

See inside for ways you can support families.

Buckner

The magazine of Buckner International
Spring 2020

Today

A portrait of Albert Reyes, a man with a grey beard and glasses, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and red patterned tie. He is smiling and standing in front of a wooden background.

Albert Reyes:

Celebrating a decade
of leadership PAGE 10

Buckner

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Hope shines here.®



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On the cover: This year, we are celebrating a decade of Dr. Albert Reyes' leadership. He continues to be encouraged by our Buckner families and their stories as he moves into his second decade as president of Buckner International. **Cover photo by Kent Barker.**

Dr. Albert Reyes: 10 years of leadership

Editor's Note: Scott Collins, vice president of Buckner Communications, sat down for a video interview with Dr. Albert Reyes to mark Reyes' 10 years as the sixth president of Buckner. The interview has been edited for length and for print. To see the video, go to buckner.org/blog.

BT: How would you summarize the last 10 years as the sixth president?

Reyes: I would say the last 10 years have just flown by. I want to ask the question: "Where did the time go?" I guess you don't think about that; you're just going to the next thing and trying to serve people and get things done, so it didn't even cross my mind.

thought, "Wow, I've been promoted. I've been elevated."

His next sentence, of course, was, "And we wish to take this opportunity to air our grievances." I found out afterward that the other pastors were upset with him because they didn't agree. But I was up in the pinnacle and then down in the ditch in a matter of 10 seconds.

I had to figure out how I was going to recover from that. I had donors with me and of course, staff, city leaders, government leaders, pastors, people from the community.

I just prayed, "Lord, help me out of this. What do I say now after – how do I recover?" And I remembered something my pastor Charlie Johnson used to say. Charlie Johnson used to say, "Something doesn't have to be perfect to be good."

BT: What have been some of the joys?

Reyes: There is great joy in knowing the brand called Buckner means something, that people come to expect a certain level of quality and excellence. I would say not perfection because we don't really aim for perfection. We try to do our best and we sure aim for excellence.

The quality and caliber of individuals that want to work at Buckner just amazes me.

BT: Let's say you were sitting around a table, just having coffee with your five predecessors. What would you say to the previous five presidents of Buckner?

Reyes: I would probably say that I've come to learn, through experience and through research I've done on leadership, that



BT: What are some favorite memories for you?

Reyes: When I was in Kenya for our 10th anniversary, I was coronated with the title that has stuck with me now for 10 years. We were in a small village where everybody came out and the leading pastor, who was not authorized to say what he was about to say, stood and introduced me as "His Excellency, The Reverend Doctor Albert Reyes." I'd never been referred to like that, so I

every president had only one chance to do the best they could with what they had to work with at that time.

I'd really want to ask questions. "Tell me about, you know, major decisions that either were positive or negative, because I'm a student of leadership. I want to learn what were you thinking, what was going on, what happened, and what can we learn to carry forward?"

BT: How has your thinking about the organization changed?

Reyes: When I first was elected in January 2010, one of the things that marked that day was a ceremonial passing of a photograph and a book. The book is R.C. Buckner's *Life of Faith and Works*.

And then there was also a framed picture of the chapel he built on the historic campus after a wrecking crew went in and began to tear it apart. It was sort of a sacred thing to tear it apart. And what Dr. Ken Hall said to me that day was, "Buckner is still here because we've never been afraid to change." And that just really anchored in my mind that we're still here because we've been willing to adapt and be flexible and to change and to ask what time is it and where are we and what's needed?

That thinking led us to ask the question, "What if we could begin to bring solutions to help struggling families to help them get stronger and more successful and to the point where they don't need our help anymore and children could remain where they belong, in their own family?"

We called it the Community Transformation Center and later we changed the name to the Family Hope Center and we've been doing it now for a little bit better than 10 years. We just did it because we thought it was the right thing to do, no government funding, no previous plan of success, no proof of concept other than we've got to do something than just wait for the damage to happen.

We have it down to \$2,000 for family coaching for one family for one year, to keep the family and the children together, versus allowing abuse to happen or not reacting until the abuse happens. Then you're talking \$54,000 for one child to be placed.

BT: What are the strongest assets Buckner has today?

Reyes: You know, people probably get tired of me saying it, but 140 years is 140 years. I think, probably the strongest asset is that we've been doing the same thing for 14 decades and we're good

at it. And I think we carry with us, with our style of service and ministry, a global standard that's really hard to match. The brand, the quality, and of course, the consistent commitment to our faith, trying to imitate our leader Jesus and relating to people, that's the secret sauce of Buckner.

BT: Why did you choose *Hope Now* as the title for your new book?

Reyes: Our tagline is "Hope shines here®" and we've focused on hope as what we offer to people with real solutions and difference-making experiences, and we've said, "You know, families need hope. Children need hope."

So, taking off from Hope shines here, I started thinking about it and I thought, you know, the book title ought to be *Hope Now*. I've never met anybody in 13 years who was willing to reschedule hope or defer or delay. No one has ever said "later;" they've always said "now."

Scripture says, "We are the hope of glory. Christ in us." That's the hope of glory. That's the hope we offer people we encounter. And I think they can tell the difference. I think people know given a little bit of time, they can tell we're different. Maybe not better, but we're different. And it's – well, the difference is Jesus in us that comes out.

BT: What's next? What's the most important thing in certain terms of vision that lies ahead for Buckner?

Reyes: I think the most important thing that lies before us in the next 10 years is to become crystal clear about what we do, and you would think after 140 years we should know, but we still are always trying to define it so it's contextually appropriate and it matches the 21st century now into the third decade we're beginning in 2020.

With the idea of being real specific about who we are and what we deliver and how we do it, lasering those approaches that then make it irresistible for donors to say, "I want to be a part of that. I want to sign up to help make that happen."



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Albert Reyes".

Albert Reyes, President and CEO
Buckner International

Visit my blog at www.bucknerprez.com

buckner.org



Amanda and Johnny McDorman have been foster parents for eight years. Every day they fight for their children, but when they met Sebastian, they knew they needed to be a hero for him. **Learn more at buckner.org/BucknerToday.**

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



Letters to the Editor
If you have any questions or comments about the articles you've read in *Buckner Today*, email us at bucknercommunications@buckner.org.

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IN OTHER WORDS | SCOTT COLLINS

Give 'em the boot

In 1969, Mickey Eddins and his brother launched M&F Western Products in Sulphur Springs, Texas. Today, it is the world's largest producer and distributor of western products such as belts, boots, etc.

It all started because Mickey wanted a Cadillac. As a small boy, he would watch with envy as salesmen pulled up to his dad's shoe shop. They all drove Cadillacs. So, Mickey decided he wanted to become a salesman and drive one, too.

