

See inside for ways you can support families.

# Buckner Today

The magazine of Buckner International  
SUMMER 2022

A woman with short dark hair, wearing a pink ribbed sweater, blue distressed jeans, and maroon boots, is smiling and carrying a young girl on her back. The girl is wearing a floral scarf and a tan jacket. They are standing on a sidewalk in front of a brick building with a green bush to the left.

## A blue print for success

Single mother finds direction and hope  
at Buckner Family Pathways™ PAGE 10

# Buckner

A publication of Buckner International • **Volume 47, Number 2 • Summer 2022**

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Buckner International  
Board of Trustees Chair  
Susan Wilhoit

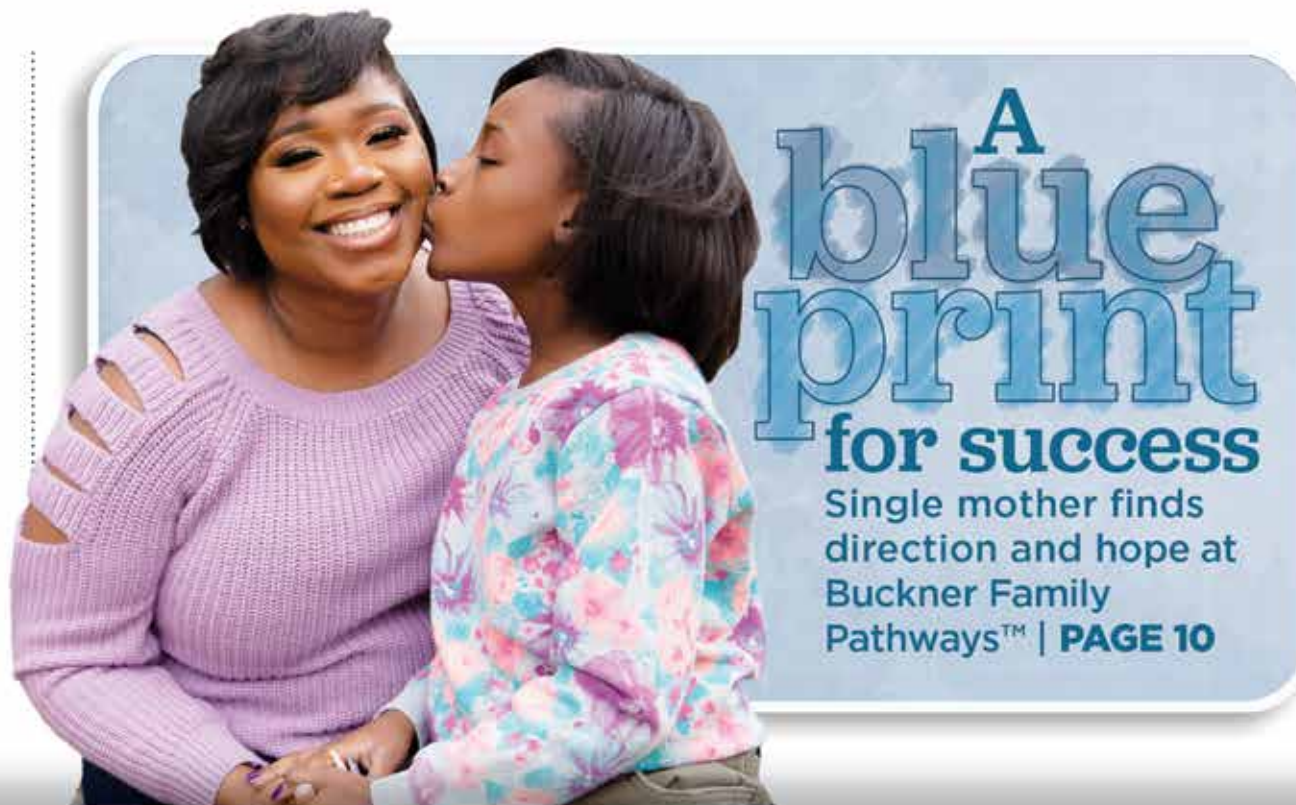
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## LEADERSHIP

PRESIDENT & CEO, BUCKNER INTERNATIONAL  
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 **BUCKNER**  
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# her Today



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**On the cover:** LaSherrell Hayes was dangerously close to dropping out of school, but felt the pressure to provide for her daughter. She found resources to make that possible through Buckner Family Pathways™. Photography by Aimee Freston.

# Board takeover

**By Susan Wilhoit**

*Chair*

*Buckner International Board of Trustees*



*Susan and husband Randy pictured here with their grandsons, Will and Jack.*

**A**s chair of the Buckner International Board of Trustees, I asked permission to “take over” the Presidential Perspective column in this issue of *Buckner Today*.

Anytime you hear the words “take over” in today’s world, you immediately assume something bad. Not this time. Representing the board of Buckner, I wanted to take over Dr. Reyes’ column so I could talk about him, something he would never do.

During our April board meeting, we recognized Dr. Reyes for his 10 years as president/CEO of Buckner. If you know him or have ever worked with him, you know he is a humble person, who believes in teamwork and collaboration. That’s true with the Buckner team as well as his interactions with the board.

Our meeting in April was one of the best meetings I’ve experienced during my time serving on the board. It was my privilege to serve as host during a celebration for Dr. Reyes and his partner in life, Dr. Belinda Reyes. Our board deeply and sincerely loves Albert and Belinda, and we are grateful for their service to Buckner.

Elected the sixth president of Buckner in 2010, Dr. Reyes assumed the title of both president and CEO in 2012 when Dr. Ken Hall retired. That succession of presidents at Buckner was perhaps one of the smoothest transitions in our 143-year history, even eclipsing the death of our founder, R.C. Buckner, when his

sons Hal and Joe took over leadership. As a board, we are grateful for the seamless succession of leaders.

Under Dr. Hall, Buckner experienced exponential growth, as it had under Dr. R.C. Campbell during his 33 years as our leader. Like his predecessors, Dr. Reyes is leading Buckner into new growth and opportunities to fulfill our mission.

