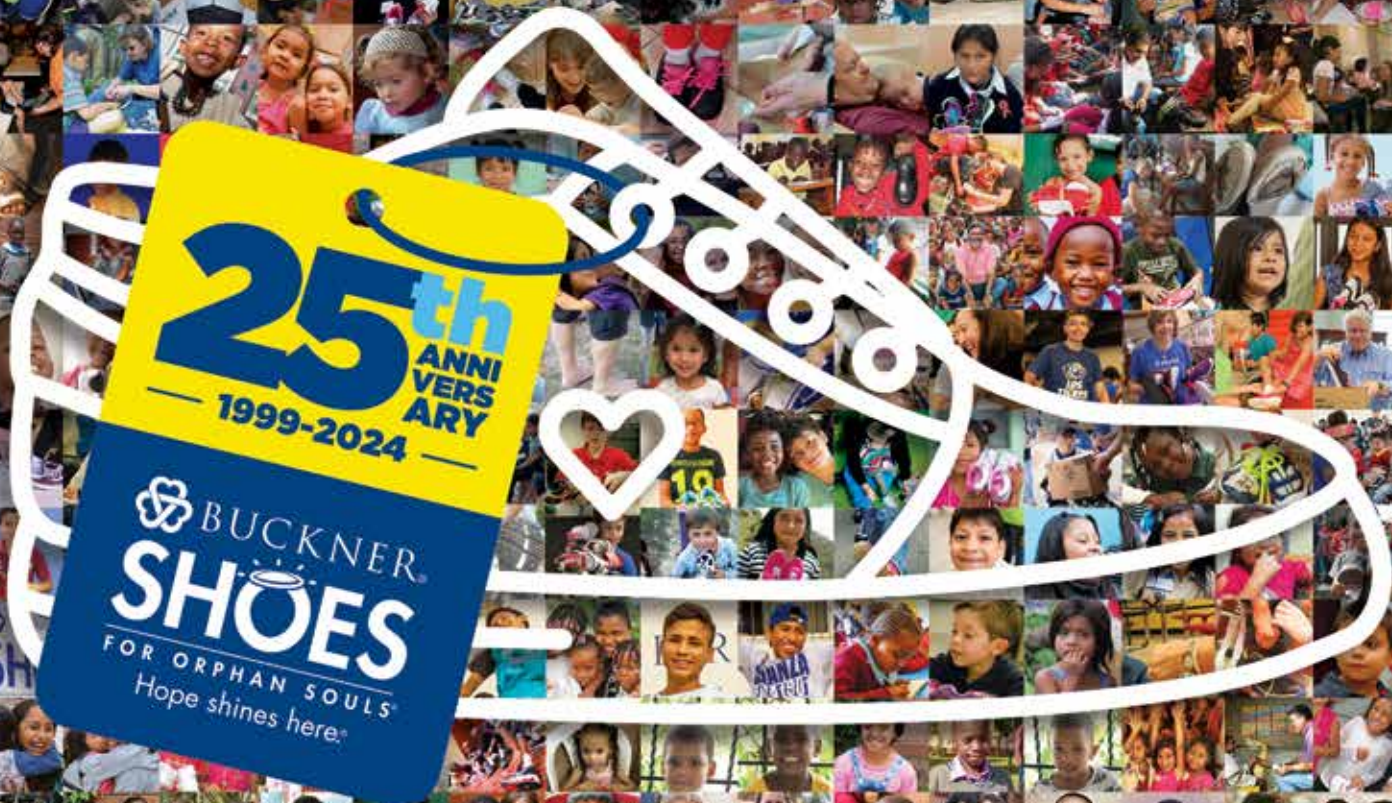


See inside for ways you can support families.

# Buckner

The magazine of Buckner International | FALL 2024

# Today



## Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®:

25 years of providing shoes — and hope — for millions of children pg10





I love the theological concept that God uses ordinary people, in ordinary stations of life, in often ordinary means, to love and serve his world.

— Read more about how a small church is making a big difference in the lives of children on page 22.

