

See inside for ways you can support families.

Buckner

The magazine of Buckner International | SPRING 2025

Today

A photograph of a woman with long blonde hair, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and blue jeans, hugging a young girl from behind. The girl is wearing a green t-shirt, black shorts, black socks, and blue sneakers. They are both holding a small, fluffy brown dog. They are standing on a paved sidewalk next to a grassy area.

Caring

too much:

A good thing in foster parenting

PAGE 28

Buckner Today

A publication of Buckner International
Volume 50, Number 2 • Spring 2025

Foster Care: Making room for more

Follow the stories of Buckner foster families who fill in the gap for vulnerable children until they can return home safely. **PG14**



12



Strengthening her family on her road to independence

To help single moms reach their full potential, Buckner offers a hopeful pathway and a brighter future.

24



A quarter century of courage and caring

North Texas family dedicates more than two decades of putting vulnerable children's concerns first.

LEADERSHIP

CEO, BUCKNER INTERNATIONAL
Albert L. Reyes

VICE PRESIDENT OF COMMUNICATIONS
Chris Ruth

EDITORIAL STAFF

SENIOR DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
Melissa Grych

SENIOR ART DIRECTOR
Alan Paul

DIRECTOR OF MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS
Emily Ahrens

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
Linda Goelzer

GRAPHIC ARTIST
Luis Pérez

CONTRIBUTORS
Leslie Barker
Michelle Flores
Juan Garcia
Jessica Gardner
Christie Gibson
Linda Goelzer
Melissa Grych

Josué Lara
Nik Holman
Tim Miller
Chris Ruth
Debbie Scroler
Susan Simmons

CONTACT

EMAIL: bucknercommunications@buckner.org

PHONE: 214-758-8000

Buckner Today is published by the Public Relations Office of Buckner International. ©2025 Buckner

Postmaster: Send address changes to Buckner International Public Relations, 12377 Merit Drive, Suite 900, Dallas, Texas 75251 • www.buckner.org



BUCKNER
Hope shines here.®





We're called to love the least of these. And as long as we can, we will.

– Lance Raymond *Read the story on page 24 of a couple who says fostering is not about ease, but obedience.*

Departments

**04 PERSPECTIVES
ON BUCKNER**

**Finding families
for children**

CEO Albert L. Reyes

**06 IN OTHER
WORDS**

**Bringing people
together**

Chris Ruth

**08 BUCKNER
JOURNAL**

**16 VOICES
OF BUCKNER**

**Serving foster
families**

Debbie Sceroler



20

28

Recovery, restoration and reunification

The story of baby Alisha in Guatemala reminds us of the universal need for foster families and the beauty found in parent and child reunions.

Caring too much: A good thing in foster parenting

How one foster family navigates the path of loving vulnerable children and letting them go when the time comes.



32 Faith plus finances equals hope for family's transformation

A Rio Grande Valley wife and mother transformed her family and others when pairing budget-balancing skills with a faithful and obedient heart.

On the cover: Meghan Homan hugs her son tightly. She and husband Jason also have enough hugs for the foster children who might need them. [Read more on page 28.](#) *Photo by Juan Garcia.*



Finding families for children

Finding families for children is a core belief in how we approach foster care and adoption at Buckner. This may sound simple and even obvious, but at one time it was a revolutionary concept.

For much of history, children were treated as a commodity. Until they reached the age of adulthood, they were considered the property of their parents. And if a child had no parents, they might be the property of an employer or the state.

My mind immediately conjures an image of the orphans imprisoned in a workhouse in the Dickens novel *Oliver Twist*. Sadly, the mistreatment of children can be traced as far back as our written word.

The Old Testament documents depictions of infanticide and child slavery, while the European feudal system placed children at the bottom of the hierarchy of rights and privileges. If a parent was unable to pay off a debt, their child could be used as a form of payment or indentured servitude.

This mindset is why even as formal processes were created in the 1800s for adoption, the original focus for many institutions and agencies in the U.S. was to find a child for the family. But that is not how we can best protect children.

Even at Buckner, our approach to caring for orphans and vulnerable children has changed over the years. While we started as the Buckner Orphans Home, we moved away from institutional group homes because research showed children thrived with families.

By finding the right family for a child, we recognize who the child is and what they need to heal and flourish. We acknowledge their status as a gift from God, as Psalm 127:3 tells us: "Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him" (NIV).

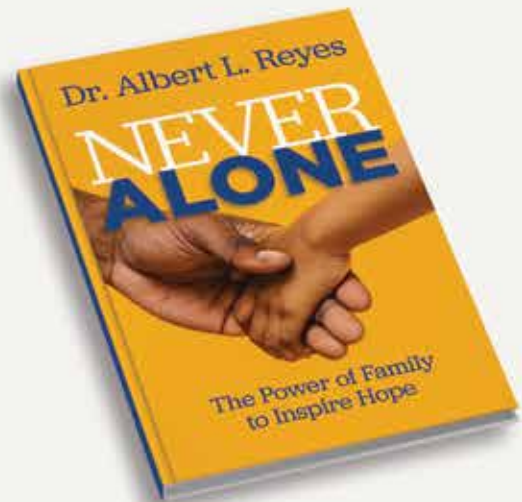
For foster care, we are often looking for the right family in a specific season of a child's life, as well as what is right in the long term. And by offering a variety of support programs and services to wrap around families, we can be both reactive and preventative to protect children and strengthen families.

This issue of *Buckner Today* includes the story of a little girl in Guatemala named Alisha. Circumstances of poverty and neglect dictated the need for a temporary family to love and

care for Alisha – but the determination of Alisha's mother to improve her knowledge and circumstances meant reunification was possible.

By focusing on the right family for Alisha, we were able to walk alongside foster parents Felix and Brenda as they cared for Alisha during her time in a hospital and her recovery from a severe infection. At the same time, we walked alongside her mother, Esperanza, as she met the court's requirements to regain custody of Alisha and to meet her ongoing medical needs.

Sometimes we find a family, and sometimes we rebuild a family.



My third book, *Never Alone: The Power of Family to Inspire Hope*, analyzes dysfunctional families featured in the Bible. However, I also discuss the hope and redemptive potential for each family to become all that God intended them to be.

Families can and should change to become healthier and safer homes to allow their children to grow, develop and realize their full potential. Because each family's responsibility is to love their children for a lifetime. **BT**



Albert Reyes, CEO
Buckner International
Visit my blog at www.AlbertLReyes.com



Reunited

Esperanza needed help learning to care for her daughter. Buckner supported them both through that journey. *Read more on page 18.*

Teaching and training equals exponential impact



When I was in my mid-20s, I spent a year working as an assistant construction supervisor for Habitat for Humanity in Birmingham, Alabama. It was a volunteer position through the government agency AmeriCorps.

