

We're celebrating 50 years of ministry in the Rio Grande Valley! **See inside.**

Buckner

The magazine of Buckner International
FALL 2021

Today

Riding the
roller coaster
of foster care and adoption **PAGE 9**

LOVE

Buckner

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PRESIDENT & CEO, BUCKNER INTERNATIONAL
Albert L. Reyes

SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT OF COMMUNICATIONS
Scott Collins

VICE PRESIDENT OF CREATIVE SERVICES AND
OPERATIONS COMMUNICATIONS
Russ Dilday

EDITORIAL STAFF

EDITOR
Emily Ahrens

**DIRECTOR OF DIGITAL
COMMUNICATIONS**
Aimee Freston

ART DIRECTOR
Alan Paul

GRAPHIC ARTIST
Luis Pérez

CONTRIBUTORS
Delcia Lopez, Louis DeLuca, Mark Sandlin

WEB/MULTIMEDIA MANAGER
Bradley Vinson • buckner.org

EMAIL
bucknercommunications@buckner.org

PHONE
214-758-8000

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ner Today



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On the cover: Faith and Gerald Varlack of Mission, Texas, became foster parents through Buckner in 2018 and have fostered over 12 children since then. They see their foster and adoptive journey – all the roller coaster's ups and downs – as a spiritual journey. *Photography by Mark Sandlin.*

Mind the gap

When I was in England a few years ago working on my book “Hope Now,” I became familiar with the warning signs to “mind the gap!” – a common announcement alerting riders of London’s famed rail system.

The popular phrase was coined in 1968 as a way of warning riders to not fall through the crack between the platform and the train while boarding and disembarking the train.

Now, the gap is so small, it would be impossible for someone to literally fall through it to the track below. But, while the gap may not be life-threatening, it can cause serious harm.

For 142 years, Buckner has been a “mind-the-gap” ministry for vulnerable people in our society. Our ministry started with a



calling to mind the gap for orphans after the American Civil War. Vulnerable children were falling through the cracks of a world that had no social services other than those organized by local churches. Soon after Buckner Orphans Home opened, the ministry identified another gap: the needs of elderly citizens.

Time after time, Buckner has “minded the gap” by stepping up to serve local communities and by developing innovative ministries. As our world has changed, the nature of those gaps has also changed significantly.

Earlier this year, we received a plea from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS). The lack of foster homes and similar places led to children sleeping in Child Protective Services’ (CPS) offices or in hotels under the supervision of CPS caseworkers.

To mind that gap, Buckner began providing safe, secure temporary housing for these children who were falling through

the cracks.

When the U.S. saw a surge of migrants at our southern border, thousands of those entering the country were unaccompanied minors. More than 4,000 of those children were taken to the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center in Dallas, where they were kept until officials could connect with relatives in the U.S. They came with nothing. So, along with Catholic Charities of Dallas and Trusted World, a Dallas-based charity, we stepped into the gap, fulfilling the needs of these children, from soccer balls and Bibles to hygiene kits.

Sometimes, the gaps we mind are smaller, more personal. Every day, chaplains at our six senior living communities mind gaps by serving the spiritual, emotional and mental needs.

Historically, Buckner’s growth has come from our willingness to mind the gap in communities lacking vital services. In some cases, we initiated ministries and in others, we stepped in to support and expand existing services.

One of those is the Rio Grande Children’s Home in Mission, Texas. Founded in 1963 by Rev. Buddy Owens, the RGCH faithfully served neglected children in the Lower Rio Grande Valley for 35 years. When the time came for Rev. Owens to retire, his board turned to Buckner, asking if we would take over operations of the home to continue serving the needs of children in the Valley. The children’s home became a part of our existing ministries in that region.

In 2021, we’re celebrating 50 years of ministry in the Rio Grande Valley. This issue of *Buckner Today* gives you a glimpse of what we do every day to keep children and families from falling through the gaps in one of the poorest regions in the country. With support from hundreds of volunteer mission groups every year, we are working to close the gaps, improving the lives of children and their families.

When God sees the gaps in our world, he calls us to stand in those gaps for him and be his bridge to a hurting world. I’m grateful you have heard that calling too. Thank you for standing with us as we mind the gap for God. **BT**



Albert Reyes

Albert Reyes, President and CEO
Buckner International

Visit my blog at www.AlbertLReyes.com

Droning on

IN OTHER WORDS | SCOTT COLLINS

Meet Tim Miller (pictured below with his daughter). Tim is our very talented videographer on the Communications Team at Buckner.

If you're reading the digital version of *Buckner Today*, it's easy to see some of Tim's handiwork by clicking on any number of video links embedded in this issue. If you're literally thumbing through the magazine, I hope you'll go to our website or our YouTube page and see these videos. They will inspire and encourage you.

A few days before we visited the Lower Rio Grande Valley to collect stories for this issue, Tim asked about acquiring a drone.



Having never visited the Valley, he wondered if a drone might help us capture and explain the Valley to you.

Watching Tim bust open the package and assemble the drone for the first time in the parking lot of the Rio Grande Children's Home was like watching a kid at Christmas. His excitement only grew as he piloted the drone skyward over the Children's Home campus and circling the Peñitas colonia where Buckner serves families through our Buckner Family Hope Center, like a hawk soaring majestically.

It's stunning how our perceptions change when we see things from a higher altitude. Watching Tim's drone capture the world from an elevated perspective, I realized the importance of

stepping back (or up) to get a wider view of the world.

This view helps us think strategically, to see the world around us as a whole, and to understand what each part needs. That's something Buckner does extraordinarily well.

But like a drone, we have to eventually come back down to earth. Imagine a video shot only with a drone. You'd miss the wonder on a child's face or the glow in her eyes you can only see with a close-up shot. That's something else Buckner does well. Having seen the needs from a higher vantage point, we come back down to address issues face to face.

My favorite part of the drone metaphor, though, is home. Tim explained that he establishes a point on the ground where the drone lifts off from. That's home. When it's time for the drone to return to the ground, its program brings it right back to the point from which it started.

For 142 years, Buckner has stayed grounded to our core mission rooted in James 1:27, to "visit widows and orphans in their distress." Like the drone, if we know where we came from, it's easier to return.

Tim's drone reminded me: With a higher view comes a bigger vision that can only be accomplished when we get down to earth. **BT**



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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott Collins".

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

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Reasons
we're
excited
at
Buckner!

Celebrating five decades of impact in the Valley



This year marks 50 years of ministry work in the Rio Grande Valley. From foster care and adoption to family preservation, the families are being strengthened and empowered each day. To help us celebrate, turn to page 8 and read about the many different ways families and staff have continued to adapt and serve over the last five decades.



New ways to serve safely with Buckner



As we all settle back into a new normal, we have created many opportunities for you and your family to serve safely. You can virtually tutor, serve in the Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid, host a shoe drive and more. Find out ways to serve safely in your community this fall at [buckner.org/volunteer](https://www.buckner.org/volunteer).



There's still time to Run for Hope



Lace up your shoes and walk or run a 5k with your family and friends on either September 18 or 19, 2021 to help Buckner serve vulnerable children and families. Since we're racing virtually, you get to choose the date and location that works best for you. If you register after August 31, you are not guaranteed to receive your race packet by race day, but will still receive it.

Share pictures of you and your group running for hope through social media using #BucknerRunforHope.

Don't wait, sign up today at [buckner.org/events/run-for-hope](https://www.buckner.org/events/run-for-hope). **BT**





grande celebration

BUCKNER CELEBRATES 50 YEARS SERVING RIO GRANDE VALLEY

1971 is heralded by Apple TV+'s groundbreaking documentary "1971" as "the year that music changed everything." It was the year that saw rock, soul and R&B come together, changing music forever.

That same year, Buckner broke its own ground by joining with First Baptist Church, Brownsville, Texas, and opening a new foster care group home in South Texas. The new project started in a two-story house renovated by the church, which became home to 10 children and a couple serving as house parents.

Since that initial ministry in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, Buckner has served the area in multiple ways, from Brownsville to Mission, including offices in McAllen. Today, Buckner still provides **group foster homes** on the campus of Rio Grande Children's Home, which became part of the ministry in 1998. In addition to the children's home campus, Buckner works with local families to provide **community foster care and adoption**.

