

See inside for ways you can support families.

# Buckner

Today

The magazine of  
Buckner International  
Spring 2021

# Buckner *International*

Celebrating 25 years of global impact

# Buckner

A publication of Buckner International • **Volume 46, Number 2 • Spring 2021**

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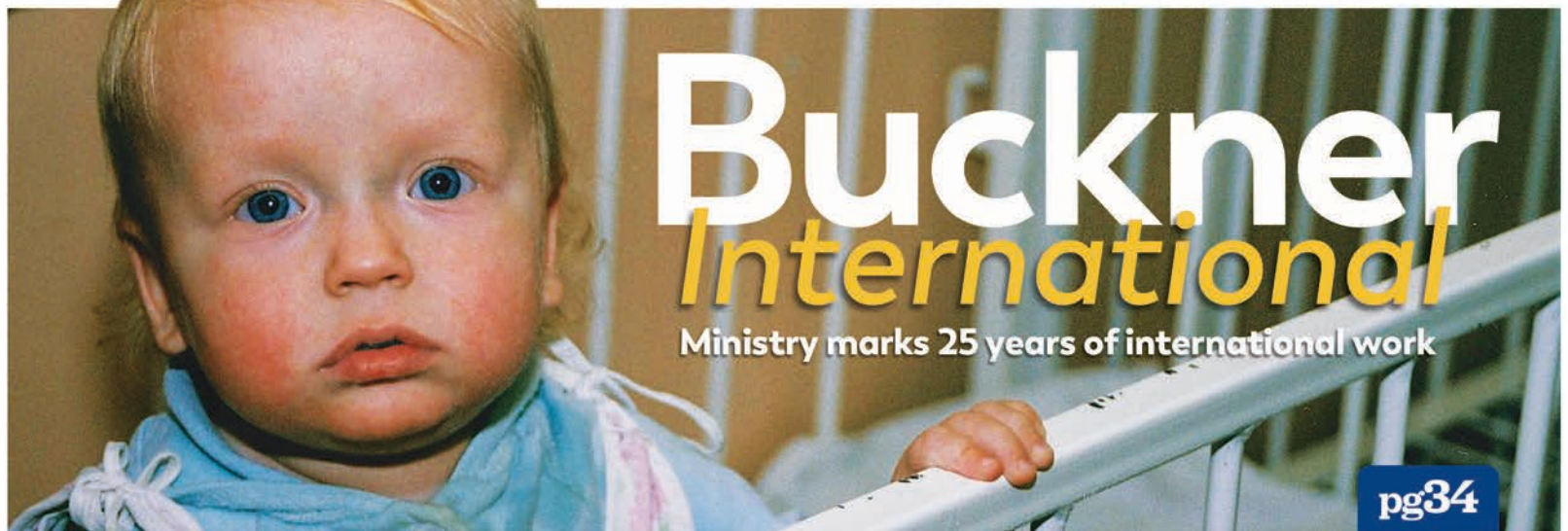
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# her Today



## Buckner International

Ministry marks 25 years of international work

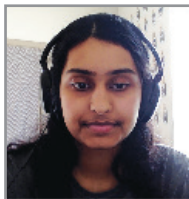
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**On the cover:** Maria Nekesa Okuta, 86 when this photo was taken in 2018, served as a kinship caregiver for three of her grandchildren in Busia, Kenya. Buckner Kenya supported her and her grandson Maxwell Okuta. Buckner began an empowerment program for guardians and caregivers like Mrs. Okuta who care for their grandchildren. (Photo by Mark Sandlin)

# Advocacy to action

**A**dvocate (ad-vo-cate); noun; One who pleads the cause of another; one who defends or maintains a cause; one who supports or promotes the interests of a cause.

In the New Testament, the Greek word *paracletos* translates to “advocate.” It’s used to describe the role Jesus has as “our Advocate with the Father.” In rabbinical literature, the word indicates someone who intercedes on behalf of another.

Before Buckner existed as an organization, we were an advocate on behalf of vulnerable children and senior adults. Years before opening the original orphans home, our founder advocated in churches, political settings and even in a religious newspaper he bought so he could keep the plight of the vulnerable in front of his readers.

Inevitably, advocacy turned to action and Buckner Orphans Home was opened. But we have never abandoned our role as advocates.

Buckner is considered a thought leader in services for vulnerable children, families and issues related to senior adults. While it’s an area of our work often unseen by many, it is a critical role we play, expanding our reach beyond our own programs. Our innovation in areas such as family preservation programs is a model for child care agencies here and internationally. The Buckner Family Hope Center is unique for its depth of services we deliver to vulnerable families.



That creative spirit has led us from action to advocacy, reversing the paradigm. Because of the successes we see delivering services, we are often asked to share our models and data with like-minded organizations. We have a responsibility to share knowledge gained with others seeking to help the vulnerable.

Our retirement services team is populated with some of the brightest minds in the country on issues related to seniors and

senior living. Like our children and family services area, we readily share that knowledge with similar providers, believing we have a responsibility to all seniors, not just the ones we serve directly. The Buckner response to the coronavirus pandemic is one example of our team’s expertise and a model for other senior living agencies.



Just as Buckner is an advocate, we also need advocates – those who “promote our cause” and who stand beside us in service to children and seniors. Your role as a donor, volunteer and advocate is crucial to us. Your prayer support, advocating for our ministry to God, makes a difference. Your prayers for desperate children matter.

## Annual Report

I hope you’ll take a few minutes to peruse our 2020 Buckner Annual Report. [You can find it here.](#) The past year was, to say the least, unprecedented. But through perseverance, courage and creativity, our team served more than 125,000 individuals.

Our retirement services associates stepped up to the frontlines of the pandemic and have responded with dedication, courage and distinction. Our six communities combined served 2,205 residents. But more than just being there, our associates served in creative ways and in ways that “Inspire happiness®.” During the February winter storm, all six communities faced overwhelming situations, with the loss of



**“ Because of you and your faithfulness, our donor support was as strong as ever. We didn’t know what to expect, given the global crisis we all faced. And yet our donors provided more than \$10.6 million to serve children and families. Our total number of supporters was up by 17% in 2020. ”**

electricity and water, but we overcame the conditions and served residents with care and compassion during a difficult time.

On the children and family services side, the team pivoted almost overnight in March 2020 and adapted to virtual methods for serving children and families. We’ve said it over and over for a year, but in times of global crisis like this, it is the vulnerable who are more vulnerable. We’ve seen in this past year, whether it’s the pandemic or the winter storm, vulnerable families face higher mountains to climb out of the crisis.

Even with all the chaos of 2020, Buckner Children and Family Services still reported some strong numbers:

We served a total of **1,129 children** in foster care and kinship care. That includes **828** domestically and **301** internationally.

We also completed **155 adoptions** – **112** domestically and **43** in Kenya.

Our Family Pathways programs served **484 people**.

And our Family Hope Centers served **11,670** domestically and **29,640** internationally, for a total of **41,310 people**.

Our domestic client assistance and aid served **974 people**, while our international ministries served **26,668**.

Altogether, our BCFS ministries served **79,256 individuals**.