Since Dr. Reyes became our leader, we’ve seen some amazing growth you may not realize:

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The total assets for Buckner since Dr. Reyes has been president and CEO have grown from **\$401,006,000 to \$1,025,609,000**, crossing the \$1 billion mark for the first time in 2021. **That’s an increase of 156%.**

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Our annual operating budget has grown from **\$105,309,000 to \$161,787,000 in 2021, an increase of 54%.**

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And our revenue has grown from **\$117,151,000 to \$172,256,000 for an increase of 47%.**

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The Buckner Impact Fund, which helps subsidize our work, **has grown to nearly \$500 million.**

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But **the most important number** is the number of lives impacted. With an average of just over 100,000 lives impacted each year, **more than a million people have been served by Buckner during his tenure.**

Knowing Dr. Reyes' humility and his sense of collaboration and teamwork, he would be the first to tell you these numbers reflect the ministry of Buckner and not just one person. But we also know it starts at the top. He has set the tone of working together, not for his scorecard or Buckner's, but for the glory of God and the kingdom of Christ.

When we asked staff a couple years ago to look at developing a new mission statement, Dr. Reyes took the lead. We needed something simple yet profound; something memorable yet accurate. With his leadership, the team proposed a mission statement that accomplished those goals and kept our focus on Jesus.

"The mission of Buckner is to follow the example of Jesus in serving vulnerable children, families and senior adults."

While that may be the mission of Buckner, it also describes Dr. Reyes' own life and leadership.

He is a person who follows the example of Jesus in everything he does, and we are grateful to have him as our leader and to celebrate his 10 years as our president and CEO.

As a gift to him, we recorded a video featuring messages from each of the board members. After the dinner, Dr. Reyes told me, with a lump in his throat, it was the best video he'd ever seen. To get a sense of the love and respect we as board members have for him, let me invite you to watch that video. The theme that emerges from the video is the humility of Dr. Reyes and the love and respect we, as a board, have for him.

**Celebrate Dr. Reyes' tenure with us:**  
[buckner.org/CelebratingALRTenure](http://buckner.org/CelebratingALRTenure)



We also showed a video with Dr. Reyes reflecting on his tenure as president/CEO. I think you'll find it both informative and encouraging.

**Watch Dr. Reyes' reflection video:**  
[buckner.org/10YearReflection](http://buckner.org/10YearReflection)



As a board of trustees, we take very seriously our stewardship of this ministry. We have an obligation to our history, but more importantly, to the kingdom of God. This is a Christ-centered ministry with a biblical mission and mandate. We do not take that lightly.

As the current leader of the board, I can go about my other tasks and duties assured that with Albert Reyes at the helm, the ship is on course and able to make course changes as needed. The trustees enjoy a strong bond between staff leadership and the board that is built on mutual trust, a rare commodity today. At the center of that bond is Dr. Reyes.

On behalf of the board of trustees and Dr. Reyes, I'd like to thank you for your trust in Buckner and in our leader. We want you to know how much we love and support our leader, and we grateful for your partnership in this work. **BT**

*Susan R. Wilhoit*

# Happiness inspired



A few weeks ago, I spent two full days in Houston and Beaumont filming videos at our Buckner Retirement Services communities. Total, I drove nearly 650 miles in three days, from Dallas to Houston to Beaumont and home.

It was the drive home from Beaumont I feared most because I knew it would come later in the day after working at Buckner Calder Woods. It's a long drive no matter how you do it. But when I got in my truck to head home, I found myself surprisingly energized.

The trip's focus was producing a video about the Buckner Senior Care and Assistance program. It's one of the many things that stands out about Buckner and makes us unique. If a resident living in a Buckner community runs out of money, the Senior Care fund is there to provide financial support and assistance. As Abraham Mathew, senior executive director of Buckner Parkway Place in Houston, said, "How can we tell someone who has lived with us all these years that this is no longer your home just because you can't afford it?"

You can see why I was so energized after the video shoots. But



it wasn't just the senior care program that got me pumped. It was the people I met on the trip.

As video shoots usually go, one is never enough, so we added a couple extra videos to the trip. Derone (pronounced Darren) Martin, executive chef at Parkway Place, is being recognized this year by LeadingAge Texas for his outstanding leadership. A chef winning a leadership award? Shouldn't that go to an executive director?

It didn't take long watching Martin in the kitchen to recognize his skills as a leader match his culinary expertise. A "conductor of crazy" is how Martin describes his work leading the culinary team. **I hope you'll watch his story at [buckner.org/CommunityHeroesinAction](https://www.buckner.org/CommunityHeroesinAction). Oh, and bring a napkin to use when you see his mouthwatering delights**



But wait. We weren't done. Theresa Gillum retired April 7 after

41 years at Baptist Haven/Parkway Place. Yes, 41 years. She started April 7, 1981. I've been at Buckner 28 years and feel I'm pretty much a part of this ministry. But Gillum's 41 years blow me out of the water.

For 41 years, she has been on the frontline of ministry every day, caring for residents like they were her family. As she puts it, "I want the family members to know without a shadow of a doubt that they can walk out of this building and not have to worry about their family, knowing that 'Theresa's there, and I don't have to worry. I know that they will take care of my family.' I just really feel it's a calling."

**Meet Theresa:** [buckner.org/Retirementafter41years](http://buckner.org/Retirementafter41years)



And just think. Those two videos were the "extras" on this trip. Back to the Senior Care and Assistance Fund video. Betsy Bixby is the perfect picture of a daughter lovingly caring for her 97-year-old mother. Bixby's love and care for her mom can be seen and felt. While her words in the video convey that care, her expressions and the tender way she talks with her mother express a deep love.

"It's frightening to think about your parent running out of money and not having good care and this was an absolute answer to prayer," Bixby shared. "I feel like Parkway Place and the Buckner umbrella, it's a beautiful approach to caring, for caring for our seniors. It's what God calls us to, to care for the widows and the infants."

Added Senior Executive Director Mathew, "Buckner stands out, saying that 'You can outlive your finances, but you can't outlive the care we have for you.'"

Take a few minutes and watch this video and you'll see not only the impact of the Senior Care and Assistance Fund, but the love a daughter and the extended family at Parkway Place have for seniors: [buckner.org/CaringforSeniors](http://buckner.org/CaringforSeniors)



And one more. The last shoot of the trip was at Calder Woods in Beaumont where I met J.D. Firman, a World War II veteran who lost his wife recently. David Ummel, executive director of Calder Woods, tells the story in such a compelling way, as he and Mr. Firman became friends through the crisis.

In need of financial help as Mrs. Firman was on hospice care and in her last days, Ummel and the team at Buckner Retirement Services, "stopped what they were doing and worked together to make this happen," Ummel said. "It says a lot about Buckner."