The **Buckner Family Hope Center in Peñitas** has become a cornerstone for families living in the community northwest of Interstate 2. Through **family strengthening programs** built around **family coaching**, Buckner works to elevate the circumstances of families, enabling them to take care of their children. Since opening work in Peñitas, Buckner has hosted numerous **mission teams** from across the country in **home building projects** for deserving families.

The FAYS program* – Family and Youth Success – in the Rio Grande Valley, formerly known as STAR, helps children and families in Brooks, Cameron, Hidalgo, Kenedy, and Willacy counties.

*The Buckner FAYS program in RGV is funded through the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS).





Riding the roller coaster

This family is committed to the ups and downs of fostering, adoption

STORY BY RUSS DILDAY • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK SANDLIN

There's a sense of energy when you walk through Faith and Gerald Varlack's front door. It's more than a house; it's an experience.

Maybe it's the original art or the comic book collection displayed on the brightly painted walls of blue, orange and green in their open-concept home in Mission, Texas. Or the music playing in the background, or the bright Rio Grande sun filtering through large windows and onto a lifetime of family photos of the couple with their three adult biological children: Cherish, Japheth and Adriel.



Foster and adoptive father Gerald Varlack holds foster son, Moses, during a quiet time at home.



More likely, though, the energy in the house comes from the constant movement and laughter from Zane, Jesse and Moses - all under the age of 3 - as they play with their parents. The couple adopted Zane, 2, in June after fostering him since he was a newborn. They are currently fostering Jesse* and Moses,* and hope to adopt Moses soon.

The experience that is the Varlack home can be credited to the family's personal vibrance. Faith and Gerald are both educators – she teaches choir and he teaches math – as well as artists. All members of the family are active musicians. Faith and Gerald participate in the music ministry of their church, Calvary Baptist in nearby McAllen, and their three older children have been vocalists in school and church since childhood.

But adding to the energetic feel of the home is Faith and Gerald's admission they're also roller coaster riders of sorts. As they say, it comes with the territory of God's calling for them to serve as foster and adoptive parents.

Melanie Mata, the Varlacks' Buckner case manager and adoption worker, said, "When you walk into the Varlack home, it's a little bit of chaos since we've gotten the last placement in here. But it's a home filled with love. Everyone is very hands-on, very attentive, very patient with one another. Everyone helps out and picks up the pieces."

When Faith first approached Gerald about her desire to foster a few years ago with another agency, Gerald responded with a single question: "Why do you want to do this?"

"He's the more logical one," Faith said. By 2018, though, the couple had prayed through their mutual decision to become foster parents through Buckner.

"We finish the trainings, we get certified, and we get our first placement, a couple of boys," Gerald recalled, "and that placement is very ... What's the word I would use, Faith?"

"An emotional roller coaster?"

"An emotional roller coaster," he agreed. "The pendulum shifted from high excitement and then high anxiety and then back and forth between those two."

Gerald described the highs: "God was giving us this opportunity, and we looked at it as ministry with caring and compassion, everything like when we talk about what it means to be a Christian and what it really means ... 'widows and orphans,' right? The orphan finds mercy in God, and God cares about the orphans. It's really what we should be all about. I guess for me I was feeling, 'Wow, this is what my faith in action looks like.'"

But, like any roller coaster, there were dips. After seven months of



“ ”

The emotional realization that a foster parent’s job “is to love them while we have them. **And that was a hard lesson,**” Faith said between tears. “I’m trying not to get emotional. It’s so hard. But **when I let it go and I let God have control ... it was easier for me to actually take the next placement.**”

caring for the boys, the Varlacks realized their foster boys needed a higher level of care than they could supply.

“They were amazing kids,” she said. “That [honeymoon] phase ended and then we thought, ‘This is above our ability’ and we had to let that placement go. Then it was a lot of questioning ourselves if we failed and a lot of regret, to the point that Gerald asked, ‘I don’t know if I want to do this anymore.’”

Part of Gerald’s disappointment, she explained, stemmed from his passion. “He really gave everything, I mean everything. Those were his boys. It was hard, getting him to want to foster again.”

But Buckner foster care staff found another placement, a brother and sister who were soon to be reunited with family. Since the placement was temporary, both Buckner and the Varlacks felt it might be a good transition to a more positive experience for the foster parents and children.

“They said the little boy was very aggressive, and he wouldn’t talk to anybody,” Faith said. “But in one month’s time he was talking and smiling, and that was because of Gerald. In his heart, he was saying, ‘I’m not going to fall in love again. I’m not going to do it.’ Yet, he still was so amazing with them. It was a great experience and Gerald was more open to the next placement.”

Gerald’s eyes light up as he confirmed her words. “After that one, after the little boy and the little girl, that’s when this guy came,” he said, looking at his newly adopted son, Zane. “He was our third placement, right out of the hospital.”

Zane came into their lives in 2019 as an emergency placement at just 3 weeks old and eight weeks premature.

“He was a preemie, so every hour and a half to two hours he needed to eat,” she said. “We had a solid three months of no sleep. We were zombies that summer. With those kinds of experiences, you can’t help but fall in love, right?”

When the couple learned Zane would probably not return to his birth mother because of decisions she was making, they were determined to “fight for this baby” and adopt him. But Zane’s adoption proved to be another roller coaster, as efforts to reunite him with his birth mother floundered while she struggled with drug use and jail time.

It eventually led Faith to the emotional realization that a foster parent’s job “is to love them while we have them. And that was a hard lesson,” she said between tears.

“But that was a lesson I learned with Gerald. I’m trying not to get emotional. It’s so hard. But when I let it go and I let God have control ... it was easier for me to actually take the next placement, and the next

What kind of families foster and adopt? To help you get to know the Varlacks better, we asked Faith and Gerald to describe each other as parents. Here's what they said:

Gerald on Faith:

- She's a mama: nurturing, direct, honest, loving.
- She doesn't baby them the way that I do.
- She helps them grow up while I might help them stay in diapers longer.
- She knows when something's wrong even before it happens.
- She's willing to let them try and maybe fall and just learn that way.
- She's a mama bear too. If you get anywhere near my kid and you're a hostile threat, you will die.
- She's the perfect mom.



Faith on Gerald:

- He is probably the more overprotective one.
- He is the one who will get down and dirty. He plays with them.
- He's super fun and very nurturing.
- He's the one that will change diapers and get up in the middle of the night.
- He'll wash the bottles.
- He's amazing. He's just a great dad. I don't know anybody that's like him.
- He is willing to sacrifice and do anything for his children.
- I think he's a great example of a father.



placement, because it's not about me controlling it. It is about whatever God wants.

"When the adoption finally happened, I was like, 'OK, God, you chose us, you decided we were the ones that were the best home for him.' It's a big responsibility, but it was also a big 'Wow.'"

While Zane's recent adoption has proven to be a high point in the family's roller coaster ride, the addition of "Baby Moses" in late March provided a butterfly-in-the-stomach moment for them.

Moses is named for the Texas Safe Haven Law - commonly referred to as the Baby Moses Law - that allows parents unable to care for a newborn the ability to bring the child to a designated safe place, with no questions asked.

The Varlacks had indicated they would be willing to adopt an infant, but the day Moses arrived, they were presented with a quick-response proposal by CPS: Would they be willing to make the decision to adopt this child they'd never fostered - or even seen?

Faith recalled the phone conversation. "They said, 'There's a baby, and it's under the Baby Moses law, so it's going to go to adoption. Are you interested?'" she said. "I was like, 'What? You've got to be kidding.'"



Zane came into Faith and Gerald's lives in 2019 as an emergency placement at just 3 weeks old. The Varlacks became his forever family in June. The foster care journey toward adoption was a roller coaster.



Loving the Varlack roller coaster journey? See more amazing photography of the family [here.](#)

“ ”

“It’s so hard to believe. I’m pinching myself. We have six children right now and we’ve fostered over 12, but **my prayer is that these boys would feel loved, and not just loved by us but loved by God.**” *-Faith*

The family’s response was immediate. “Well, just throw our name in there and we’ll see,” she told the caseworker. “I doubted it would happen because there’s just so many people. And then he called back and said, ‘They chose you. CPS chose you.’”

“We got the call on Friday and then he came to us on Saturday,” she said. “Again, I felt that same responsibility, like God chose us, because there’s a lot of people that could have been chosen in the situation. He thought we were good enough, deserving enough to raise this child.”

The Varlacks hope to adopt baby Moses in the near future, their fifth child. Cherish, 24, is their oldest. She said her parents’ commitment to children has given her a lot of respect for them.