Every Saturday, I taught groups of 25 to 100 volunteers how to frame walls, raise trusses, shingle roofs, install siding, and paint. Then Tuesday through Friday was spent fixing their mistakes and preparing for the next large group.

Walls needed to be plumbed and squared, shingles pulled up and straightened, porches leveled, and paint touched up. But despite all the blunders that required correcting, the process was much faster than if I was alone.

I learned patience that year... so much patience. But I also learned about the power of teamwork and the strength of numbers.

Saturday morning would start with an introduction about Habitat and some background about the family whose home we were building. Following a prayer, I would explain our main objectives for the day and discover if any of the volunteers had

previous experience with construction or even using tools.

From there, I assigned four or five volunteers to serve as crew leaders. I taught each of them what we needed to complete that day and how they could in turn teach a group of volunteers assigned to them. Once every leader and their crew had a task assigned, I would spend the rest of the day floating from group to group answering

questions, teaching skills, and encouraging people to step outside of their comfort zones.

I would invest in a few people, and they would invest in a few more. This created a ripple effect of knowledge and direction that would turn a bare concrete slab

into the framed walls of a house by the end of the day.

But more importantly, those who never held a hammer at the beginning of the day might gain the confidence to be a crew chief the next time they volunteer. And then maybe one day they are spending a year of their life as an assistant construction supervisor.

This approach to volunteer labor is not unique to Habitat for Humanity. Nonprofit organizations only exist through the ability to bring together

“To truly follow the example of Jesus for service, each of us should strive to not only be a doer but also a teacher.”

people with a shared passion and direct them toward a common goal.

As stated in Ecclesiastes 4:12, “One person could be overpowered. But two people can stand up for themselves. And a rope made out of three cords isn’t easily broken” (NIV).

Jesus sent out his disciples “two by two” to carry the message of his kingdom (Mark 6:7 NIV). He taught them so they could teach others who would in turn continue to spread the gospel. But the idea of sending the disciples in pairs represents the need to work together to be more effective.

Dr. Robert Cooke Buckner did not create his orphanage with the intent to care for every orphan himself. He employed widows to serve as matrons for the children. He also built cottages around the orphanage to house seniors like Dr. J.M. Holden, a disabled veteran who worked as a dentist for the orphans home for 15 years.

And today, our ministry doesn’t attempt to care for every orphan in Texas or Guatemala or Kenya by ourselves. We train foster families to provide care so children can live in a home surrounded by love. We also train respite caregivers to provide a break for the foster parents. And we engage volunteers and donors to support these families.

The mission of Buckner is to follow the example of Jesus by

serving vulnerable children, families, and seniors. You’ve likely read those words in these pages dozens of times... if not hundreds. But even Jesus didn’t go alone to serve the vulnerable.

To truly follow the example of Jesus for service, each of us should strive to not only be a doer but also a teacher.

A foster parent can care for one or two children, but they can also share their passion with others to recruit additional foster parents. A donor can give money to Buckner, but they can also become an advocate and inspire others to give. And Buckner employees can do more good by expanding our circle of influence than trying to do everything ourselves.

This is one of the reasons we write and edit a new issue of *Buckner Today* every three months. Our writers are bearing witness to stories of transformation and the love of strangers. We hope our stories inspire others to seek the light or be the light because 50 unskilled workers with hammers will always be faster than only me with a nail gun... as long as I feed their passion and point them in the right direction. **BT**

Chris Ruth is Vice President of Communications at Buckner International.

BELOW AND PREVIOUS PAGE: Snapshots from the writer’s experience with Habitat for Humanity in 2006 to 2007, from raising walls to welcoming a homeowner into her finished house.



BUCKNER *Journal*

>> Buckner Southeast Texas celebrates new office

The grand opening of Buckner's new office in Southeast Texas was commemorated in early May with a ribbon cutting celebration. Located in Beaumont, the new office houses Buckner programs that support vulnerable children and families who call the Southeast Texas home, including foster care and adoption services, family support services, and the Buckner FYI Center for teens exiting foster care.

The new office allows Buckner to better serve local families by creating more efficient and streamlined operations for the growing family support programs, such as Fatherhood

EFFECTS, an educational program that aims to strengthen bonds between children and fathers.

"We believe strong families is one of the ways we protect children. Strong families also make strong communities," added Henry Jackson, president of Buckner Children and Family Services.

Last year in Southeast Texas, Buckner impacted more than 2,000 lives locally, including 54 foster care placements, 20 local adoptions, and 88 youth aging out of foster care. Buckner has been serving children, families and seniors in Southeast Texas since 1970. **Learn more at buckner.org/Beaumont. BT**



>> Buckner Foster Care and Adoption earns accreditation

Buckner foster care, adoption and kinship care programs recently earned accreditation by CARF International.

"The CARF accreditation shows families we are committed to reducing risk, addressing health and safety concerns, respecting cultural and individual preferences and providing the best possible quality of care," said

"This accreditation reinforces our commitment to put our families' needs at the center of everything we do."

Henry Jackson, president of Buckner Children and Family Services.

This is Buckner's first accreditation awarded by CARF and Jackson said it represents the highest level of accreditation that can be given to an organization. The process took more than a year of preparation before the review began and requires ongoing work to meet high quality standards after the accreditation.



The Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities, now known as CARF International, promotes optimal outcomes of services, continuous improvement and adherence to rigorous standards.

For Buckner, these standards include assessing leadership, evaluating competencies and articulating a high-level plan to advance the standards of service.

"By pursuing and achieving accreditation, Buckner domestic foster care, adoption and kinship care programs have demonstrated they meet international standards of quality and are committed to continual excellence," Jackson said.

"This accreditation reinforces our commitment to put our families' needs at the center of everything we do and honors the generosity of Buckner donors who want to see children provided with the best possible care," he added. "I am extremely proud of all our team members with our foster care, adoption and kinship programs for their dedication to service." **BT**

>> Buckner Westminster Place renovates cottages for skilled nursing care

Buckner Westminster Place, Buckner's senior living community in Longview, recently completed the second phase of a renovation to skilled nursing cottages.

The cottages provide a higher level of nursing care, called skilled nursing, with private apartments in a more home-like setting with finishes and comforts of home.

The first phase of the renovations of the cottages was completed earlier this year with updates to common areas, including the dining area, the hearth, parlor, and corridors all refreshed with new flooring, paint, lighting, and furniture.