Stayed tuned for Mr. Firman's story in the next issue of *Buckner Today* as we finish editing that video. You won't want to miss it. It's guaranteed to inspire happiness. **BT**



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

**Visit [buckner.org/volunteer](http://buckner.org/volunteer)**  
to find volunteer opportunities in the United States and around the world. Help organize fun activities for foster children, prepare boxes of aid or deliver shoes to vulnerable children around the world!



### Letters to the Editor



If you have any questions or comments about the articles you've read in

Buckner Today, email us at [bucknercommunications@buckner.org](mailto:bucknercommunications@buckner.org).

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See how Buckner is

# on the



## Experience the foster care and adoption journey with the Holloway family

**R**ob and Emily Holloway felt a calling toward adoption for a long time. But once they learned of the need for safe foster care homes, they knew they had to do something. The family fostered Kayla, and after 893 days in care, she joined the Holloway family forever.

**Meet Rob and Emily:**  
[buckner.org/HollowayFamily](https://buckner.org/HollowayFamily)



## Breaking generational poverty through Faith and Finance classes

**P**astor Doug Ashley is impacting the community through the Buckner Family Hope Center™ at Longview by teaching Faith and Finance. Throughout the pandemic, he continued to lead the class virtually. Today, they meet again in person, and families continue to be empowered through their finances.

**Watch how Pastor Doug is changing his community:**  
[buckner.org/FaithandFinance](https://buckner.org/FaithandFinance)



# move



## Buckner senior living communities offer community forever

When your loved one transitions into one of six Buckner senior living communities, you can rest assured they will be cared for. The Bixby family has found support, resources and respect in the transition into assisted living.

Watch the Bixby family's story:  
[buckner.org/CaringforSeniors](https://buckner.org/CaringforSeniors)



## Protecting children through foster care

Paul and Daisy Ledet have fostered 21 children ... and are joyfully looking forward to having more. In this process, they have found joy in helping make a difference in each child's life. Read their full story on page 18.

Watch the Ledets' story here:  
[buckner.org/LedetFamily](https://buckner.org/LedetFamily)



# A blue print for success

Single mother finds direction and hope at Buckner Family Pathways™

Story and photography by Aimee Freston

**A few years ago, LaSherrell Hayes had never dreamed she'd own her own house. As a single mother staying with a friend, the idea of home ownership even just having a savings account seemed out of reach.**

Hayes was going to school, but she was dangerously close to dropping out. She felt the pressure to provide for her daughter, but didn't know how she could continue to work, go to school and navigate difficult living situations.

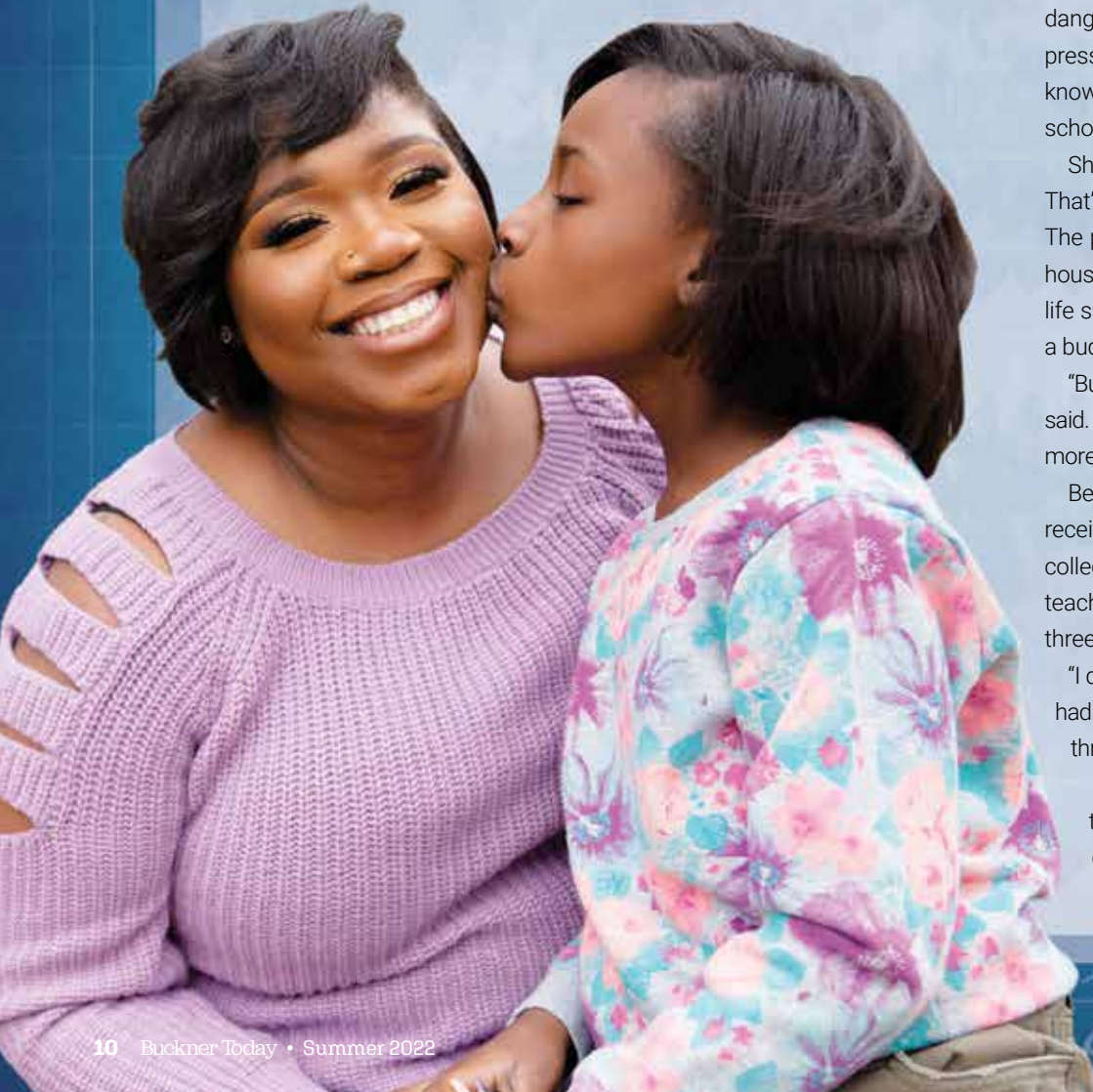
She needed help and she needed help fast. That's when she found Buckner Family Pathways™. The program not only helped her gain immediate housing, but it gave her resources and guidance to life skills and financial principals, such as building a budget and saving money.

