

See inside for ways you can support families.

Buckner

The magazine of Buckner International | WINTER 2025

Today



**Building a
legacy of
possibility
and purpose**

One mom's starting over story. | PAGE 32

Buckner Today

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Aging out doesn't mean giving up

Statistics paint a bleak picture for children aging out of foster care, but support programs like Buckner transition services bridge the gap to adulthood and the path to a stable future.

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When clients of one Buckner ministry find a future at another, families are strengthened, generations transformed, and seniors inspired.

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A family who cares

Father-daughter duo Alcir De Sa and Eliana De Sa serve with the same love and compassion but with different Buckner ministries.

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I see the difference. I see the mission and vision of Buckner. It drew me in, and I knew that this is exactly what I was looking for. – Alcir De Sa

– Read more about the legacy of caring that led a father and daughter to their hearts' work in two separate Buckner ministries on page 20.

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On the cover: When single mothers like Reynelda McDonald (left) are accepted into Buckner Family Pathways®, the road to self-sufficiency is challenging and transforming. Her children are inspired by mom's strength through perseverance. *Photo by Tim Miller*





Intersecting ministries

The mission of Buckner International is to follow the example of Jesus by serving vulnerable children, families, and seniors.

You have likely read those words at least a dozen times in my articles over the years and many more times in the stories told throughout the pages of our magazine. Your support allows us to carry out this mission through our two ministries: Buckner Children and Family Services and Buckner Retirement Services.

While both ministries bear the name Buckner after our founder, R.C. Buckner, it's easy to feel like the similarity stops there.

How do foster care, adoption, Buckner Family Pathways®, and Buckner Family Hope Centers® relate to Parkway Place in Houston, Baptist Retirement Community in San Angelo, and Ventana by Buckner in Dallas?

Over the years, I've heard many variations of that question from donors, employees, and even our board of trustees. I always welcome the questions because it's a conversation I love having. Did R.C. Buckner envision our senior living communities when he took in the first three orphans 146 years ago? I believe the answer is yes ... well, sort of.

Our mission and vision are rooted in the biblical, theological, historical, institutional, and practical dimensions that are the foundation for why our ministry exists and the direction it continues to evolve.

SERVING MANY VULNERABLE



Serving orphans of fathers who died in the Civil War was the driving passion of R.C. Buckner's ministry. The driving force of his vision for the Buckner Orphans Home was to re-create a sense of family for children who had lost theirs, reflecting James 1:27: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." (James 1:27).

The priority of serving orphans and widows goes back much

earlier in the Bible. It is embedded in the first five books and the teachings of Moses among the people of Israel. Moses made a plea on behalf of the less fortunate, speaking of the fatherless, the widow, and the alien with a call to justice, generosity, and redemption for the poor and disadvantaged, especially the orphan, widow, and foreigner (Deuteronomy 24:17-22).

Jesus told his disciples to let the children come to him so he could bless them (Luke 18:16); he served the family of Lazarus (John 11:17-44); and he served senior adults by providing for the care of his mother even as he gave up his life on the cross (John 19:25-27).

R.C. Buckner served orphaned children because of their vulnerability, but he used his knowledge and influence to serve all vulnerable populations. In addition to starting the Buckner Orphans Home in 1879, Buckner started the Dallas Humane Society; several schools; the first orphanage for African American Children in Gilmer, Texas; the first Baptist Association of African American Churches in Texas; and the first graduate theological school for women. He also served on the founding board of Baptist Sanitorium, later named Baylor Hospital, and currently known as Baylor, Scott & White Health.

As the Buckner Orphans Home grew, Buckner employed widows to serve as matrons for the children. And as those women grew too old to care for the children, Buckner ensured they always had a home on the campus.

In 1905, Buckner began to formally serve senior adults with cottages built on the historic campus thanks to a cash gift of \$3,000 from Mrs. P.S. Ramsauer. The first resident was retired veteran and preacher E.B. Eakin and his wife. They were both 80 years old.



Our first senior living community dates to 1954 thanks to the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. R.W. Trew of Muenster, Texas, specifically for the purpose of funding a home for the aging on Buckner property in Dallas. The





Mary E. Trew Home was the first phase of the Buckner Retirement Village. Our second community came in one year later with the opening of Buckner Baptist Haven in Houston in 1955.

WHERE MINISTRIES MEET

We apply the same mission-driven approach to senior living as we do in serving children and families. By following the example of Jesus in service, Buckner builds and operates nonprofit senior living communities that love and empower seniors during a time they may need more mental, emotional, social, and spiritual support.

While it may seem like our two ministries run parallel to each other, there are many times they intersect both intentionally and unintentionally. Some of those moments are captured in this issue of *Buckner Today*.

John Bender, our chaplain at Parkway Place in Houston, wrote an article for this issue that touches on the ways Buckner supports seniors, including involving them in Buckner's mission. Parkway Place residents volunteer with local Buckner Children and Family Services

programs and collect shoes for Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®.

Another article is about an amazing father and daughter I met during one of my recent trips to Houston. Eliana De Sa serves as a family coach at the Buckner Family Hope Center at Northside, while her father, Alcir De Sa is the transportation associate at Parkway Place.

Over the years, we've had clients of our Family Hope Centers secure jobs with our senior living communities, and we've met many residents of our senior living communities who were adopted through Buckner or resided at the Buckner Orphans Home.

Did R.C. Buckner picture the current state of Buckner International? He may not have specifically imagined our ability to establish in-country foster care and adoption in Kenya while also inspiring happiness in the lives of Austin seniors, but I know the heart and purpose behind our mission to serve the vulnerable is exactly what he had in mind. **BT**



Albert Reyes

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



Hope and inspiration

From its beginning 146 years ago, to today, Buckner has ministered to vulnerable children and widows, while inspiring happiness in senior adults.





The transformative power of a safety net

The thing about a safety net is you usually don't realize you have it until the first time you fall and it's not there. Hopefully when that happens, the metaphorical fall isn't too far and the surface below you is not too hard.

When I think back over my life, I remember the results of a few missing safety nets after I left home. The first time I did my own laundry resulted in some pink shirts. With my curfew gone, I managed to sleep right through my first college class. And I spent several years in my 20s without health insurance until my first hospital bill.

These missing safety nets all had to do with moving away from my parents. But in each instance, I learned. I started sorting my laundry by colors. I remembered to set my alarm. And at the insistence of my future wife, I budgeted for health insurance.

I picked myself up in each instance and became more self-sufficient without my parents. Now I have another safety net in my life that is no longer there.

Scott Collins has retired after more than 30 years leading the Buckner International communications department and I was selected to replace him.

I worked with Scott for nearly seven years. In that time, I've written countless articles, letters, and speeches; produced more than a dozen events; and advised on emergencies and sensitive situations. But during those seven years, I knew I always had Scott supporting me if I made a mistake.

And now I don't.

Every issue of *Buckner Today* you have read over the past three decades contained a publisher's message from Scott. This is the first issue without it. I wrote this article without Scott's input or edits, and he will not read it until his issue of the magazine arrives at his home. The safety net is gone, and I hope any falls don't hurt too much.

Regardless, I will strive to follow in Scott's footsteps continuing to make sure that we are "telling the stories of Buckner stories" as he is well known to say. That is, sharing the good news of lives changed because of Buckner's transformative work.

Those stories we share revolve around the four pillars that define our ministries at Buckner: Protect Children, Strengthen Families, Transform Generations, and Serve Seniors.

My favorite pillar is Transform Generations. I'm pulled to it

because we successfully transform generations of a family when we remove the safety nets and guide them toward lasting self-sufficiency.

Seeking support at a Buckner Family Hope Center® includes family coaching with the goal of elevating a family past the need for the Hope Center. Buckner Family Pathways® supports single mothers through higher education and helps them break the cycle of poverty. Both programs may be providing education and counseling to parents, but it's also parallel with the support we provide their children.

“Scripture gives us the blueprint to create change in our lives, as well as in the lives of others.”