“In that way, my opinion of them hasn’t changed much,” Cherish said. “They’re great, but I think I have a lot more respect for them and now know how much work it was to have three toddlers at the same time.”

Reflecting on their foster and adoptive journey – all of the roller coaster’s ups and downs – Faith reflected on how it’s been a spiritual journey as well.

“It’s so hard to believe. I’m pinching myself,” she said. “We have six children right now and we’ve fostered over 12, but my prayer is that these boys would feel loved, and not just loved by us but loved by God.”

“I know God has a purpose for them,” she said. “We got the opportunity to be in their lives and that they will just be happy and really, really will serve God. I want them to do really great things. I really have dreams for them to do that because I don’t think it was an accident that they were with us.” **BT** *Names have been changed to protect privacy.



FAMILIES IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY: Stories of hope

STORY BY RUSS DILDAY • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK SANDLIN

In real time

Some Buckner success stories are still in the making

Typically, when we share the stories of Buckner, we tell stories of success: People who, through their own initiative, the help of Buckner staff and supporters and, in no small part, God's grace, have been able to overcome circumstances meant to hold them back from winning in life.

But occasionally, we also have the opportunity to share stories that happen in the hard times and in real time. The times where the word "obstacle" is used in present tense and those we seek to help are in the middle of a struggle to succeed.

It was in this real time of life where I found Luis Rodriguez. I had asked my Buckner teammates to point me to an example of a fatherhood success story, and all fingers pointed to him.

At first, he seemed like an unlikely success story. Still reeling from the impact of his wife leaving their marriage and the loss of his job during the pandemic, Luis lapsed into a deep depression.

"Everything just broke. Everything went down the drain," he said. "At the beginning, she took the kids. And it was three to four months of drinking, staying in a room, just getting up to get another beer. And when I didn't have any more beer, I started to sell plasma. I sold my car stereos. I sold one of the cars. It was just bad."

But his situation began to change when his children moved back home, and he met Buckner Family and Youth Services (FAYS) case manager Yvette Ramirez, who was invited by the local school system

BT

Success in the making

Luis Rodriguez is still in the middle of a hard battle: His wife leaving, losing his job and now raising four kids on his own. But Buckner staff already point to him as a success in the making.

to intervene. With her help, he made the decision to pour his energy into fathering his four children, ages 13-15, including 14-year-old twins.

Single fathering soon presented its own challenges, including rebellion and lack of communication that spilled over into the children's school efforts.

"When Ms. Ramirez started calling my son, I asked her if I could get help as well because [my wife] left and it was just this big depression," Rodriguez shared. "It was a little bit scary for me to ask for help. But eventually I did, and I started take classes. Buckner had a program called 24/7 Parenting, so I started there.

"At that time, it was just anger, depression," he recalled, showing obvious emotion. "And just then, this pandemic started, so it left us at very wrong times. It's been tough."

We momentarily stopped the interview. When you're dealing with wrong times in real time, a little bit of time can help you regroup.

Ramirez continued the conversation: "My part was working with his son (also named Luis) because he was rebellious. We were working on communication and his behavior. So, both the family and him have come a long way with the goals that we worked on, both with him and his son."

When she first encountered Rodriguez, she said, "He was angry. He's very straightforward. He told me he was angry at everything that was happening. So my role as a case manager was to try to help him overcome that and try to help him find additional help. And he has come a long way."

"They've been helping," Rodriguez said, "with counseling, how to work with my kids, how to be a better parent, how to overcome the situation and get out of this depression I'm still going through, and get back on my feet."

That help included connecting Luis and his children with resources such as counseling and medical clinics and, because he lost his job during the pandemic, Buckner also has helped him with bills.

But most important, he said, is "the friendship and being there when you need to talk to someone."

While Rodriguez is still suffering from the lack of employment and ongoing challenges of single parenting, Ramirez said he and his family have made big strides.

"He's changed his parenting skills. His boy came a long way," she said. "He was rebellious at the beginning, but he wanted to come back with dad. We continued working with communication, self-esteem, getting along with his siblings, listening to dad. So, those are the successes that the family has."

"He's a success in the making," Ramirez acknowledged. "We're still working on stuff, but I do see a lot of improvement in his family and in his parenting."

And, even though he sees himself still experiencing struggles, he also sees hope in his future.

"I see myself doing much, much better. It's time for me to move on and do what I do best, be a dad and get myself a steady job," Rodriguez said. "I see myself in a year as a truck driver. That's what I want to do,

truck driver. I told my kids when I get my CDL (license), let's go visit the states, let's go. That's what I want to do."



When caterpillars become butterflies

Anjali and Adan Santiago sit in the cool kitchen of their new home, sipping coffee and playing with their daughter, Anya, 2. Even though it's still early morning, temperatures outside are in the 90s. Adan is a mechanic who has started his own auto repair business, Adan's Automotives, with Anjali, and he's already been working in his shop behind their home. Anjali is an ally for the local Buckner Family Hope Center in Peñitas and teaches woodworking and budget-minded crafting to other local families.



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Adan, Anya (2) and Anjali received a new home through a Buckner home build in 2020 and used the new home as a base for their business and to help their community.

The couple is relaxed as they sit with each other and, by many accounts, happy and successful. They've paid off a big portion of their debts and bought a piece of land to expand the auto repair business.

They started their business with the help and encouragement of the Family Hope Center, and their home is the result of a 2020 "virtual home build" by the Woman's Missionary Union in conjunction with Buckner. It was WMU's 10th home build project.

Despite the successes in their lives, ask Anjali about their history, and she grows misty-eyed, comparing their past lives to caterpillars who now have become – with the help of Buckner, its volunteers and their community – butterflies.

Their Buckner story started with a few chance encounters. Before

they met, Anjali had delivered pizza to the Family Hope Center on several occasions, and Adan had asked about doing handyman work for the building, but they never attended any of the center's programs.

But after they met and married, it was the mutual despair each was feeling, Anjali said, that drove them to seek more at the Family Hope Center.

"Years later I meet Adan, and I come into the neighborhood," she recounted. "I'm new to the neighborhood. I had just been released from prison, doing eight years.

"My relationship with my husband was hard, our language barrier (Spanish is his first language, English is hers)," she said. "The communication, the arguments, the drugs, the drinking that we were doing. I had already been home some years, and it was really hard to integrate back into society. I never matured. It was eight years in prison, eight years doing drugs. I was behind in responsibilities, just growth all around as an adult. So when I came here, I didn't know how to have relationships with family or with other people, so all of my relationships were kind of rocky."

She says she "came to a point in life where I wanted to die. I didn't want to live anymore. I had gotten back into drugs, and I just was floundering. I couldn't make a friend in the neighborhood. I had been here like a year and a half, and my language barrier prevented me from

getting to know the community.

"And then I finally went to Buckner," she remembered, "and I got a free calendar after spending five days in rehab. I went and got medicated, and I got balanced. I came out with a whole new perspective. And I got from Buckner what I needed, that I probably wouldn't have gotten anywhere else. Because I got the support. I got the tools. I got strengthened in my finances, my spirituality. I went to counseling with Buckner. I learned about business, accounting ... Every aspect of my life, every need was met through Buckner, who had resources that could help me integrate and become a functioning human in society."

She compares her personal transformation experience to "a caterpillar that came out as a butterfly. I think it's as simple as that. I went in and I ate up everything I could, and I grew, and I feel like I'm just now expanding my wings, getting the strength so that I can continue. Connecting with Buckner has helped me to love my community, that I [originally] hated."

That love of community and interaction with the Family Hope Center has sparked a dream in Anjali to "build a community garden. There's just a lot of things that I'm involved with that touch Buckner."

But her focus is on establishing their young family. "We're still growing. We're a family that has struggles, just like anybody else. We have arguments, and, oh, I have a 2-year-old," she added with a smile, "but I am happy. I have my faith. I have a home.

BT

Finally a family

After many years facing drug abuse and communication struggles, Adan and Anjali are working together to be a strong family for their 2-year-old Anya.



A cornerstone in the community

Adan, pictured on right with Family Hope Center director Jorge Rodriguez, owns an auto repair business. He and wife Anjali are also working on creating a community garden. The resources and relationships they've built through the Family Hope Center have helped kick start their success.

The Santiago family has come a long way. See more powerful images of their story [here](#).

