Services, touching many children and families with her love and care.

Salinas, a servant-hearted native South Texan with an eye for detail, began her career journey with Buckner on January 3, 1989. With a degree in child development and family living, she applied for a job with Buckner as a case worker, unaware of the transformative journey that awaited her, or the 35 years of service that lay ahead of her at the same organization.

"I really didn't have a plan for my career," said Salinas. "I knew I wanted to work with children and families. That I knew."

## A LONG BUCKNER CAREER

In her initial role at Buckner, Salinas supported vulnerable children and families navigating crises. Her empathy, dedication and knowledge were a perfect match for the families she served. Just over a year later in August 1990, she was promoted to lead case worker and never slowed down.

As the years unfolded, Salinas' impact grew as she continued to work with more vulnerable children and families seeking support with Buckner in the Rio Grande Valley. She transitioned from lead case worker to program director, and then to Rio Grande Valley area supervisor. She continued to take on more responsibility, expanding how many lives she has touched as her Buckner roles expanded.

Early in her career, Salinas was one of the first directors of a partnership with Buckner and Texas A&M University, developing community centers in Texas border communities. Her guidance and support for families in these areas helped the families grow stronger and helped ensure children grew up in loving homes.

Salinas now serves as senior director of Buckner Family Support Services and Transition Services. In this role, she oversees a group of

state-wide Buckner programs supporting children that include Family and Youth Services (FAYS), Healthy Outcomes through Prevention and Early Support (HOPES), Fatherhood EFFECT, Texas Home Visiting, and services for youth who are aging out of foster care.

"There is no job I haven't loved," said Salinas of her various roles at Buckner.

Salinas championed many different programs in her time at Buckner and played a crucial role in the success of programs in the Rio Grande Valley. One of her most fond memories was the implementation of what is now known as FAYS, a program offering counseling, coaching, and other support services for families experiencing conflicts.

Salinas was thrilled to accept a new challenge and serve children and families with programs and services that proactively prevent family displacement, helping them grow stronger together.

"I like a challenge," said Salinas. "Of the changes I have seen, there is always something positive waiting for us on the other side."

## A CALLING TO TEACH

The youngest of seven children, Salinas desired to be a teacher when she grew up. She said her childhood teachers instilled in her a love for learning and opening doors and opportunities for other people.

"I was born to be a leader," said Salinas. "I have had the opportunity to teach many team members. To teach and to train and to help them become their best selves so we can put out our best work for those we serve."

Salinas dedicates time to her team members to ensure that each person feels cared for, encouraged, and valued. Whether it is a quick conversation about kids and grandkids, a lunch where work talk is off the table, or a celebration of a job well done, Salinas is always ready to provide the support her team members need.

"The nature of our work is hard work," said Salinas. "It is emotionally and physically draining when you are focused on caring for others and walking with them through life's challenges. If we are asking them to do the work that they do, we need to invest back into them, to support and sustain them to keep going and doing this work."

## CONTINUING TO SERVE

Salinas's 35 years at Buckner are far from the end of her service, and she is excited to see what God will do for her and Buckner in



years to come.

“God still has me here. I have not heard that it is time for me to go, so I will not go.”

In the meantime, Salinas is enjoying time with her husband, Steve, and watching their babies raise babies. Her three children have blessed them with eight grandchildren ranging in age from eight years to two months old who love spending time in the pool and doing arts and crafts.

When asked what she wanted someone to remember about her journey at Buckner, Salinas said, “What Buckner does for the soul. We are surrounded by prayer. We depend on each other.”

Her legacy is etched in the smiles of parents who found hope when

they needed it most, a joy of a child who found a forever home, and the cries of laughter that come from her team members as they talk about what their children and grandchildren did over the weekend.

“This is a ministry not only for our clients, but for our team members. It is life sustaining, and it has helped me in my life journey. Who knows where I would be if not for Buckner.”

Back in Welasco, Texas, at the Progreso Family Community Center, Salinas was honored with the planting of a tree. Today, the tree still stands strong, a testament to the blossoming growth of the many families touched by Salinas’ compassion and support.

Congratulations, Monica Salinas, on 35 years at Buckner International. **BT**



# Finding room to breathe

Story by Susan Simmons

Photography by Susan Simmons and Elisabeth Sabella

**“In the year between these two retreats, my walk with God has gotten stronger. I couldn’t wait to bring my kids back.” Danielle smiled as she said it, thanking me for all the work that brought her family back to Camp Buckner for the second time. When this young mom told me how she had grown spiritually in the year since her first visit to Camp Buckner, I knew exactly what she was talking about.**

I clearly remember watching the sun set behind tall southern pines. I was sitting in the middle of the softball field at the church camp where I spent a couple of weeks every summer. I was 17. I remember what I was wearing, the feel of my Bible in my lap, and the distant sound of the band rehearsing for the evening worship service.

Camp is one of the most peaceful places in my memory and I have never doubted that God is the author of that peace. I marvel at how much I needed time away from my usual pace of life, even before

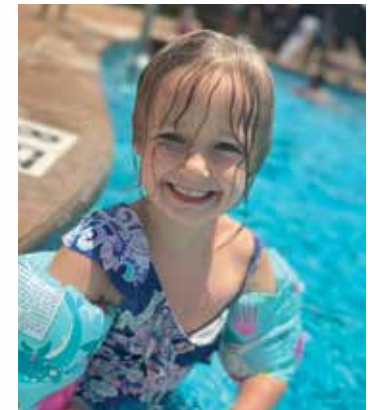


cell phones and the internet; before I had a job or a mortgage. Before I knew loss, regret, disappointment, and a long list of fears, I found stillness sitting outside with Jesus. Since the summer I was 12, I've spent more than 300 days as a camper or working at a camp, because it continues to make me feel the nearness of God.