And add to that, **43,956 shoes** were distributed through Shoes for Orphan Souls® during a very tough year to give away shoes. We also collected **67,025 shoes** in 2020.

So, when you add all of it together, including BCFS, BRS and Shoes for Orphan Souls, we served a total of 125,417 people last year. Let that number sink in for a minute. During a year when we had to change and adapt everything, we still served more than 125,000 people.

And then there is you. Because of you and your faithfulness, our donor support was as strong as ever. We didn’t know what to expect, given the global crisis we all faced. And yet our donors provided more than \$10.6 million to serve children and families. Our total number of supporters was up by 17% in 2020. In a year when we could not host donors and volunteers to directly



participate in our work, that level of support is truly unprecedented.

We are seeing light at the end of the long, dark COVID-19 tunnel. While we never stopped serving children, families and seniors, the past year offered its share of struggles and challenges. We are now opening our Buckner Family Hope Center buildings to resume in-person services. Now, more than ever, the families we serve need you. The after-effects of the pandemic are leaving desperate families more vulnerable.

I pray you will join us as an advocate who also takes action. **BT**



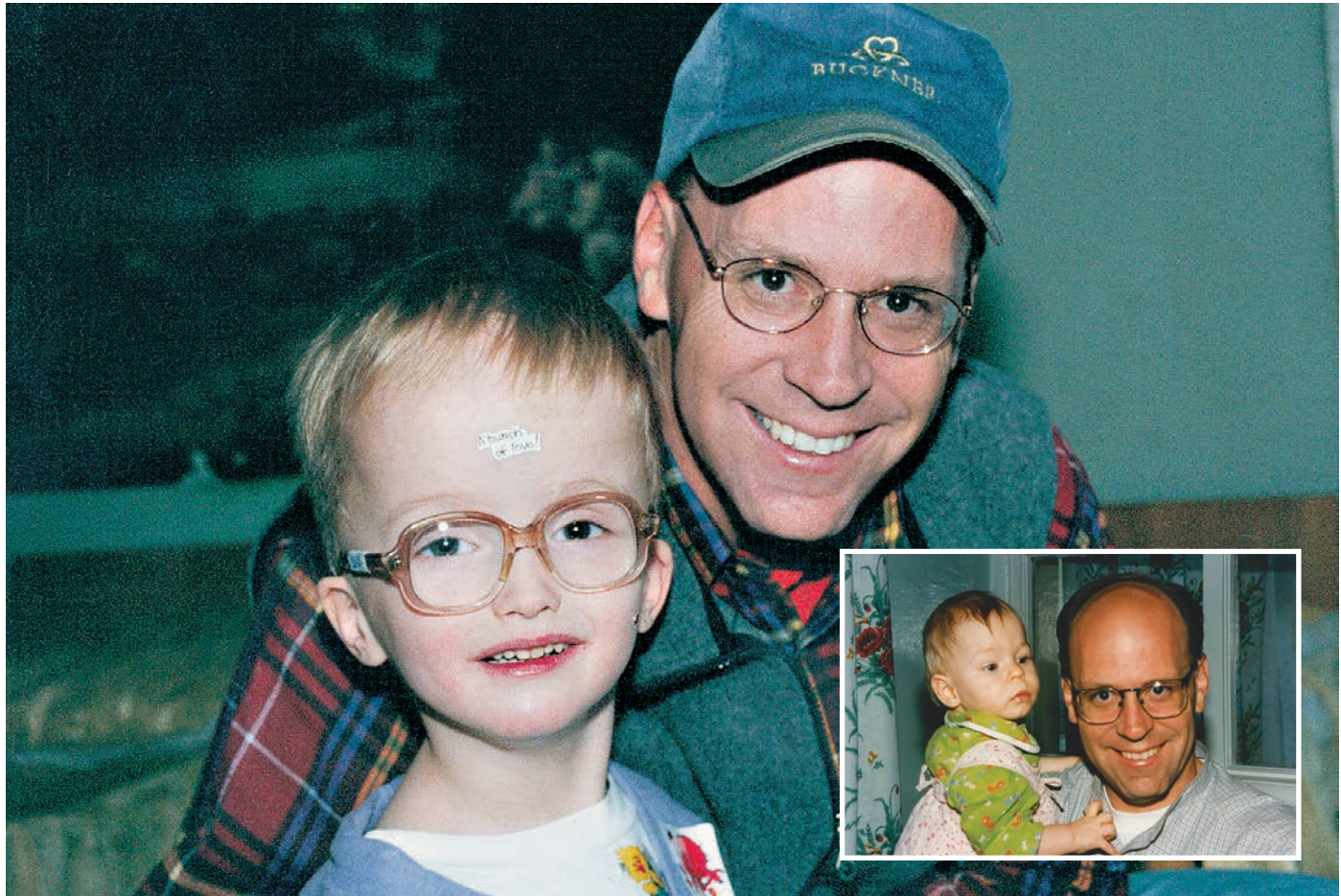
*Albert Reyes*

**Albert Reyes, President and CEO**

*Buckner International*

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

## Psst! Don't tell Albert Reyes



If you know my boss, Albert Reyes, please don't tell him about this column. I wouldn't want him to get the wrong idea when he finds out I have the easiest job at Buckner, and maybe even in the world.

It's not only the easiest job, but in my opinion, the best. I've spent the past 27 years telling the story of Buckner, or as I observed my first week here, my job "is telling the Buckner story by telling Buckner stories." Most days that's like telling a Texas BBQ pit master to smoke a brisket.

I've always been enamored with stories. And while I like to tell stories about things in my own life, the stories of other people are always so much better. I've had some interesting things happen, like the time I woke up in a tent in Botswana, looked out the window and saw an elephant standing against the canvas. But nothing in my life compares to the stories I've heard and told

during my time at Buckner.

There are obvious reasons Jesus used stories. People can relate to characters in a story and the lesson becomes personal. It's been said Jesus is the greatest storyteller in history, so I guess that makes my chosen profession acceptable.

When I started writing, I was taught – threatened might be a better word – that I am not the story. Journalism 101, literally, teaches writers to write in third person, no "we" or "I." It's a strict rule and helps keep the writer out of the story. "You are not the story," my professor reminded the class often.

While there is such a thing as poor writing, even good writers are no better than the story being told. That's why I have the easiest job in the world. Our biggest challenge planning each issue of *Buckner Today* is deciding which stories not to tell. They're like

that manna from heaven in Exodus. Every morning when you wake up, the ground is covered with them.

A few weeks back I was thumbing through bound volumes of past *Buckner Today* issues. It became a walk down memory lane, with more than 26 years of stories flooding back. It's strange how vividly I remember some of those stories and the circumstances surrounding them. Often, it involved evenings in the living room of a foster family, after everyone returned home from a busy day. I read some of those stories, looked at the photos and wondered where that little girl is now, 25 years later.

When I tell the story of a senior adult, a child or a family, I feel a heavy responsibility to take you there with me, inside that living room and immerse you into the narrative. I want you to see what I see, smell what I smell, feel what I feel. In other words, I want to show you the story, not just tell it. It's hard to write about giggles and the smell of fresh baked cinnamon rolls hanging near the ceiling of an adoptive mom's kitchen. Years ago, I suggested we invent a way to "scratch-and-sniff" the pages of *Buckner Today* so you could fully experience a Russian orphanage.