Multiple stories in this issue reflect the generational transformation your support helps create. When a child sees their parents succeed despite the odds, they are more likely to succeed too. When they see their parents make mistakes only to correct their behavior,

they are more prone to persevere.

The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus was the greatest catalyst for generational transformation ever. A common theological concept explaining why Jesus died is substitutionary atonement: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

But if we want to look at Jesus' death from a historical and philosophical perspective, we might apply the theory of causation. It took the death of God's perfect son to allow his followers to stop watching and to start doing. Jesus' life and death were the cause, and Christianity was the effect. Without Jesus' physical presence to care for the poor, it truly became the responsibility of each of us.

His death gave us a chance at self-sufficiency. We can truly follow in his footsteps and serve the orphan and the widow. And when we fall, and we often do, we can pick ourselves up knowing his love will always be there as a safety net for our souls. And while the Bible may not teach us to sort laundry or navigate health insurance, it does give us the blueprint to create change in our lives, as well as in the lives of others.

Scott may not be my safety net for rhetoric or theology when it comes to this editorial, but I have no doubt I will receive a mostly constructive text from him that helps me be better. **BT**

Chris Ruth is Vice President of Communications at Buckner International.



Scott Collins worked hard and also created a culture of camaraderie among communications department team members.



BUCKNER *Journal*

>> ‘Micro to macro impact’

Buckner Dominican Republic celebrates new location, 15-year anniversary

Buckner Dominican Republic recently celebrated two important milestones. This year marks 15 years that Buckner has been supporting vulnerable children and families in the Dominican Republic, powered by philanthropic love and generosity. And what better way to start the new year than with the physical result of bighearted commitment, in the opening of the newly relocated Mendoza Family Hope Center® in Santo Domingo.

The Family Hope Center had outgrown its space, and the new location has more room for activities and programming, offering a secure and comfortable place for families seeking support.

“The current location is close to the previous one, but it is not in the same community. It is a blessing that we are close enough to continue to serve current beneficiaries as well as new ones near our new center,” said Eunice Pérez de Acevedo, executive director of Buckner Dominican Republic.

Family Hope Centers are a hub of activity for the communities and the families say they find hope when they are at the centers, Pérez said. Programs include family coaching, after-school programs for children, vocational and technical training, spiritual enrichment, and humanitarian aid such as food and clothing.

Now fully operational in the newly relocated Family Hope Center, the Buckner team is celebrating the 15th anniversary of Buckner Dominican Republic’s registration as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in the country.

Buckner Dominican Republic is one of Buckner’s six NGOs that

include Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, and Kenya.

“Through the Family Hope Center and its programs, Buckner is promoting the transformation of the family. When the family changes, it changes the community. When the community changes, it changes society. When society changes, it can change a country,” Pérez said. “Buckner is changing the country from the micro to the macro. This is the real legacy and impact Buckner is making in the world.” **BT**



Buckner Dominican Republic celebrates 15 years, and a new location in which they transform families to give hope to communities, society and their country.



>> Afterschool aces in public health

Hope happens when elementary-aged students learn health and wellness from doctors

Children's arms stretched eagerly into the air, enthusiastic to answer the teacher's question about how to be a buddy to someone who is being bullied. They squirm anxiously on their floor mats wanting to participate in the discussion. The confidence and interest expressed in their eyes and faces is something that's increased over the past school semester with a specially designed curriculum for the Afterschool Program of the Buckner Family Hope Center® at Reed Road in Houston.



Schweitzer Fellow Lauren Do easily holds the attention of the students in the Afterschool Aces in Public Health class at the Family Hope Center on Reed Road.

The kids are part of "Afterschool Aces at Buckner Family Hope Center" that brings health and wellness lessons to the students, first through fifth grades, every week since September 2024.

The name, the fun curriculum, and the way it's presented, comes from Michael DiLeo and Lauren Do who attend Baylor College of Medicine and are recipients of Schweitzer Fellowship mentorships – a one-year concentration in healthcare leadership for graduate and undergraduate professionals. They volunteer and have earned grants to bring community projects that offer solutions to unmet needs in underserved communities. The curriculum for the program at the Family Hope Center is scientifically based and approved by the Schweitzer Fellowship.

"Studies have shown that early childhood period is extremely vulnerable. Current elementary-age children impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic face learning disparities due to the challenges of online education during that time," said

Stephanie Panameno, children's program supervisor at Reed Road.

Panameno also said that in addition to traditional subjects, the Reed Road students experienced a gap in learning health and wellness skills. Topics include the importance of physical activity, healthy eating, emotional regulation, environmental conversation, and other topics to help increase knowledge of skills that will improve their overall health and well-being.

The new curriculum is shared in an abbreviated format monthly with the students' families as well. It informs them of what their children are learning so they can put the knowledge into practice together as a family.

In addition to the weekly health and wellness curriculum, DiLeo and Do recruited medical students from the Schweitzer Fellowship alumni group to provide one-on-one tutoring for the children to help them catch up with regular school subjects.



Schweitzer Fellow Michael DiLeo engages students on health and wellness topics during the Afterschool Aces in Public Health class at the Family Hope Center on Reed Road.

The tutoring from medical school students will continue in fall 2025. When DiLeo and Do finish the current program in May, the curriculum they developed stays with the Family Hope Center for the benefit of many more children and families. **BT**



Learning made fun
Afterschool Program students at the Family Hope Center on Reed Road are having fun learning health and wellness from doctors.

>> Dr. Albert L. Reyes celebrates 15 years of leadership with Buckner

January marked a celebratory milestone in the history of Buckner, the 15th anniversary of Dr. Albert L. Reyes serving as its sixth president. He follows five others in the history of our 146-year ministry that continues to impact people of all ages.

Reflecting on the past 15 years, Reyes shares his surprise at how the Lord has provided for the ministry with the right leaders, the right people and the right resources to help Buckner accomplish its mission, as well as explore new opportunities to serve.

"And our best talent is also found in the ranks of Buckner staff at every location," he added.

During his leadership, Buckner has experienced exceptional growth and expansion in just the last five years, including Buckner Family Hope Centers opening in Midland, Donna and San Antonio,

acquisition of Fort Worth senior living community The Stayton at Museum Way, and expansion of family preservation programs, such as Fatherhood EFFECT.

"I can see how the hand of the Lord prepared me in business, both family and corporate settings, in pastoral ministry, in military chaplaincy and in higher education leadership at Baptist University of the Americas, and at Buckner, and laid the foundation for what I do today," Reyes shared.

"Leading Buckner today is the best use of my skills, experiences and background for God's Kingdom as I offer my best service to him. The work is heavy, the challenges are great, and the opportunities are even greater for us to bring the Kingdom close to vulnerable children, families and seniors." **BT**



»» Buckner Kenya honored for outstanding educational opportunities

Creating access to affordable and quality education for Kenyans creates equality for families



Buckner Kenya was recognized as “Best in Education” in the first annual Kenya NGO Awards, honoring nongovernmental organizations for their work to improve the quality of life and economic health for Kenyans.

“How did we react? With jubilation and thanksgiving in our hearts. It was singing and dancing everywhere,” said Dickson Masindano, executive director of Buckner Kenya. “All our teachers received a standing ovation.”

“It was a unique opportunity to be at the pinnacle and it allowed us to showcase our stories of working with Kenyan children and communities. The team’s resilience, innovation, and dedication to serving the vulnerable allow us to make a lasting impact. We have been inspired to keep doing what we do well.”

Buckner International’s work in Kenya began in 2001 and includes several family preservation programs including foster care, domestic adoption, and child-centered, family-focused support and assistance at five Buckner Family Hope Center® locations.

Programs include schools, early childhood development centers, medical clinics, water wells and spiritual development programs. Last year, Buckner Kenya expanded educational

offerings with the addition of ninth grade.

Programming also includes business education and vocational training. Children have opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities and talent development programs across Kenya.

Education is the key to creating a healthy and strong future for children and families, Masindano explained.