The recently completed phase two updated the kitchen areas.

"Our desire is to maintain a comfortable and welcoming

home for our residents, regardless if they plan to stay for a long time or are with us for a short period of time during rehab or skilled nursing," said David Ummel, executive director of Buckner Westminster Place. "We are always evaluating every part of the community to ensure it's a home that makes our residents happy, comfortable, and proud. Renovating the cottages is part of our continued investment in the community and the residents who call it home."

In addition to skilled nursing, the community offers independent living apartments and patio homes, assisted living apartments, memory support residences, long-term nursing care or short-term rehabilitation. **BT**



>> Buckner staff join foundational ministry

When the Limon-Quintana family started getting to know the people at the Buckner Family Hope Center® at Peñitas in 2019, they had no idea just how many Buckner employees would eventually have an impact on their family.

Jose and Maria have five daughters. Seven people in a house with a leaky roof and only two beds had become wearisome and unsafe for the family.

For two years, the family participated in educational classes at the Family Hope Center, such as financial education and parenting. Families who complete required work through the Buckner Family Hope Center to strengthen their family may apply for consideration for Buckner's Healthy Housing program. The family works alongside many volunteers to build a new home.

The Limon-Quintana family was thrilled when they learned their application was approved and eager to have a new house where they would be safe and comfortable.

Soon, their home was taking shape – 500 miles away in Dallas,

Texas. In April 2024, Buckner team members who normally spend their days working in front of a keyboard came together to build the Limon-Quintanas' family home. The foundation and walls were assembled in the parking lot of the Buckner Humanitarian Aid Center, then disassembled into components and loaded on a truck headed for the Rio Grande Valley.

Groups of church and college volunteers continued work on the new home once it arrived in Peñitas. Buckner team members from Mission, Texas arrived with paintbrushes in hand to finish the final stages before move-in day.

In November 2024, Jose, Maria and their daughters moved into their new home. The Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid provided five new mattresses for the girls, who were thrilled to share bedrooms instead of a bed.

Meaningful team building, like this home construction project, has positive outcomes for everyone involved. Reconnecting people with purpose is key to maintaining a passionate approach to the work God is doing through Buckner. **BT**



In April 2024, Buckner employees from across the organization assembled walls and a foundation for the Limon-Quintanas family as part of Buckner's Healthy Housing program. The family moved into the new home in November 2024.



A blessing written on a piece of lumber from the Buckner employees' home build: "May this home be always full of love."



Learn more about how to get involved in Buckner Healthy Housing.





Strengthening her family on her road to independence

Buckner Family Pathways® Amarillo is the place Micaela Reynoso found when she was pondering leaving the comfort and free rent of her parents' home.

Reynoso worked full time, attended nursing school, and was raising her young son. The schedule was tough, but overall life was good even as it was stressful. They were surrounded by loving family who encouraged her pursuits.

Why leave all that? Reynoso wanted to begin a strong and separate family unit for her and her son, Sebastian. She wanted them to have independence and self-sufficiency in the midst of the larger family.

Reynoso heard about Buckner Family Pathways through Amarillo

College and with Buckner's support began to forge her own path.

Life changes

Reynoso believes she would have finished her college degree if she had kept going the way she was, but concedes she needed support to build a separate family identity with her son away from her parents' home. Family Pathways was the stepping stone because the program provides single-parent families the opportunity to live in a safe, secure environment

*Story by Linda Goelzer
Photography by Linda Goelzer
and Christie Gibson*



Above: Amarillo Sod Poodles player poses with Micaela Reynoso and her son after Sebastian threw the first pitch during Buckner Night at Hodgetown Stadium. Below: Micaela Reynoso and her son create sidewalk chalk art during a recent visit to their former Buckner Family Pathways apartment.



while completing their educational or vocational goals and learning the skills they need to be self-sufficient.

Reynoso reflected on the moment reality hit her that she was accepted into the program and preparing to move into her own apartment. She was excited but also feeling homesick at the same time.

“Me and my son cried even though we were only five minutes away from my parents’ home,” Reynoso admitted.

“Just being able to rely on my parents was a big crutch. They weren’t going to let me fall. Being in my own apartment, I had to pay the rent, follow the rules. In my mom’s house, she held me accountable, in the apartment, I held myself accountable. I was very reliant on Mom.”

Despite her fears and misgivings, Reynoso was determined to find success.

“She came in prepared to succeed. She followed the rules without question. She participated in what was offered to her for support, and

she set goals and accomplished all of them, making it look easy – even when it wasn’t,” said Melanie Rice, Family Pathways program director in Amarillo.

Family Pathways offers single parents tools such as counseling, parenting education, money management training, and more.

Micaela easily agreed counseling was crucial to her emotional well-being at a particularly significant time.

“When I filed for child support, it caused a lot of emotions. My counselor is the only way I got through it,” Reynoso nodded her head with emphasis.

Celebration

Family Pathways is the launching point for many success stories of single parents, like Reynoso, with a desire to complete a college or vocational education, but who struggle due to the cost of rent, transportation, and childcare. These and other barriers often discourage single parents, and they may drop out of school.

An associate degree education cuts in half the likelihood that a single mother in Texas will live in poverty when compared to her counterparts with a high school diploma. With a bachelor’s degree, single mothers in Texas are 70% less likely than high school graduates to live in poverty.

Reynoso checked off all her goals before she received a bachelor’s degree in nursing from West Texas A&M University and graduated from Family Pathways. She is a registered nurse at a local hospital and has been able to support herself and her son, buying a car when her car quit running, and even purchasing a home.

While the young mother has pride in those accomplishments, she celebrates another goal most of all: greater patience with her son and learning to cope with the emotions of co-parenting a child in separate households.

Their extended family was present when five-year-old Sebastian was recently selected to throw out an honorary first pitch at the Amarillo Sod Poodles baseball game on Buckner Night at Hodgetown Stadium. His mother, a former high school softball pitcher and outfielder, beamed with pride.

Reynoso feels like her son can be proud of her, too, when he’s old enough to understand the road she’s traveled for them. She has confidence in her ability to provide for them on her own, in great part because of the life skills she learned, like budgeting and saving.

Reynoso had not heard of Buckner before her own experience. She hopes other single parents will consider applying for Family Pathways.

“My son and I are close. We have our own family. And I still apply the budgeting tools to help me as a new homeowner and paying the mortgage,” she said. “The counseling definitely helped me put my feelings into words and how to separate my emotions from a situation. And it helped me put words to the ideas in my head about my future.”