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## Simplicity and necessity

The simplicity of a pair of shoes. That's the secret recipe behind the success of Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® for the past 25 years. It's something everyone understands. We all need a new pair of shoes, some of us more than others.

It's as easy to market as Kleenex. And it's the reason we've collected more than 5 million pairs of new shoes since 1999.

But just as important as the simplicity of the "product" has been the necessity of wearing shoes. No doubt one of the first things you do every morning is put on a pair of shoes. Most of us would be afraid not to put on shoes for fear of cutting our feet or

countless other possibilities.

Shoes give kids health, education, opportunity, and hope. We don't ask the boys and girls to choose which one they want. They get all four when they get a new pair of shoes.

As simple and necessary as our messaging may be, you are the real reason we're celebrating this 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Because of you, and tens of thousands of committed people like you, boys and girls all over the world have received a new pair of shoes. Those shoes were given by friends like you and



prepared for shipment by many others who labor in our Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid in Dallas as volunteers.

I've had the privilege to put new shoes on the feet of hundreds of children. It may be the most Christlike act I've ever witnessed. Something special happens when you kneel and remove old, tattered shoes and socks, wash a child's feet, and place new socks and shoes on the child. That's a special moment for me. But it is followed by a special moment for the child, as he or she breaks into a wide smile and begins trying out the new shoes.

Anyone who has been involved with Shoes for Orphan Souls over the past 25 years has a story, something that happened or a "God moment." I've heard dozens of these stories from volunteers and staff. They happen during shoe drives or while sorting shoes at the Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid. And they especially happen during shoe distributions at Buckner Family Hope Centers®.

These stories range from the miraculous with shoes seeming to appear out of nowhere just as a group is running out while putting shoes on children's feet, much like the fish and loaves, to volunteers sensing God's real presence while sorting shoes and writing notes to go inside the shoes for the children.

For me, his name is Juan Miguel. I met Juan Miguel two years ago on a trip to Guatemala. It had been three years between international trips for me due to the pandemic, and I was anxious to spend time with the families we serve.

Likewise, the event hosted at the Buckner Family Hope Center in San Jose Pinula, just outside Guatemala City, was our local team's first large community event in more than two and a half years. The long lines of children and parents winding down the street made it immediately obvious how excited the community was for the celebration and how important Buckner was to the community.

Included that day was a shoe distribution, where I volunteered to help. I washed the feet of dozens of children, putting new socks and shoes on them – some who were nervous, some joyful, and some ticklish.

But Juan Miguel stood out to me. This was his first time at the Family Hope Center. He chatted the entire time as I wiped the dirt from his feet, pulled on his socks, and laced his shoes. He told me all about his favorite subjects in school, his love of soccer and superheroes, and how fast his new shoes were going to make him. He was joyful and pure.

It was only later I learned that Juan Miguel's mother almost didn't bring him to the event. Her mother, Juan Miguel's grandmother, died the day before. But despite her grief, she felt drawn to the Family Hope Center. She believed she would receive a blessing by coming.

That blessing came in the form of a new pairs of shoes for her son – and hope. She realized that people care about her



and Juan Miguel because of a pair of shoes. As she was leaving, she told our staff she was interested in returning to participate in classes, such as financial empowerment and parenting.

Juan Miguel's story is simple. There is nothing particularly miraculous about it. There was no blinding light from heaven or ocean parting that day. Yet in a simple act of love and kindness, a family in grief found compassion and hope. That's the power of a new pair of shoes.

You have a "shoes story" too. It's the support you give this ministry. Thank you for being a part of Shoes for Orphan Souls in whatever way you participated. I want to ask you for continued support in the years ahead. There are more children who need shoes, but just as importantly, they need the hope those shoes give. **BT**



*Albert Reyes*

**Albert Reyes, President and CEO**

*Buckner International*

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

## Third person

This is it. My last column for *Buckner Today*. I'm retiring from Buckner Jan. 31, 2025, after more than 30 years. It has been an honor beyond description to tell the Buckner story and I am grateful to God for this privilege, which has consumed nearly half of my life.