While I have worked hard as a writer to be the storyteller/shower and not become part of the story, that doesn't mean I'm dispassionate about Buckner stories. Seeing the strength, love and courage I've observed for a quarter of a century has changed my own story. It's not that I have become part of the stories I've told, but the stories have become part of me.

So, do a favor for me, will you? Don't tell Albert Reyes how easy my job is. We wouldn't want him to get the wrong idea. **BT**

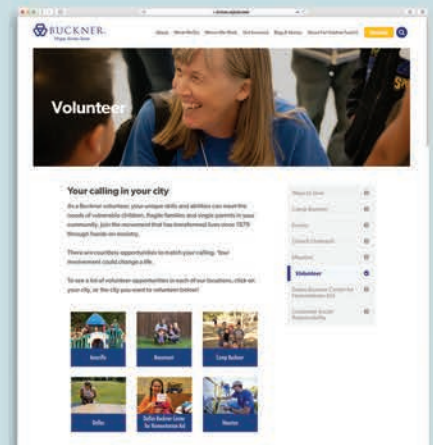


Scott Collins is Senior Vice President of Communications at Buckner International.



Buckner International has partnered with you throughout an extraordinary year. Through a pandemic, winter storm and more, you have continued to bring hope to vulnerable children and families. [See how you can help deliver hope.](#)

Visit [buckner.org/volunteer](https://buckner.org/volunteer) to find volunteer opportunities in your community and near to your heart. Help virtually tutor a foster child, prepare boxes of aid or the many other ways that match your skill set.



## 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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# 3

Reasons  
we're  
excited  
at  
Buckner!

## Buckner Retirement Services is re-inspiring happiness



Hope to return to the things we love is right around the corner as vaccinations continue to be received. At each of our six senior living communities, safety precautions are continuing to be put in place, but more opportunities are opening up for recreation, dining and fun for our residents and members. Are you looking for a safe community to call home? [Visit bucknerretirement.org](https://www.bucknerretirement.org) today to set up a virtual or in-person visit.

# Happiness.

Re-imagined.  
Re-experienced.  
**Re-inspired!**



# 2020: The year we stood together, six feet apart



We never ceased one day of service. We never said the word, "impossible." We were able to keep serving because you stood in the gap, stayed tuned in to what we were doing, and continued to be a part of our team through your prayer support and your gifts.

Your support helped create the miracle that was 2020. [See the many ways you impacted Buckner in 2020.](#)



# Serving seniors with excellence



The 2021 LeadingAge Texas Awards presented Buckner Retirement Services with four honors signifying continued excellence in serving senior adults throughout the pandemic.

The awards include Dr. Herbert Shore Outstanding Mentor for **Cheryl Johnson**, director of health care services; Service Excellence for **John Bender**, Parkway Place chaplain; Excellence in the Workplace for **Parkway Place**; and Public Trust for **Buckner Retirement Services**.



Cheryl Johnson

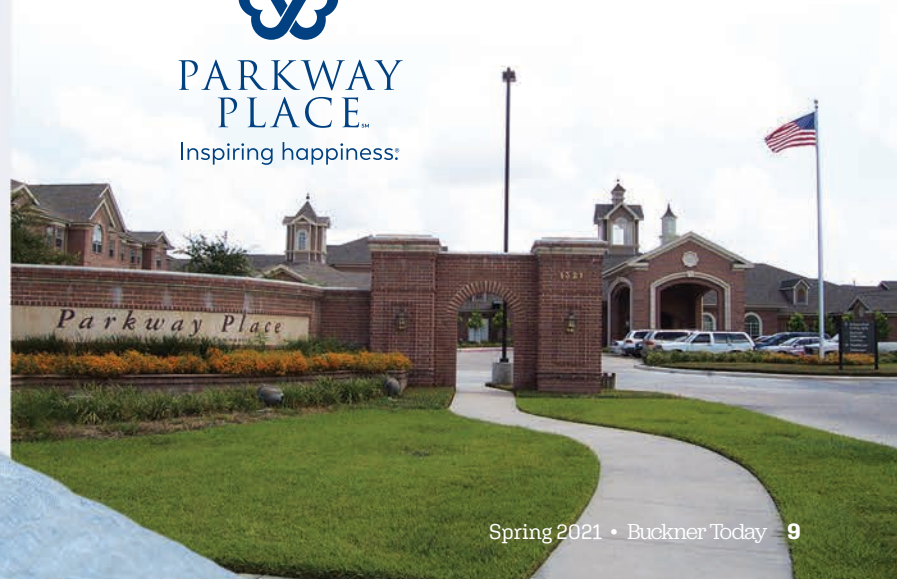


John Bender

LeadingAge is a not-for-profit organization providing leadership, advocacy and education for not-for-profit senior living communities and operators. **BT**



PARKWAY PLACE  
Inspiring happiness:



# May is National F

**There are 423,997 kids in foster care in the U.S.**

**F**oster care in the United States has evolved into more than 420,000 kids in care waiting for a stable family. These children were removed from their homes for different reasons.

According to the Department of Family and Protective Services, about 63% of kids in care were removed from their homes due to neglect and 34% were removed due to parental drug use.



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# Foster Care Month

The goal of foster care is to remove children from unsafe or unhealthy environments and place them in a safe home while their birth family works toward reunification.

Foster families provide a loving environment for the child to live in while a permanency plan is made.

This month, we celebrate the families that have opened their homes to provide a safe environment for those in need.



# The Moore family experienced many closed doors, but the *open doors* are the ones that matter most

*Story by Emily Ahrens • Photography by Shaie Williams*

**M**indy and Shawn Moore had a calling: Foster children in need. But their journey to Buckner Foster Care and Adoption was met with many closed doors at first.

In 2010, they adopted their first two sons, Ian and Owen, in Georgia.

Ian, 2 years old at the time, was a simple adoption process.

But they also chose to foster his younger brother, Owen, 4 months old then, to keep them together. Owen was in their care for 18 months before Shawn and Mindy were able to adopt him as well.

Shortly after, they moved to Texas and started looking into private adoptions.

"The Lord shut the door, I don't know how many times," Mindy said. "It was not the way it was supposed to go."

Mindy mentored youth at their local church and began spending a lot of time with one of the girls in her group.

"Deja probably should have been in the foster care system, but her grandmother had intervened. When her grandma became deathly ill, she was only 14," she said.

"She came to stay with us and just never left." Her grandmother

recovered, but Deja longed to be adopted into her forever home.

When Deja turned 18, the Moores adopted her.

"It's always been our heart to foster and provide a safe and stable home, no matter what the outcome is. Whether we have them for a day, whether we have them for the rest of their lives,"

Mindy said.

Mindy worked for Child Protective Services as a caseworker when they moved to Texas. "All of my interactions with Buckner were my most positive experiences. The Lord radiated through everything," she said.

Buckner was the clear choice when it came to foster care and adoption for Shawn and Mindy. "The Lord just said yes."

When the Buckner case manager called Saturday morning, they could feel God saying yes to this step. The twins, Emerson and Everett, were placed in their home at 4

months old.