“We believe education is an equalizer in life.”

–Dickson Masindano

“The most significant difference we make for any families we serve is to ensure the children can access affordable and quality education through our schools at the Family Hope Center,” he said. “When children

go to school and successfully complete that education, they have an opportunity to go to college and thereafter securing a job that will make a difference in their lives and the whole community.

“We believe education is an equalizer in life,” Masindano said. “Empowering vulnerable children and families through education is a lifetime investment. It brings real all-round change and instant impact in the communities. It improves the standards of living and brings healthy lifestyles.” **BT**

Aging out doesn't mean giving up

Story by Jon Mark Beilue • Photography by Shaie Williams

For Daylin Shaw, it seemed like every job he had, his coworkers talked about doing something more. They talked about bettering themselves, talked about creating a future, talked about reaching their potential, and Shaw listened.

After receiving his GED in 2019, Shaw started classes at Amarillo College but quickly lost interest and quit. His next job was a fast-food restaurant stop. It seemed like a way station.

“Everybody at my job was saying, ‘Yeah, I’m going to do this after I get out of school or I’m going to do that,’” Shaw said, “and I was like, ‘Dang, maybe I should focus on school.’”

He quit the restaurant and worked for a time at a department store and then for a box truck rental company. A friend of his worked at the maximum-security state prison just northeast of Amarillo. The money was better. He suggested that Shaw apply.

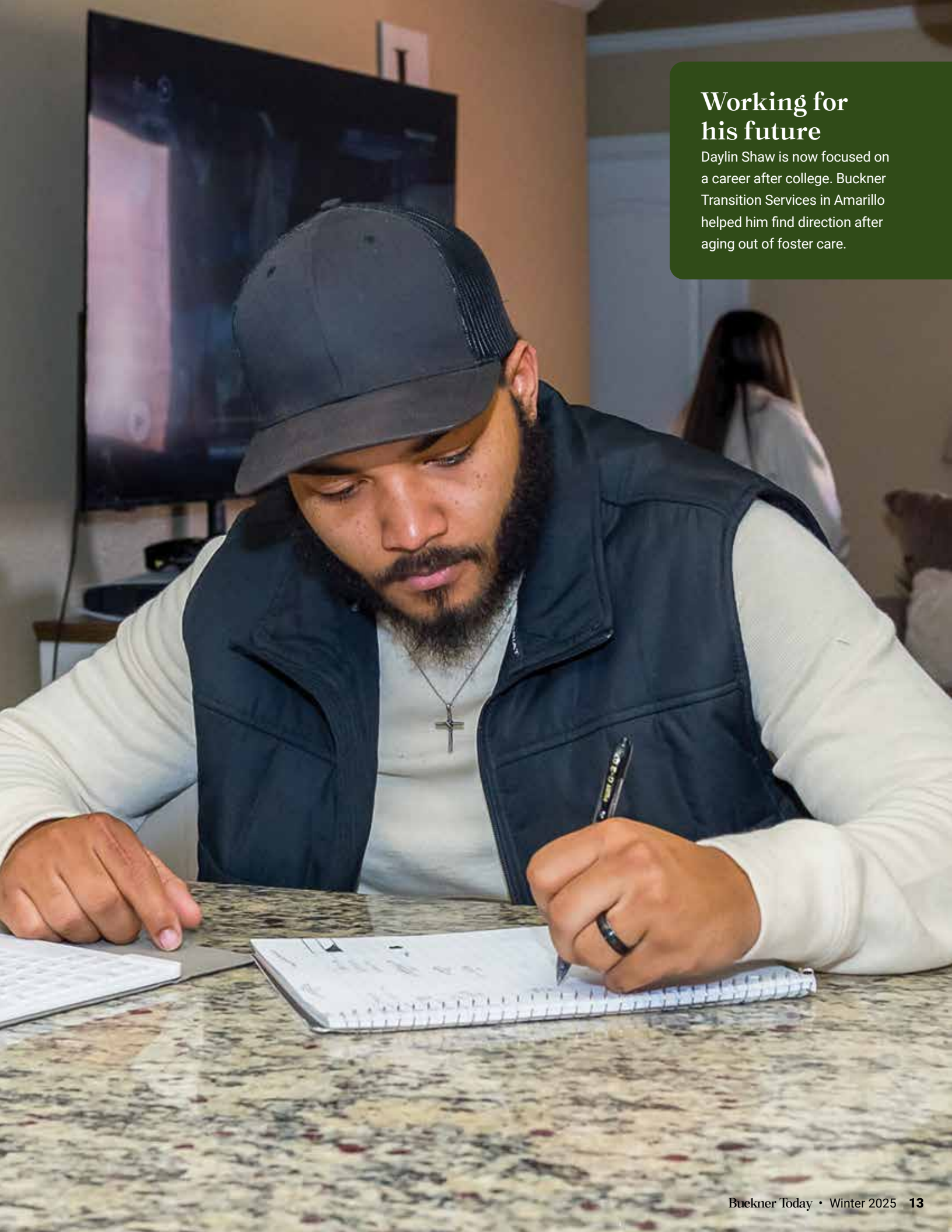
Shaw was accepted and trained as a corrections officer. A CO is a tough dangerous job where the hours can be strange, and the pay is low for what is required. Turnover is high.

“I was there for about a year, and everyone I worked with talked about going into law enforcement, about wanting to be a cop or work in a county sheriff’s department,” Shaw said. “I didn’t pay much attention to it.

“Then I started thinking that I could be a cop. It would be a big step in my life. I’m not that immature kid anymore.”

Shaw, however, was just a few years out of foster care. He was in that “danger zone” of so many who age out of the foster care





Working for his future

Daylin Shaw is now focused on a career after college. Buckner Transition Services in Amarillo helped him find direction after aging out of foster care.



Daylin Shaw with his fiancée Delillah Cruz. Shaw balances his full-time job and evening college classes with the support of Buckner Transition Services.

system. The cracks of society grow larger, the safety net is smaller, and life, once again, can seem difficult to navigate. Only this time there is no foster care to help steer.

A challenging period

Statistics paint a bleak picture. After reaching the age of 18, about 20% of young people who are in foster care suddenly have no place to go, once again, no home. And nearly 50% will be either homeless or incarcerated at some point in their life, said Bekah Coggins, director of transition services for Buckner.

“They’re extremely at-risk,” Coggins said. “A number will be homeless in the sense they don’t have a permanent address to call their own. They may be couch surfing, staying with friends or relatives for a little bit. About half (of former foster youth) will not have gainful employment, a steady job, by age 24. When you don’t have that support any more, the results are pretty staggering.”

Buckner’s transition services began about 25 years ago as the federal and state governments sought ways to help children who became legal adults as they left foster care and faced a myriad of obstacles toward a stable future.

“When I turned 18 and went to college, I had the safety net of parents and it was still a big adjustment,” Coggins said. “A lot of them don’t even have that. We are saying we are here to be a safety net and to help them take steps to be successful on their own.”

Nearly 23,000 kids age out of the foster system in the U.S. each year, and about 1,000 in Texas. In the Lubbock-Amarillo region where Coggins is based, her team is currently serving about 115 clients annually, many who are referred from programs outside of

Buckner’s. But she doesn’t know how many actually age out of foster care and are enrolled in a program other than Buckner’s.

“We help through a really challenging period of entering adulthood,” Coggins said. “That’s when you think you know everything, and you get out on your own and it’s a lot harder than you thought it was.”

Preparing for adulthood

The State of Texas regulates transition services offered to young people who are preparing to leave or have already left the foster care and adoption system. Buckner Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Center in Amarillo, works in collaboration with the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services and the Texas Workforce Commission, to provide services to current and former youth in state foster care. Services include classes, guidance in understanding state benefits, case manager support, and mentoring through decisions, and even college applications.

If a young person is still in foster care at age 15 1/2, there’s a state-required life strategy class that covers the basics for growing teens – drivers education, applying for a drivers license, job interviewing, making doctor appointments, financing and budgeting. The classes are a prerequisite for eligibility to receive a check for a Transitional Living Allowance from the state after they leave care at age 18.