"Buckner was everything it needed to be," Hayes said. "It trained my mind to continue to survive in a more healthy way. They gave me the blueprint."

Because of the training and resources she received at Family Pathways, today Hayes is a college graduate, working as a special education teacher in a Dallas school, and owns her own three-bedroom, two-bathroom home.

"I don't know that I would be right here, right now, had I not went through it," Hayes said about going through the Family Pathways program.

Family Pathways set her up for success. And the only reason she found out about it was during a chance encounter at her school.



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*ce hope success*

Hayes was walking the halls of her school, feeling depressed and hopeless. She was trying to maintain 18 credit hours and multiple jobs to support her daughter. But it was leaving a toll on her mental and physical well-being.

"I was lost and unstable as a single parent," Hayes said. "At this point, I was merely existing. I struggled with mental, physical and emotional stability. I felt hopeless with my inconsistent living situations and was severely depressed because I had a child who depended on me solely, and I did not have a stable home for us."

Her school was hosting a community event where Family Pathways had a booth. She almost walked right by the event, but some volunteers encouraged her to check it out. That's when she found out about Family Pathways.

Hayes applied and was accepted to the program.

"It was not what I expected," she said. "My mind was blown by how beautiful it looked to me. Most shelters or transitional housing is not such a nice facility to be in. Even though you are going through a hard time, you don't feel that way pulling up to something so nice."

From day one, Hayes applied herself to the rigorous program requirements, even though sometimes it was challenging. Each person in the program is expected to attend monthly meetings, participate in financial workshops and therapy sessions, maintain a certain GPA and build their savings account.

"It was overwhelming, but it was worth it," Hayes said. "They knew what they were talking about. Buckner Family Pathways took the stress away from so many things. I began to heal and grow as a person, mother and student. My baby and I both benefited from mental [health] services. Buckner catered to the needs of our whole individual beings."

Now that she has graduated from the program and bought her own house, Hayes said she understands even more why Family Pathways had such strict requirements. They were building a foundation for her to live successfully after graduating from the program.

"Buckner literally woke me up," Hayes said. "I am so much better because I chose to submit and surrender to God's will over mine in my desperation, depression and weakest moments. I chose Buckner, as afraid as I was, because I knew in my weakness, God is strong. I learned balance there. Maintaining balance is still a struggle, but it is much easier with a blueprint." **BT**



**BT**

## Family Pathways: A place to heal and grow

*Buckner Family Pathways™ provided LaSherrell Hayes affordable housing, education and child care to help her achieve her dreams and set her up for a life of self-sufficiency. Using the skills and tools she learned from Family Pathways, Hayes and her daughter are both thriving. Hayes is a successful teacher and recently bought her first home.*





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## Single mother breaking generational cycles

*Brooklyn Cole didn't think twice about reuniting with her younger brother Anthony to give him a safe place to grow up. Once she and her son Andres found stability at Buckner Family Pathways™, her top goal was to provide that structure and safety for Anthony too.*

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# and found

Buckner Family Pathways™  
mom adopts her little brother

**Story by Scott Collins • Photography by Louis DeLuca**

Brooklyn Cole was there as a pre-teen sister when her little brother Anthony was born. She even cut his umbilical cord. More than 10 years later, Cole is back in Anthony's life, only this time she is reconnecting her little brother to a new mother – herself.

When Cole and her biological son Andres entered the Buckner Family Pathways™ program in Midland, her Buckner caseworkers asked what her goals were. A career in the medical field and reuniting with her little brother Anthony topped Cole's list. And while those were tangible goals the Buckner team helped Cole accomplish, her long-term objective was to break the generational cycle of instability she was born into.

Raised by her grandparents because her parents were incarcerated, Cole met her dad for the first time when she was 7 after he was released from prison. Her mother has consistently struggled with addiction and was in and out of her and Anthony's lives. Her grandparents who raised her struggled with similar addictions.

Growing up in that environment, Cole started getting into trouble when she was in seventh grade.

## “It means I don’t have to live with another family”

On Nov. 5, 2021, Brooklyn Cole, Anthony and Andres joined officials from Midland County and a host of Buckner staff for National Adoption Day where Anthony officially became Cole’s son.

Watch the powerful video featuring their adoption day and the journey toward becoming a family: [buckner.org/BrooklynCole](https://buckner.org/BrooklynCole)





"I was kind of lost," she said. "I didn't know what was going on in the family. I knew whatever it was wasn't right."

She was in and out of juvenile detention and in 2017 became pregnant with her son Andres. Knowing her son would be born into the kind of dysfunction that marked her own life, Cole used her pregnancy as a wake-up call. It was time to be the person in her family who made a change.

"There's one thing that I did not want and that was to raise him in the family that I had been raised in. I love them, but it wasn't healthy. I wanted to make a better life for my son," Cole said.

Her journey out of generational dysfunction led Cole and her son to Family Pathways, where she has a safe place to live while attending college as she moves toward her dream of working in the medical field as a surgical technician.

"We have some generational work to do," she said. "Some bloodlines need to be cleansed. But this change is going to affect generations and generations and generations to come. This is not just for my two boys, but this is going to be for their kids."

"Our goal for her is what she wants, and she wants to break the generational cycle that she was born into," said Cindy Muro, program director of Family Pathways in Midland. "It's a bright story. It really does mean hope for families and means hope for her family. All the struggle and the turmoil that she's been through, this is a moment in her life that will change it all."

And while Cole and Andres were moving past the troubles of their family, she wanted to help her little brother Anthony find safety too. Soon after entering the Family Pathways program, she reached out to the Buckner team in Midland about becoming a kinship caregiver for Anthony. Buckner kinship is similar to foster care, the main difference being a family member providing care for the child rather than a traditional foster family.

Because Buckner provides both Family Pathways and foster care in Midland, the Buckner team was able to work together across departments and get Anthony moved into Cole's care as his kinship provider. And because she has a safe apartment through Family Pathways, it became the perfect place for Anthony.

But becoming her brother's kinship caregiver was just the first step for Cole. Concerned he might someday end up being separated from her, she started exploring the idea of adopting him to ensure they could stay together.

"Anthony has always been like my son in the sense of me just having him since he was little and being by his side," Cole said. "But I love that kid so much, and it does hurt knowing that all I can do to protect him is keep him with me where he's at and give him the stability and raising him in a godly home."

On Nov. 5, 2021, Cole, Anthony and Andres joined other families, officials from Midland County, and a host of Buckner staff for National



Adoption Day where Anthony officially became Cole's son. The cord she had cut at his birth was reconnected.