"There's a lot of things I still want to accomplish. And sometimes I tend to move too fast, and I've got to slow down, let God make the way first before I try to jump on the unpaved road," she explained. "I want to open up my own nonprofit organization with my community garden and stay connected with Buckner, so we can, together, help strengthen my community."



Looking to the future...

When Miriam Salinas steps out of her mobile home to greet us in the tropical heat of the Rio Grande Valley, it's like she's stepping out of the past and into her future.

The mobile home represents Salinas' past life, which includes poverty and lack of opportunity. It's a dilapidated wreck, with no working plumbing and air conditioning in only one room for the family that includes her husband Mario and their three children who still live at home.

"Because of the heat, there are quite a few little animals and flies," she said. "I have to feed my family breakfast, lunch and dinner in the only room that has air [conditioning]. And it is super hot. It seems like I'm punishing them."

She's able to say that last bit with a hint of a smile because, as



Miriam Salinas and her two daughters walked through their new two-bedroom home being built by Buckner volunteers with hope and pride. Their original home (below) lacked air conditioning in most rooms, as well as no working plumbing.

she continues walking, she walks past her new commercial nursery business and rounds the corner of the mobile home and into sight of her new home, a two-bedroom frame home being built by Buckner volunteers, with help from Buckner Missions staff.

The nursery and new home represent a new future for her and her family. It's a future, said Buckner Director of Missions Chris Cato, that will mean financial stability for the Salinas family.

"In addition to being in the home build program, they learned to garden and grow plants at the Buckner Family Hope Center through our Texas A&M AgriLife partnership," Cato said. "Last year after the ag classes, they wanted to start a nursery business, so a Missions staff member met with them consistently, coached them on bookkeeping, entrepreneurship, etc. Now they have a super-impressive spread of plants, hundreds upon hundreds, that they sell at market and online. It was a way that Miriam could supplement their income and stay home to take care of their kids."

Salinas said the Family Hope Center/AgriLife course "helped me with the flowerpots, with soil. And that's how it all started. [They also helped] with shade for the plants and then irrigation."

Pointing to the rows of maturing trees beside her house, she added, "I used to have only oak trees, now I have a little bit of everything."

She said that after the family moves into their new home, they plan to move the old trailer and replace it with a large greenhouse.

(Continued on page 20, right column)





ABOVE & LEFT: Working with the Buckner Family Hope Center and Texas A&M's AgriLife, Miriam is able to create income for her family with her nursery business in their new greenhouse. She has hundreds of plant varieties that she can sell at market or even online.



BT

New home, strong relationships

Ron Corkill, construction and aid coordinator for Buckner Missions, loves working in the Rio Grande Valley. Families and staff work side-by-side to build their new homes in collaboration with the Family Hope Center.

Family coaching: More than meets the eye

Being healthy is much more than diet and exercise. Being healthy should be looked at holistically. Buckner family coaching seeks to serve families by challenging, encouraging and empowering them to be their best, healthy and complete selves. Families can plug into one-on-one coaching, classes and more at Buckner Family Hope Centers.

Recently, we had a chance to sit down with a few family coaches in the Rio Grande Valley who gave us the inside look into what family coaching is all about.

“What we do in family coaching is not just explore their desires, their interests and self-determined goals, but we also take a look at their overall health,” shared Jorge Rodriguez, Buckner Family Hope Center executive director and former family coach. “The family comes to us at a point in their life – sometimes a crisis, sometimes just looking to develop a particular skill in their family.”



Lili Alejandrez
Buckner Family Coach



Jorge Rodriguez
Buckner Family Hope
Center Executive
Director

Each family receives coaching personalized to their goals and needs. No two families receive the exact same coaching, but each coach is dedicated to coming alongside them to reach a place of self-sustainability.

“We want to challenge them, not only in the goals they determined, but also some of the things we feel will help them become more resilient. Some things they might even be blind to,” Rodriguez said.

Through the family coaching model, both families and children:

- Learn care and respect for self and others
- Discover their talents and opportunities
- Become servant leaders
- Break poverty cycles through education and jobs

The biggest testament to the power of family coaching is seeing self-sufficiency.

“One of our favorite things to hear at the end of coaching is, ‘Hey, we finished these goals,’ and then they tell us, ‘This is what I want to do next,’” Rodriguez shared. “That’s when we realize they are setting their own goals now. We’re no longer coaching them on what’s needed to take the next step.”

For Lili Alejandrez, Buckner family coach at the Penitas Family Hope Center, the relationship between her and her families is paramount. Because of the relationship built over time with one of her clients, a recent widow who came in timid, isolated and didn’t know how to drive has now blossomed into a business owner and independent mother that takes her son on fun road trips.

“All we have to do is be the person that believes that they can do it,” Alejandrez said.



ABOVE & RIGHT: Miriam has connected with the Family Hope Center and Buckner family coach, Lili Alejandrez. Lili and Buckner Missions construction and aid coordinator Ron Corkill pray over Miriam and her new home.

“What I like about this is that between all of us, we work with the plants, and I can go to work and take the children with me,” she said. “I don’t have to leave them with anyone. The children say that when they grow up, they also want to work with plants. It’s strange that they say that, but they see how quickly you earn money.”

As she walks up to her new front porch to see the progress the volunteers are making on the already framed and roofed home, she beams with hope. “The children will be able to play and walk everywhere. They will not be scared when rain and strong winds come. They now say they will no longer be afraid.”

... and grateful for the past

She greets the two local volunteers working on the home alongside Ron Corkill of Buckner Missions. “I am very happy. They are working without pay. I bring them sodas, Gatorade, water,” she said.

One of the volunteers is Carlos Cabrera. He and his wife, Elizabeth Gracia, received a new home through Buckner in 2019. As he said in an

interview later at his home, he gives back through volunteering because of the inspiration he receives at the Family Hope Center.

"I feel very happy because that was a very great blessing," he said. "Something that impacted me was the way in which Buckner people support families and how they help you get ahead. Buckner looks at the hearts of people. I see how they strive and how they are brave ... and to come help us and motivate us to be able to, like me as a parent, to get ahead and try harder.

"We feel very happy to have this house and we are blessed because a house like this we practically cannot afford it," he said. "It is something very nice to own a new and special house. For me, it is special because each one of you has put a part of yourselves here in our house.

"When they called me from Buckner to tell me I had [qualified for a new home] I was filled with joy and I thanked God," echoed his wife, Elizabeth. "Before they told me that our family had been chosen, I would get up at 4 a.m. to pray and fast with God to ask him for a miracle. And

I know it was God moving in people's hearts."

It was those volunteers, he said, including churches and businesses volunteering through Buckner, who inspire him to volunteer on other home builds.

He said that during the presentation ceremony of the keys to his new home two years ago, "They told me, 'Here is your house and these are the keys,' And I started crying because the days they [the volunteers] were here ... well, I don't know, there was a very strong connection, and suddenly I felt alone because they left. I didn't want that to happen."

"They filled our hearts," she said. "Nobody complained that it was too hot. Nobody complained that they were too tired. They all wanted to work. The young ones too. I asked the boys, 'Do they pay you anything?' They said, 'No, they pay us up there. In heaven we have our reward. We are sowing for the kingdom of God.'

"Young people, little ones, told us that," Elizabeth said. "And I started to think, 'What a great example they set for us.'" **BT**



BT

'They will not be scared'

Previously when storms came through the area, the Salinas family would take cover in an underground shelter because their mobile home was so flimsy. Now, they don't have to fear the home making it through bad weather.



One home, three dedicated teams



BT

Volunteering without borders

Cottonwood Creek Church in Allen, Texas, with First Baptist Church Lufkin as their guide, built a home for a Buckner family in the Rio Grande Valley in their own parking lot. Volunteers supported them in Allen, while other volunteers got to make the journey with the home to put it back together in Peñitas.



and **600** miles

Rio Grande Valley family receives remote build by church in Allen

Story by Emily Ahrens • Photography by Louis DeLuca and Russ Dilday

Maria Pena bakes dozens of empanadas and other delicious pastries in her commercial oven in her new kitchen every day. Before, it would take more than an hour to bake 60 empanadas. Today, she bakes more than 100 within 40 minutes.

When we met Maria in 2019, she had recently lost her husband to a sudden heart attack and her now 15-year-old son, Leo, suffered from finding his father dead. She was lost, insecure and not sure where to turn next, until she took a chance and opened the door to the Buckner Family Hope Center up the road in Peñitas, Texas. Quickly, Maria found her footing and was inspired to become the independent businesswoman she always dreamed of.