Additionally, Buckner now offers Life Skills training to youth ages 15-18 who are not currently in foster care but who were previously in care and either adopted, reunified with family, or achieved some other type of legal permanency.

Buckner gets referrals for transition services for those ages 18 to

21. Money is set aside to help with rent, utilities, groceries, gas and transportation needs, and a cell phone. For those in school, there's help for internet and textbook expenses. Plugging into a mentor program, a church family, or with other former foster care youth for support and accountability is an important facet, explained Coggins.

A Buckner case manager checks in with their client at least monthly, but usually more frequently. Then they meet in person four times a year.

"We talk about goals and where they want to go," Coggins said. "We'll build a road map and check with them each quarter. That's a really crucial part of the program to help you with the direction you want to go. We want to help them dream big, but we also need to put practical steps in place."

A tuition waiver from the state is available for post-high school education. The waiver does not cover books or room and board but does pay for tuition and fees. If a student enrolls in a class before age 25, the tuition waiver is good at any point in the future. The waiver also covers vocational education.

"About 75% of those coming out of foster care say they want to go to college, but only 3 to 4% graduate with some kind of degree. They find out what college requires of them," Coggins said. "We will plug them into tutoring but also let them know that all kinds of work fields are available in trade schools, too. If they change their mind in what they want to do, what does the pivot look like?"

Pivot in the right direction

Shaw's life has been a series of pivots. He was born in Amarillo and moved to Dallas with his grandmother when he was 6 years old. He was a self-described "troublemaker" at school. At age 14, he returned to Amarillo with a younger brother to live with foster parent Patricia McKellar, who was a cousin. With McKellar's own three children, it

was a different atmosphere for Shaw.

"I had to adjust to the environment and new people," he said.

It was often 1 1/2 steps forward, one back, he said. He got decent grades in high school but then began skipping school. Shaw dropped out as a junior. At his foster mother's insistence, he took and easily passed his GED.

That was when he aged out of the state foster care system. Through a referral, he was soon accepted into Buckner's transition services to help bridge that path from foster care to adulting on his own. Shaw is one of 55 clients in the Amarillo area; there are 60 in the Lubbock area; and three case managers in each city.

"What we typically see is we get a young person to a good point and then life happens," said Jessica Delarosa, transition program supervisor for the Amarillo/Lubbock region. "We have to reinitiate what we were first working on to get them back to the point of success."

Shaw, now 23, is one of the more independent people in the program. He has a fiancée, Delilah Cruz. After a series of jobs, he has now worked for three years at Blue Beacon Truck Wash on I-40 in Amarillo, putting in 40-45 hours a week. He's also taking criminal justice classes at Amarillo College. In five years, he'd like to be a deputy in a county sheriff's department and have their own home together.

"I see a very motivated individual in Daylin," said Delarosa. "He's a hard worker and knows what he has to do. He's consistent in work and school. He's had the mindset from the beginning of our program that he wasn't going to let anything hold him back to reach his potential."

As independent as Shaw is, transition services stepped in when he broke his thumb last year. Unable to work for a period of time, the transition program helped with a portion of his rent and utilities.

"It's a pretty good thing to know if anything ever happens and I fall short somewhere, I can always count on Buckner if I really need it." **BT**





When Buckner ministries align lives are transformed

Story and photography by Linda Goelzer

Just a year ago, neither Blanca Villegas nor Terrance Lewis were quite sure where life was leading them. Villegas was trying to find ways to make ends meet and support her children. Lewis had moved to Dallas to help care for an aging family member. But what they had in common was hope.

Today, both are part of Buckner's ministry serving seniors, both working as full-time Certified Nursing Assistants (CNA) at Ventana by Buckner.

But the story of how Villegas and Lewis arrived at Ventana last November is an interesting journey of two Buckner ministries coming together to meet each other's needs – the ministries of Buckner Retirement Services and Buckner Children and Family Services.

Seeking hope

Villegas and Lewis were formerly clients of the Buckner Family Hope center at Wynnewood. Both contacted the Family Hope Center about a new training program to become a CNA.

The two were welcomed with open arms and connected to a variety of support that would ultimately help set them on a new path that neither one expected, they admitted.

"Last year, Villegas and Lewis became the first two students to

successfully complete our CNA program, a collaborative effort between Dallas College, Ventana by Buckner, and the Buckner Family Hope Center," said Spencer Watkins, community coordinator at the Family Hope Center at Wynnewood. Beginning in the spring the center will be known as the Buckner Family Hope Center at Oak Cliff to reflect the broader area the center serves.

To qualify, students first completed a six-week course at the Family Hope Center called Level Up. Coursework included financial education, including budgeting and saving, as well as job skills training, including resume building and interviewing. Students also met with a family coach who worked with each to set personal goals for the immediate future and long-term success.

Once that groundwork was laid, Watkins helped the students on their path to earn CNA certification through Dallas College. Buckner helped the students enroll, helped them cover the cost of the college courses, and armed them with necessary supplies, including textbooks and scrubs.

All the while, students continued meeting with their family coach to stay focused on their goals. Watkins checked in on them and also attended class from time to time for extra support, he said.

Upon earning their state certifications which required classroom,

clinical and a state examination, students were able to tour Ventana and interview for CNA positions.

While Buckner had helped them prepare for the day, the candidates, however, would have to earn the job themselves.

Like many healthcare providers, CNA positions are highly competitive to fill, explained Raegan Quesenberry, director of human resources at Ventana. The senior living community's services include skilled nursing care and so healthcare professionals make up part of the community's team of associates.

While expert and compassionate providers is always a top priority, Quesenberry explained that there was also a desire to support employees who wanted to grow their Buckner careers. Several of their associates had expressed interest in additional training, such as CNA certification.

And so began a partnership with Ventana and the Family Hope Center.

Building relationships

Villegas and Lewis serve as CNAs within Ventana's skilled nursing care. Both are quick to point out the importance of connecting with those for whom they care.

"We are trained to take their vital signs, we get them up and going, weigh them, lift or rotate them in bed, change bedding and clothing, serve meals – and we listen to them while we're doing it," Villegas said.

"We are required to understand their conditions," said Lewis. "We need to know how much they eat and how to help them eat. Everyone here operates within strict safety standards. But they put their heart into their jobs. When we are caring for a patient, we're also getting to know them and who they are as a person.

"It's also nice to arrive each day and know there's someone anticipating your countenance. It makes it easier to encourage people and inspire happiness in them," Lewis added.

Training the Buckner way

Villegas and Lewis each said they are deeply grateful for their journeys that led them to the Family Hope Center and, in turn, Ventana. In fact, they both notice the difference it makes in their work at Buckner because they were trained "the Buckner way," already familiar with Buckner's values and mission.

Villegas admitted one of the most challenging and rewarding parts of the journey was the prerequisite to complete coaching, finance and job skills classes – and the self-discovery that happened as part of that.

"When I started I was lost," Villegas divulged. "I was checked out. I would sell things online, but my two kids never saw me have a legit job. The staff at the Family Hope Center just kept reaching out and they never stopped. So, I attended their information session about CNA classes because I thought it was going to be quick to get that license."

Instead, Villegas said class experiences like working with a team to learn about herself: her strengths, weaknesses, opportunities

for improvement, is just one example of the self-examination that prepared her for the type of employee she is today. That is, someone who is requested by the patients and performs with excellence and pride, she smiled, something that was absent before.

"I say that I was made by Buckner and created for Ventana," Villegas affirmed.

Though Lewis didn't live near the Family Hope Center, he attended an open house event after receiving a Buckner email. He came without an identified need. Yet, he was new to caring for his father with dementia and communication was challenging, given his father's condition and the history of their relationship.

"One of the things I was immediately able to identify was a sense of community to come alongside you to cover whatever you need," Lewis began. "Buckner exemplifies Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The daily needs were getting met and there's always something to learn about self. I enjoy self-evaluation – how can I be a better version of me?"