"She has had to learn how to be a mother of not only her baby, but also her brother," Muro said. "She's learned to be the head of the household. She's learned to be a good student. She's learned to be a great role model for the community, and she's done this at a very young age."

Cole credits Buckner with giving her hope, helping her get back into school and helping with the adoption of Anthony. But more than anything, she recognizes God's plan.

"I do think it was God's plan to allow things to happen and work out the way they have," she said. "He restored a lot of time and he's been there to work with us through the whole thing."

"She's the perfect example of a young woman, a young mother, that is taking charge of her life and learning how to be self-sufficient and taking responsibility for everything that's going on around her and pushing through, moving forward, making decisions that are going to get her where she wants to be," Muro said.

Reflecting on his adoption by his big sister, Anthony is fully aware of the impact and what it means for him.

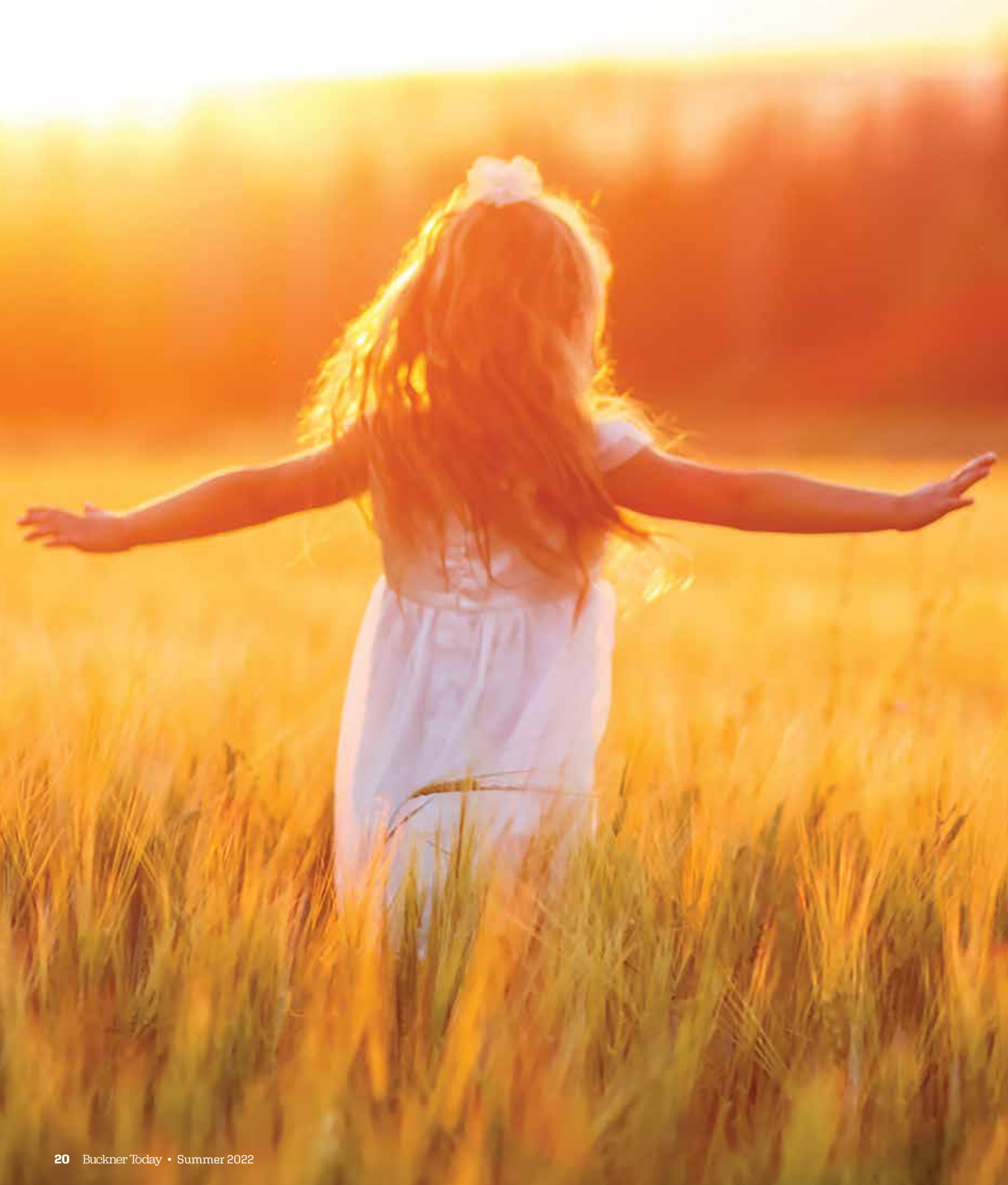
"It means I don't have to live with another family," he said. **BT**



BT

## Creating safety and structure

*Brooklyn Cole didn't have a safe home as a child, surrounded by addictions and instability. Through Buckner Family Pathways™, she has transformed generations and created a secure home for both Andres and Anthony.*



# Something about summer

fills the air with anticipation — the bright sunshine, the longer, fun-filled days and a much-needed break.



But, as I'm sure you can imagine, for so many vulnerable children and families, the days of summer are only brighter outside. The dark clouds of **poverty, instability and difficult circumstances** still hang heavy in their lives with little hope for breakthrough.

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

Thanks to you — it can be.

When you give, hope doesn't just shine through your generosity ... it blazes.

With your support today, you will give children and their families a glimmer of hope that becomes a floodlight to illuminate the bright future ahead.

Any special gift you can give today to **help meet the \$75,000 challenge in full** will have a powerful effect to give even more vulnerable families a breakthrough this summer.

Give today:  
[buckner.org/SummerBreakthrough](https://buckner.org/SummerBreakthrough)



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Hope shines here.®

Paul and Daisy Ledet have fostered  
21 children, and it's still

# 'A beautiful thing

Story and  
photography  
by Russ Dilday

**y**ears ago, Daisy Ledet, a public-school educator, kept seeing a sign on the side of a local bus. Although it was a sign appealing to prospective foster parents, she saw it “as a sign from God.”

“The last time I saw this sign, I took the number down and ... I made that phone call. That was the best phone call that I could make in my life - to be a foster mom,” Daisy shared.





It didn't take much to convince her husband Paul, also a teacher, to agree.

"Well, initially, I didn't want to do it because our kids were grown up," Paul said. "In a way, it was like starting all over again, especially when she said we would have foster kids anywhere from 0 to 10 years old.