Mickey was traveling in the 1960s selling products to western stores when he got a call asking if he could sell boot jacks. "I can sell anything to anyone," he said.

He sold out his first order of boot jacks in days, so with his brother, they borrowed \$850 and launched M&F.

In December, my friend Chris Liebrum, whose parents grew up at Buckner Orphans Home as kids, called me asking if Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® could use children's western boots.



On Jan. 29, we picked up the first load of nearly 30,000 children's western boots. The boots, while well-made and fully functional, were finished incorrectly and show wear sooner. Mickey could have sent them on to western stores, but he chose to eat the cost and donate the boots to Buckner.

Mickey eventually got his Cadillac, even though today he drives a pickup. But he'll tell you his career as a Christian businessman has given him a lot more than a vehicle. And he's determined to give back.



Scott Collins is Vice President of Communications at Buckner International.

Volunteering= Improved health.

(And it's TONS of FUN!)



Volunteering may improve your mental health and help you live longer.*

Visit [Buckner.org/volunteer](https://www.buckner.org/volunteer) to learn how you can not only improve your state of mind and health status, but positively impact the life of a child in your community.



[BUCKNER.ORG/VOLUNTEER](https://www.buckner.org/volunteer)

*American Psychological Association

3

Reasons we're excited at Buckner!

Our NextStep program is empowering women!



The NextStep Supervised Independent Living Program provides young adults with the support they need to meet educational, career and independent living goals and achieve independence.

The residents experience training, coaching and opportunities for spiritual and personal development. Our NextStep residents are thriving –



including transitioning to adult living with savings accounts, reliable transportation and stable employment. Many of our residents are actively employed

with Ventana by Buckner. We are so excited to see these residents flourish as they continue to gain new skills and confidence.



Because of you, the lives of children, families and seniors are being changed



From Beaumont to Midland to Longview, each of you are investing your time and gifts to serve the vulnerable children and families in our communities. Leading classes and after-school programs to building homes, lives are being impacted and changed by your dedication.

Because of companies, churches, groups and individuals, hope is shining throughout Texas and beyond.

Are you volunteering through Buckner yet? If not, visit buckner.org/volunteer to see where you can change the life of a child or family right in your community.



Together, we are impacting children through foster care and adoption domestically and internationally



With your help, we are continuing to serve children domestically and internationally through foster care and adoption. You have stepped up to support vulnerable children in Texas and beyond. From kinship care to adoption, needs are being met.

In 2019, Buckner served over 1,000 children through foster care and adoption domestically. This marks the fourth consecutive year Buckner has served more than 1,000 children through these ministries – the only four years for that to happen in the 140-year history of the



organization. Children are finding forever families and lives are being impacted.

Internationally, Buckner is continuing to lead in-country foster care and adoption. Over 300 children in Kenya were served through foster care and adoption – with a record of 43 children finding forever homes through Buckner. Thank you for all you do to care for vulnerable children and support these ministries. **BT**

Running toward his Father's voice

**Albert Reyes:
celebrating a
decade of
leadership**

Story by Ken Camp





BT

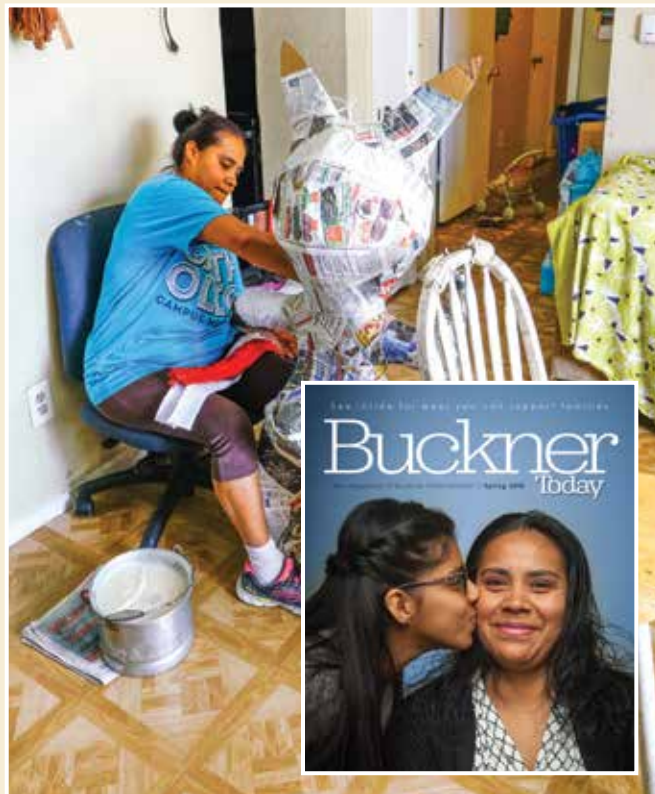
Prepared by God.

For Albert Reyes, he sees every life experience as preparation from God for this role at Buckner. From working in his family's business, as a pastor and as president of an educational institution, God used skills from each to shape him.

Helping discouraged families find hope keeps Albert Reyes motivated as he enters his second decade as president of Buckner International.

He thinks about couples like Serapio and Marta Hernandez and their daughter Amanda.

When Serapio lost his job after 17 years, he knew he had to find another way to provide for his family. So, he and Marta started making and selling piñatas to a broker who turned around and sold them for a significantly higher price.



Marta, and daughter Amanda, pictured above were featured in our Spring 2018 issue. Through the Family Hope Center, the whole family has built a fruitful business and Amanda is working toward a college degree.

Serapio chopped reeds from the Trinity River bottom to use in creating the piñata skeletons, and then he, his wife and their children spent long hours covering them with brightly colored paper.

"Get used to making piñatas," Marta told Amanda. "This is going to be your life."

But staff at the Buckner Family Hope Center at Bachman Lake — where Marta already had benefited from parenting classes — helped the Hernandez family discover another way of life. They learned how to develop a business plan, create a website and market their piñatas directly, building a fruitful business.

Soon, the couple doubled their income. In time, Serapio found another job, and the piñata-making business provided much-needed supplemental income to help the family improve their housing situation.

Now Amanda attends a program that allows her to earn an associate degree at the same time she is working toward her high school diploma. She dreams of being the first college graduate in her family and becoming an elementary schoolteacher.

When families discover hope, whole neighborhoods — whole communities — change for the better, Reyes noted.

"We're transforming communities, one family at a time," he said.



As a child, Reyes learned an important lesson from his father, a U.S. Marine. When his father called, young Albert was told to come running toward the sound of his voice as fast as possible, saying, "Yes, sir," each step of the way.