Blanca Villegas, CNA and Terrance Lewis, CNA discuss the coordination of a skilled nursing patient's care, at Ventana by Buckner in Dallas.

They have only just begun

Villegas and Lewis also found a friend and support in each other as the two got to know one another through their coursework at the Family Hope Center and Dallas College. Lewis encouraged Villegas then and they continue to do that for each other now.

Both are already setting sites on furthering their education, Villegas as a licensed practical nurse (LPN) and Lewis said he might consider developing a niche in long-term care.

And what about any changes in their personal lives because of their journeys from Buckner Family Hope Center to serving with Buckner Retirement Services?

"I enjoy my children," said Villegas. "I also know I'm creating a baton to pass on to them. No one handed me a baton because there wasn't one. But I'm going to have one for them." **BT**

Help provide dignified, dedicated care for seniors

How will I be cared for in my twilight years?
It's a season of life when we all need help.

Sometimes seniors living at one of our seven Buckner senior living communities run into financial struggles. Many live longer than their resources last. When that happens, we provide assistance.

Because God promises to never leave us during our time of need, we are committed to keeping that promise to seniors.

You can help make it possible for seniors to always have dignified, dedicated care at a Buckner senior living community.

While it's possible for seniors to outlive their finances, they'll never outlive our care for them.

Help us keep our promise to financially struggling seniors. Scan the code or visit www.Buckner.org/BucknerToday.



BUCKNER®

Hope shines here.®



A family calling to

Story by Kayla Salzman

Photography by Tim Miller



One Buckner, one family

Father-daughter duo Alcir De Sa and Eliana De Sa serve with love and compassion across different Buckner ministries.

Memories of kicking the soccer ball with siblings and playing in the sunshine on the beaches of Brazil bring joy to Alcir De Sa and his daughter, Eliana, as they recall what God has done in their lives as a family. From multiple international moves to finding themselves both employed with Buckner ministries, the De Sas are a perfect example of what it means to serve families - as a family.

Alcir and Eliana are each Buckner team members in Houston, serving in two different areas of ministry. While Alcir is the transportation associate for residents at Parkway Place, a Buckner senior living community, Eliana is a family coach for family preservation programs at the Buckner Family Hope Center® at Northside in Houston.

NEW FAMILY

Alcir was born and raised in Brazil by his single mother with his brother and sister. He remembers watching his mother with awe as she tackled the roles of mom and dad to provide for him and his siblings.

Perhaps the servant leadership demonstrated by his mother encouraged Alcir to dedicate his life to ministry. While living in various countries, he served in several pastoral roles, fostering a heart for ministry in his children and raising his family with a foundation built on Christ's teachings.

When the De Sas moved to New York 20 years ago, they sought a church home, a familiar place to find friends who became their family. Eliana and Alcir shared that while the transition was difficult, as they overcame language barriers and cultural differences, they feel blessed to have experienced in a new way what family can mean.

Speaking multiple languages, Eliana grew up in a home where her Brazilian father spoke Portuguese, her Argentine mom spoke Spanish, while she and her brother were primarily raised in America and learned English.

"I like to say I live in a tri-cultural home," said Eliana.

A FAMILY FOR OTHERS

Upon their move to Texas, it was Alcir who found Buckner first and inspired Eliana to take a leap of faith and apply for a job at the Family Hope Center. Eliana could not believe how happy her father was each day coming home with a joy she described as one that only

serve in Houston

comes from preaching the gospel to the masses.

“I see the difference. I see the mission and vision of Buckner. It drew me in, and I knew that this is exactly what I was looking for,” Alcir said.

After many prayers and conversations with her father about his experience with the organization, Eliana joined Buckner as a family coach, excited to have a role in the same organization that brought her father so much joy.

“My dad always made a big deal of emphasizing how it is more than a job, it’s a ministry,” Eliana said. “As I started working that was the first thing I noticed. Just the heart and the emphasis of ‘be the hands and feet of Jesus.’”

Like the church family was for the De SAs when they first moved to the U.S., Eliana had developed a desire to be that person for other families in her community. As a family coach, she is able to live her dream of helping others adapt, while maintaining and celebrating their cultural origins.

Eliana’s clients at the Family Hope Center predominantly speak Spanish as their first language. Her own experiences allow her to help build a connection with her clients from day one. Eliana says that enables them to feel comfortable and flourish in the Family Hope Center programs, focused on strengthening families through education, financial empowerment, child and youth development, and more.



“I have clients who are first generation here, so it’s been great that I have that connection with them because looking at my story, my parents’ stories, we share what it’s like to adapt to a new culture,” said Eliana.

“We serve people of diverse backgrounds, and I think that’s what’s beautiful; it’s not limited to one group of people. I get to serve my entire community.”



LONG-LASTING LOVE

For Alcir, connecting with Parkway Place senior residents begins the moment they step onto the bus. His favorite part of his job is hearing residents’ life stories and learning who they were, are, and hope to be.

“I love my position at Parkway Place because it connects me to the seniors,” he said. “They inspire me so much when they share with me their stories of life, and marriages of 50, 60, even 70 years.”

Stories of long-lasting marriages and the beauty within the memories shared with Alcir bring him an immense amount of joy and encourage him in his own marriage.

In January 2025, Alcir and his wife renewed their wedding vows in celebration of their 25th marriage anniversary in the chapel at Parkway Place, surrounded by children, friends, and residents who have become like family as well.

Buckner has become an integrated part of the De SAs’ life with father and daughter serving in the organization. Around the dinner table Alcir shares the stories of residents and the advice they pass to him, for the benefit of his children. Eliana enthusiastically talks about upcoming events and the success of programming at the Family Hope Center.

“I think what’s beautiful is how diverse Buckner is as an organization, but the ministries have the same heart – and that’s where we connect,” Eliana shared.

“Buckner has become that place for us,” said Eliana. “Where even though we are in different ministries, we have the same heart, and we are doing the same work, just in different areas.” **BT**

Serving seniors

By John Bender | *Chaplain, Parkway Place*

Caring for seniors is not a business model, it's a ministry, meaning we are focused on caring for people first.

In Deuteronomy 5:16, Moses said: *Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.*

We are called upon to care for our elders, honor their accomplishments and wisdom, and ensure they have a bright and dynamic life through their current stage of life.

At Buckner Retirement Services, our commitment to this calling is unique. Following are some of the many different ways in which we support and care for seniors.

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Part of the testament to living lives with purpose and vitality includes connections with others. Living in close proximity to others, such as a senior living community, doesn't automatically check that box.

At Buckner communities we focus on engaging activities that bring joy and purpose and are specifically designed to foster connection with others.

At Parkway Place, for example, all four areas of care – independent living, assisted living, memory support and skilled nursing – have their own dedicated, full-time life engagement associate whose primary focus is to ensure residents have a well-rounded lifestyle, feel valued and supported. That's not simply entertainment but also finding activities and engagement that pull people together and generate happiness. One resident was visiting her family for the holidays and informed them that she had to get back to her apartment because she didn't want to miss a special planned event that day.

Some activities create friendly and fun competition, such as a chili cookoff in which associates compete and residents vote for the best décor and best tasting chili. Our cultural day fosters relationships between residents and associates – who introduce their own cultures to our residents – with celebration of cultures from all over the world such as Africa, Indonesia, Brazil, or Iraq. The residents participate in songs, traditional dances, and food.

SERVING OTHERS

Because Buckner's mission is to help vulnerable seniors, children, and families, we are in a unique position to connect seniors with our other ministries. In turn, we are creating volunteer opportunities that engage our residents but also have a positive impact on everyone involved.

In the fall, residents passed out candy to children at a trunk or treat at a local campus for Buckner Children and Family Services.

We have also collected shoe donations for Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®.

You don't see that in other communities – connection between seniors to children and families.

The residents at Parkway are giving of themselves – and they love those Buckner kids!



TAKING CARE OF EACH OTHER

Buckner senior living communities are just that – a community. They are engaging and warm and inviting.