"They were born January 1 and spent time in the NICU for the first couple of months," Shawn shared. "Emerson, who is technically older, probably had the most problems to start with."





While in the NICU, the twins faced challenges but were able to come home to the Moore home. "We will probably never catch up on the sleep we lost, but it has been worth every sleepless hour up with them," Shawn said.

A special relationship blossomed through the birth great-grandparents. With their age and health issues, they knew they couldn't provide the full spectrum of care. But they were dedicated to showing up day in and day out with the twins.

"This was a good fit with us because we just think biological family is important. To this day, we still have visits with the great-grandparents," Mindy said. "They were front and center, praying over us during the Zoom adoption ceremony."

This placement was unlike any other experience for them, and in a way, felt easier than the others. "Sometimes you don't like the answers or the results, but we know we're following where God has called us," Shawn said.

"We just want to be obedient to what the Lord is calling us to do. And it's worth it. Get attached, jump in," Mindy encouraged others. "It's going to be messy, but in the end it's beautiful. There is always the 'what ifs' and you can 'what if' yourself right out of a blessing." **BT**



# Family *reunions*

**For the Vasquez family, foster care is just the beginning** | *Story by Scott Collins • Photography by Russ Dilday*

**K**aari Vasquez was drawn to the home as soon as she saw a picture of it. Maybe it was a fluke or a coincidence the house was on Kari Ann Drive, but the similarity to her own name caught her attention.

Kaari (pronounced Car-ee) dragged her sons David and Anthony to an open house “just to see it, and we walked through and just absolutely fell in love. The boys were excited.” She rushed home and told Lee, her husband, he had to see the house.

**Then they started praying.**



BT

## Humble beginnings

*13 years ago, the Vasquez foster care journey began in a one-bedroom apartment.*

"We just prayed, 'OK, God, if you want us to move and have this home, make it very clear.' So, we waited," Kaari said. "The price was too high for us, so we waited awhile longer."

After submitting an offer below the owners' asking price, they decided to write a letter explaining their desire to use the home to serve foster children through Buckner.

"We wanted to explain why we made a low offer. We didn't want to be rude," Kaari added. "We could just picture our family in this home and we told them [owners] how we desired to use it. 'We'd love to foster siblings and your home would give us the room to do that.'"

When their realtor called to say their offer was accepted over a higher one, they were "blown away." And then they learned more. The family selling the house had been a foster family and used the home just as the Vasquezes imagined using it. Their letter hit the spot.

But there was more. Soon after moving in, a new neighbor came by and said her son had been walking the neighborhood and saw the house for sale. He prayed over the house, the

neighbor said, then went home and told his parents he felt God was telling him the home would be used for ministry.

Lee and Kaari started their journey as foster parents 13 years ago in Virginia while living in a one-bedroom apartment. The call came for them to care for a brother and sister. But when the children showed up, it was two boys. The youngest was a 3-month-old named David, who stayed with the Vasquezes, while the 6-year-old went to live with another family. Thirteen years later, David is still with them, but not as a foster child. They adopted him.

Their youngest son, Anthony, came soon after. His mother had aged out of foster care and was headed to jail. Initially, the plan was to keep Anthony as a foster placement for a year. Lee and Kaari agreed they wanted Anthony to maintain a relationship with his birth mother, so they visited her in jail with Anthony in tow.

"That was a very difficult time," Kaari said, "but God really used that to help her see that we loved her and we cared about her."

Kaari, a speech pathologist, had just start working full time again and was overwhelmed with two small boys along with her work.



*Kaari and her boys love to laugh and learn from each other.*



*"I always say the day it becomes easy to say goodbye is the day we should quit [foster care]," Kaari said. "Because, really, the children deserve us to become attached to them, to fall in love with them, to love them as our own."*

"God made it very clear what he wanted me to do," she said.

She told her boss about Anthony and that she needed to bring him with her to the school where she was working, so the school opened a spot for him.

Lee, an engineer with UPS, was traveling regularly for work then and Kaari was nearing a breaking point.

"I found myself in my laundry room crying and just asking God why. I wanted to be home and I thought it would be better for Anthony. At that moment, God gave me peace, and I was just thankful for all that he had provided."

The day after her laundry room breakdown, Anthony was diagnosed with hearing loss.

"So, here he was in one of the country's best schools for children with hearing loss. Had I not been working full time there, he would not have been diagnosed as quickly."

Co-workers approached her and said things like, "Wow. What are the chances that this child was placed with you and now he has a hearing loss? I don't believe in God, but that makes me wonder."

The irony of Kaari and Lee adopting two foster boys isn't lost on them. Their motivation for becoming foster parents in the first place was to reunify foster children with their biological families,

while taking opportunities to serve the families along the way.

"It's not just the child you're bringing in, you're going to be alongside the family, or the parent, who is trying to get their child back," Lee said.

"Sometimes it (our calling) has looked like children being reunited with their birth families," Kaari added. "But truly, the most powerful and important piece to that calling and what we've seen over these years is the healing that comes from them accepting Christ, learning about who Jesus is, and being restored to him."

Lee believes God has a plan for every family they serve through foster care. That plan "is for individuals, for families who are going through a tough time to see salvation at the end of their suffering. We have to trust that God is going to bring them back together."

"Being foster parents, that's our first goal – to try to work with the family, strengthen them, build them up, encourage them so that their family can come back together," he added.

As a result of getting to know the families, Kaari said their own family has grown exponentially because they now have "extended" family everywhere they've lived, including two years they served at an orphanage in Baja, Mexico.



"The Vasquez family has felt the pain and grief that comes with loving so deeply," said Andi Harrison, regional director of foster care and adoption for Buckner. "I am very thankful that we are able to offer our families the counseling to find healing through their journey. The counseling that we are providing families like the Vasquezes extends longevity in this ministry as families receive the support from their organization."

"The Vasquez family continues to respond to the gospel by saying yes to caring for children through foster care, but they take it one step further by showing love and respect to each of the birth parents," Harrison added.



After finishing their stint at the orphanage, the Vasquezes needed to decide where they would live back in the U.S. Kaari researched states needing foster families, especially ones that speak Spanish, and found Texas. As they zeroed in on the state, they contacted Buckner and were told Dallas-Fort Worth had a high need for what they had to offer.

"We knew of Buckner because of some friends at our church in Virginia," Kaari said. A good friend from the church knew Buckner President and CEO Albert Reyes and recommended they check out the Dallas-based ministry.

"We researched and we really connected with the mission and the vision that Buckner had," Kaari said. "I called Buckner up

before we moved here and asked where the greatest need was for foster parents."

They chose Texas and the Dallas-Fort Worth area because of Buckner.

"One thing that set Buckner apart from other agencies was the support they offer our family," Lee said. "Not just the kids that come in to stay with us for a short while, but David and Anthony also get to benefit from therapy through Buckner and us as a family. We've worked through some things that are difficult."

"Whether or not a child is able to reunify, we see the big picture," Kaari said. "God's ultimate plan is for us to be able to share his love with others and pray and desire for them to experience that for themselves and ultimately come to know Christ."

And while their mission is reunifying children, that also means suffering losses along the way. It was that fear of seeing children come and go that caused Lee to hesitate at first.