That future, Reynoso said, includes returning to school to become a nurse practitioner. No one is doubting she’ll accomplish it. **BT**

M Foster Care: aking room for more

Children thrive in a safe, loving home and all children deserve that. Yet not all children have a stable, loving home environment.



Child abuse and neglect are two reasons why children are placed into the custody of the state's foster care system. The system is designed to remove children from unsafe or unhealthy environments while families work toward reunification.

According to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, there were more than 53,000 confirmed encounters of child abuse and neglect in Texas in 2024, with over 40,000 of those in cities Buckner

International serves. No matter what the number is – even one is too many.

Courage, calling and commitment

Foster Care Month is a time during which we devote special attention to foster families who open their hearts and homes to vulnerable children and demonstrate love, trust, and care. While foster care families provide for a child's basic needs, they also nurture children under their supervision by modeling what family looks and feels like when there is love and trust in the home. Foster families provide an environment of security and consistency where children who have experienced trauma can heal and feel safe.

Buckner programs are designed and implemented to aid in preventing child abuse by helping families grow stronger in their parenting and communication skills, as well as in their mental, emotional, and financial wellness. Buckner does this because we believe that child abuse ends when families are strengthened. Until that happens, though, there are caring and courageous foster families for vulnerable children, providing them with love and security, whether it's for a brief time or as long as it takes.

Buckner's approach to foster care is to find families for children, rather than finding children for families. Buckner puts the child's needs first. This approach aims to protect and empower children to achieve their goals and flourish in life.

There are nearly 30,000 children in foster care in Texas and an overwhelming necessity for foster families to meet their essential care. Learn more about all the different ways you can support foster care, including a no-obligation, virtual information meeting. [Visit buckner.org/fostercare](https://www.buckner.org/fostercare) to help protect children. BT



Foster care and the essentials of respite

By Debbie Sceroler

Senior Director of Domestic Foster Care and Adoption Services

Buckner considers foster care and adoption a ministry. We put the child's best interests first and then match them with the best foster family for their needs. Many of our foster care families believe they were called to become foster parents as a personal ministry.

Even then, foster care is a journey of the heart that challenges the strongest and most loving person. So much is required to nurture a vulnerable child whose history often involves neglect or abuse, the most common reasons why children are removed from the home.



I often get the question about foster parents, "How do they do it?" It is not easy and that's why I want to talk about the importance of respite care for foster families.

Support is essential

Respite ultimately benefits both foster parents and the foster children because a rested, supported caregiver can offer more stability, patience, love and connection than a foster parent who



is struggling with exhaustion and burnout. The average length of time a family fosters is one to two years. However, the length of service increases significantly among families who find and receive support. Buckner has families who have fostered for more than 20 years and welcomed more than 40 children.

Respite is important as it provides the opportunity to rest, recharge and hopefully, prevent exhaustion and burnout before they happen. When any parent has time away from their children, they come back to their duties more rejuvenated. For foster parents, a step away to focus on their marital relationship is self-care which can improve their physical, mental and emotional state, providing the strength needed to support and connect with foster children.

Without breaks, foster parents can quickly become overwhelmed which can impact the care they provide to the children and youth with trauma history and special needs. Foster families are often faced with emergencies or

major life events related to their foster child's life experiences. Taking breaks periodically can help a foster parent to handle the unexpected with less stress.

The need is ongoing

Sadly, there are more children in foster care in Texas than there are foster families to accommodate their required care. Nearly 30,000 Texas children need foster care in the cities where Buckner services are offered. The greatest need continues to be for older children, sibling groups, and children with complex needs, whether medical, developmental or intellectual.

Foster parents bear witness to the resilience of the human spirit as they watch children overcome adversity and flourish in their care. If you want to provide much-needed support for foster families as they minister to vulnerable children, at right is a list of specific ways individuals or groups can join hands to support foster children and families.



Ways volunteers can provide respite care to foster families

- ♥ **Host a monthly or quarterly night out** for foster families where vetted volunteers arrange care and activities for the children.
- ♥ **Host a special event** for biological children of foster families or a day for the family and their children; include passes to the zoo, waterpark, or another theme park.
- ♥ **Set up meal deliveries** when families receive a new placement or experience a challenging placement.
- ♥ **Provide household help.** Volunteers can mow lawns, do minor repairs, or help with errands.
- ♥ **Organize holiday or special occasion support.** Sponsor families during holidays or birthdays with gifts, special items, or parties.
- ♥ **Organize connection groups.** Host a space and time where foster parents can have time to connect and encourage one another. Provide a simple meal or snacks.
- ♥ **Maintain a welcome and emergency supply closet.** Keep a closet stocked with essentials foster parents may need quickly. Examples are car seats, cribs, toiletries, diapers, or pajamas.
- ♥ **Pray for foster families.** Write encouraging notes or letters, send birthday and anniversary cards, or send gift cards for special occasions to be used by the foster parent for self-care.

Forms of respite care that require agency training:

- ♥ **Become a respite care provider.** This involves being a licensed foster home and in-home or out-of-home childcare provider for periods of 72 consecutive hours or more.
- ♥ **Become a substitute caregiver.** This involves specific training to allow for supervision of children on a regular, recurring basis, or for periods of time exceeding 12 hours or overnight, but not more than 72 hours.
- ♥ **Become a babysitter.** Babysitters provide substitute supervision of children in care for occasional periods of time, not to exceed 12 consecutive hours and never overnight.

If you belong to a community group that is looking for ways to volunteer, perhaps one of the suggestions in the list will interest you. Remember that you would be helping foster families, as well as the vulnerable children in their care. BT

Shine hope into the lives of vulnerable children

So many boys and girls long for a place to call home. With your generous support today, you can provide a safe and loving family for a vulnerable child in foster care.

Your generosity today will empower God's work, encouraging more Christ-centered families to open their homes and lives to care for a child in crisis for a season or a lifetime.


Join us today to make the future brighter for children served through Buckner Foster Care and Adoption. Through your prayers and support, many lives can be transformed.



BUCKNER®

Hope shines here.®





R

ecovery, restoration and reunification

Story by Josué Lara
Photography by Tim Miller and Josué Lara

On the outskirts of Guatemala City rests a tiny cinder block house on the edge of a mountain. Reaching it requires a car ride up winding mountain roads, followed by bumpy, narrow dirt roads. After about an hour and a half, the journey ends at a gate. Beyond it, visitors walk past a few apartments and down some stone steps. Straying too far off the path could result in a long tumble off the side of the mountain. The house clings so close to the edge, it feels like it could teeter off the cliff.