So, when the boy made his profession of faith in Christ at age 9, he applied what he had learned about obedience to his new relationship to God.

"When my heavenly father calls, I start moving toward his voice. And my answer is 'yes' before I even know what he's asking," Reyes said.

To fulfill God's calling on his life, Reyes wanted to begin preparation for ministry at seminary immediately after he graduated from high school. His pastor patiently explained seminary was a graduate school, and he needed to attend college first. So, Reyes earned a bachelor's degree in business administration at Angelo State University before going on to seminary.

“ When my heavenly father calls, I start moving toward his voice. And my answer is ‘yes’ before I even know what he’s asking. ”

—Albert Reyes



He served three churches as pastor before accepting the call to become president of Baptist University of the Americas in San Antonio. He also was elected to a term as president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

At BUA, he led the school to earn accreditation and certification, to achieve a record on-campus enrollment, and to secure its first multi-million-dollar gift. Then he received a call from Buckner.

Ken Hall wanted to ensure the organization that had greatly expanded during his time as CEO and president would have a smooth transition when he retired. He asked Reyes to consider accepting the presidency of Buckner Children and Family Services, with the understanding he would succeed Hall as president — and later CEO — of the parent organization within a few years.

As he prayed about it, Reyes felt a sense of “accomplishment and release” regarding BUA and excitement about the challenges Buckner offered.

“I signed up to be a servant, not the master. I never got that confused,” Reyes said. “So, when the master says, ‘Stop doing this and start doing that,’ get excited about ‘this’ and don’t worry about ‘that.’”

Reyes became president of Buckner Children and Family Services in 2007, president of Buckner International in 2010 and CEO in 2012.

At Buckner, Reyes knew he would face challenges in succeeding “a longtime successful president,” but he was determined “to lead according to how God shaped me.”

“Early on as a youngster, I figured I might be good at organizing things,” Reyes said, based on his experience working in his family’s business.

In retrospect, he saw how God used his varied experiences — in business, as a pastor and as president of an educational institution—to prepare him for his new role at Buckner.

*When elected in January 2010, Dr. Ken Hall ceremonially passed on a book by R.C. Buckner, *Life of Faith and Works* to Reyes.*





"God never wastes an experience. It's to prepare you for what you know not of," he said.

Reyes committed to build on the foundation that had been laid the previous two decades, while adapting to new contexts and continuing to improve processes.

Rodney Henry, chair of the Buckner International board, believes Reyes brought the right set of skills to the organization at just the right time in its history.

"How he thinks about things — understanding the organization and taking a process-oriented approach — has been very valuable," Henry said.

Reyes helped Buckner carefully examine its varied programs, evaluate their effectiveness and make necessary adjustments, he noted. In the process, he demonstrated both the clear-eyed view of a business administrator and the compassionate heart of a pastor, Henry added.

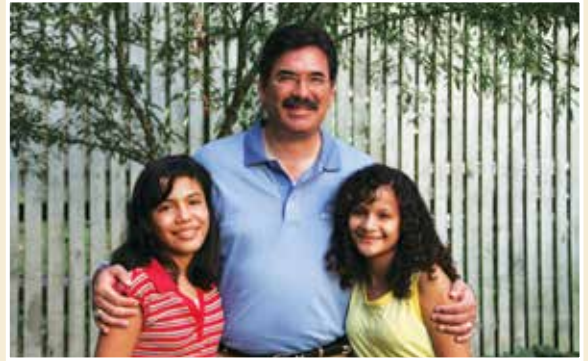
"He established a culture of excellence," Henry said. "Albert has stressed that we need to concentrate on doing what we do well, do it with excellence and do it in a way that is sustainable."

Both Henry and Reyes point to Buckner's development of Family Hope Centers — first piloted under Ken Hall's leadership in Guatemala in 2008 as a Community Transformation Center — as perhaps the organization's most significant contribution in the past decade.

"So much effort through the years has been focused on responding to crisis. The Family Hope Center model intervenes before the kids and the families are at a point of crisis," Henry said.

Through its long-established programs of adoption and foster care, Buckner continues to respond to abused or neglected children who are unable to continue to live with their families of origin.

However, the Family Hope Center model focuses on building family strength and helping families reach their God-given potential.



"We're helping families stay strong and keeping kids in the families where God put them," Reyes said.

In addition to providing family assistance and sponsoring community events, the centers offer parenting classes, adult education courses, programs to teach financial empowerment and initiatives devoted to spiritual enrichment.

"The secret sauce is family coaching," Reyes said.

The family coach is a Buckner social worker who meets with a family to evaluate their situation and help them set their own goals based on protective factors — knowledge of parenting and child development, nurturing and attachment, social and emotional competence, resilience and social connections — and spiritual development.

"I asked my staff, 'What does it cost to keep a family whole?' It costs \$2,000 for one coach to serve one family for one year,"

Reyes said.

In comparison, "the cost of doing nothing" is conservatively estimated at \$54,000 per year, based on data from Child Protective Services — a ratio of \$1 spent on prevention compared to \$27 spent on protection, he added.

"But really, how can you quantify the trauma on a child?" he asked. "This is about getting to the root of the issue before it becomes an issue."

Spiritual development happens naturally, he added. Buckner is not an evangelistic organization or missions society. But because of the nature of the work it does — offering hope and healing to hurting families — the people whose lives are touched begin to ask spiritual questions, Reyes said. He noted 1,000 people every year come to faith in Christ through Buckner's programs.

"We don't have to bring it up. They bring it up," Reyes said.

Looking ahead, he sees Buckner continuing its emphasis on strengthening families.

"Communities are made up of families. The smallest building block in human society is the family. God designed the family. The family is the core," he said.

In the days ahead, Reyes wants Buckner to "stay in that space and create a model people will want to imitate" to build strong families.

"To think Buckner has to be everywhere there is need is prideful and a bit arrogant," he said. Instead, he hopes Buckner personnel can share what they have learned, consult with other agencies around the world and equip them to strengthen families.