Seniors in our communities care for each other too. We have what we call “vessels of joy.” We discuss how we can bring joy to some of the residents who are not mobile or not participating in activities or connecting with others. At Parkway Place in Houston, every floor has an ambassador so that when a new person moves in, they have a guide to help them navigate their new home, introduce them to others, and invite them to participate in activities and fun. Our vessels of joy find satisfaction and pleasure to be used of God for his service.

SPIRITUAL CARE

Buckner is unique in that each senior living community has a full-time chaplain on site. We provide spiritual support at every level of care in our communities.

Buckner's goal is to ensure residents have spiritual guidance to navigate life's changes, comfort during loss, support for challenges, and celebrations at times of joy.

And we rely on a cadre of residents who volunteer for the same reasons. They lead Bible study classes and prayer groups, greet worshipers, sing and play music, and read scripture.

To ensure everyone's needs are met we have on-site services as well as volunteers from various denominations, and transportation to neighboring places of worship. All with the same goal to support residents with spiritual care.

Often when new seniors move in, they're surprised to learn there is a full-time chaplain on staff, even if they knew Buckner is a faith-based nonprofit. That's because it's unique. I desire to be here to experience life together. This is the example of Jesus.

This senior community is my church.



FIND YOUR COMMUNITY

Knowing the seniors in our community and being a part of their daily life is a privilege. Our goal is to serve, whether that's spiritual healing, comfort for a loss, or simply sharing breakfast. I make waffles every Wednesday morning for our residents, and I have regular customers. What's important is that we've built a relationship, so for me, waffles are more than just breakfast. It is life relating to life.



I often start my mornings with a coffee pot topping off cups in our dining rooms. It's precious time because I am able to interact and ask questions about their day. I look forward to conversations in the hallway and the dining room. The interactions may be only a few minutes as we pass each other, but they are the most meaningful times of the day. We care and that's what sets us apart.



IT'S ABOUT THE PERSON FIRST

It's important that seniors have a place to call home – a place that truly cares for their well-being. Likewise at Buckner, it's important to us that our people always have a place that is home.

The fact is that some people live longer than their personal funds. Qualified residents at Buckner senior living communities can apply for support through the Senior Care and Assistance Fund. This safety net is made possible by generous donors who have the same goal as we do – to serve and care for seniors.

I can't describe the emotion and relief that washes over seniors who have benefited. Their faces are tense and suddenly they can relax. What follows are words of gratitude and often tears because sometimes there just aren't enough words. We give them a big hug and tell them we're glad you are here.

It touches your heart to hear stories about what that support means to the people whose lives it has touched.

And you see this level of compassion, commitment and love from everyone with Buckner Retirement Services. That's what's different about our senior living communities.

Caring for seniors as God instructs us is how we show his love. "Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly, and revere your God" (Leviticus 19:32).

Put simply, we strive to follow the example of Jesus. **BT**

Parkway Place is a Buckner continuing care retirement community in the heart of Houston. With 159 independent living apartments, 58 assisted living apartments, 24 memory support rooms, 40 nursing rooms, and a rehabilitation center, Parkway Place is dedicated to providing exceptional care and support for seniors.

The long



Big Journey

Story by Scott Collins
Photography by Tim Miller

I listened to the voicemail several times - over and over - and after each time hearing the message, I stared at the phone in stunned silence. It happened Jan. 18, 2024. The voicemail is 2:52 long. I know because I saved it.

The story goes back to January 2003. I was with the first Buckner mission group to ever work in Guatemala. The group from First Baptist Church in Waco, Texas worked in an orphanage in Huehuetenango providing medical clinics, leading Vacation Bible School for the kids, and trying to make the best of what were horrible conditions.

The orphanage was located inside the compound of what used to be a city storage facility. There were old, rusty cars and trucks sitting in the yard and each morning we saw evidence of rats feasting on whatever they could find left over from the day before.

His best chance

On Wednesday of that week, the orphanage director, Sandra Temaj, received a phone call from the local hospital. A two-month-old baby had been found lying next to his mother on the streets of Huehuetenango. The child was at the hospital and needed a place to live.

He was rescued and named Jose.

I tagged along with the orphanage director, our part-time Buckner director in Guatemala, Betsy Bautista, and Ashley Barber Warwick, a nurse and Buckner mission director from Texas. Morris Abernathy, a friend, photographer, and former colleague, came too, along with a

Happy to be wrong

I left Huehuetenango with the mission team, returned to Texas, and life moved on. There were dozens more stories about children like Jose rescued and given a chance.



Jeremiah Purdy and his mother, Melissa.

Then I listened to the voicemail a year ago, 21 years later. The voice was Melissa Guynn who lived in a place called Chincoteague, Va. She had a copy of the *Buckner Today* article from 2003 and was calling to connect with me.

Two years after baby Jose was picked up at the hospital and taken to the orphanage, Melissa adopted him. Today, he is a 22-year-old young man searching for his past.

“What could I tell him?” she said, when we talked a day after I heard the voicemail. “You probably know more about where he came from than I do.”

The first week of June, I was joined by Tim Miller, director of video production at Buckner, as we flew to Norfolk, Va., and drove Hwy. 13 across the 22-mile-long bridge over Chesapeake Bay to Chincoteague to meet Jose, now known as Jeremiah Purdy.

Seeing him all these years later, I thought about the title I’d given to that story in 2003 – “His Best Chance.” At the time, it seemed like the best he could hope for was life at the orphanage inside the walls of that city. Compared to spending his life on the streets of Huehuetenango, it seemed like a good hope.

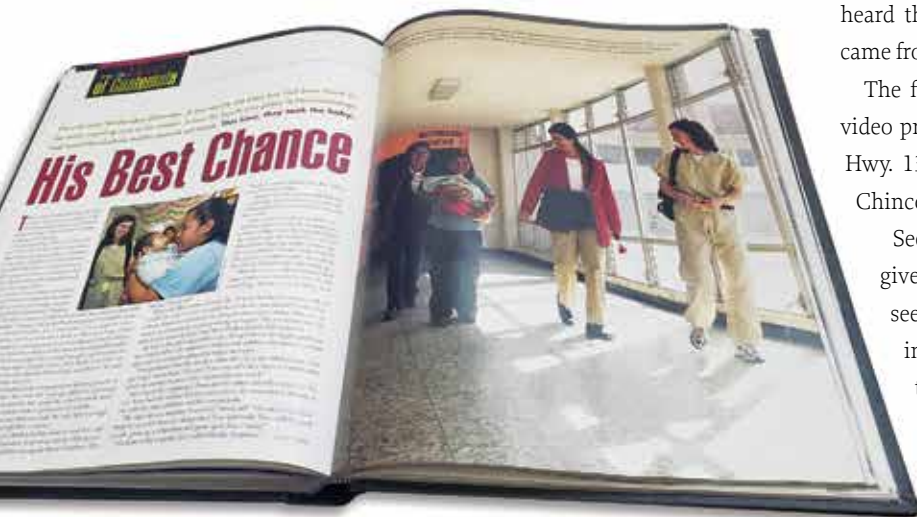
But here we were all those years later talking and taking pictures. I’ve never been so happy to be so wrong in my life.

When Jeremiah turned 18, he and Melissa sat down and went through everything she had about him from Guatemala and his adoption. That led Jeremiah to become more interested in his past and to look for more information.

“We sat for a couple of hours on the bed and just went through all his paperwork and things,” Melissa said. “Because he was abandoned, he had a lot of questions. We both do.”

Sitting in the living room of their home on Chincoteague Island, Melissa and Jeremiah talked about the search for his past. He’s curious, Melissa said, so together, they have reached out to multiple people who might connect him with his roots in Guatemala. He has become especially interested in his indigenous Mayan roots and Guatemala history. He has connected with other Guatemala adoptees on social media and formed a group, sharing their experiences and what it means to be Guatemalan and Mayan.