Danielle currently has about eight "camper days" so far and she said that she feels God's obvious presence too. If ever there was a group of people who need permission to pause, breathe, and enjoy the beauty of the world around us, it is families served by Buckner programs.

The women of Buckner Family Pathways® aren't strangers to challenges such as hard relationships, fear, addiction, debt, violence, or a host of other trials. They are the sole or primary providers for their children and are enrolled in college full-time. For most, a family vacation is out of the question.

Once a year, Family Pathways participants are given the opportunity and the tools to take a road trip to Camp Buckner where they observe their children interacting with the world around them. A group of trained and vetted volunteers watch the children during



chatted, the teenage daughter from one family reached over to pick up the one-year-old son from the other family. They're walking through this chapter together, as neighbors and friends.

Before the last day of the Family Pathways retreat, there were already children asking, "Mom, are we coming back next year?" I couldn't help but note that I hadn't seen a single child glued to a digital screen. I witnessed storm clouds, sunburns, and skinned knees, and also a lot of fun and opportunities to rest. Like the spring that trickled behind the dining hall, God's good gifts of family and friendships keep flowing, filling us with peace. **BT**

a daily break for parents. The rest of the day is spent splashing in the pool, reeling in the biggest fish of the day, flying down the zip line, or hiking rocky trails. It allows some youngsters to discover a new side of their mom and a piece of the world that is different from home.

Earlier the same day, another young mom asked me how I knew I wanted to marry my husband. We talked about dating and keeping trusted friends around us to help us make wise decisions. There are a lot of questions about this when you're 22 and mother to the cutest 2-year-old, but I was so glad she asked.

Later, I joined two other single moms from the same city, and their children, in the dining hall. Over fried chicken and mashed potatoes, they told me about their plans for the future. While we





# A different Journey

Planting a Buckner Family Hope Center® in San Antonio

STORY BY MELISSA GRYCH • PHOTOGRAPHY BY AUDRA BEATY



**F**or years as a state trooper, Manny Alaniz knew he was protecting lives. But he questioned whether he was really saving them.

After more than two decades in law enforcement, Alaniz somehow felt hollow, he admits.

A different calling pushed Alaniz toward “a new life,” as he describes it, which eventually led him to Buckner where he now works to start Buckner services and outreach in the San Antonio area.

## What was missing

Alaniz’s career with the Texas Department of Public Safety ranged from patrol duties in Houston to investigating major crimes and organized gangs in Houston and San Antonio. His career culminated in Austin as a law enforcement administrator.

“When I was promoted to captain in Austin, I commuted daily from San Antonio, not wanting to relocate my family again. During my daily commute, I prayed about God’s loving mercy in saving me and my family. My desire was to do his will and follow his

direction,” says Alaniz. “I realize now what I didn’t know back then - that I was about to embark on a different journey.”

Alaniz and his family started attending a new church and met new friends, including someone who would be a pivotal guide. Dr. Albert L. Reyes, who at the time was president of the Baptist University of the Americas and would later become president of Buckner International in 2010.

“After years of law enforcement, I no longer wanted to deal with people. My dealings with the public were primarily adversarial. I thought, I just wanted to study the Bible,” Alaniz says. “Thinking back at that makes me laugh. God probably laughed, too. How can I serve the Lord in the ministry and not have anything to do with his people?”

“Dr. Reyes talks about this a lot. God is steering everything. We resist and resist. But when we give in, he guides you. He leads. We follow.”

### Tying it all together

Alaniz earned undergraduate and graduate degrees, became ordained, and was serving as both a pastor and a church planter.

That’s when he received a call from Reyes, who had joined Buckner International. He discussed plans to start a Buckner Family Hope Center® in San Antonio.

“I moved from saving the lives of the people of Texas to saving souls for the king of glory. Saving lives are important but the soul of a person is eternal.”

Alaniz joined Buckner in October 2023 as director of the Buckner Family Hope Center in San Antonio, for which Buckner is still searching for a permanent site.

### Putting down roots

The goal of the Family Hope Center is to strengthen families so children can stay in a strong and loving home. At the center, families receive critical services, aid, and coaching, including counseling, financial education, ESL classes, computer literacy, and job skills training.

Even though San Antonio is the seventh largest city in the U.S., almost 20% of Bexar County residents live in households earning less than the federal poverty level. More than 50% of families are single-parent households.

“We want to fill a gap and so we’re currently studying the area’s needs,” says Alaniz. “One location is near an elementary school. Some 90% of families that go to the school are living below poverty level, 97% are Hispanic, and 27% cannot speak English.”

Alaniz is focused on developing relationships with community leaders, pastors, and other organizations that support a healthy, strong city.

“I’m letting them know Buckner is here and what we do. We’ve gotten tremendous response to what Buckner does to impact families,” Alaniz says. **BT**

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

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Outside the city, under the stars, surrounded by hills, Camp Buckner provides a place of healing and transformative hope for Buckner families each summer. Read about the power of God's creation on page 36.