Maria and son, Leo



Through the “Business Incubator” program at the Family Hope Center, Maria started her catering business and has successfully built a sustainable income for her family. But her success story doesn’t end there.

Six hundred miles northeast of Peñitas, Cottonwood Creek Church in Allen, Texas was ready to be volunteering again after a long year facing the pandemic. In 2017, the church worked with Buckner Missions on a home build. But this year, the home build looked a little different.

Through a mentorship with First Baptist Church of Lufkin, Cottonwood Creek built Maria’s new home – in their church parking lot in Allen, Texas.

The idea originated in Lufkin 10 years ago when church members were searching for ways to involve their members who couldn’t travel to the Rio Grande Valley for a week. Over the years, FBC Lufkin built and funded six homes in their own parking lot that later found their place in the Rio Grande Valley.

The instant bond between Cottonwood Creek, FBC Lufkin and Buckner teams was astounding. FBC Lufkin didn’t hesitate to make the



Over the course of 11 weekend shifts, Cottonwood Creek Church volunteers worked together to frame the Peña home. Building the home was no easy feat, but the volunteers kept their focus on who it was for.



Once the home was built in the church parking lot, volunteers worked together to take it apart for transportation to the Rio Grande Valley.





six-hour drive to Allen to support the building process, offer knowledge and encourage the volunteers to keep going. The three teams poured over the home plans, adapting and adjusting as needed. The air in the Cottonwood Creek parking lot was thick with harmony and collaboration for the days of building ahead of them.

“Everyone rolled up to the parking lot, rolled up their sleeves and joined us in the effort to build this house,” shared John Hathaway, Cottonwood Creek church member and volunteer. “The team from Lufkin had done a remote home build before, so they provided us with some floors plans, modules and it was so helpful.”

Seeing these two churches collaborate on a build and show each other the ropes is what keeps mission work alive.

“Our work at Buckner simply would not happen without the generosity and sacrifices of others,” shared Chris Cato, Buckner director of missions.

“This was such a beautiful picture of how two churches stepped out in faith to deliver Kingdom-sized impact for a family in South Texas,” he continued. “Seeing this come to life makes me hopeful for this idea igniting a passion in churches and groups across Texas – yielding resources and teams so together, we can build a safe and secure home for any family who qualifies, without the hurdle of travel or distance.”

With the foundation Buckner Missions provided for the home build process, and the ongoing support from FBC Lufkin, Cottonwood Creek was given the tools to begin their first remote build.

The challenge of taking a completed home from Allen to the Rio Grande Valley phase did not phase them. They got straight to work. Because of the remote build, families could play a role locally to impact Peña and her family hours away.

“A lot of families, even without COVID-19, it’s hard for them to take a week to go down the Rio Grande Valley,” shared Keith Sanders, Cottonwood Creek church member and volunteer. “But with the fact they could drive up to the church and see the house being built there, as the house got further along, a lot more people started to sign up.”

Sanders and Hathaway laugh when they think about this project and the skills it took. Before 2021, they couldn’t imagine building an entire home in a parking lot. But they kept their sights on who the home was for, and the rest would come together – piece by piece.

In just 11 days, nail by nail, board by board, the home took shape.

And then the new home was taken down. Section by section, organized sections were carefully packed down to make the journey to Peñitas where the teams could quickly rebuild.

For five days in the Valley, the Buckner Missions team alongside 20 Cottonwood Creek volunteers rebuilt the home all over again. The Rio Grande sun rarely took a break, but the volunteers felt relief as they worked tirelessly to bring this home to life for the Peña family.

“There was so much protection from God while we were there building in the Valley. There was a nice cool breeze, cloud cover,” Hathaway said.

For Peña and her son, building alongside these volunteers brought more than hope. It brought back the memories of working side-by-side

with her husband, his dad.

As the windows went in, and boards secured, Peña and her son, Leo, smiled and worked beside the volunteers to finish every detail of their home. Today, she enjoys the comfort and security of a professional kitchen to continue her business endeavors.

And yet, this story is waiting for the next chapter.

Remote builds through Buckner Missions bring people together even when we have to be apart. Cottonwood Creek volunteers, through the mentorship they received by FBC Lufkin, are ready to share this knowledge with the next volunteer group.

“We are so excited to help whoever is interested to get going. We are working to create that start-up pack of information that will encourage other groups to traverse that gap of knowledge and fear and just be able to do the build and see who it’s for,” Sanders shared. **BT**

Are you ready to change a family's life in a parking lot? Contact the missions team today to get your church or organization involved with a remote build.
Buckner.org/missions



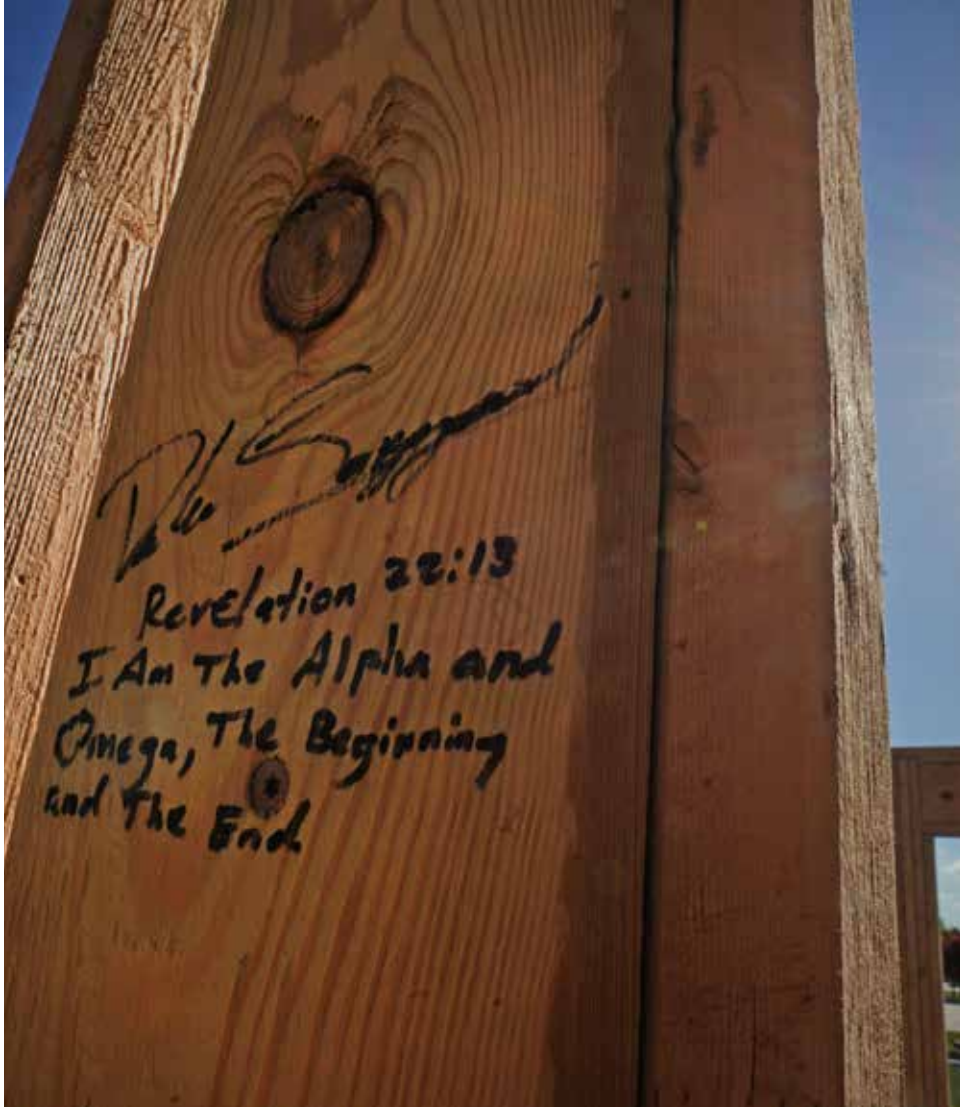


Photo by Delcia Lopez



BT

From grief to hope

Maria Pena's husband passed away in 2018, leaving her a widow and single mother. From that moment on, she worked to provide for her family through her catering business with support from the Buckner Family Hope Center. Qualifying for this new home brought hope. She and Leo worked alongside volunteers to build it once the home arrived in Peñitas.