"But once it's all said and done, once you get the first kid in your house and you see what kind of difference you make in the life of that child, you're not going to want to quit."

And they didn't. They initially started fostering with another agency, but since fostering through Buckner three years ago, the parents of four adult biological children have served 21 children as foster parents, eventually adopting siblings Jacobi and Jakayla.

Daisy Ledet said the secret of the couple's ability to care for each child is love.

"Why do I foster kids? Because I love them," she said. "They need me and I need them. You know, a lot of people ask, 'When are you and Mr. Paul going to stop?' We're not done 'til it's all over. I love helping. I love being a foster mom."

Buckner foster care home developer Annie Flemon called the

Ledets, "great foster parents. I tell people all the time during training, if you want to be a great foster parent, you have to have a heart for it.

"You can't just say, 'I want to come because I know God told me this is what I need to do' or 'I want to give back,'" Flemon said. "You have to actually have a heart for these children because these children come with baggage. Paul and Daisy definitely have a heart for children."

### Parents of siblings needed

Early in their fostering career, the couple welcomed Jacobi into their home when he was only 5 days old. Just 18 months later, they found out he had a sister and welcomed her into their home as a foster child when she was 3 days old.

"When Jacobi first came to us, I said, 'Paul, he needs us,'" Daisy recalled. "We may be of age, but to get up every night to look over his crib and say we love him ..." Her voice trailed as if remembering Jacobi, now a tall 9 year old, as a baby. "... and then a couple of months later, we get a phone call: 'We just found out Jacobi has a sibling, and her name is Jakayla.'"

"You look at Jacobi and then you look at his sister, Jakayla, our

hearts just opened up,” she continued. “That was a wonderful thing. It was a beautiful thing. It is very important to keep them together.”

Flemon said finding parents who will foster siblings “is very important. We definitely need foster parents, and we admire our foster parents for wanting to foster siblings.

“When siblings are removed from their families, their sibling is all they have,” she continued. “If you separate siblings, you separate that bond. There’s no family continuity there. And so it’s just great when you can find a family to promote that continuity so that siblings can remain together, and they can continue to grow together.”

## 21 ... and counting

“They have a heart for the children, and they work together as a team,” Flemon said. “Paul and Daisy have fostered 21 children through Buckner, and I believe the lives of those children who have gone from their home were changed tremendously. We’ve heard some success stories as well about some of the children who have returned to either their biological mom and dad or with another relative.”

“With 21 children,” Paul paused as if calculating the possibilities,

“we still have at least 50 more to go.” He resolved his thoughts with a slight grin.

“We’re still young. We’ve got a ways to go. We can take care of some more foster kids. And we think we could do it for at least another five, 10 years,” he said. “And it’s really important to me. I didn’t think it would be initially, but we know that even if we keep the kids for three months, we know we made a positive difference in their lives. So, to me, it’s just like teaching at school. We’re making a difference. And these kids’ lives are going to be changed forever because of the two of us.”

Daisy agreed. “When you see these kids, you see the potential they have. I tell my kids they’re going to be somebody. When [foster children] come into our home, we say, ‘You’ve got a story.’ You don’t know their story, but they are graceful and they’re going to be somebody,” she shared.

“They’re going to grow up and they’re going to come back and they’re going to say thank you,” Daisy said. “Being a foster mom is joy, and it gives joy to the Ledets.” **BT**

“They have a heart for the children and they work together as a team, Paul and Daisy have fostered 21 children through Buckner, and I believe the lives of those children who have gone from their home were changed tremendously.”

—Annie Flemon, Buckner Foster Home Developer





# The journey is worth it, even if the bus ride is three hours one way

**Takiyah Outerbridge brings joy to Buckner Parkway Place every shift**

**T**akiyah Outerbridge's early morning alarm goes off, her feet hit the ground, and her first thought is, "Thank you, God, for my job."

She walks her 12-year-old daughter, Victory, to her school bus stop and then walks across the street to catch her first bus of the day to get to work. She travels more than three hours by bus and train to get to her job as a dietitian at Buckner Parkway Place. This journey is worth it for the place and career she's fallen in love with. But it took prayer and determination to get here.

In 2017, Outerbridge decided it was time to make a change. She packed up her and her then 8-year-old daughter's belongings to leave her husband after years of struggles. She had her mind set on Arizona, but God had another plan.

"I was headed to Arizona only to hear from God, and he told me to come back to Houston," she shared in a recent letter to Buckner.

Outerbridge and Victory found shelter at New Hope Housing. Living across the street from the Buckner Family Hope Center™ at Reed Road, she became curious about what was offered there.

Outerbridge didn't waste any time finding out more and getting Victory plugged into programming too. "I just fell in love with Buckner," she said with a smile.

While living at New Hope Housing, Outerbridge was working at Fiesta Mart, a local supermarket. She began as a cashier and then worked in the produce department. But the work environment was not healthy for her and caused a lot of stress.

She would pray over and over, "God, you have to direct me. I have to get out."

**Story by Emily Ahrens  
Photography by Tim Miller**

Outerbridge leaned into prayer and into the relationships she had in her community, including the one with Erin Mahaffey-Ratcliffe, community coordinator at the Family Hope Center at Reed Road.

"One day I was coming off the bus and Miss Erin said I needed to come in and fill out some paperwork," Outerbridge shared. "She tells me there's a lady here doing interviews. I'm like, 'Interviews for what?' And Erin says, 'Whatever you want.'"

When someone meets Outerbridge, they are welcomed with joy, laughter and a big smile. This encounter was no different. They asked about her preference for working



with people and handling meals.

“People are my favorite. I love people,” Outerbridge recounted from that interview. The role would be working with seniors and helping with their meals, both things she was passionate about.

But the position was nearly 25 miles away and Outerbridge doesn’t drive – especially on highways. So again, she prayed.

“I was applying for other jobs too,” she explained. “So, I had three options for a job. And I said, ‘God, give me a job that’s more to my personality. It has to be matched to my personality.’ And then Buckner called.”

Outerbridge joyfully travels across Houston to reach Parkway Place, typically entertained by her favorite Golden Girls episodes. When asked if it’s worth it?

“Yes, it is, because I fell in love,” she said. “I love talking to the residents and my coworkers. And God’s spirit is here, and

I feel it.”

To receive support through the Family Hope Center and becoming a Buckner employee, Outerbridge can’t imagine being anywhere else. One of her goals is to be able to retire from Buckner.

“I feel like God has given me, for the first time in my life, true love with a job,” Outerbridge said. “This is more than a job; this is more about fulfilling what God wants you to have in life. And that’s how I feel – like I finally did it at 42 years old.”