Buckner is already making a significant impact among like-

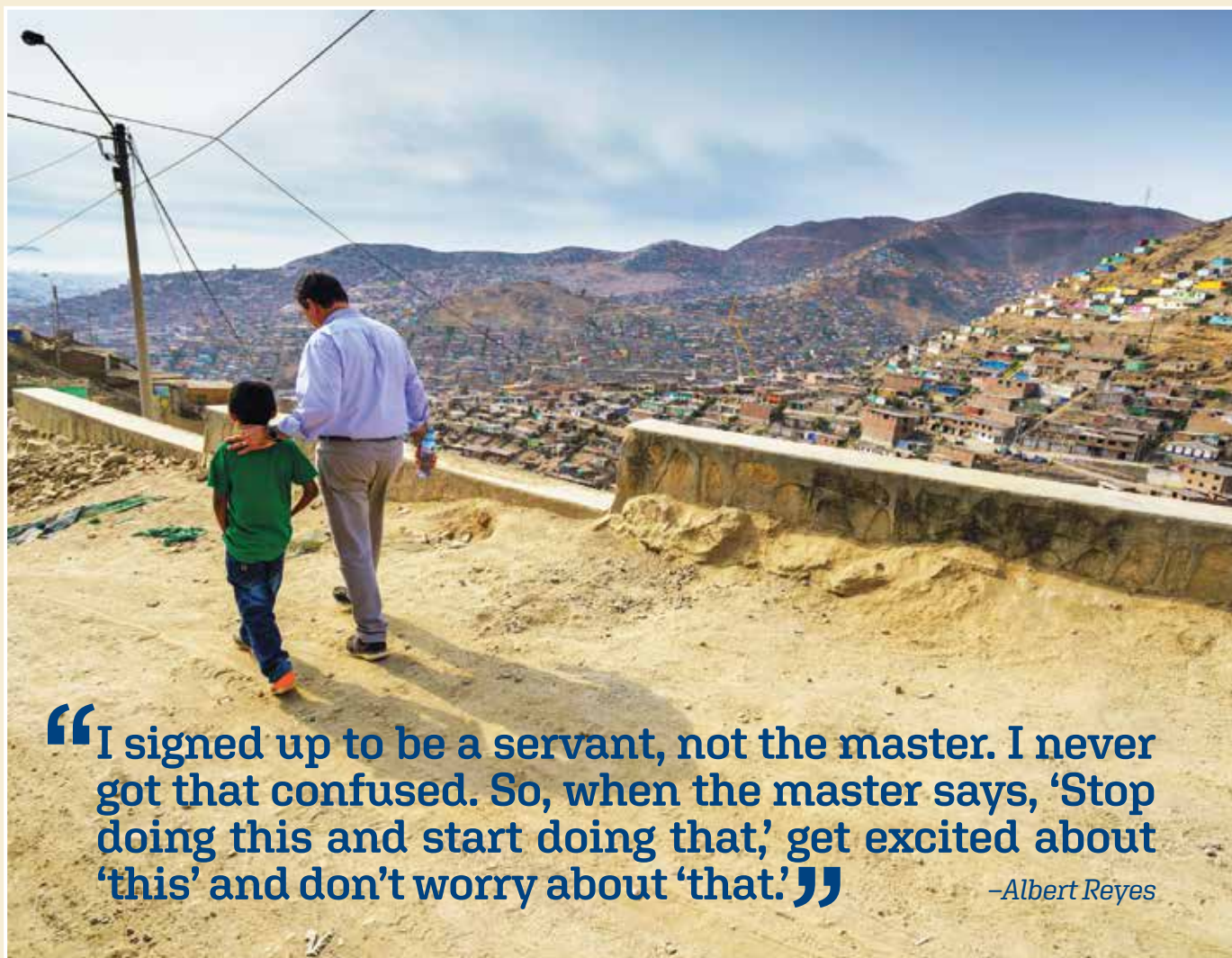
minded service providers. Reyes serves as an officer on the board of the Christian Alliance for Orphans, a coalition of more than 200 organizations devoted to care for vulnerable children.

Jedd Medefind, president of the alliance, praised Reyes for the "rich and godly wisdom" he brings to his coalition's governing board.

"He is a great listener," Medefind said. "He thinks before he speaks, and when he does speak, others listen."

Often, agencies either focus exclusively on protecting children or on restoring and strengthening families, Medefind noted. Under Reyes' leadership, Buckner has led the way in doing both effectively and set an example for others.

"It's a rare combination," he said. **BT**



“I signed up to be a servant, not the master. I never got that confused. So, when the master says, ‘Stop doing this and start doing that,’ get excited about ‘this’ and don’t worry about ‘that.’”

—Albert Reyes

Out of the ashes: Stronger

*Story and photography
by Aimee Freston*

As a single mom caring for a disabled daughter, Yanilka Castillo was forced to put her own dreams aside and carry heavy burdens. For the sake of her children, she smiled but inside she felt dark, as though the world was crashing in around her.

She moved to the United States from Panama without knowing anyone and without speaking English. She thought it would be the American Dream, but it seemed more of a nightmare. She learned English within six months and found a job as a nanny but the family took advantage of her and refused to pay her. She married and had two children, but her husband was unkind and constantly delivered emotional abuse, telling her she was unworthy and worthless.

She refused to believe him and for the sake of her children, she left so they wouldn't be a part of his abuse. Then she discovered she had breast cancer. Again, she mustered up the strength she needed to survive. She went through treatments during the day alone. Then she would pick up her children and smile though she felt fear inside.

When her son cried about her losing her hair, she comforted him with assurances it would grow back. But inside she also cried.

"It's all for my kids," she said. "Somebody has to be strong for them. I just have to do it. I just have to do it. I can get stressed always thinking about my kids. I pray to God all day to give me strength to help keep me going. But it's not easy."

Again and again, Yanilka faced challenges head on — determined to conquer. When she needed to get her daughter to medical appointments in Dallas, she taught herself to drive so she could get her there. All she ever wanted was to become a nurse but it always seemed like the world was against her.

In one of her darkest moments, Yanilka found the Buckner Family Hope Center in Longview and the pressure slowly started to lift from her aching shoulders. She worked with a family coach to develop goals. She started working with a counselor and

attending therapy. They supported her when her daughter had to be hospitalized. Yanilka went from hopeless to the hopeful.

"I have hope now," she said. "I can call [Family Coach] Courtney [Barr] and she will listen to me and give me resources to help me with my needs. I feel joy and happy when I walk out of here. I just walk much better when I come here."

With encouragement from her family coach, Yanilka decided to pursue her dream of becoming a nurse. She signed up for classes

to begin her certification to become a CNA. But two days before she was going to start classes, her daughter went missing. Frantically, she searched for her daughter who needed medical attention. Hours later, she was found, but Yanilka questioned if she should still go to the classes.

"Right when I was ready to go back to school, this seemed to wreck my chance," Yanilka said. "But I took the chance and now I'm a CNA."

All through her studies, the Family Hope Center and her family coach were there to help her along the way.

Today, Yanilka is still a part of the Buckner family as she works at Buckner Westminster Place as a CNA.

"It's a blessing working there," Yanilka said. "It's like we are a family because they care about the residents. There's a lot of people that do the job just to get the check, not because they really care, but for me, it's something that I love. I love to make the residents smile."