Photo by Delcia Lopez



Photo by Delcia Lopez

Photo by Delcia Lopez

Catching up with Stephanie Ellison now ... and **'Always Forever'**

Story by Russ Dilday • Photography by Emily Ahrens

*"Hey, sweet child, it's time for bed.
Close your eyes and rest your head ..."*

If the opening lines of Stephanie Ellison's new book, "Always Forever" (Winn Publications, 2020) sound like a bedtime story a parent would read to a child, you'd be right. It's also a lullaby, with accompanying music available online.



Stephanie with husband Danny and daughters, Molly and Willow.

The last time we caught up with Stephanie was in the Summer 2015 edition of *Buckner Today*. Stephanie, a former Buckner foster child, had relayed her inspirational story of growing up in foster care to becoming a mother of three girls: Abby, Emma and Molly. Since then, she and husband Danny have added a fourth girl, Willow, to the family.

Stephanie, a school counselor, said a number of factors – her job “planting seeds” in children’s lives, her reflection and gratitude for her time as a foster child and the impact it had on her life, along with the love she felt for her four daughters, sparked the idea to write a children’s bedtime story parents could use to connect more deeply with their children.

She said she was determined to write “Always Forever” one night as she struggled with the chaotic outcomes of her family dysfunction when she was growing up.

“I was rocking Molly to sleep and reading a story to her every night and reading her the book ‘I’ll Love You Forever,’” she said. “And I was like, ‘Why did it feel like my family was so messed up? A lot of times you just felt unloved. I felt unloved. And so I carry that with me and those little struggles, and it was a battle within my chest.

“As I’m holding my little girl, I’m singing the song that I wrote for her,” she recalled. “It just says ‘Always forever, you’ll be my sweet baby, always forever. I’ll love you like crazy.’”

The idea became the genesis for the book, which she wrote as an interactive lullaby and bedtime ritual for parents and their young children, even parents and children who might not be in traditional roles or homes, she said. “Children who look like me growing up.

“Sometimes it is a foster parent. Sometimes it’s a relative. Sometimes it’s not a mom rocking her baby back and forth. Sometimes it’s a grandparent or a foster parent,” she said. “Not only can this be read to your own biological children or your bonus children, but also to your foster children or your neighborhood kids or your classroom. I’ve had teachers buy it and read it to their classroom and share it as like a social, emotional lesson for kids.”

*When the sky is cold and grey,
I’ll pray with you for brighter days.
I love you!*

Ellison said writing the book – and overcoming her anger – “has really brought a lot of healing, to see life in that perspective, even though it was a difficult process to get there. It’s a very simple, short read. It has children from different races. It has children with disabilities in it. I also wanted to honor my brothers who both passed.”

She said the book is also a reflection of the care she received from



BT

A love letter

"Always Forever" is Ellison's way of sharing the love she received in care to families navigating similar journeys.

“The genesis for this book, which I wrote as an interactive lullaby and bedtime ritual for parents and their young children, even parents and children who might not be in traditional roles or homes... Sometimes it is a foster parent, or relative or grandparent.”

– Stephanie



Wherever life plants you
bloom with

grace



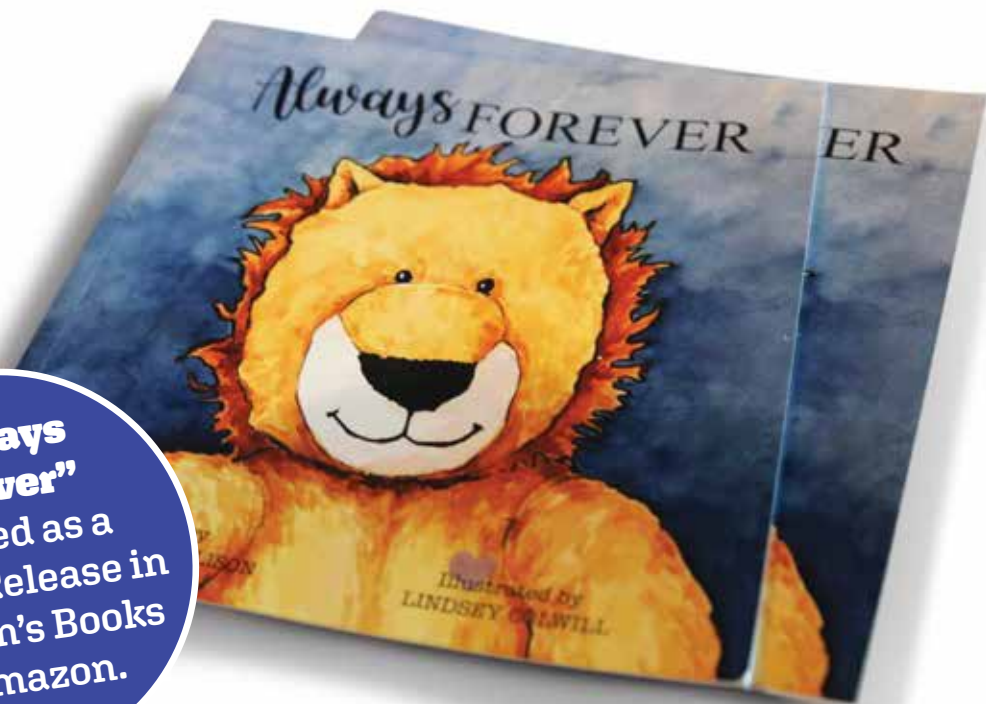
(from left to right) Danny and Stephanie with Abby, Emma, Molly and Willow.

foster parents and others as a child.

"The message is love," she emphasized. "Always the kind that's unconditional, the kind where they, beyond a shadow of a doubt, loved you. This is my thank you to everybody who planted seeds in my life, including Buckner, including my foster families, including the family that took me in my senior year, including all of them, my teachers, this is my thank you to them."

*Wherever you go,
Near or far,
I will love you,
Always, forever. BT*

"Always Forever"
debuted as a
#1 New Release in
Children's Books
on Amazon.





BT

'Someone like me'

Owusu-Hemeng's three books feature kids of all races and abilities so whoever reads them can find someone who looks like them on the pages.

Follow along with Michelle's best-selling journey with more photography [here.](#)

WORDS

have power

Wynnewood Family Hope Center mentor now a best-selling author

There are pages and pages within journals containing the words that Michelle Owusu-Hemeng needed to hear. But she never realized so many other children like her needed to hear those words too.

Owusu-Hemeng grew up knowing the value of giving back. Her mother poured into her the idea that there were always ways to give, to encourage and to share her joy with others.

"I love giving back and I love helping kids," she said. "I started looking online for ways to plug in and found the Buckner Family Hope Center at Wynnewood and loved what they offered for the kids."

An English teacher by day, she would come after school to help lead the children through math and grammar activities on the iPads and computers.

"Whenever Michelle would enter the building, everyone knew she had arrived," shared Cheryl Williams, Buckner Family Hope Center Interim Director at Bachman Lake.

"Her unique laugh, big smile and joyful presence always lit up the room," she shared. "Although the kids might experience frustration at times, she would always encourage them and continue seeking another way to make reading come alive for them."

Each week, Owusu-Hemeng would show up sporting her big smile and encourage the kids at the Family Hope

Center with the words she held close to her heart too. One day, her mother told her those words needed to be shared with kids all over.

"Originally, I said no to writing a book. I journal just to write it out, but my mom said someone needs to hear your story. Someone needs to see this in pictures," she said.

She put the words to paper and found a friend who was also an illustrator. Without any prompting, her vision came to life through his drawings in her first book, "Who I Am." Each picture beautifully complements the words alongside Akosua and her journey.

It was also important to her that the books were inclusive. Teaching special education, mentoring at-risk kids, and working with all demographics, Owusu-Hemeng wanted to be sure children who read this book were able to find someone like them on the pages.

"The illustrator took the time to even show the texture of the little girl's hair and brought to life words I couldn't even write," she said.