As you approach, the giddy laughter of a 2-year-old girl, Alisha, can be heard, along with the excited response of her mother, Esperanza.

This joyful interaction is the fruit of a difficult journey.



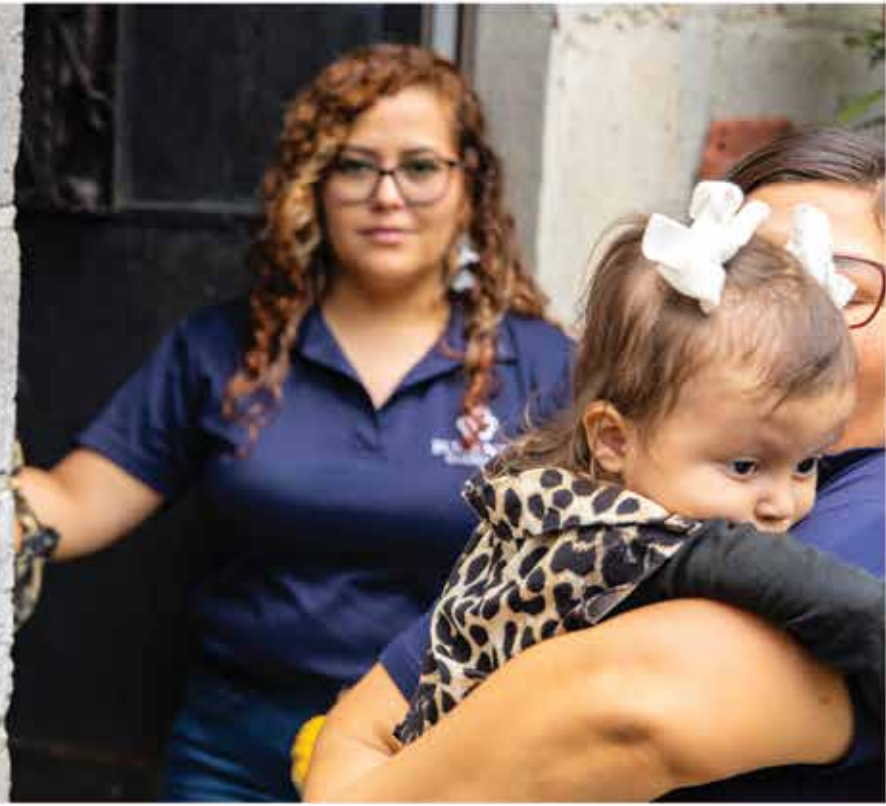


Holding on Tight

Esperanza never gave up hope, working hard to reunify and strengthen her family.



“God has given us both a second opportunity at life together.” –Esperanza



Esperanza and Alisha are often visited by the Buckner Guatemala team who provide support and basic needs like diapers.

Turning point

Nearly two years ago, Alisha became sick. Her mother rushed her to the hospital. “She convulsed more than three times,” recalls Esperanza. She seems to grip her daughter, sitting on her lap, tighter as she remembers. “She was in the hospital in an intensive care unit for 18 days.”

Alisha’s diagnosis was septic shock. After a month in the hospital, the state intervened. Due to signs of neglect, they removed Alisha from Esperanza’s custody.

In the subsequent court hearings, the judge realized Esperanza’s neglect was not out of malice, but out of lack of resources and education. Esperanza’s life, like many others living around her, was defined by hardship. Living in poverty without a strong support system and little education, she struggled to care for herself and her daughter. Her daughter’s hospital stay was a breaking point, but also a turning point.

Esperanza was offered a path to reunification. “The judge sent me to a parenting school and counseling,” she says. “I had to complete a course in order to have her back.”

Esperanza accepted the challenge.

“The situation was complicated; Alisha was put at risk,” says Victor Lopez, executive director of Buckner Guatemala. “We knew we had to work with Esperanza so she could have the

parental skills needed, but at the same time we needed to ensure Alisha was taken care of and would be ready to reunite.”

A season of healing

Alisha was placed with Buckner foster parents Felix and Brenda. They live on the opposite side of Guatemala City, a far drive from Esperanza.

“We always had this desire to take care of children,” Brenda says. Their motivation to foster was deeply personal.

Felix and Brenda are a retired couple who worked their entire lives to provide for their children and build a home. This home is an oasis in the middle of an impoverished area. It is surrounded by lush green trees bearing a variety of fruits. The large kitchen constantly smells like coffee, which is growing right outside the window.

At a young age, Felix turned his love for photography into a business that Brenda helped run. The decades of work are reflected in every aspect of their home.

“We started to reflect on how our children grew up; because we both used to work a lot, we had to give them to others to take care of. It felt like a second chance at parenting,” Felix says of fostering.

The couple make it clear that their home is a place that they want to share with others, like their daughter and grandson, Caleb, as well as the foster children they have welcomed.

“It had been a while since our previous placement, so we

were ready for another. Buckner told us they had a little girl, but she needed a lot of attention,” says Brenda.

The decision to care for Alisha was not easy. She remained fragile and in need of constant care. The placement would require them to be in and out of the hospital, while also taking care of their grandson. They prayed long and hard before saying yes.

Felix recalls his shock at first seeing Alisha. “She was very skinny and delicate; from the moment we met her we realized she was going to be our biggest responsibility.”

Brenda stayed in the hospital with Alisha for a total of 33 days. Amid COVID restrictions, she couldn’t leave the hospital and had to sleep on the floor of the hospital room. Felix stayed home with their grandson.

Slowly, Alisha’s health improved, as did the bond with her foster parents. After she was discharged from the hospital, Alisha began to smile and laugh and form a bond with Caleb, who is only 3 days younger than her.

Reunification

Meanwhile, Esperanza continued to work toward her goal of reunification with Alisha. She regularly connected with Ana, her Buckner case manager, and her counselor who helped her through courses and provided support throughout her journey.

The process was long and difficult, and Esperanza remembers being desperate to see her daughter again. She describes a time she went to Palencia, the area where Felix and Brenda live, to walk the streets, despite not having an address, hoping for a glimpse of her daughter. “Buckner reassured me she was okay, and that helped me,” she adds.

Four months later Esperanza completed everything the court required. The Buckner team says that her drive propelled her to complete the course thoroughly but quickly so she could reunite with Alisha.

“I feel better about myself and proud of what I did for my daughter,” she says. “I think that there are other parents out there who may think that there is no way to get them back. But as a mother that has love for them, you must do everything you can.”