Contemplating this step has led me back in time, reminiscing on the countless stories I have told. For the first edition of *Buckner Today* in magazine format, I wrote about the life of "Hee Haw" TV star Lulu Roman who grew up at Buckner Orphans Home. More recently, I'm writing the story of reuniting with Jeremiah Purdy, a baby boy born on the streets in Guatemala in 2002 and who was adopted through Buckner.

Benjamin Franklin once said, "If you would not be forgotten as soon as you are dead and rotten, either write things worth reading, or do things worth the writing." I believe deeply that Buckner has given me the opportunity to write things worth reading. As much as I have loved the many co-workers I have served alongside, it has always been about the clients' stories for me. They have inspired me and given me hope.

My college writing coach and professor taught us to write in the third person, reminding us we are not the story nor are we part of the story. But during these three decades, the stories have become a part of me, making me the person I am today. I will always be grateful.

Countless colleagues have encouraged me to write a book about the stories I've seen over these 30 years, and I have always demurred at the idea, mostly because it would be like getting a drink from a fire hydrant, there are so many. I wouldn't know where to start, or even more challenging, where to end. Still, as I near the exit, the idea intrigues me because these stories are so compelling and because I've learned so much from the people we serve.

Telling so many powerful stories as a third-party observer through the years affects a person. Many times, I've sat in an interview with a foster parent, a child, or a mom who has overcome immense odds and wondered how I would have responded given their circumstances. I love the life stories of residents at our Buckner senior living communities. I've talked to a wide range of residents, including the former corporate secretary at Exxon who led the team that came up with that name (it's a fascinating story), to missionaries from China

who were persecuted in Japanese camps during World War II.

I have been immensely blessed to serve alongside talented and passionate individuals throughout my career at Buckner. Former staff members have gone on to become leaders in the communications field with other ministries. During my time at Buckner, I have officiated at the funeral service for a staff person and performed the marriage for another. I have seen team members get married and start families, watching many of their children graduate from college. And if I may be permitted a bit of hubris, our teams through the years have been recognized by our peers in our profession for the extraordinary work we have produced.

None of this would have been possible without opportunity, and

I am thankful to Albert Reyes and Ken Hall for the opportunities I've had to serve and to use my calling and my profession for the kingdom of Jesus Christ. And of course, my wife Judy and daughter Claire have been part of everything, enduring long trips away and supporting me at every moment.

I would be remiss not to mention the influence Russell Dilday had on me and the example of leadership and courage he imbued in me. I became director of

Public Relations at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary when I was a tender 29-year-old. Those became traumatic and ultimately life-defining times for many people, as a board of fundamentalist and vindictive trustees fired Dr. Dilday, and I was immediately caught in the whirlwind. Less than an hour after he was fired, I found myself in a small office with the board leaders who gave me specific instructions for framing their ungodly actions with so much spin it made me dizzy. That was March 9, 1994. I started at Buckner June 6, 1994.

The Buckner story in and of itself is amazing. When I came here in 1994, the annual budget was \$30 million. We had no website, no email, only operated in Texas, and had three aging retirement communities. Then, it was Buckner Baptist Benevolences. As I leave, the annual budget for 2025 will push \$200 million. This is a thriving organization whose DNA points not only to the impact it has on lives around the world, but a symbol of what a ministry can be if it avoids mission drift and stays anchored to its biblical core.

It's fitting that my last issue of *Buckner Today* features the ministry



*Always a storyteller, Scott Collins can be found behind the camera capturing the testimony of God's work through Buckner.*

impact of Shoes for Orphan Souls®. In a way, Shoes and I grew up together during our time at Buckner. It's a ministry close to my heart since my first trip in February 1999 with KCBI Radio as they handed the program to Buckner.

Shoes for Orphan Souls is a metaphor for how I feel about the work Buckner does. It's practical and meets immediate need. And most importantly, it's one of the most Christlike ministries I've ever seen.