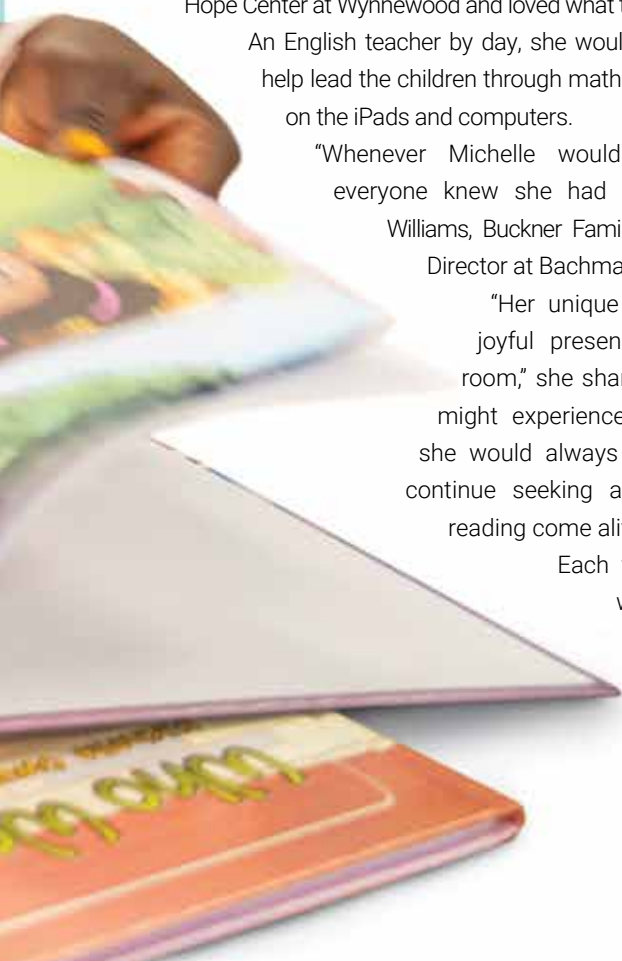
At just 30 years old, Owusu-Hemeng is now a best-selling author on the New York Times Children's Picture Books list, three times over. Her second book, "Who We Are," features the same little girl, Akosua, with a little boy addressing common stereotypes one page at a time. And in the spirit of 2020, Michelle wrote "Akosua's Quarantine," to help teach children what a pandemic and the new normal even looks like for them.

Her three books are letters to kids to remind them of their beauty and worth, regardless of what they see.

"There are so many insecurities going around with kids – even in elementary ages. I want them to know that every part of them is beautiful."

"Spending time with these kids helps me too. They need someone – but they don't know how much they help me too," she shared. "They motivate me to do everything I want to do." **BT**

Story by Emily Ahrens
Photography by
Mark Sandlin



Celebrating 20 years and

371,000 pairs of shoes

By Aimee Freston

Can you imagine 371,000 children? That's enough children to fill every seat in the Dallas Cowboys stadium four and half times.

That's how many pairs of shoes Rotarians in Missouri Rotary District 6040 have collected in the last 20 years for children in need around the globe. And it all started because of one great idea and one really long friendship.



Buckner Senior Vice President of Communications Scott Collins (left) and Larry Lunsford (right) flank Lunsford's mother at a recent Missouri rotary shoe collection event. Collins and Lunsford have been friends since childhood.





BT

Service reaching beyond Missouri

When the Missouri Rotary District 6040 was looking for ways to serve beyond the state, they connected with Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® to serve thousands of children internationally.



Each annual Missouri rotary shoe collection is an effort of hundreds of volunteers.



Larry Lunsford was traveling to Dallas from Missouri for a family vacation, but in his head, he was muddling around ideas for his Rotary District. He was newly elected as the district governor, and he wanted to find a way to unite what was then 54 Rotary Clubs in the North Missouri district.

“Service before self,” is the Rotary motto and Lunsford knew the best way to unite the clubs was through a service project. He just had to find the right one.

On his family vacation in Dallas, Lunsford stopped to see an old friend. He and Scott Collins grew up together in Macon, Missouri. They were also teammates, having played countless baseball games together. But they hadn’t seen each other in years.

Their families were visiting with each other in Collins’ family room in February 2001 and Lunsford mentioned his hope to find a service project that would be a good fit for his Rotary District. That’s when Collins told him about Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®.

Buckner International had recently acquired Shoes for Russian Souls from KCBI radio and changed the name to Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls. Collins, who led the Buckner communications team, had just finished shooting a new video for the program.

Collins pops in the VHS and Lunsford was transfixed.

“I’m just kind of standing there in his living room, and I’m like ‘holy

cow,” Lunsford said. “That was the moment when I thought, ‘Well, this could be it.’”

Rotary is an international organization, but for many rural clubs like in Missouri District 6040, it can be difficult to connect on that international aspect of rotary. Shoes for Orphan Souls allowed these clubs to fulfill their motto of service on an international level.

“That’s the real magic in my view,” Lunsford said. “The magic of the Shoes for Orphan Souls project is the fact that it allows Rotarians to connect internationally while serving children.”

And magic it was. In 2001, their first year collecting shoes, Lunsford set a goal of collecting 2,600 pairs of shoes – one pair of shoes for every Rotarian in the district.

At the end of their collection period, the clubs gathered in a central location and did a roll call, publicly declaring the number of shoes each club brought in. They surpassed their goal by almost three times with 7,300 pairs of shoes collected.

“They just absolutely blew it away,” Lunsford said. “It was so magical. I still get chills when I think about that first opportunity.”

Like Cinderella’s slipper, Shoes for Orphan Souls was the perfect fit for the Missouri Rotarians. They continued to collect shoes each year and their total collection amounts kept growing.

They now have 56 clubs in their district and collect between 15,000-19,000

pairs of shoes each year as well as shoelaces, socks and cash donations.

It's not unusual for a Rotarian to walk into one of their clothing stores in town and buy them out of shoes.

"They get the importance of it for a child," Collins said. "They're tied to the story, and they know how powerful that is for a child. They go beyond, 'let's just set a goal and hit it.' They truly get the mission, and I think that's why they've done it for 20 straight years."

But even the way they collect the shoes has gotten bigger.

Instead of having 56 clubs drop off shoes in a central location, a group of Rotarians caravan with a 53-foot trailer to all the communities throughout Northern Missouri and pick up the shoe donations.

For four days in the spring, the shoe caravan makes over 15 stops throughout Northern Missouri to pick up shoes donated by the Rotary District. The days start early and end late. The trip is grueling, but for those who participate in the caravan, it's their favorite time of the year.

It's a bit unusual to see such a large trailer traveling on the rural roads to the pick-up locations. Oftentimes, the trailer will need to make detours to go around low hanging wires or narrow roads. But when the clubs see the truck rounding the bend, they let out a cheer.

"If you're a local Rotarian, that's really exciting," Lunsford said. "They've been working on this project collecting these shoes and then they see the big truck come and they get to load their shoes and see

the shoes that are already there. Just to be part of that environment. It is really cool."

The shoe caravan became another special way to connect all the clubs together.

Because of COVID-19 in 2020, they scaled down the caravan to keep it safe for all participants. All stops were made outside, they wore masks and instead of a 53-foot trailer, they drove a smaller trailer hitched to an SUV.

The smaller trailer allowed the Rotarians to make stops in places they could never reach with a 53-foot trailer, and they were able to stop at every rotary community in this year's 20th anniversary year.

This is just another example of the district's perseverance and creativity that has led to more than 371,000 pairs of shoes in 20 years.

And it all started with an idea in a friend's living room.

"It really is all about relationships and connectedness," Collins said. "Larry and I had no idea 50 years ago when we were playing little league baseball together that we'd be looking at this type of thing. You just never know what people are going to come up with if we give them the chance to think about the things they can do. That's so significant. Everybody has somebody they grew up with who you never know, they may be the next person to say, 'What can I do to support what you're doing?' That's cool." **BT**



"It is really all about relationships and connectedness." –Scott Collins





BT

It's all about relationship

For Chaplain Rick Webb, and the other chaplains will agree, relationships take time and dedication. Each one cherishes the relationships they have with residents and Members at each senior living community.

LIFE

stories of

Chaplains share stories of faith, life with seniors

Story by Russ Dilday • Photography by Mark Sandlin

Chaplain John Bender (pictured below) has spent most of his career as a pastor and church educator in churches in Tennessee and Texas.

But when the door opened for him to serve as a chaplain at Parkway Place, a Buckner senior living community, in 2016, he walked through – and into a new phase in his life story of faith. He also discovered, much like his counterparts, that door led to a new world of stories of life and faith.



‘Everybody’s got a story to tell’

“As soon as I walk into work, as soon as I walk in the building, I’m excited about walking in every day,” Bender said. “I’ve been here for five years, and there’s not been a day where I haven’t walked in the building going, ‘I’m wondering what God’s going to do today?’”