Yanilka hopes to continue her studies and become a nurse. She knows hard times will continue to come, but she also knows she has the support of friends at the Family Hope Center and the faith that God will get her through anything.

"God knows why I'm still here with everything I have been through," she said. "But without him, I certainly wouldn't be here. He is so good and I'm really blessed to be here and have my kids. Because it's just good." **BT**





BT

Pursuing her dreams.

Yanilka Castillo knows what it's like to put everyone else first. But now, she is chasing her own dreams of becoming a nurse.

It just goes on, and on, and on... *...or does it?*

So many children and families are trapped in a relentless cycle of addiction, poverty and abuse.

And all too often, these destructive behaviors are passed down from one generation to the next.



Those entrusted to the care of Buckner International are the most acutely at risk — and without intervention, they have little hope of ever escaping this downward spiral.

poverty
anxiety
abuse
adolescent
pregnancy
depression
neglect
unemployment
alcoholism

Research shows that **deeper poverty** results in **more severe** and **more prolonged** depression and anxiety.

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57%

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can help
break this
destructive
cycle!



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Thank you for your generous support.

Turn over to discover how you can help break the cycle!



 **BUCKNER®**
Hope shines here.®

When a single mom chooses faith over fear

— Story and photography by Emily Keller —



Taking a leap of faith changed Allencia Washington's life – twice. Struggling to juggle school, work and raising her then 3-year-old daughter Kimber, the Houston native applied to the Buckner Family Pathways programs in Houston and Conroe in December 2015. With the only availability in Conroe, Allencia took a risk, leaving the comfort of what she knew and moved.

"Conroe is not close. It was very intimidating because I just don't know these people. It seemed like a lot of rules," Allencia said. "It seemed like a lot to uphold. And I was still attending Houston Community College, so I drove Monday through Friday from Conroe to Houston, but God made it happen."

Coming to the program in early 2016, Allencia carried a lot of emotional pain and trauma and had never been open to counseling in the past. After choosing to dive completely in, she found counseling made a huge impact in her life. Moving away from Houston, she chose to see Conroe as an opportunity to take a step away, to focus on healing and redefining who she wanted to be.

"I wanted to get out of my own way. I wanted to see what else was out there," she said. "I wanted to see what God had in store for me. I wanted to heal and get rid of the trauma. I wanted to get rid of the hurt. I wanted to be a better parent. I wanted to be a better person, not just for me, but for my daughter."

After two years of settling in at Family Pathways in Conroe, Buckner offered her a program extension in Houston. Tears fell, she said, as confusion and frustration enveloped her.

But as she cried out to God about her hurt and the sacrifices she made to come this far, she felt the truth that God was testing her. She called Anna Rodriguez, program director for Family Pathways in Houston, confirming she would move to Houston. "I felt like I was being torn. Was I still supposed to go?"

"So I was able to move my housing to Houston. I'm here in the flesh now and I'm so glad I did. It was the best decision I could've made and I'm glad I was obedient," she said.

Since moving back to Houston in 2018, Allencia can't deny what God has done in her life. Graduating with an associate degree from HCC and now nearing graduation from an undergraduate program at the University of Houston, she finds herself continuing to ask God what's next and is confident in his will for her.

Through the mountains God has moved in Allencia's heart and life, she chose to utilize her testimony as a launching point to begin her ministry, Pillow Talk. It began in early 2019 as a vision of a place where mothers can have a safe place to share, ask questions and be empowered.

"It's all about self-care, self-love, getting in tune with yourself

is important," she said. "Knowing that you are worthy, that you are loved, that you matter, that you are important. I needed something like this growing up and there's so much pain and so much hurt out there – and I know as women we don't always want to let people in. So just allowing somebody to have this safe place."

Allencia invites women of all ages and walks of life in intimate groups of eight to experience sticking together, lifting and building each other up. They gather twice a week for prayer, laughs, tears and a time of sharing.



Not only has Allencia excelled in school and created her own ministry, she is also now a business owner. Her brand, ANK Organic Body Butter, is not something she expected to do, but she enjoys making the beauty product herself and sells it through social media.

Allencia and Kimber, now 7, have found a life of success and stability through Family Pathways. This environment has also given Allencia the opportunity to pour faith and knowledge of Jesus into Kimber, making their strong mother-daughter bond even stronger.

"Buckner has given me the opportunity to redefine who I am. Trust in this process. If I would have stayed in Conroe, I wouldn't have taken this leap of faith and been able to witness and experience any of this." **BT**

“Buckner
has done
so much for me and
my family”

Mother and daughter transformed by two Buckner programs

Story and photography by Aimee Freston

When Alissa Campos was 9 years old, she and her younger sister were removed from their mother's care and placed in the home of their great aunt in Midland, Texas. Alissa was old enough to know her mother wasn't doing well and she spent the rest of her childhood angry at her for not taking the necessary steps to rectify the situation.

“When I was younger, me and my mom's relationship was really great. She was a good mom,” Alissa said. “The last time she went away, I had so much anger and so much resentment and sadness, it was just horrible.”

As a result, Alissa had to grow up fast. While her aunt doted on her younger sister, Alissa always felt she was an outsider, someone who just came with her baby sister. She never was able to establish a connection with her aunt.

BT

A restored family.

For Alissa Campos and her mother, Buckner programs changed the trajectory of their lives – and their relationship. Alissa has accomplished many goals through her time at Buckner NextStep, and her mother is doing the same at Buckner Family Pathways.



But Alissa was determined and ambitious. When she was just 16 years old she completed a certification to get her CNA license. But nobody would hire her because she was under 18.

Just before she turned 18, she had the opportunity to meet her mother for the first time in years. It was awkward, she said, but they stayed and talked for hours. After that conversation, Alissa and her mom started communicating more through text messages and on the phone.

Alissa came to Dallas to visit her mother and her half sisters. Her mother was living at Buckner Family Pathways, a transitional home for single parents to receive affordable housing, child care and counseling while attending college.



During the visit, Alissa's mother encouraged her to apply to the Buckner NextStep program, a transitional home for young women who have aged out of foster care and located on the same campus as Family Pathways. Alissa didn't want to leave Midland so she just put the thought behind her.

But she continued to think about it and just weeks after graduating from high school, she moved to Dallas and was accepted into the program. Living on the same campus has helped Alissa and her mother repair their broken relationship. Talking to

her mom and half sisters used to be uncomfortable for Alissa but now it's completely natural.

"We spent a lot of time apart and I spent a lot of time hating her," Alissa said. "And it doesn't feel that way now. Like it feels like we've been together all this time."

Alissa was able to see the positive changes in her mother and see how Family Pathways gave her mother the direction and help she needed to be a good mother and student.