"I thank Jesus Christ our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he considered me faithful, putting me into service." (1 Timothy 1:12) **BT**

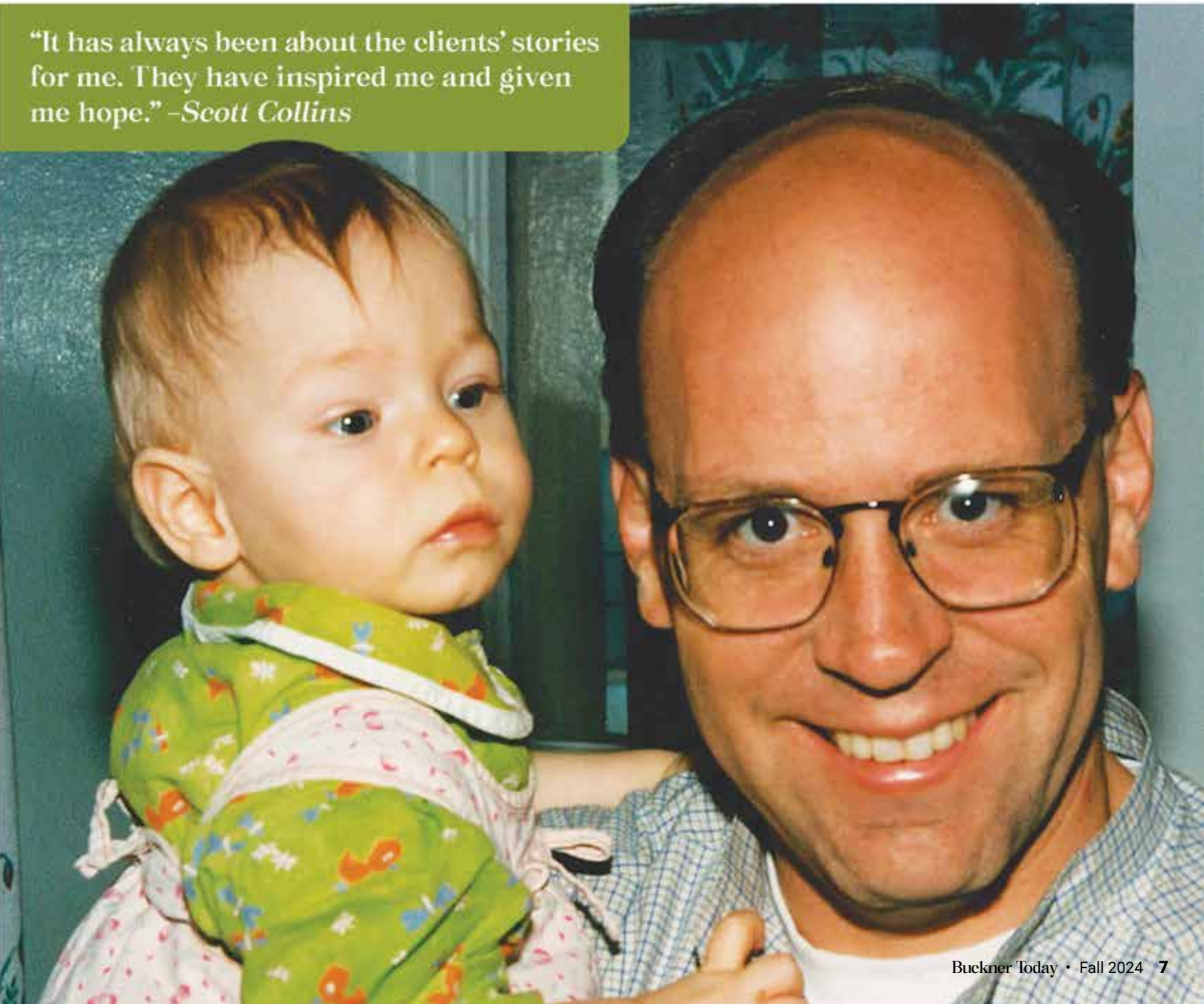


A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Scott Collins".