He said as a chaplain, his purpose is “to do life with the residents. I find purpose by listening to people’s stories. Some people say, ‘I don’t have a story,’ but if you sit and talk with them alone, everybody’s got a story to tell. My purpose is to walk with each resident through their story – when life is great and when life falls in.”

Rick Webb (pictured below), chaplain for Buckner Westminster Place in Longview, said sharing others’ stories is the result of a relationship that chaplains must first build.

“With chaplaincy, you have to build a relationship. You earn the right to be heard,” he said. “Early on, I met a lady I went to visit in the hospital and after a fairly good visit, she still seemed distant.

“I asked her, ‘Can I pray for you?’

“She said, ‘No.’

“That just doesn’t happen,” he said. “In the South, even polite atheists will let you pray for them, so I was really surprised when she said no.

“Over the course of time, we built a relationship and began to talk more and more,” Webb recalled. “I found out she had been angry with God since the Battle of the Bulge

[Continued on page 36]





“With chaplaincy, you have to build a relationship. You earn the right to be heard.” *-Rick Webb, chaplain for Buckner Westminster Place*





Residents and Members at Buckner senior living communities are encouraged to continue with life. Classes, worship and activities are offered throughout the week to keep them active and engaged in their community.



in 1944. She was young, married. Her young husband had just deployed to training in Belgium where it was 'safe.' That's what they were told. That's what she believed as a young wife.

"Yet he gets killed in the Battle of the Bulge because that's where the Germans tried their push. From that point in time - 66 years later - she had been holding onto this anger at God having taken her young husband," he said. "And, you know, sometimes you walk into those moments, and they don't train you for this in seminary.

"But when she told me she was angry with God, what popped into my head? I just said, 'Well, you know what, God still loves you and he's not angry with you. So let's talk.

"And so over time, she did open up," Webb said. "Eventually, I was able to help her understand that God loved her. She was able to come back to God and pray, to come back to God and find peace and forgiveness. People hold onto things. Time doesn't heal anything. That's a lie. You have to intentionally address it and talk about it."

Similarly, Chaplain David Mann sees his ministry as a way to "walk alongside" members at Ventana by Buckner in Dallas.

"I've always felt comfortable with the senior population," said Mann. "Something that's really near and dear to my heart is that I get to journey alongside people of all kinds of different faiths, people who have come from all different types of life. It's just really exciting to be able to do this journey with them."

Mann, who provides chaplaincy services through a unique collaboration between Buckner and Baylor Scott & White, sees ministry to seniors as a sacred "privilege."

"One of the keys of what I believe is found in Genesis: How the Bible reminds us we are all people made in the image of God," he shared. "I have an opportunity to walk alongside with or hold their hand or listen to their story or offer some spiritual insight with a person made in the image of God. It is a tremendous privilege to be able to do that."

Chaplain Kenneth Harpster of Buckner Villas in Austin sees each individual resident's story as puzzle piece into one collective story. He said he is able to share their life stories with others when he conducts memorial services for those who pass.

"Whenever we have a memorial service for our residents, I get to take the pictures they have given me and I scan them in," Harpster said. "I make them a PowerPoint with whatever music they want. I get to see their lives from beginning to end. It's worth every minute and for me, it's just great fun and a great joy to do that."

'The goal is the Gospel'

For many of the chaplains, sharing life's stories always leads back to sharing the story of the Gospel of Christ.

Daniel Carpenter, chaplain for Calder Woods, the Buckner senior living community in Beaumont, said the spiritual needs of seniors are

Chaplain David Mann, pictured below and inset, cherishes the opportunity he has to journey with people from all walks of life. At Ventana, he leads times of prayer and learning to get to know Members, including this service in assisted living.





On the left: Kevin McSpadden, chaplain for Baptist Retirement Community in San Angelo, Texas, said he sees all residents as “valuable.”
On the right: Rick Webb, chaplain for Buckner Westminster Place in Longview, Texas, said his purpose is “to do life with the residents.”

“I have a favorite verse, and it’s the one on my business card. It’s from 1 Thessalonians where Paul wrote, ‘We loved you so much. We’re delighted to share with you not only the Gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.’ That’s what it’s really all about, that we share the Gospel.” *–Kevin McSpadden, chaplain, Baptist Retirement Community*

“very unique.”

“Each generation has a different set of values, but really, it’s just the way that they process things,” he said. “And they also have a different set of concerns, things they’re processing. And so, the goal is always to get to the Gospel, but sometimes you have to help them process it in a variety of ways.”

“My theology or philosophy of chaplaincy is biblically based,” added Chaplain Kevin McSpadden of Baptist Retirement Community in San Angelo. He said his ministry is based on a biblical passage from the Apostle Paul.

“I have a favorite verse, and it’s the one on my business card,” he said. “It’s from 1 Thessalonians where Paul wrote, ‘We loved you so much. We’re delighted to share with you not only the Gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.’ That’s what it’s really all about, that we share the Gospel.”

McSpadden said he also focuses on the personal value of each resident.

“Our folks are older now. They don’t feel valuable anymore in different ways. They used to be the head of something. They used to be a church pastor, or they used to own their own business. Well, they don’t do that anymore. So we make sure we try to do all we can to make sure they understand they’re still valuable. They are valuable.”

Webb also noted the lack of value some residents feel, often because of the emphasis modern culture places on youth.

“America is a youth culture,” he said. “But the truth is the scriptural approach to age is that they ought to be respected and cared for and loved. At Buckner, we have the chance to do what God asks us to do with all the elderly. And that’s an absolute joy.”

“I deal with people preparing for eternity while living life to the fullest every day,” he said. “I take the Gospel of Jesus Christ and apply it to the needs and the hurts and the pains and the challenges of aging.”

“People have different struggles,” said Charlie Wilson, president of Buckner Retirement Services. “The chaplains help them through that, the chaplains meet the spiritual needs of the residents, the members that live there and the associates that work there every day.”

“As a faith-based organization. It’s critical to our mission,” he said. “We’re proud that we’re centered in Christian beliefs, and we serve all people. But that’s the core to what we do and where that sets us apart from other communities. There’s a lot of other options for people. A lot of them have no faith connection, but people that really want to strengthen their faith know that Buckner is a really good option for them.”

Unlike many ministers, though, chaplains who have walked alongside seniors and shared their stories often face the inevitable need to say goodbye to their constituents, Mann said.

“One of the biggest challenges I think, of senior ministry is in those times when someone’s coming to the end of life, and you’ve made that relationship with them and you’re having to say goodbye. It’s also a blessing. It’s the blessing of getting to know people, but it’s also the challenge in the heartache of having to say goodbye so many times.”

“I think another challenge is when you see, particularly in a continuing care community, where you see people who start out independent and then begin to physically deteriorate, and then you see people who may have to go to memory care or to nursing care.”

“But, we’re blessed that we have a wonderful opportunity to take care of these people,” Mann reflected. **BT**

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73-year-old Joan continues to dance her way through challenges

— Story and photo by Emily Ahrens —

Joan Countess, 73-year-old resident at Buckner Retirement Community in San Angelo, Texas, has been line dancing for over two decades.

“My husband, Bill, and I began square dancing over 20 years ago. When he broke both of his legs, I still had such a passion to continue dancing. I found an instructor in Brownwood, Texas, who taught me everything I know about line dancing,” Joan shared.

When Joan and Bill moved to their home in San Angelo, she searched for ways to continue her passion. Other residents even know her as “the line-dancing woman.” While she had never officially taught line dancing before, she loves it.

“We started the beginner class in March 2021. It started with just a few of us, and now we regularly have about eight women

each week come and dance.”

The hour-long beginner class is no joke. Joan enjoys challenging the dancers while having fun. Typically, they don’t stop moving for the whole hour.

“There are so many benefits to line dancing,” she shared. “It has helped keep me healthy with my osteoporosis, and it’s great to get everyone moving.”

The women work together to remember the steps and counts to each line dance. The many different pieces of line dancing are also beneficial for focus and memory.

“Having to focus and remember steps for each line dance is great for long-term memory strength,” she said. “I always remind them they don’t have to be perfect, just follow along to the beat of the music.”

She laughs and tells the class, “Don’t follow me because I’m not perfect either.” **BT**



Joan Countess leads a beginner line-dancing class. She added an advanced class more recently for residents of Buckner Retirement Community in San Angelo, Texas.

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