For Felix and Brenda, the reunification was bittersweet. “We didn’t have her for long, but it felt like a lifetime that we shared with her,” says Brenda. “When the time came to let her go, it was overwhelming.”

“She was a different woman,” says Felix of Esperanza. He and Brenda had only met her at a hearing when the court handed Alisha over to them.

But on the day of reunification, they saw a marked difference.

Brenda calls it a miracle.

“She told us; ‘I know that God is going to give me another opportunity. And I didn’t come here because someone forced me. I came here because I want to take care of my daughter.’”

Felix and Brenda see the change in Esperanza as a work of God and as an encouragement that reunification, when possible and safe, is best for a child.

“When God wants to rescue a person, he’s going to do it and he’s going to use all means. He uses people; he uses families; he uses doctors; he uses everything, but God is the one that saves this person.”

Now Esperanza cares for Alisha as she needs, including visits to a physical therapist. She also maintains a relationship with Buckner, which provides basic needs for them.



“Every day I ask God to give me wisdom and to be a good mother to her,” she adds.

Felix and Brenda plan to continue fostering. “I know that God will bless them for having done all that,” says Esperanza. “Maybe Alisha won’t remember them, but she will always keep them in her heart because of the way they took care of her and how they loved her. She won’t forget the people who love her.”

“We know change can happen, even when a child has been put at risk, because we know God’s redemptive work of reconciliation,” says Lopez. “People like Felix and Brenda inject hope into the protection system through sacrificial love, which brings hope of a bright future for people like Alisha and Esperanza. I see this story as a beautiful example of our mission and vision fulfilled.”

“God has given us both a second opportunity at life together,” adds Esperanza. With tears in her eyes and emotion in her voice, she holds Alisha even tighter. “What we went through was difficult,” she continues. “But God was always with us. And I will always be with her.” **BT**

A legacy

of love 25 years in the making

Story by Nik Holman • Photography by Tim Miller

In a quiet corner of North Texas, a story of love and dedication has unfolded for over 25 years. Lance Raymond, a retired Dallas police officer, and Paula Raymond, a former Buckner caseworker, have opened their hearts and home to 46 children in foster care.

Caring for 46, many of them after the Raymonds had already retired, would be impressive enough, but their compassion extends even beyond the home. Their daughter, Brianna, was inspired to follow in her parent's footsteps, adopting two children of her own.

Their journey began not with a plan to foster, but with a heart ready to serve.

Calling of compassion

"I worked at Buckner in 1988," Paula recalled. "We had a little boy who couldn't go home one weekend, so he came with

us. That was the moment we knew we were called to this."

That call lingered through the early years of parenting their biological children, Brianna and Eric. Eric, who has Down syndrome, required multiple surgeries and significant care. But even then, the Raymonds knew their home could be a place of healing for more children.

"We truly saw this as a ministry," Paula said. "Not something we rushed into, but something we prayed over, thought through, and committed to wholeheartedly."

Lance, then serving as a Dallas police officer, had witnessed firsthand the consequences of broken systems and broken homes. "I'd bring kids to CPS in the middle of the night. Their parents were gone, high, or just lost. I saw trauma every day and I knew these kids deserved better," he said.



Above: Mackenzie, Eric, and Grace Raymond enjoy family time around the table. Center: Lance and Paula Raymond have dedicated 25 years to welcoming children into their home.



The ministry of fostering

After completing Buckner's foster training program in 1999, the Raymonds welcomed their first child into their home. What followed was a steady stream of children – some for a few weeks, others for years – each one uniquely impacted by the Raymonds' stability, structure, and unconditional love.

The Raymonds specialized in therapeutic foster care, welcoming children with higher needs, including those with Down syndrome, autism, and behavioral challenges. One such child was Mackenzie, a 17-year-old with Down syndrome, who has been with the Raymonds for over seven years.

"We've had Mackenzie twice now," Lance shared. "She came back into care after enduring abuse and neglect. So, we just committed to parenting her until she turns 18."

"McKenzie has thrived with them," said Sheree Scott, Buckner home developer supervisor who previously worked with the Raymonds for over two decades. McKenzie has a different caseworker now. "She's safe, she's loved, and she knows that. That's the beauty of the Raymonds' home."

But where does this beauty come from? What makes a retired couple, who should be slowing down, keep going?

Scott answered, "They see this work as their mission field. It's

James 1:27 in action. 'Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress.'"

Lance agreed, recalling Ephesians 2:10, "We take our Christianity seriously. 'We are his workmanship, created unto good works that God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.' So, we do good works to serve others, not for our salvation, but as a thank you."

Brianna's path

Their daughter Brianna was just 11 when the family welcomed their first foster child. She grew up understanding trauma, compassion, and sacrifice.

"She really understood what we were doing," Paula said. "She saw the hard parts, but she also saw the joy."

That understanding blossomed into action. Brianna and her husband, Jared, adopted two of the children who had once stayed in the Raymond home. "She said, 'If they ever come back into care, I want to adopt them,'" Paula recalled. And they did.

It hasn't been easy. Brianna faced many of the same challenges as her parents. But she persevered, anchored by the same faith and conviction that guided her upbringing.

"She told me once, 'In foster care, I learned that no one is permanent,'" Paula said. "That's hard, but it also made her determined to be someone who is."



Above: The Raymonds' daughter, Brianna, and her husband, Jared, followed the Raymonds' example by adopting brothers Jaxton and Roman.

Faith, family and support

Throughout their journey, Buckner has been a steadfast partner. “They gave us training, counseling, and community,” Paula said. “Anytime we needed anything, Buckner was there.”

Scott echoed that sentiment. “Buckner is really good with that wrap-around service. We provide education, counseling, and post-adoption support to help families like the Raymonds. It’s a big reason they fostered for so long.” She added, “It’s not just about placing children. It’s about walking alongside families with consistency, advocacy, and prayer.”



Why they stayed

Over 25 years, the Raymonds have seen heartbreak and hope. They’ve navigated behavioral challenges, developmental delays, and systemic hurdles. But through it all, they’ve remained rooted in their calling.

“Some of our kids stayed for years,” Paula said. “Others left and came back, sometimes more than once. But each time, we chose to say yes.”

When asked if it gets any easier, Lance was clear: “It’s not about ease. It’s about obedience. We’re called to love the least of these. And as long as we can, we will.” **BT**



From left: Eric, Lance, Grace, Mackenzie, and Paula created a legacy of love and healing.

“I saw trauma every day and I knew these kids deserved better.” – *Lance Raymond*



The Evicks' story: Their ministry of love through foster care

Vicki and Doug Evick have opened their loving home to foster 21 children over the past eight years. The children live with them for a short time or for as long as it takes.