"I thought, why would we get into foster care? It seemed like something very difficult, an emotional roller coaster," he said. "If you take in a child, you fall in love with the child, and then you have to give up the child. Why would I do that to myself on purpose?"

"I think the hardest part of this – of doing foster care – is also one of the most important lessons that we've learned and that is to be able to trust God with all our children," Kaari said. "To be able to trust

that even when the situation is something that we feel is not best for the child or we feel frustrated with or that we're questioning, it's trusting that God has good plans for that boy or girl and that he loves them more than we ever could."

Reunification has no bigger advocates and fans than Kaari and Lee because they know children belong with the families God put them with if possible. So, they deal with the goodbyes and pray.

"I always say that the day it becomes easy to say goodbye is the day we should quit," Kaari said. "Because, really, the children deserve us to become attached to them, to fall in love with them, to love them as our own. They deserve that. They deserve nothing less. And if we were to give them less, it would hurt less." **BT**



**Three weeks old and an**  
*answered  
prayer*  
**for the Sappingtons**

Story by Emily Ahrens  
Photography by Shaie Williams

Amanda and Jarrett Sappington had two sons, but they "just had this feeling that [their] family needed to be bigger." They heard about Buckner Foster Care and Adoption in Amarillo and started looking into it, but did not tell their young sons yet.



BT

## The little sister they always needed

*Aban and Camden embraced Trinity as their sister from the moment she came home.*



One afternoon, Amanda and Jarrett picked up their youngest son, Camden, from Bible school to a surprise.

"Look Mom, here's you and daddy and our new baby," the 6-year-old pointed out in his drawing of Abraham, Sarah and a little baby, from class.

The couple looked at each other in shock. They hadn't mentioned the possibility of another child to the boys.

Just a few short weeks later, Aban, their 9-year-old son, asks in the car when their new baby is coming. The confirmation from God kept coming.

They began to plug in to the Buckner foster care and adoption program by attending the informational meetings.

"We prayed about and truly felt God wants us to do this, so

let's see where he takes us," Amanda said.

Two months dragged on for the family while they waited for their first placement. But Jarrett and Amanda received the call one Tuesday morning that there was a baby in need.

When Amanda looked into Trinity's 3-week-old eyes, she fell immediately in love. The rest of the family wasn't far behind either. Aban and Camden latched onto their baby sister without hesitation.

But the journey was just beginning. Trinity was battling many health conditions.

"From the beginning, I made a calendar for the judge that had color-coded doctor visits," shared Amanda. "We were at the doctor every six weeks with her. It was strep, RSV, an eye turn that needed surgery."



Jarrett and Amanda knew God placed Trinity in the right home at the right time. Amanda is an optometrist and Jarrett's father is a respiratory therapist. Each struggle, they had knowledge and support along the way.

"Our job is to keep her safe and healthy," Amanda shared. "She had been that sick at moments and we only knew what to do because we are medical people, and are surrounded by medical people, but to anyone else – it could've gone too long."

"We became so in tune with what each cough meant and with what she needed," she said.

Their two young sons reminded them of their purpose even when the foster journey was challenging.

"The boys had such a good acceptance of the truth that she's not ours, we're caring for her. And you would never know, she was always their sister," Jarrett said. "But they did a better job at hanging onto that and would remind us to pray."

On June 30, 2020, the family gathered around their computer for one of the first virtual adoptions of the year. They celebrated Trinity officially becoming a Sappington. Placed with them at just three weeks old, she is now a vibrant, healthy 2.5-year-old.

"I truly feel like God brought us into this process for this child," Amanda said with a smile. **BT**

**BT**

## Full of fun and sass

*Trinity was at home from the minute she was placed with the Sappingtons. Nearly 3, she is full of fun and sass.*





Jane\* journeys to  
future, thanks to



# If you could meet Jane today,

you'd discover a compassionate and confident young woman about to graduate from college — determined to build the best future for her two young sons.

But it hasn't always been this way. Just a few years ago, Jane was in prison, locked up and away from her boys on charges of a drug-related felony.

It was rock bottom for Jane and she could see no way forward.

But all that changed, thanks to friends like you.

After serving out her sentence, Jane was offered a place within Buckner Family Pathways, a holistic transition program empowering single-parent families in crisis

to turn their lives around and achieve stability and self-sufficiency.

Today, her future's looking bright. Jane is studying to complete a bachelor's degree in information technology and saving to purchase a home for herself and her boys.

In Texas today, women ages 25-34 are the largest demographic living in poverty and one in every three children in Texas lives in single-parent households.

You can help bring about this kind of transformation for more single parents in crisis through your gift today for Family Pathways. And the need is vast — so many families are waiting for support ... waiting for solutions ... waiting for hope.

**Thank you for giving generously!**

# ward a hope-filled o friends like you!



**Give online at**  
**[buckner.org/Transformation](https://buckner.org/Transformation)**

## Blessings

Motherhood is one of Briana's biggest blessings. Through the challenges she faced, Briana always put her sons first.



# Homeless, pregnant and aging out of foster care

Briana now supports those facing what she once faced

Story by Emily Ahrens • Photography by Shaie Williams

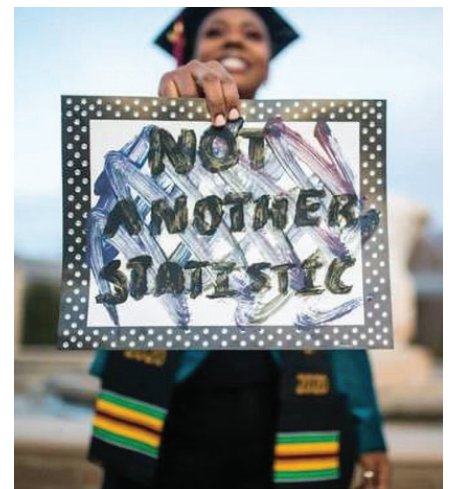
**I**magine being 14 and facing homelessness. Briana Wright knows what it's like all too well.

The third sibling of seven, Briana and her mother didn't agree on much and the environment she was living in was not safe. To avoid the abuse at home, she spent time couch surfing, homeless at times and just looking for a place to stay.

"In ninth grade, summer came around and my mom told me they were going to drop me off at my grandparents' house while they go on vacation," Briana shared. "She drove me to Amarillo, from Lubbock, with two weeks' worth of clothing and never came back."

Attempting to find routine in Amarillo was difficult. Briana's grandfather was a functioning drug addict. "He's able to do the bare minimum, he's able to survive. Outside of that, he can't take care of anybody else," she said.

She continued to attend school diligently at Amarillo High School even when it felt like everything else was falling apart. Her grandmother had a stroke and was put into a rehab facility. Again, Briana shuffled her living situation.





*Briana and Samuel II celebrated their love and got married in February 2021.*

"I tried to stay with her there, but I was also dealing with a lot of trauma and looking back, I really put my grandmother through it."

At 16, she decided it was time to leave. Working with the homeless liaison at school, she was able to receive food stamps as an unaccompanied minor. Moving in with her current boyfriend at the time, Briana was met with abuse, again. When she came to school with bruises, burns and pieces of her hair ripped out, Child Protective Services was called. And, she was pregnant.