“Growing up, I was always happy, and I never really knew much about my adoption,” he said. “I knew I was adopted, but I guess I



In the spring 2003 issue of *Buckner Today* magazine, the story of Jeremiah’s rescue included a photo of him as an infant being carried out of the hospital toward a path of hope.

14-year-old young lady named Dora who would become the baby’s primary caregiver at the orphanage.

It was a powerful experience, and I wrote about it as part of a story package detailing the mission trip. I called the article “His Best Chance” and it ran in the spring 2003 issue of *Buckner Today*.

I wrote in the article, “The moment was a mixture of sadness and hope. Doctors confirmed the infant was healthy and in good shape despite being neglected and abandoned. Hospital nurses and the four women who had come to take Jose cooed as they took turns holding him. At times, Jose looked back and grinned a toothless smile.”

The article ended with this: “The hope is that someday Jose will fulfill his dream.”

just never focused on any of it because I was so young. When I got to high school, that's when I started getting curious and wanting to reconnect with my culture and my heritage."

Melissa said as Jeremiah was growing up, she read to him from books about Guatemala to ensure he had a connection with his past. "He's done so much research," she said. "I mean, he's like a walking history book."

While there may be some mystery about Jeremiah's past before he was adopted, there is no mystery about his adoption. He was originally matched with another family, but that didn't work out and the Buckner team reached out to Melissa and said the infant was available for adoption. Melissa remembered a photo she had seen of Jeremiah (then Jose) reaching out in the picture.

"When I saw that picture, I just felt like he was reaching out to me," she said.

After several stops and starts, the adoption was finalized, and Jose came home with his adoptive family.



Scott Collins, former senior vice president of communications for Buckner, visited with Jeremiah and his mother to talk about that first time when Scott met Jeremiah.

When he thinks about what life might have been, Jeremiah thinks long and hard. It's something he's contemplated his entire life.

"I do think about that," he said. "What if my mom had never given me up, or what if I was never found that day? I definitely know my life would be completely different. I'd probably, to be honest, be in a lot of poverty."

Above the front window of their home in Chincoteague hangs a sign that describes for Jeremiah and Melissa the central theme of their lives since he was found and later adopted. "Home is where your story begins."

While Jeremiah's story may have started on the streets of a city in Guatemala, his story today is being written with a loving family in Virginia.

It turns out his best chance wasn't the orphanage after all. **BT**



Going back to his roots

Although Jeremiah doesn't remember the infant in the photo he holds, he has developed a deep interest in his Mayan roots and Guatemalan history.



Family feels son's presence in Buckner-built home

Brayan Guana had a dream. It wasn't for him. Brayan's dream was for his mother, father, and his two sisters. And while Brayan's dream came true, he wasn't there to see it. But his impact lives on.

"My son was a sweetheart," reflected his mother, Elvira Guana. "He would help you. He would do a favor for you even if he couldn't. He never asked for anything in return. He was always helping others."

Added his father, Horacio, "If he had a five-dollar bill in his pocket and you asked him for it, he would give it to you, even if he was left without."

The family lives in the Lower Rio Grande Valley near the town of Peñitas and Brayan's dream was for his family to have a home of their own.

"He had big dreams," Elvira said. "I would tell him, 'Son, those are very expensive (dreams),' and he would say, 'Mom, it's OK to dream.'"

"Brayan was that kid," said Buckner missions coordinator Gabriel Flores. "He was just quiet, but if you asked him to do something, he

did it with all his heart. He was just this really good kid that would help make my job easier and introduce me to the community."

It was Brayan who encouraged his mom to attend classes at the Buckner Family Hope Center® in Peñitas. The Family Hope Centers strengthen families through education, financial

empowerment, child and youth development, family coaching and counseling, and spiritual enrichment.

It was Brayan, at the tender age of 18, who pushed his mother to apply for a new home through the Buckner Healthy Housing program, where families can qualify to receive assistance to build a home of their own after attending

the necessary classes at the Family Hope Center. Brayan made sure the family worked through all the requirements to qualify. And it was Brayan who patiently sat with his parents and helped them complete the application for the building of a new home.

STORY BY SCOTT COLLINS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY BOBBY HESTER



Moving forward

It was Brayan's dream come true. But it was a dream he didn't live to see. Brayan was killed in October 2021 in a car accident.

Elvira tears up talking about the loss of her son. More than three years after the accident claimed his life, the pain is still there.

"What happened was an unfortunate accident," she said. "He was a good son. I can say all this with pride. I'm very proud of him.

"Sometimes I start to cry, and I say that God has already given us the greatest test in life, having lost our son, and yet we're still standing. God has decided for things to be as they are."

And while Elvira and Horacio are still standing after the tragedy,

moving forward is difficult for the couple.

"I still can't get over it," Elvira said. "When I talk about him, it hurts my soul. I believe that one day when God calls me, I will see him, and I will never be separated from him."

Two years after Brayan's death, Elvira and Horacio completed the classes and all the requirements at the Buckner Family Hope Center and qualified for a new home, the one Brayan dreamed about and pushed his parents to work toward.

That house was assembled by Buckner staff in Dallas as a team volunteer project, shipped in modules to Peñitas, and then reassembled by church volunteers working alongside Horacio,



A labor of love.

Family members partnered with volunteers to build their house into a home. It's just what Brayan wanted for his family.





Elvira, and their two daughters.

“I thank Buckner and God because we now have a house, and my daughters aren’t cold anymore. It’s something we had wanted all this time, but it had not been possible,” Elvira said. “Even with us working day in and day out, we just had not been able to get a house. But I thank Buckner because this has changed our lives.”

United together

Pictures of Brayan line the walls of the house. He looks out from the photos, wearing a straw cowboy hat, jeans, western shirt, and a broad smile.

The classes they took at the Family Hope Center helped the couple develop a small business repairing automobiles. Horacio has a shop behind the new home and income helps the family move forward, Elvira explained.

“We are grateful for this house and the start of our business. The two of us are moving forward,” she smiled.

Indeed, after nearly 20 years together, Elvira and Horacio were officially united in marriage by Flores, the Buckner team member who has walked alongside the family through their journey.

“Elvira said, ‘Hey, one of the last things that we feel we need to do is get married and we know we need to be married by a minister. We feel that God needs to join us,’” Flores recalled.

With their marriage, a new home, prospects of a growing business, and healing coming every day, Horacio and Elvira say life is heading in the right direction and the future is bright.

“I think that God is so great,” Elvira said. “I can visualize my daughters all grown up and studying. I can see us not letting the house run down, maintaining it. And I can see myself one day in the future letting my grandchildren run around here.



Gabriel Flores (left), missions coordinator for Buckner Rio Grande Valley, united Elvira and Horacio Guana in marriage.

“I thank Buckner because I can visualize this house and what it will look like in the future,” she added. “We are all very happy and thankful.” **BT**

Click [here](#) to meet the Guana family and see the house that is Brayan’s legacy.



Kindness returned

Single mother finds hope in the place where she once served other moms

Story by Nik Holman • Photography by Tim Miller

Divorced and left to care for six children, Reynelda McDonald feared eviction from her three-bedroom apartment. When the day was over, she'd find herself alone, praying for one more night with a roof over their heads. Praying there was enough gas in her car to get to work or that a tire wouldn't go flat. Even with two jobs, the bills kept piling up. Credit cards were maxed out long ago.

McDonald's children breathed softly through the paper-thin walls, and she wondered where it all went. Her idyllic family life and meticulously planned future had been the center of her world. She was more than 3,000 miles from home and faced a future with no support, no money, and no hope. She wondered how one woman alone could save her family.

Happy, solid middle-class life

McDonald's story began in Alaska, where she met her future husband whose work with a government agency brought him there. His career paid the bills and provided a good life. With their future

secure, he convinced his wife to leave college and begin raising their family. Her husband had the job, McDonald ran the household, and their routine functioned smoothly for more than 12 years, which is why nobody noticed when the cracks began to show.

The couple decided to move, closed their eyes, pointed their fingers at a map and found them firmly planted on Lubbock, Texas.