"She works really hard," Alissa said about her mom. "I wish I could work that hard. I really do."

Where there was once resentment now there is only admiration. Alissa marvels that such a transformation has taken place.

While Alissa may not think she works as hard as her mom, she is determined and has goals too. She started attending college to renew her CNA certification and work toward her associate degree. She continues to get certifications as an EKG technician and in phlebotomy. Eventually, she wants to become a nurse.

"I actually kind of hate school," Alissa said. "I hate school so much, but I go every single day because it is interesting and it was something that I actually liked."

The counselors at NextStep have helped Alissa with resources and guidance to help her succeed after she leaves the program – such as learning to make a budget and saving. They even helped her navigate how to buy a new car.

"Buckner has done so much for me and my family," Alissa said.

And now Alissa is part of the Buckner family. When Ventana by Buckner, the newest Buckner senior living community to open in Dallas, was hiring, Alissa applied and was hired as a CNA in skilled nursing. She works the night shifts so she can still attend school during the day.

It feels very natural for Alissa working with patients and it's something she has grown to enjoy.

"It just kind of feels like I'm just there to help them. And that's really it," Alissa said. "And you get to know a lot of these patients and they talk to you. It's nice."

Alissa has one more year in the NextStep program and she is determined to glean as much information as she can during that year.

"I have goals," Alissa said. "I need to save more because I don't want to be in a bind. I need to learn to budget. I'm trying to be as independent as I can be." **BT**



BT

Determined.

At just 16 years old, Alissa completed her CNA certification. She's also certified in phlebotomy and as an EKG technician. Her next goal is to become a nurse.

Photo by Emily Keller

'Here's Elijah!'

Once abandoned on the side of the road, a boy finds his forever family through Buckner

Story by Russ Dilday



Early on a hot August morning in 2018, a local farmer was driving down Hwy 73 near Port Arthur, Texas when he spotted cars in front of him swerving to avoid something ahead of them in the road. Alarmed, he slowed down to see the cause of the commotion.

What he saw shocked him. They were swerving to miss a baby boy in the road.

Alayna George, now his adoptive mother, gave the details of the morning that eventually led the baby boy to be her son: "So he pulled over on the side of the road and decided to pursue him. He was nervous because he thought, 'This kid's going to run away from me, and I'm going to push him into traffic instead of getting him to come to me.'"

But the boy "came right up to him and with no hesitation at all, let him pick him up and thank goodness he did," she said. "He was in just a diaper. He was filthy, and he was malnourished. He had a speech issue and several other health issues."



The George Family: From left to right, Hayden (11), Parker (8), 4-month-old Andi, Alayna, and Kenneth, and Elijah (4).



By that afternoon, a Saturday, Buckner had called foster parents Alayna and her husband Kenneth, asking them for an emergency placement. Alayna will always remember how she met her third son.

"They brought him to us, and they opened the car door and he looked at me with his bright blue eyes and his blonde hair, and they said, 'Here's Elijah.'"

She instantly had a few questions. "He was supposed to be a 2-year-old. And I looked at him and said, 'Are you sure he's 2?' He was so tall and big, he looked like a 4-year-old. But he's just been a bigger personality and outgoing and advanced and, looking back now, how he looked then is just the perfect depiction of him."

It didn't take Elijah long to bond with the family. "As soon as he got out of the car, it took us five minutes to coax him inside because he immediately was just wanting to play with everything and see everybody," she said. "We live next door to my parents and so of course, they were there and he immediately ran up to my dad and gave him a hug."

He also found the refrigerator. "He helped himself right to the fridge and ... handed me the chocolate syrup saying he wanted 'choc milk.' He fit right in from the beginning."

The Georges live in Orangefield, Texas, where Alayna's lived her whole life. They have three boys, Hayden, 11; Parker, 8; Elijah, who's now 4; and four-month-old daughter, Andi. She describes her family as a "typical country family. We love to go to the lake as a family, we

love to play outside, go for walks. All the normal, typical outdoor things that you do together. We ride bikes, we like to tube on the boat. We like to just enjoy swinging and playing in the pond. Fishing, hunting."

When Elijah came into their home as a foster child, they had only been fostering a few days. She and Kenneth had wanted to foster for years but waited because "we wanted our kids to be older than the children we would be fostering. It's always been a passion of mine. Since I was a little girl, I knew I wanted to adopt and have biological children. And so I wanted to follow what God was telling us to do."

The couple chose Buckner to lead them through the fostering process because of its reputation in South Texas. "We had always seen commercials on TV or saw advertisements online or heard the name Buckner," she said. "We had heard that it was a great agency for families, that they invested in the whole family, not just the foster children themselves. So we chose it for that reason."

"We feel very supported and impacted by Buckner, specifically by [Foster Care Case Manager] Yolanda [Hopkins]," Alayna said. "Yolanda has been there through the ugly, as well as the pretty. And Yolanda was definitely there to remind us of our why and remind us that it is so important what we're doing and we are needed and we are valued."

Their oldest children were excited to be foster brothers. "We had mentally been preparing them for fostering and we had told them there are several possibilities of how kids will feel when they come

into our home ... but they were so excited that he was so excited and they just got on the floor and started playing with him."

"It was a honeymoon phase for a couple of weeks," Alayna added.

"And the boys did struggle, as we expected. But through talking it out and reminding them of our why and the reasons that we're choosing to do that, they were able to see it for what it is and come back around and be excited again."

Since Elijah's been a part of the George family, he's grown physically and mentally, but he's also "grown spiritually as well and knows who God is. And he asks to pray every night at bedtime," Alayna said. "He wants to say the blessing for the meal. So his spiritual growth as a 4-year-old has been incredible. And emotionally ... he knows that this is his home, these are his family members, these are his siblings, his mom and dad."

Alayna admits foster care can be a "roller coaster," with appointments, casework and evaluations, but it's grown her family's faith as well. There was the possibility of reunification with family members, an aunt and uncle, but health issues led them to ask the Georges to adopt Elijah.

"The foster and adoption journey has done so much for our faith," she said. "It is very, very hard. It's hard physically, emotionally. And so you have to have faith because it is the only thing that pushes you through."

Almost a year and a half since he became their foster child, Elijah became a part of his forever family in a courtroom adoption ceremony. "Elijah's adoption day was super exciting. It just so happened that his adoption day was not far from his birthday either," said Alayna. "We did a big, huge combined birthday and adoption day celebration. So we had all his biological family, who we're still very close with."

The party featured bounce houses, chili, cake, family and friends. "We just played and ate and played and ate and watched him run around and he had chocolate all over his mouth and his hands," his mother said. "And we didn't even care because it was his day. And ... all day long he kept telling everyone, 'I'm Elijah Ray George, I'm Elijah Ray George.' He was so proud of his name."