"I moved into a psych treatment facility here and for about a week CPS was trying to see who would become my temporary guardian because my mom had basically relinquished her rights by not showing up," she shared. "I became a ward of the state."

Three months pregnant, Briana went in for a routine doctor's appointment. There was no heartbeat. She had lost the baby. "I was not prepared for that," she said. "Then my behavior got worse, I started fights at school, smoking and making poor decisions."

Sent to Tyler, Texas, for emergency shelter after the psych ward requested her to leave, Briana's life would never be the same.

God met Briana at the shelter. "That's where I found myself; I found God. I found out more about who he saw me as, compared to who I saw myself as. Or even what the thick binder with my name on it said who I was."

Over the next four years, Briana continued her journey back to Amarillo. Briana found knowledge and support when she came to Buckner that year. She participated in the preparation for adult living (PAL) sessions through the Foster Youth Independence (FYI) program.

At 18, she got pregnant again. She moved into a group foster home where she struggled to find her place.

"I started to feel like I could do it on my own," Briana said. "I had a boyfriend who had a stable job, stable housing and transportation who said he'd take me to and from school, and it just made sense at that time."

Facing abuse again, Briana put her foot down. She would not go through that again. She and her son, Greyson checked into the Salvation Army. While it was a step in the direction of independence, it

was not the safest place for her and Greyson, now 7 years old.

"So I reached out to Buckner for the after care services that were offered," Briana explained. "I was able to secure housing and stability."

Through the after care program, Briana was able to finally focus on her education and career goals.

"I had always dreamed of being a social worker. Back when I was an unaccompanied minor, she was the only one answering the phone. She was my saving grace."

Bound and determined, Briana obtained her associate degree from Amarillo College in 2018. But she wouldn't stop there.

"I went back to the shelter that had accepted me as a child and worked there as a staff member. I knew what I wanted to do, I was hungry," Briana said.

She went on to study at West Texas A&M University. Briana celebrated earning a bachelor's degree in December 2020.

"I have this passion in me to help people who were me. People who are like my mother, my brothers and sisters, and those who are in the foster care system," she said.

She began applying to positions through Amarillo, including one within Senate Bill 292, a grant program through Texas Panhandle Centers. Today, she is a case manager that helps with behavioral health, jail services, relapse prevention and more.



Briana is now the one answering the phone for those who need someone.

"They would usually hire someone who already has a year of experience and someone with a master's degree. But they saw that hunger. And I know it was just a God thing," Briana said.

It has come full circle for Briana. With determination and drive, the course of her life dramatically pivoted. A mother to Greyson and Samuel III, and recently married to Samuel II, she is stronger than ever.

"Over and over again, God's been a part of it all," she said. **BT**

# Paying it back and forward

Story by Scott Collins

Photography by Corrie Coleman



**R**ishun Beasley spends her days looking for something she's already found. It's a search that drives her every morning and one she knows will never end.

It started more than 20 years ago at Buckner, where she found a solution and where she decided she'd spend her life helping other children find it, too. So, every morning, she answers her alarm clock, wakes up her five children and heads out the door, dropping them off at daycare and school before starting her search.

*(Continued on page 32)*





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## Home is where the heart is

*The Beasley family  
knows they can count on  
each other, even when  
times are tough.*

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Rishun, who grew up as a Buckner foster child, turns her car toward her office at Child Protective Services, where she spends her days searching for permanent solutions for children in the system – children like she was. She works as a permanent managing conservator with CPS.

"I'm trying to find permanency for them," she said. "Whether that's a relative or whether that's adoption."

As a child, Rishun and her three siblings experienced foster care and were eventually placed with a relative in kinship care who took custody of the children. It was that very personal experience that led her to a career with CPS.

"I have to say that going through CPS as a kid led me to feel that I wanted to give back and just lend a helping hand. I want to provide for these kids some type of support while they're in CPS," she said.

Her goal is to provide children with the same love she remembers receiving from Buckner staff while she was in foster care.

"They were so caring and understanding," she said. "My experience in CPS was not as bad because Buckner was really, really devoted

to making sure that us kids were OK and had what we needed.

"I'm working with children whose parents' rights have been terminated and I'm just trying to find permanency for them so they don't have to age out of foster care, which is very challenging," she continued.

She is just as determined to provide her five children with everything they need, too. Rishun is intent on giving her four sons and daughter a "better life. I want to show them how to grow up so they go off to college and seek that additional education past high school."

And while she is intent on meeting her children's basic needs, Rishun is also making sure "they know how to transition from being taken care of to taking care of themselves and being able to be successful adults and know how to survive."

And, she added, she wants them to know that someday the roles will change. "I'm going to need them to take care of me, so I want to teach them how," she said.

But an even more important lesson she's passing on is to never give up, "no matter what life throws at you. You just keep trucking,

you keep pushing, you keep jumping over hurdles and working your way through obstacles.

"When stuff gets hard and it feel like it's not working, you just have to believe," she added, echoing advice she learned from others. "Just don't give up. No matter how tough things look – and I go through a lot. I mean, when it rains, it pours on me and it can get really heavy. But I still have to get up in the morning. I still have people depending on me."

Growing up with Buckner, she learned the value of "self-care," she said, something she still does every day, including keeping a journal of her thoughts. Buckner has also provided therapy for Rishun this past year when she said her life "almost crumbled right in front of me."

That help came through a friendship she struck up two years ago with Keri Pettis, manager/director of the Buckner Family Hope Center located at the Texas Rangers MLB Academy in West Dallas. Rishun said she contacted Pettis wanting to get involved with activities for children at the Family Hope Center.

"Miss Keri has just been phenomenal," she said. "She is an amazing person to have in my crazy life. She's right there for for me, and Buckner has provided just anything I've needed."

During the height of the coronavirus pandemic when grocery items were in short supply, Rishun and her kids received help from the Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid. Along with participating in programs at the Family Hope Center with her children, Rishun also volunteers to help out. She also went through the center's parenting nurturing program.

"Rishun is very resilient and she is committed to her role as a mother and isn't new to making sacrifices to make sure her family doesn't go without," Pettis said. "She has a loving personality and is always looking for ways to serve others."

Pettis described her as "extremely intelligent" and someone "who doesn't give herself the grace and recognition she deserves for all that she has accomplished."

Rishun knows every day has its challenges, but she wants the foster children she serves and her own children to "push forward," advice she takes personally for her own future. Pushing forward for her looks like becoming a licensed social worker and some day owning a children's therapy program, "especially for foster children. I also want to have my own foster home and become a child placing agency."

"I always push forward," she said. "That's why I work with foster care kids. It really is something that I would do for free. I really love helping the system that helped me." **BT**



# Buckner International

Ministry marks 25 years of international work | Story by Scott Collins



BT

## Mapping the Future

2020 marked 25 years of international work for Buckner, prompting tectonic shifts in the decades-old ministry, including a name change. Remembering the epitaph R.C. Buckner had on his tombstone, the organization began serving, "Not one orphan child, but all orphan children."