Her next hard decision is to move closer to Parkway Place and away from the comforts of being next door to the Family Hope Center. But just like all the times before, Outerbridge knows God will provide. And she knows the community she’s found at both Buckner locations will always be there for her. **BT**

BT

## It's never too late to make a change

*In her mid-30s, Takiyah decided it was time to find her passion and joy for life again. She and daughter, Victory, found a fresh start at the Buckner Family Hope Center™ at Reed Road that led to a job she loves.*



# Aging out of foster care doesn't have to mean nowhere to go

**At** 18 years old, Abigail Leal made the decision to officially age out of the foster care system after spending two years under the care of her older sister.

In 2017, Leal, who was only 16 at the time told her sister about the the sexual abuse she was receiving from her biological father. After gathering more information, Leal's sister immediately removed Leal and their younger brother from the home.

The following morning, Leal's sister contacted the authorities to begin the process of foster care placement. When Texas Child Protective Services arrived, Leal said she was afraid to share her story in fear of retaliation from her father.

Leal's sister, at 24 years old, became a foster parent for her siblings.

Because of her age, Leal was immediately referred to the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program through CPS, to learn what resources were available to her as a teenager who planned to age out of the foster care system. The PAL program then referred her to the Buckner FYi center in Amarillo, Texas. Leal said Buckner was a place where she never felt judged or unsafe, but always accepted and cared for.

"With Buckner I know that any questions or concerns I have, I can ask them, and they will gladly answer it," Leal said. "They're a support system and shoulder to lean on during this transition period in my life."

The transition to adulthood is one most will face with a family cheering them on and serving as a safety net when life throws curveballs. When someone ages out of the foster care system, there is a lack of support in every area of adult life.

Seeing that lack of support, Buckner created the National Aging Out of Foster Care Awareness Day on May 31. The awareness day focuses on the more than 23,000 youths who turn 18 with no permanency

**STORY BY  
KAYLA SALZMAN**

and seemingly nowhere to turn at the end of their time in foster care.

According to the National Foster Youth Institute, 20% of those who age out of foster care will become instantly homeless. Less than 3% will graduate with a college degree. Leal is breaking both statistics with the help of Buckner.

While at the Buckner FYi Center, Leal applied for college, moved into her own apartment, enrolled at West Texas A&M University and took charge of her own life.

Today, Leal looks forward to December when she will successfully graduate with a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies from West Texas A&M University with a goal to become a math teacher. She plans to return to school to obtain her master's degree in education in the future.

Leal said the Aging Out of Foster Care Awareness Day is a leap in the right direction for people to see how important it is to care for those who are transitioning into adulthood without the support of a permanent family.

She also said by bringing attention to the aging out process, there is more opportunity to share with those who are aging out of foster care what is available to them and can be an encouragement to reach their highest goals.

As someone who aged out of foster care, Leal now advocates for others to break the bounds of statistics and reclaim their lives. She has spoken in front of crowds and shared her story with others in hopes of showing the world what can happen when hard work and determination are applied. **BT**



“Aging Out of Foster Care Awareness Day is a leap in the right direction for people to see how important it is to care for those who are transitioning into adulthood without the support of a permanent family.”

*–Abigail Leal*



BT

## Dancing with faith

*Julia Cook, single mother of four, has walked through adversity. Instead of letting that hold her back, it fuels her fire. She now teaches Zumba, performs regularly at comedy shows and is always open to what adventure is next.*



# "GOD IS DOING A a new thing"

**Julia Cook faces new adventures head on with the support of the Buckner Family Hope Center™ at Reed Road**

STORY BY EMILY AHRENS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM MILLER

**J**ulia Cook's smile is infectious. As a mother of four walking through homelessness, she could've let that smile fade. But her smile encourages others to keep dancing through life too.

Cook and her family found shelter at New Hope Housing in September 2020.

The family was staying at a hotel but couldn't afford it once she lost her job doing security for Walmart. They sought shelter with Salvation Army, but for a long-term option, they were referred to Star of Hope and moved into New Hope Housing across the street from the Buckner Family Hope Center™ at Reed Road.

Cook jumped into a Bible study and a mom's support group, while her children also enjoyed attending classes and field trips. As someone who loves to dance and workout, attending a Zumba class at the Family Hope Center was a no brainer for Cook. That day though, the instructor taught a "pound series."

"Pound is where they take drumsticks and you use them as weights as we work out, and it's very intense – she [the instructor] was very intense," Cook said with a laugh. "I was about tap out. She's too tough."





While that might not have been her favorite exercise class, Cook ran into the instructor, Rochelle, at church. They enjoyed service together and headed out for a meal afterward. Rochelle challenged Cook to sign up to become a Zumba instructor.

"I wanted to introduce fitness into my own life, so I went ahead and did it. I did it I guess by faith because why else would I do it?" she said.

As soon as Cook was a certified Zumba instructor, the staff at the Family Hope Center encouraged her to teach a class at the center. She led her first class on Feb. 24, 2022.

"Buckner believes in me so much," she shared. "It was just like, 'Boom, here is your first class.'"

Attending a Zumba class led by Cook is all about having fun and moving your body. The music is upbeat, and she encourages participants to keep moving however they can. No one would be able to tell she was nervous to teach. And Cook spends about two hours in preparation for each Zumba class she leads.

"It feels scary; I'm not going to lie. But I feel like God is



doing a new thing in my life," she said. "With new things, come new challenges. With prayer, I just ask God to help me grow into these new leadership roles."

Overcoming adversity has set Cook on a path of adventure. While she is fervently pursuing her goals of being a Zumba instructor, she also writes songs and performs comedy. She recently completed more than 80 comedy shows in the last 100 days. Cook is the first to admit these new opportunities bring fear but isn't afraid to lean on the support around her to take the next leap.

"With God on your side, all things are possible," Cook said with a smile. "This place has shown me that, whatever you don't have, God can still provide through other people."

The support through the growth keeps Cook going.