And he showed off his new shirt. For his adoption ceremony, the baby who was found on the side of a road in nothing but a diaper was wearing a t-shirt that read, "Team George: Lifetime Member." **BT**



It all started with a pair of shoes

City Credit Union's heart and passion for service

Story and photography by Aimee Freston

Making a difference in their community has always been a cornerstone for City Credit Union in Dallas. In an effort to increase their community presence by educating people on financial wellness and helping those in need, City Credit Union is extremely active with Buckner International, participating in several different volunteer efforts throughout the year. And it all started with a pair of shoes.

During City Credit Union's 75th anniversary, they made a poignant effort to increase their community involvement with their Random Acts of Kindness initiative, encouraging their employees to do acts of kindness in the community, whether it was paying for a cup of coffee or giving up their place in line. One of their board members heard that Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® was urgently asking for shoe donations to send to Guatemala. They decided to do a shoe drive at their credit unions.

"It was really fun because no one collects shoes," said Sharon Gillespie, marketing manager for City Credit Union. "It's such a unique thing, and it was fun for employees to go out and buy shoes."

The City Credit Union shoe drive brought in 210 pairs of shoes, 163 pairs of socks and more than \$1,200 in donations. Additionally, they hosted a Buckner shoes night at a Dallas Stars game and raised over \$6,000 to purchase new shoes for vulnerable children.

Soon afterward, Sharon took a tour of the Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid and learned about the other ministries Buckner

does besides shoes to help vulnerable families and children in Texas and around the world. Sharon realized Buckner and City Credit Union had similar missions to improve families in their local communities and started organizing other ways to get involved and collaborate with Buckner.

"It was so interesting to see all the ways Buckner is involved in helping families," she said. "I didn't know much about the Family Hope Centers or Family Pathways, and I started to understand that it's not a handout. The families have to work toward their goals and it's breaking the cycle of abuse and getting out of those situations."

What started with a pair of shoes grew to hosting a back-to-school drive to collect backpacks and other school supplies. At Christmas, they organized a festive toy drive where employees decorated Christmas-themed toy collection boxes for various drop off points for employees and members to donate toys or monetary gifts. Between all their

efforts, they have nearly 100% participation from employees.

"Our employees love Buckner," said Manuela Del Toro, people champion for City Credit Union. "From the very first moment we introduced Buckner to our culture committee, they were on board and our employees get really excited with the shoe and toy drives."

For City Credit Union, it isn't just about donations or monetary gifts. They also have a deep desire to educate their community on financial wellness. They have led a 10-week course at the Buckner Family Hope Center at Wynnewood, teaching financial





BT

Joy all around.

City Credit Union employees and volunteers are motivated and encouraged by the joy they experience every time they interact and serve the Buckner families.

education to families Buckner serves and awarded one family a \$1,000 business incubator grant to help them toward their goal of self-sufficiency.

"It is important that we educate our communities toward financial wellness and by getting involved with organizations such as Buckner International, we get the opportunity to touch those who are most in need," Manuela said. "Our communities are families with financial goals, dreams and aspirations to provide for their family and sometimes the resources and tools are not easily available. They may not be aware that help is out there and that it is free. That's where City Credit Union steps in. We touch those communities, educate, plant the seed and guide them through the process and then watch their finances grow and their future bloom. It is also an opportunity to educate and involve our employees on corporate social responsibilities and on the difference they can make."

Last year, City Credit Union became the title sponsor for the Buckner Sporting Clays Challenge in Dallas, opening the door for further involvement and volunteer opportunities.

"Having City Credit Union become the title sponsor was a big deal," said Amanda Tostrud, donor engagement manager for Buckner International. "They came in during a time of need and they go above and beyond their sponsorship duties as far as being hands on and making sure the experience is great."

And the list goes on and on. City Credit Union is such a willing participant in Buckner ministries and additionally helping connect Buckner to other organizations through PSAs and radio spots that the work they do has a direct impact on the families and children Buckner serves.

"They have such a heart for passion and service," Amanda said. "Working with City Credit Union is really special." **BT**

'A
light
to keep
going'

Story and photography by Emily Keller

Running away from home felt like Mary Romero's only option. When she found the Buckner Transitional Home for Women in Lima, Peru, she had the opportunity to choose a new path – a path of hope.

BT

From dreaming to achieving.

For Mary Romero, a college education was one of her biggest dreams. Today, she is a Texas Tech alumna exploring job opportunities in engineering.



Growing up in Calca, Peru, Mary was surrounded by strife. Her parents separated when she was young and she lived with her aunt for a few years. But in high school, Mary spent seven years living with her father in an unhealthy, abusive environment. She'd always dreamed of furthering her education and enrolled in a local university.

"When I started attending university, everything happened. It was really hard. At some point I just decided that I was OK with dying. I was depressed. So I decided to leave the university," Mary shared.

Her decision was not made lightly. She had always seen school as the way out of her home life. When she left school, Mary saw suicide as her only option. Mary connected with a friend who told her about Buckner's Peruvian services, and she was determined to seek out help from Buckner. With an uneasy heart, she left home with only a backpack and lived homeless until she found a temporary resting place with nuns at a local convent for a few months.

During that time, Mary felt God softening her heart. He had her where she needed to be, complete with food and shelter. The possibility of becoming a nun started to run through Mary's mind but the nuns stopped her.

"They all told me, 'You don't have the passion for this – you have the heart to go somewhere and do something else,

something big,'" she recalled.

Her chase to find the door to Buckner began again. Searching for direction, a chance encounter led her to one name: "Claudia," a Buckner staff member from Cusco, Peru.

With her money running low, she took off to Cusco on her Buckner quest. Mary was scared, but the words the nuns told her gave her peace: "Don't worry, God will take care of you."

Claudia Leon took Mary into her home until there was an opening at the Women's Transitional Home in Lima.

"Whatever money I had made in Cusco was already running out. So I went to Lima expecting to have an interview, but they sent me to another orphanage. After a few weeks, I met [Buckner staff member] Jenny and there was an opening at the transitional home."

Mary lived at the Buckner home for three years – excelling in school and learning more about how to love herself.

Throughout those years, God was not only moving in Mary's heart but in the heart of Buckner volunteer Lanie Williams of Plano, Texas.

Lanie had started her volunteering journey with Buckner through a friend's urging to participate in buying Christmas gifts. "I really had never thought about Peru in my life, but I know now there was a reason God sent me there," Lanie shared.





“I feel so blessed. God is giving me these times and I am really thankful for it. And as soon as I have the opportunity and the resources, I want to give back – like what Lanie and what Buckner did for me.”