**It took 10 years for the name to change, but only one trip to change Buckner.**



The trip was an exploratory journey in 1995 by then-President and CEO Kenneth Hall to three Eastern European countries, coming just a few years after the Iron Curtain was pulled back. What Hall found were countries long shrouded in secrecy and in desperate need, and the neediest were vulnerable children. Many were packed into overcrowded and undersupplied orphanages, essentially human warehouses for boys and girls.



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## Behind the Iron Curtain

*Soon after the Cold War ended, Buckner opened work in Russia, pulling back the curtain of neglect in orphanages such as this one in Goosivsky, Russia, in 1999. (Photo by Scott Collins)*

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The mid-1990s marked global shifts in politics, governments and communications. The Internet was emerging as the World Wide Web, breaking down geographical borders and connecting the planet as never before. And while borders dissolved, walls remained.

Initially, Buckner entered the global arena intent on facilitating international adoptions. But during that first trip, Hall was asked by government agencies in Russia, Romania and Poland for Buckner's expertise in alleviating conditions in orphanages.

"Our reputation of being a quality social service agency led to those requests," Hall said in 1996.

Buckner's first international adoption was finalized when a couple from Houston returned to the U.S. with a 5-year-old girl from an orphanage in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1995. The following February, after Hall's trip in fall 1995, Buckner hosted





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## New worlds

*Buckner began work in Russia and Romania in the mid-1990s. For staff and volunteers, visiting those countries was like stepping back in time. Buckner found deplorable conditions for those countries' vulnerable children, including this group of boys in Russia who shared an elevator shaft as their home. (Photos by Scott Collins and Russell Rankin)*

social workers from Russia and Romania in Dallas to consult with Buckner staff. That led to ongoing exchanges, with Buckner staff traveling to Russia and Romania.

The rest is history, including the name change 10 years later. By 2006 it was apparent Buckner Baptist Benevolences needed a new name, so 15 years ago this year, the organization became Buckner International.

While Buckner never opened work in Poland, work in Russia and Romania took off and in 1997, Buckner hosted its first-ever mission trip to Tirge-Mures, Romania, with 13 volunteers and three Buckner staff. In 2001, Buckner began working in Kenya and this year marks the 20th anniversary of work there.

Buckner's global reach received a major boost in 1999 when KCBI radio General Manager Ron Harris asked if Buckner would take over its fledgling "Shoes for Russian Souls" program. That same year, Buckner hosted its first drive for new shoes and collected more than 10,000 pairs, doubling KCBI's efforts. Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® was born. To date, Buckner has distributed shoes and socks to more than 90 countries worldwide.

*(Continued on page 42)*





## Journey of the Heart

Dubbed the "Journey of the Heart," Buckner hosted its first-ever Shoes for Orphan Souls mission trip to Russia in November 1999. Children in orphanages eagerly waited their new pair of shoes, delivered from the heart with love by a group of more than 75 volunteers. Volunteer Alice Wiggins, middle right, later became a Shoes for Orphan Souls fixture and still serves at the Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid in Dallas, 22 years after that first trip.





“Our reputation of being a quality social services agency led to those requests.”

—Kenneth L. Hall  
Former President and CEO

But Shoes for Orphans Souls was just the beginning of Buckner's humanitarian aid work. By 2006, the overwhelming response to global needs from donors and corporations led Buckner to begin construction for a new Center for Humanitarian Aid on land once part of the original orphans home. The 45,000-square-foot building officially opened April 4, 2007. Today, it is the staging ground for Buckner's domestic and international aid shipments, including more than 674 tons of aid distributed during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and 2021. *(Continued on page 49)*

## Precious in his sight

Within two years of opening international work, Buckner began hosting mission volunteers on trips to countries where the ministry was working. Volunteers flocked to the cause. Along with work in Russia and Romania, Buckner soon opened work in Kenya and Guatemala. *(Photos by Russ Dilday, Scott Collins, Morris Abernathy)*







Along with putting thousands of pairs of shoes on children's feet around the globe (right), Buckner International broadened its portfolio of services almost as fast as it expanded to other countries. Those expanded ministries include schools for local children in Kenya (bottom) who otherwise could not afford to attend. *(Photos by Russ Dilday and Mark Sandlin)*



## Hope shines here.®

Guatemala has become one of Buckner's strongest international ministry points. In 2015, Dulce Raymundo, pictured in the inset with her family, received the 3 millionth pair of shoes distributed by Buckner Shoes for Orphans Souls®. Her sister Gloria (left) greets a Buckner visitor at their home in 2016. The pair of shoes led the family to the nearby Buckner Family Hope Center and changed the family's life. (Photos by Aimee Freston and Misty Keasler)



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## Empowering Success

*As Buckner's international ministries have evolved through the past 25 years, one of the key developments has been teaching self-sustainability for families. Training, such as sewing classes at the Buckner Family Hope Center in Nairobi, Kenya, provide economic opportunities for families, strengthening them and improving the environment for children in the home.*

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At the Buckner Girls Transitional Home in Lima, Peru, young ladies aging out of care find help transitioning to adulthood. The home gives the girls a safe place to live while learning skills to help them succeed in life. One of those young ladies, Viviana Contreras de la Cruz (below) wanted to become a photojournalist. (Photos by Mark Sandlin)





‘Our goal is providing long-term sustainability for the children and families we serve.’

—Albert L. Reyes  
President and CEO





In recent years, the focus of international work shifted to finding solutions for children who would otherwise languish in orphanages. That shift led to the launch of the Buckner Family Hope Center model, a family preservation program designed to deliver services to at-risk families. The goal is strengthening the family so children can stay with their parents rather than being displaced and put into orphanages.

The Family Hope Center started in Guatemala and proved so successful Buckner imported it to Texas and other countries where it had ministries. Today, there are 27 Family Hope Centers serving vulnerable families and children.

As the Family Hope Center was emerging, Buckner was also introducing foster care into countries where it served. As a direct result of Buckner staff, foster care has taken off in Guatemala, Peru, Kenya, the Dominican Republic and Mexico.

Today, Buckner has settled into six countries outside the U.S. – Kenya, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru and the Dominican Republic. Local NGOs (non-governmental organizations) operate Family Hope Centers, foster care, humanitarian aid distribution and other programs needed locally.

“Our goal is providing long-term sustainability for the children and families we serve,” said President Albert Reyes. “That’s also our goal for the local Buckner NGOs. We want them to move toward self-sufficiency so that one day they operate without the need for financial support from the U.S.” **BT**

**MEXICO**

**SERVICES:**

- Buckner Family Hope Centers
- Group Foster Care Homes

**GUATEMALA**

**SERVICES:**

- Foster Care & Kinship Care
- Buckner Family Hope Centers
- Group Foster Care Homes

**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

**SERVICES:**

- Buckner Family Hope Center

**HONDURAS**

**SERVICES:**

- Buckner Family Hope Center

**PERU**

**SERVICES:**

- Foster Care & Kinship Care
- Buckner Family Hope Centers
- Transitional Home

# Buckner International Locations and Services

KENYA

## SERVICES:

- Foster/kinship care
- Domestic adoption
- Family Hope Center

**1,885,521**  
people served  
in six countries  
since 2011

Dominican Republic: 142,650

Guatemala: 257,088

Honduras: 184,271

Kenya: 119,039

Mexico: 314,358

Peru: 868,115



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Hope shines here.®

# Mesquite ISD students volunteer and learn valuable life skills, serve others

Story and photography by Emily Ahrens

There is simple peace in the quiet hum of labeling boxes, stacking tuna cans and organizing incoming donations at the Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid. Every week, a group of Mesquite Independent School District (MISD) special education students arrive to help stock the shelves, organize shoes and create order out of chaos.