"We sold everything that didn't fit in our Suburban and moved here with five kids," McDonald explained. "We were living a happy, solid middle-class life."

The transition to Lubbock was initially filled with excitement, but it quickly became apparent that the move came with its own set of challenges.

"It was a shock," she recalled. "Everything was tan: buildings, cars, the sky. It was 100 degrees when we arrived in October."

The McDonald family gradually adapted to their new environment, even growing by one with the birth of a sixth child, Herman. Despite the difficulties, church and local community

groups helped the family find a sense of belonging.

Always community minded, and with most of her children in school, McDonald filled her days volunteering with various non-profit organizations around Lubbock.

“There wasn’t a lot going on and I was home a lot. Those first few months were rough, but I found a moms group that really got me through some rough times,” she said.

And that is where she initially heard about Buckner Family Pathways®.

“We would come volunteer here in this actual building that I’m living at now and do a Bible study. Me and all my kids would come and just play with the kids that lived here,” she remembered.

As days turned into months and into years, McDonald had no idea *then* how her simple acts of kindness toward others at Family Pathways would save her own family *later*.

The shift that changed everything

In dry West Texas, their relationship fractured, and McDonald grew isolated. She desperately tried to save her marriage and her children’s sense of stability. Though she didn’t want to admit it, divorce was inevitable, and she soon faced the daunting reality of raising six children alone in a city far from her extended family.

When the marriage ended, she found herself completely unprepared for the financial hardship, emotional strain, and the crushing uncertainty of starting over.

“It was the worst that it could get,” McDonald admitted. “I had found an apartment, was working two jobs, and I was maxing out credit cards.”

Yet she remained determined to provide a secure life for her children.

But even with two jobs, McDonald struggled to make ends meet and faced the constant threat of homelessness. It was during this low point that she remembered a friend’s offer from years ago.

“I had been working at a parent’s day out and had a friend there who lived at Buckner and was part of the Family Pathways program. She was like, ‘If you ever need something, this is a great service. This is a great opportunity that a lot of people don’t know about.’”

Buckner Family Pathways is a program designed to help single mothers and families overcome barriers that prevent self-sufficiency like education and career prospects. For McDonald, the program included safe housing, educational support, and a community of support.

“I knew that Buckner was there, but I was reluctant to apply,” she confessed. “It took hitting rock bottom for me to realize that this was my only option.”

Her children at this point ranged in age from four to 18 years old. Her oldest, Tamia, had recently graduated high school. For Reynelda, the choice between reaching out for help or leaving her other five children homeless was really no choice at all.

“I applied to Buckner Family Pathways at the end of the school year, and I thought, ‘I’m going to fill out this form and we’ll see what happens. This could be a long process.’”

However, Family Pathways staff immediately recognized her need and reached out.

“The director called me and said they would like me to come in and fill out the actual application. I was in shock that it happened so quickly.”

McDonald’s acceptance into Family Pathways marked the beginning of a new chapter in her life. As she settled into her new apartment, she felt an overwhelming sense of relief.

“The kids felt safe, and I could breathe financially,” she said. “They didn’t have to worry about what could happen next.”

Through the program, McDonald was able to pursue her education while still providing for her children. She enrolled in school full-time, determined to break the cycle of poverty before it even began.

“I’m getting a degree in social work,” she confidently shared. “I want to make a difference, even if it’s just in one person’s life.”

One of the most profound changes in her life was the sense of community she found at Buckner. “It takes a lot to get you to the point where you realize this is my only option,” she noted. “And that’s where I found a community of women who have been through similar experiences. It’s been life changing.”



An inspiration to others

Family Pathways has played a crucial role in McDonald’s success. According to Jordyn Moore, director of Buckner Family Pathways in Lubbock, the program offers more than just housing - it provides a support system, including access to education, life skills training, and spiritual guidance.

“Buckner has given Reynelda an opportunity to rebuild her life,” Moore said. “It’s unlike any other nonprofit in the area. We provide safe housing while you’re pursuing an education and getting back on your feet. It’s a sense of relief for these moms.”

Everyone at Family Pathways sees McDonald as a mentor, except McDonald. When pressed about her role as a mentor to other women, she flashed a bright smile but shook her head.

“I just try to be a mom for everyone here,” she replied.

While she may not embrace the label, her strong leadership qualities have not gone unnoticed.

“She’s the president of our resident council, and everyone looks up to her,” Moore added. “Sometimes I even catch myself asking her for advice, just because she’s so wise and really has that ‘mama nature.’” Moore added that McDonald’s ability to connect with other women and provide emotional support has helped foster a sense of community.

One of the most rewarding aspects of her time at Family Pathways has been seeing her children thrive.

“They have a sense of safety now,” McDonald shared. “And that’s something they didn’t have before.”

Daughter Tamia echoes this sentiment, stating that while the transition was difficult at first, it ultimately helped their family grow stronger.

“It definitely helped my mom better herself, and that helps us too,” she explained. “She’s been the strongest person I know, and she inspires me every day.”

God has a plan

Reynelda McDonald’s journey is far from over. When asked about her plans for the future, she’s quick to reject the notion.

“My life has been built on plans. The plans are what held me up.

I know that God has one and I’m going to trust in that,” she said with conviction. Her immediate goal is to finish her social work degree at Texas Tech University, but beyond that, she is open to whatever path God leads her down.

Daughter Tamia has found inspiration in her mother’s resilience. “If she can do it, anybody can do it,” she smiled, expressing her desire to go to nursing school and work as a Certified Nursing Assistant in the short term.

The battle is already won

Reynelda and her family’s story is one of transformation and perseverance. At Buckner Family Pathways, hope shines like a beacon for single parents who have fallen upon hard times and want to create a new life for themselves and their children. With the help of a dedicated staff, lifted by generous Buckner benefactors, Reynelda’s success can be others’ success. As she continues her journey, she proves that with faith and community, anything is possible because, as she says with a smile, “The battle is already won.” **BT**

Like mother, like daughter

Building a legacy of possibility and purpose • Story by Nik Holman | Photography by Tim Miller

Left on her own to care for six children, penniless and near homeless, Reynelda McDonald reached out to Buckner Family Pathways® for help. After two years in the program, McDonald is halfway towards a degree in social work, transferring to Texas Tech this spring. She has a spacious apartment for her children, she has a job, and she has hope for the future.

However, Reynelda isn’t the only McDonald woman with new hope for her future. At 21, her oldest child, Tamia, completed the certified nursing assistant program at South Plains College and has begun the process of earning a nursing degree. She didn’t plan on attending college right out of high school, but after witnessing her mother’s strength in the face of many obstacles, Tamia felt inspired to continue her education. However, when asked who started school first, they both race to take credit.

“I did,” the mother of six said with a smile.

“But you started in *spring*,” her daughter countered.

“No,” Reynelda corrected. “I started in the *fall* because I moved here. *You* started in spring.”

Facing defeat, Tamia playfully brushes off her mother’s words and moves on. It’s a playful rivalry expected between siblings, not between a mother and daughter. However, these two have come so far, and through so much together, their



Reynelda McDonald and daughter, Tamia, are transforming their lives through education, together.

bond has grown beyond simply a parent and child, to adults who rely on one another for support.

“When my mom went back to college, I was like, ‘If she can do it, anybody can do it.’ I definitely got a push to want to start going back,” Tamia conceded.

Buckner Family Pathways exists to strengthen families by helping single parents complete educational or vocational goals while also providing safety and stability, so children learn and grow in an environment void of fear.

Tamia and her siblings are now part of a legacy of empowerment, proving that many challenges can be overcome with determination and multi-layered support. Other women in the Buckner program, like her mother Reynelda, are transforming future generations by pursuing degrees in fields like nursing and social work. These career paths often reflect their drive to give back.

Such acts of generosity shine a light on how everyone can be part

of this cycle of hope, proving that when mothers are empowered, their children inherit a legacy of possibility and purpose. **BT**



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