–Mary Romero

In 2011, she started going on annual mission trips with Buckner to visit the orphanages, transition homes and deliver Christmas gifts to those in Peru. She remembered meeting Mary at the women's transitional home and began communicating with her regularly. Lanie knew Mary dreamed of coming to the U.S. to further her education and was determined to figure out how to help make that happen.

“I remember thinking there's got to be a way, but I don't know anything about this process. With visas, anything – so God, you're going to have to just lead me and show me,” she said.

The pair began working together to find a school that could teach Mary English near Lanie's home in Plano and apply for her student visa to finish her education, because it had “felt like a failure to me,” Mary said.

With the Williamses' children grown and out of the house, Lanie and her husband felt like this was divine timing. They had plenty of room and felt called to support this young woman in the next steps of her life.

Within a few weeks, Mary was in the U.S. attending school again and living with Lanie and her family. After completing an associate degree in North Texas, Mary applied and was accepted to Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas.

In December 2019, she graduated with a bachelor's degree in engineering – marking a major milestone in her life.

“I never thought I would finish, but now I've completed this and it feels really good. I'm looking for jobs and life is hard, but I'm so very happy,” Mary said.

Lanie beams with pride when she thinks about the time Mary has spent in the U.S. with few English skills to now earning an engineering degree and looking to enter the job field. Lanie said she's seen Mary grow in maturity and spiritually.

“They helped me without even knowing me,” Mary explained. “I feel so blessed. God is giving me these times and I am really thankful for it. And as soon as I have the opportunity and the resources, I want to give back – like what Lanie and what Buckner did for me.”

Mary never thought she would get to where she is today. In Peru, she truly thought her best option was to end her life. Now, Mary is overwhelmed with the joy of being alive.

“I feel like Buckner was a door, each new person placed in my path. I wouldn't be here if that hadn't happened. I would've never met Lanie,” she said.

When Mary began her journey, she carried trauma and hurt. Through the ministry of the Buckner Transitional Home, she learned how to talk about those things and ways to heal. She shared she has more healing ahead of her, but feels more prepared and supported than ever before.

“Buckner gave me this career and all the resources – and a light to keep going.” **BT**

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Becoming a family of four in just six months

For Bethany, Jeffrey and Avery, they were home from the minute they came into Jessica Sosa's home.

Bethany, 5, and Jeffrey, 3, were Jessica's first foster care placements – and a few months later, Avery, 2, joined them. Adopting a sibling group all under the age of five might seem like a big undertaking for some, but for Jessica, she couldn't imagine not doing it.

"I saw the need in foster care when I was doing a lot of volunteering and had some friends who worked for CPS, and also a lot of friends who have fostered or adopted. I was always very aware of the need," explained Jessica.

Once she was licensed for foster care in January 2018, it only took 24 hours for her to have her first placement – Bethany and Jeffrey.

Avery, the youngest brother, was placed in another foster home in the area. The two families would do outings together, and it was apparent Bethany longed to see him more often. Over the next six months, they would visit frequently and then Avery's foster family asked Jessica if she would take him too and keep the three siblings together.

"I think having them grow up together is really important. As they get older, they'll have this connection and they can look back and see ... I've seen so many cases where the siblings didn't stay together."

Fostering as a young single woman has brought many joys, but also many challenges. Jessica laughs as she shares how much she's learned about patience and grace in the past year.

"We mess up, but that doesn't define us," she said. "I want the kids to learn that as they're getting older."

Once quiet and timid, the three siblings now love to play and laugh and exude so much joy. When Bethany first came home to Jessica, she didn't even know her own name and now she's excelling in school. Jeffrey arrived primarily nonverbal, with tantrums and the inability to really be around people, but now Jessica is getting to experience how smart he is and slowly improving his ability to speak and be around new people. While Avery was just a baby when he came to Jessica's home, he has grown into the loud, fun-loving boy that doesn't stop playing.

Jessica encourages any that are looking to walk this journey to find their support.

"Find your circle," she said. "We've had people show up with groceries – just for whatever reason. I always have someone there to support me and to support them."

Jessica never imagined her first foster placement would turn into an adoption case. But from the first time they stepped into her home, she opened her heart and loved them with all she had. **BT**



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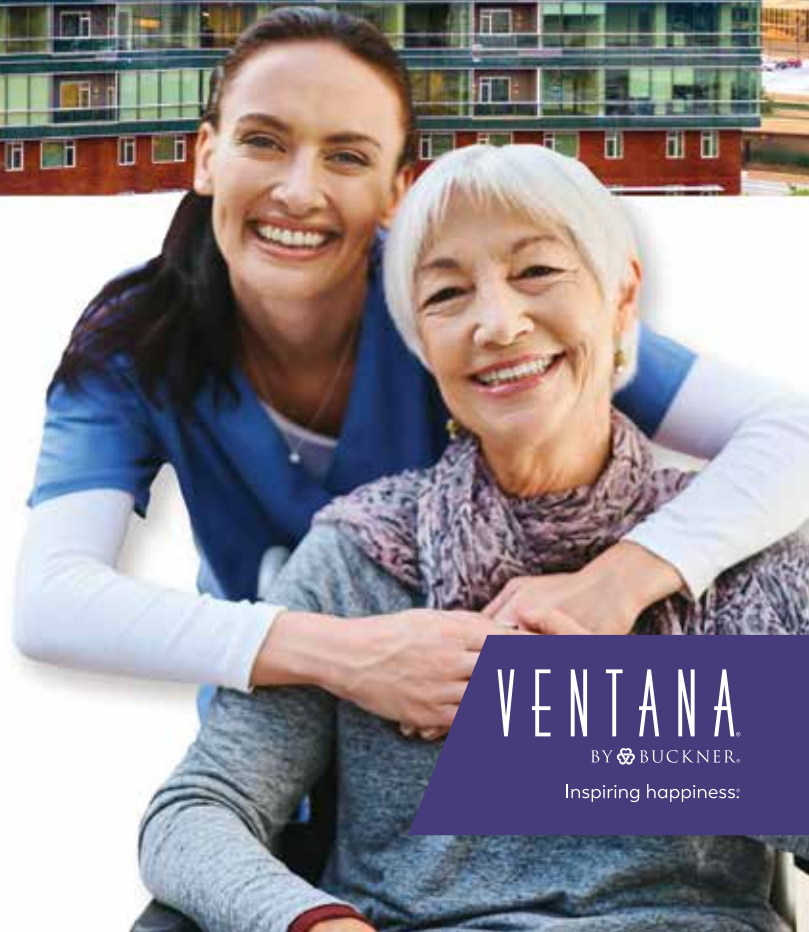
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