Vulnerable children feel loved and safe with foster families like the Evicks. And for biological parents who are working hard toward reunification, Buckner also shines hope through programs that provide education, counseling and an extra support system during their journey.

"We think God was calling us into this because if it's not going to be us, then who's it going to be? We feel qualified because God has called us," they say. **BT**



**Learn more about foster care at
buckner.org/fostercare.**

**Listen to the Evicks
tell their story.**





Caring too much:

A welcoming home

The Homan family opens their hearts and home to children who need a safe and loving place to thrive.

A good thing in foster parenting

*Story by Leslie Barker
Photography by Juan Garcia*



People often ask Jason and Meghan Homan how the couple can possibly be foster parents, knowing at any point the children in their care could be taken away. They shake their heads in wonder to hear how the Wylie, Texas, twosome puts their hearts on the line time and again. And when they say they could never do that themselves because they'd get "too attached," Jason and Meghan have an answer:



"That means you'd be perfect at it," say the Homans, who have been fostering with Buckner for five years.

Yes, fostering encompasses a carousel of emotions, they say. It interweaves the most ebullient shades of hope but also despair. Families who foster know their service enriches lives – those of total strangers and equally, if not more so, their own. They keep believing in its power. They look at the cracks created as openings for more light and more love to be bestowed on the next vulnerable child who seeks shelter and stability within their home.

A calling

The Homans, who have fostered eight children – including Leo, whom they adopted in November – learned this lesson when they fostered a little girl for close to a year. One day, they were told she was being returned to her biological family. Within a week, the little girl they had taken countless times to therapy so she could learn to swallow and to eat; the child whose tears they'd kissed away and



“What would have happened to a child if we had said no?”

whose laughter had illuminated their lives, was gone.

Buckner believes every child deserves to be in a safe and loving home. When a child's home is not safe, foster families like the Homans provide nurturing and stability, whether for a brief time or for years. The goal is always reunification with the biological family, when possible and safe. Training for foster families prepares them for that moment.

Meghan and Jason took time to heal before saying yes again. Because, they reasoned, how could they not? The need for foster care is acute and imperative.

In 2024, the 10 Texas cities Buckner serves reported 110,701 child abuse and neglect investigations. In the Dallas/Fort Worth area, 2,731 of those children were placed in foster care. That's especially sobering considering that only 68 foster families are on call to provide a safe and loving place for vulnerable children.

“There is a huge need for foster families,” says Machaella Lopez, a Buckner foster care home developer. “We obviously and unfortunately always have children coming into foster care. To see these families open their hearts and homes and be willing to go through the ups and downs and happiness and heartbreak, this is beautiful. This is what God is calling us to do.”

Which is just what Meghan and Jason, who have been married 16 years, believe is their calling – though it's not as if their lives are otherwise stress-free. She's a middle-school vice principal; he's a police officer. Just about every day, they see children whose lives are far from storybook; kids for whom intervention and stability could also provide futures of promise.

The Homans were introduced to foster care while living in Lubbock years ago. Meghan was student teaching and learned a boy in her class lived in an orphanage. His situation and his strength reminded her of the mission work she'd done at an orphanage in Mexico and how drawn she was to the children there.

“We looked into what steps were needed to foster him,” Jason said. “That's when we got really serious about it.”

The child ended up moving in with an aunt. But he had set the stage for what the Homans would be doing a decade later.

Coming and going

The couple knew about Buckner through Meghan's volunteer work there through the Junior League, and they were impressed by the organization's global reputation and mission of faith.

They signed up for Buckner's six-week course on becoming a foster family. They underwent home visits quarterly. They also continue the yearly fostering classes to stay up to date with new regulations and information.

Yet there is only so much that classes and literature about fostering can teach, Lopez said. The emotions can only be felt when that child is under your roof, well within your heart.

"You'll have highs and lows, good days and bad," she said. "A lot of foster parents don't initially understand how much you truly do fall in love with the child placed in your home. If that child leaves your home, you're heartbroken. That's something our foster parents do struggle with."

They're here!

Four months after the Homans bid a heart-wrenching goodbye to the little girl they knew they'd probably never see again, they picked up the phone when Buckner called. They heard the question that would become familiar, yet would always accelerate their heart rates: "Would you like to foster again?"

They had less than a half hour to decide. Saying yes took a fraction of that time.

Such calls can come any time but tend to be in the middle of the night, or in the darkest hours before dawn.

"All we're told is if the child is a boy or a girl, and maybe their age," Meghan says. "That's when we start getting the house ready."

Years of fostering have filled their closets with toys, clothes, diapers and pajamas for children of all ages. They keep their refrigerator stocked with string cheese, applesauce, and other treats they've learned to be comfort foods for their incoming family members.

"We pull out everything we'll need, then we stand at the door and wait," Meghan says. "When they arrive, we rejoice, 'They're here! They're here!'"

She and Jason give the children a tour of the house, stressing that whatever they need, they can have. It is, after all, their home, too.

"It does take some adjusting," Meghan says. "They've been ripped from their home. Some are scared to death; some leap into our arms. The first night they may not sleep, so maybe we'll lie down with them and rub their backs."

Reunification

The first child they fostered was at their house for his first birthday, which they celebrated with a smash cake. (For the uninitiated, picture a cake that's not much bigger than the pint-sized birthday boy who eagerly uses fingers instead of a fork to devour it as messily as he

pleases). On the child's first Halloween, he transformed into a pint-sized dinosaur, whom his foster parents took trick or treating.

During the three months they shared a life, Meghan and Jason kept his dad apprised of his son's activities and demeanor. Now, five years later, they still talk to his father, a single parent, every day.

Loving a child unconditionally and then joyfully supporting reunification can be a juxtaposition of many emotions.

"That's especially tough," Jason said, "seeing them go home and not knowing what will happen. We love the kids so hard. We feel like they're our kids and that we're losing a piece of ourselves. We want to see the great things they can become."

Buckner takes a child-first approach to foster care and adoption. The emphasis is always on what's best for the child.

It's hard, for sure, the Homans say. They don't always agree, but open communication helps.

During COVID, when a little girl was brought to the Homans, they learned she had an older sister living in a shelter. But the Homans were only licensed to care for one.

"We looked at each other: 'How can we love this baby alone, knowing her sister is in a shelter?'" Jason said.

"We called Buckner, and they helped us change our license so we could have two children," Meghan adds. "Saying yes to that second girl was the best yes I ever said."