"I didn't think I'd be here. I didn't think I'd be leading Zumba," she said. "But that's why me and Buckner, we're just trying to figure this out and do great things for the kingdom. God is the only reason I move forward scared because I know he's with me." **BT**



BT

## No looking back

*With new challenges, Cook leans into her relationship with God, even if she's afraid. "With God on your side, all things are possible," she said with a smile.*

# The Thomases: A growing family

Story by Russ Dilday  
Photography by Russ Dilday  
and John Thomas

BT

## Growing is what they do

*Like many families in the panhandle of Texas, the Thomases grow wheat, corn and cotton. In addition to growing crops, Bri and John Thomas also are growing their family legacy, through foster care and adoption. As John said, "We are a farm family and we do grow things, but we're also growing a family."*



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# The

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**Thomas family lives on the edge of a northern panhandle town called Gruver, Texas. Across the road to the north, you can see all the way to the horizon – thousands of acres of plowed fields ready for spring planting.**

Bri Thomas called Gruver, “small-town Texas. We pushed (the population) over 1,200 when we moved here. It’s the very top of the panhandle. The closest Walmart is in Guymon, Oklahoma.”

Like many in the area, John Thomas is a farmer who grows wheat, corn and cotton. Bri, a former labor and delivery nurse, is now a stay-at-home mother.

In addition to growing crops, the couple are also growing their family legacy – through foster care and adoption. As John said, “We are a farm family and we do grow things, but we’re also growing a family.”

The Thomases are parents of four biological children – two girls and two boys – but in recent years they’ve added to their family “through adoption once, and we plan to add again in the summertime,” Bri said.

Helping others has been a pattern with the pair since they were married, but they decided to help through foster parenting only in recent years, fostering a total of 10 children.

“God called us as a couple to foster and at first it was kind of a very scary thought,” Bri said. “When we started with Buckner, they said, ‘Do you want to be a foster-to-adopt family, or do you just want to be a foster family?’ We said we’d like to be a foster family. Adoption’s not our purpose.

“We started off that way and then it turned into an adoption story,” she said. “And there was absolutely a flick-of-the-switch moment when it happened.”

### A flick of the switch

Foster care rarely provides a certain path or journey. There are many times when families aren’t even sure where a child’s case is headed. About 16 months ago, a case worker walked into the Thomas home with a 6-pound baby girl and asked if they were open to adoption.

It was an unexpected question raised early in the fostering process, she said, “But he had previous dealings with the biological family, and



he knew that [adoption] was where the case would probably go.”

But the “flick-of-the-switch moment” came through prayer. “The more we thought and prayed about it, I think John really decided first that this was absolutely our daughter.”

“She’s right,” John confirmed. “It was that feeling that, ‘Yeah, she is my daughter.’ She just stole my heart. She’s just a little bundle of joy.”

The Thomases’ foster journey has spanned four years and has resulted in the adoption of the little girl, their ninth foster child. They’re planning on adopting their 10th child, a boy, soon.

## An epidemic

Bri said most of their foster children have been removed from their previous homes because of drug-related situations related to methamphetamine abuse.

“Many people don’t call it an epidemic, and it really is,” Bri said. “Meth is destroying our communities. It’s destroying families because

basically it just makes it to where the parents don’t care about anything but meth.”

A 2019 study\* authored by Jane Carlisle Maxwell of the University of Texas Steve Hicks School of Social Work cited methamphetamine as “perceived to be the top drug threat in 2019 by the three DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration] Field Divisions covering Texas.”

And the problem of meth usage and abuse, according to Maxwell, appears to be a growing trend in Texas. “Methamphetamine represented 21% of all items analyzed by Texas forensic laboratories in 2005; in 2018, it comprised 40% of all the items examined.”

“It’s not that they [parents who abuse drugs] don’t love their kids,” Bri said. “They do, but they just can’t get away from it. What we hope [our foster children] come away with after they’ve been part of our family is they feel loved and wanted and special.”

The couple’s adopted daughter is one of the survivors of the epidemic.



## A calling

Looking back over their four years of foster parenting, the couple has seen their foster and adoption journey as a calling.

“Adoption is a picture of salvation,” Bri said. “It’s what Jesus did for us, and we feel like we’d like to give that to a child as well.

“I want my kids to see the kind of mom that loves them unconditionally, that expects things from them. And I also want to show them how to fail,” Bri continued. “Well, because we all fail daily, and I want to show them that it’s OK to fail and ... we can do better next time.”

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**“God called us as a couple to foster and at first it was kind of a very scary thought. When we started with Buckner, they said, ‘Do you want to be a foster-to-adopt family, or do you just want to be a foster family?’ We said we’d like to be a foster family ... and then it turned into an adoption story.” –Bri Thomas**

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John agreed. “The kind of father I’d like to be is one like Christ. One of the things I love about being a dad and how it affects me is just that love they give you, the respect, and they just look up to you. They want to be like you.”

Pointing to his western-style boots, he continued, “So you have to put your best boots on. You’re the fun guy sometimes, but you’re also the discipline guy, too. But you’ve got to love them. They look at you as a role model.”

“I really want to teach my kids that they are important and that they are loved always,” Bri echoed. “And I think the most important thing is that they accept Christ as their savior. If we can help them to do that, then I think we’ve done our job as parents.” **BT**

*\*<https://socialwork.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Texas-Substance-abuse-trends-2019.pdf>*





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## Family tree

*Bri and John Thomas of Gruver, Texas, have expanded their family tree through foster care and adoption, adding to their four biological children through one adoption, and another expected soon.*

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# Celebrating a legacy of giving with a pair of shoes

Buckner Parkway Place exceeding their collection goal for Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®

**A**t Buckner Parkway Place, a Buckner senior living community in Houston, residents can expect to find delicious dining, community with others, holiday parties and more. But John Bender, chaplain at Parkway Place, decided six years ago he wanted to also offer a way for residents to directly impact a ministry of Buckner. Bender and staff began offering a shoe drive to benefit Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®.

Creating an opportunity to purchase a pair of shoes, or to donate, gives a level of independence and decision-making back to the residents of Parkway Place. While they can donate to the drive all year long, March was the month they emphasized it. Bender set out with a goal of providing 125 pairs of shoes to Buckner Shoes.

A few years ago, Bender visited the Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid and saw the shoe inventory. He saw the impact of

his residents' gifts. But he also saw where the need was most.

"The size three girls' shoes storage were full. The size five and six boys' shoes were full," Bender said with a tear. "But, what about size 11? The sizes 10, 11 and 12 were lacking. And sometimes little boys or girls need a size 11 too."

He shared that experience with his residents a few years ago, and every year so far, a couple donates a size 11 pair of shoes. This year, they received five pairs for that size.

"I'd like to continue to see this momentum and excitement build," he said.

The momentum of the shoe drive is even encouraging Parkway Place associates to jump into the drive too. With a joint effort between residents and associates, they exceeded their goal this year and donated 149 pairs of shoes. **BT**



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