For some students, this is a paid opportunity by the state to learn valuable job skills while volunteering with Buckner. They are a part of the MISD transition services work program, also known as the Pre-Employment Transition Services.

"The Transition Program strives to make our students productive citizens upon graduation," shared Kiffany Jefferson, MISD skills trainer. "We work on improving students' employability skills, independent living skills and community participation skills."

The work the students accomplish in a few short hours is remarkable.

Skills trainers work alongside them to guide what their next responsibilities are, but typically, they are having fun and enjoying each other's company while staying on task.

Partnering with Buckner creates opportunities to discuss who these items are for and why it is important to give back.

"Volunteering teaches the students the importance of giving back while meeting new people within the community, and it promotes positive interaction, support and encouragement for everyone," Kiffany shared.

Valerie Tran and Bobby Deets, both skills trainers, love this

outlet for the students to gain hands-on experience. During the pandemic, the class met virtually.

"We really missed out on an element of building skills through virtual learning. It's great to be back in the warehouse putting what they learn into actions," Bobby said.

In March 2020, when the pandemic shut most things down, this opportunity was put on pause too. The class met virtually at that time, but it was a great relief for the trainers, students and parents when they could safely come back in March 2021.

"There are just some things that are better when you do them in person, and this is one of those things. We love it," he said. "Volunteering helps us all understand that there are different needs in all walks of life." **BT**

**[See how you can serve in your community.](#)**



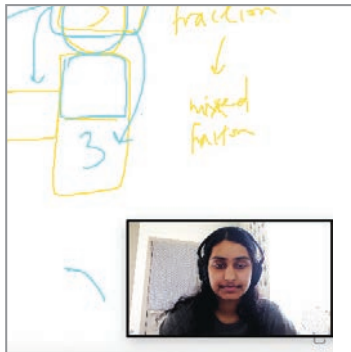
# Once tutored, now a tutor

## College student volunteers with Buckner to tutor virtually

Story by Emily Ahrens

**W**hile there is no age requirement for having a servant's heart, it is less common to hear about a college student taking time out of their demanding schedule to volunteer.

For Sneha Gajarla, a student at UT Dallas, tutoring has been a thread throughout her life.



"When I was in high school and even when I came to college, I used to go to a tutor. I always wanted to return that favor back in a way," Sneha said. "I looked into tutoring jobs first to make some extra money, but then I thought about focusing on it more as a hobby too."

She found Buckner through Foster Connect, an on-campus organization that helps bridge the gap between university students and their resources and the foster community in Dallas.

"Because I've always loved tutoring and working with children, I was excited to find out about the tutoring program where we can work with youth in foster care," she said.

In 2020, Sneha jumped into action and completed the necessary

paperwork and training to begin tutoring. By November, Sneha was helping tutor a kinship foster child in math.

Her student is in fifth grade right now, learning multiplication, long division and fractions. The best part about the virtual tutoring session is the opportunity for Sneha to connect with the child.

"It's fun to get engaged and see how her day is going," Sneha said. "But one of the most rewarding parts of tutoring has been seeing her grow."

From the middle of the first semester to now, Sneha's student was able to increase her average grade 15 points.

"Seeing the improvement in her skills and her confidence grow is rewarding," she shared. "Being able to see that I can make an impact in her life is a humbling experience."

Throughout the pandemic, the Buckner tutoring program adjusted to being virtual. Despite technical challenges, meeting virtually has created immense flexibility and increased communication between Sneha and her student.

"Tutoring does take a bit of commitment and some time for planning, but I would encourage anyone that's interested in doing it to jump in," Sneha said. "I'm the kind of person that loves to talk to people, especially from the comfort of my own room – it's even easier right now." **BT**

## COVID-19 didn't stop our volunteers

**C**COVID-19 brought many challenges, but that didn't stop Buckner volunteers from continuing to connect and work with families in Buckner programs.

"They knew their role as a volunteer was making an impact in our programs," said Lindsay Miller, director of volunteer engagement at Buckner. "I really saw a quick turn from our volunteers and their willingness to be adaptable. We really saw volunteers step up and put 110% of themselves into making it work. And we saw them overcome some hard challenges throughout."

The Buckner volunteer team adapted quickly and found ways to engage with Buckner families virtually. From online tutoring sessions and financial classes to virtual exercise classes, puppet shows and entertainment, Buckner volunteers offered their unique skills and talents to provide ways for the Buckner family to stay together even while apart.

"It's not only about the services being provided, it's about the relationships that are being developed," Miller said.

Volunteers have always been the heart of Buckner's effort to protect children, strengthen families and serve seniors, and it is through you that we are changing lives and bringing hope to the vulnerable.

Thank you for your time, effort and desire to help those in need. We couldn't do it without you! **BT**



[Watch the video here.](#)

# Thank you Buckner supporters

Buckner wishes to thank the following corporations, foundations and other organizations for their charitable contributions of \$1,000 or more during the fourth quarter of 2020 and first quarter of 2021.

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Zugaro Family Fund of Communities Foundation of Texas

# National Aging Out of Foster Care Awareness Day is May 31

By Emily Ahrens

**On average, more than 23,000 children will age out of the foster care system each year in the United States alone, according to the National Foster Youth Institute website. Statistically, 20% of them will become homeless, while only 3% will earn a higher education degree. In 2020, almost 40% of children in Texas left foster care due to age.**

Since 2014, Lubbock, Amarillo, Beaumont and Dallas have served over 1,000 teens and adults who have aged out of the foster care system through programs like FYi and NextStep.

FYi and NextStep programs help keep these teens on the right track during their transition into adulthood. The programs provide college application help, job skills training, food and pantry supplies, financial support and more.

"The youth in foster care who are not adopted or reunited with family before 18 will take one of two paths. They will either 'age out' of the foster care system on their birthday or attend a further education program and have the option to remain in the state's custody until they are 21," shared Bekah Coggins, Buckner Children and Family Services transitional services supervisor.

Former foster youth need the same support that everyone desires in their daily life. As they age out of the state's custody, these kids have huge decisions to make, some of which will determine if they have a roof over their heads. With so many resources available and the benefits that come with graduating college, the most necessary help is support.

Buckner programs help connect foster youth with resources and opportunities available to them. Supporting those aging out can look like a variety of things: volunteering time, donating needed items or even financial donations to the program of your choice. **BT**

**[Learn more on how you can help foster youth who age out.](#)**



# Buckner International

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Lace up your shoes and walk or run a 5k with your family and friends on **September 18 or 19, 2021** to help Buckner serve vulnerable children and families. Choose the date and location that works best for you and share pictures of you and your group participating through social media using **#BucknerRunforHope**.

*for Run*  
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Registration available at [buckner.org/events/run-for-hope](https://buckner.org/events/run-for-hope)