The girls are now 3 and 13; their families and the Homans go to each other's homes and celebrate holidays together.

"It's amazing to see that flourish," Meghan said. "The mom told us, 'I just needed to know my girls were in a safe place so I could get the help I needed.'"

It's worth it

And that, Meghan says, "is why we do this."

Despite the inherent heartbreak, fostering has tightened even more the bond she and Jason have.

"We rely on each other," she said. "When the kids have fits and tantrums, we have to be able to tag each other in."

They also garner support from other foster parents, their own parents, even people they work with – reminding the couple that, as repeated as the phrase is, fostering really does take a village.

"It's hard," Jason said, "but every broken heart is worth it. We think about the kids, the toys they left behind that remind us of them. We celebrate the birthdays of each one of them. Sometimes you never get over what's happened. But we know we made a difference in each kid's life."

And sometimes, he says, they ask themselves a question they probably don't really want an answer to; one that reminds them anew why they do what they do:

"We wonder, 'What would have happened to a child if we had said no?'" **BT**





Principles into practice

The principles Graciela learned at the Faith and Finance class encouraged her to start a small business making and selling tamales.

Faith plus finances equals hope for family's transformation

Story by Josué Lara • Photography by Michelle Flores

For Graciela Ramirez and her family, faith and finances are two elements of their lives that have become a catalyst for generational transformation.

A class that marries the two elements is taught in Buckner Family Hope Centers® across Texas. It is of particular importance in Peñitas, a small town in the Rio Grande Valley where Buckner established a Family Hope Center in 2012.

Family Hope Centers offer classes and resources to help families not just survive but thrive. The Faith and Finance class teaches participants a biblical perspective on managing their finances, as well as providing encouragement and accountability for creating a budget and overcoming debt. Like much of the Family Hope Center's programming, donors and volunteers support the curriculum, staff training, and supplies.

"A lot of the challenges that our families face are due to economics, mainly because they earn way below what they need to," explained Jorge Rodriguez, director of the Buckner Family Hope Center at Peñitas. "What we're trying to do is ensure that whatever they're spending on is connected to whatever they value. This is why faith is a part of the class. We want their faith and their finances to align. We're teaching them to stretch their resources, their dollars, and their budgets."

But life was not easy.

With a son and three young daughters, Graciela's life became overrun with unpaid bills and growing expenses. She was overwhelmed, especially after difficult recoveries from childbirth, which left her unable to work. The bills came one after another and the family could not stay ahead.

A church friend encouraged Graciela to go to the Family Hope Center for support.



Graciela takes a homeownership class taught by the Buckner Missions team. These classes teach the basics of home building so clients can participate in their home build. Bottom right: The Family Hope Center provides fellowship opportunities for the community, including Graciela and her daughters.

“I didn’t even know what it was,” said Graciela. “She told me it was a place where you go for help, so you don’t feel alone or stressed.”

Her first contact with Buckner was at a shoe distribution event hosted by the Family Hope Center for the community.

“The start of a new school year was stressful because I didn’t know how I would buy the children shoes or clothes,” she recalled.

The shoes were a help not just for that school year, but they opened the door to a new community, and eventually a class, that would give her family hope.

At the time, Graciela was pawning belongings to pay bills, borrowing gas money, and running out of funds within a week of getting paid. “I didn’t know how to plan for my finances or make a budget,” she said. “The Faith and Finance class fascinated me because it showed a path forward.”

Graciela learned how to plan spending, track expenses, save for the future, and align her finances to her values. “I learned to say no to unnecessary expenses, like when the kids ask for things at the grocery store, and to prepare for seasons like Christmas and months when we have higher bills due to the cold.”

Graciela said that she would come home and excitedly tell her husband, Daniel Ahumada, everything she learned in the class. Together, they began to implement these principles into their lives.

“We make our budget monthly. We see everything that we have spent in the past month and everything that we need to spend the following month. We evaluate how much money we make weekly and make a spending plan based on that, which includes how much we put into our savings account and our emergency fund. This way if something beyond our control happens, we are ready and not stressed.”

Graciela and Daniel are using their new financial plan to grow his auto-body shop, while she has leaned into her passion for cooking to start a business of her own. She began making and selling tamales and desserts. “I sell about 100 to 120 tamales each week,” she said with pride.

And this newfound financial discipline paid off – literally. The family saved enough to buy a used car in cash, avoiding interest and the stress of a loan. They’ve also opened a bank account for their daughter’s college fund.

Graciela’s and Daniel’s oldest daughter, Nicole, has recently started high school and would be the first person in her family to go to college. She wants to be a teacher and eventually go to law school. Nicole, inspired by her mother’s growth, began reading the class material herself and now helps Graciela stay accountable with the family’s spending.

“I see that my daughters are smart, so I encourage them to keep going and reach their educational goals,” she said with hope in her eyes. “At Buckner we have learned that these goals are attainable.”

Another milestone the family reached is being accepted into Buckner's Healthy Housing program by completing required classes and family coaching at the Family Hope Center. The family will work alongside volunteers to build a new home. The program will ensure that the Ramirez-Ahumada family has a home for years to come without overwhelming financial stress. The build is scheduled for October 2025.

Graciela's transformation has gone beyond finance; she said the class also impacted her faith.

"We learned that the Bible teaches us to give from the little or much that we have. God says we should share what we have with those who may not have as much," she said.

Graciela has become a passionate volunteer at the Hope Center. She began helping with childcare, and youth programs, and has since become an ally for other women going through the Faith and Finances class. She walks with them through challenges in their finances and

has even helped lead a few sessions on creating long-term and short-term financial goals.

"She probably taught the class better than us because she had those real-life experiences and examples," said Rodriguez with a proud smile.

Graciela has helped with the class five or six times now, and each time she has grown in confidence. "I want to tell the participants how my life has changed and encourage them to stay focused," she shared.

The Ramirez-Ahumada family still face financial challenges, but they no longer live in fear of the next bill. Instead, they live with confidence and hope in their stewarding of God's provision.

"God has blessed me a lot," Graciela said with a huge smile. "The Buckner team taught me to trust in God, because he is working all things for our good." **BT**



Volunteerism celebrated
Graciela receives a certificate from Buckner Family Hope Center at Peñitas Director Jorge Rodriguez for her volunteerism.

Buckner International

12377 Merit Drive, Suite 900, Dallas, TX 75251

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Dallas, TX
Permit No. 530

Children thrive in loving homes. Foster families provide hope for vulnerable children to help them see a bigger, brighter world. Read one foster family's story of a quarter century of caring for children. **Page 24**