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

**Word in action.** Throughout his 30 years at Buckner, Scott Collins traveled to many different countries to capture the stories and pictures of Buckner's profound impact, including multiple mission trips to Russian orphanages. But behind the scenes, he too was participating in the ministry work as well, providing love and hope for vulnerable children around the world.

"It has always been about the clients' stories for me. They have inspired me and given me hope." -*Scott Collins*



# BUCKNER *Journal*

## >> Community program revitalizes basketball court

On Oct. 14, about 40 volunteers spent four hours meticulously hand painting a mural on the basketball court at the Buckner Children's Campus in Dallas.

The court transformed into a bright focal point for families who are part of Buckner programs, such as Buckner Family Pathways®.

The mural's images of a basketball and soccer ball were a nod to the dual purpose of the court, both basketball and futsal. Futsal is similar to soccer but is often played on basketball courts.

Buckner was one of the recipients for sports court revitalization as part of a national collaboration between nonprofit City Year and AT&T's Revive Tu Cancha initiative. Translated to "revive your court," the project refreshes local sport courts. Sports equipment including futsal goals and balls, basketballs and storage containers were donated to Buckner.

"We're so thankful these organizations and their volunteers gave their time and energy to this beautiful refresh of our basketball court," said Lindsay Miller, DFW executive director for Buckner Children and Family Services. "This court is a place where our families build a community of friends and neighbors who love and support one another."

Center court of the mural featured a modern design of the Buckner Hornets, the mascot of the school that once stood nearby. The campus is located on land that was once part of the Buckner Orphans Home, which included schools from elementary through high school and a gym. **BT**



# >> Calder Woods uses fitness tests to customize wellness programs

Calder Woods, Buckner's senior living community in Beaumont, created a fun way to develop customized health and wellness classes for residents.

Staying active is an important part of a healthy lifestyle for seniors, so a diverse selection of health and wellness programs are offered to residents to inspire progress toward an active healthy lifestyle. The selection is evidence-based as well as tailored to the community's specific needs.



"These programs are carefully designed based on the results of fitness assessments that help us determine the most suitable classes," said Wellness Director Ronald Sanders.

Sanders conducts on-site fitness assessments based on

research from peer-reviewed journals in sports, physiology, nutrition and aging. Comprehensive evaluations usually require a time-intensive visit to a health care provider; however, Sanders conducts the assessments himself to gain real data allowing him to make decisions for future fitness and wellness activities at the community, based on findings.

Additionally, Sanders tracks the results year-over-year.

"Tracking health and wellness is more fun because seniors know what kind of progress they're making," said Sanders. "We evaluated several key health indicators, assessed fall risk, and depression scores."

Sanders tracks metrics for weight, blood pressure, heart rate, oxygen saturation, electrocardiograms (EKG), and lab work related to cholesterol, diabetes, and metabolism. Metabolic health is a critical factor in maintaining energy levels, supporting immune function, and preventing chronic diseases, he said.

Based on information gathered, upcoming classes at Calder Woods will focus on weight training to recover muscle mass, bone density, and flexibility; core fitness to continue work on balance, stability and posture; and cardiovascular fitness and endurance. **BT**

# >> Buckner Longview carnival provides joy to families

The sounds of children's laughter rang as basketballs sunk in nets, golf balls rolled down the green and tokens clinked in the giant Connect Four game.

On Oct. 1, volunteers, donors and staff welcomed 102 Buckner families to enjoy a fall carnival complete with games, popcorn, cotton candy, snow cones and more at the Buckner Longview campus.

Presented by Texas Bank and Trust, the carnival called "Experience Hope" welcomed families from multiple programs, including the Buckner Family Hope Center®, Buckner Family

Pathways®, Healthy Outcomes through Prevention and Early Support (HOPES) and Fatherhood EFFECT.

The carnival gave families a safe and welcoming place to play while building strong family bonds.

"I love seeing all this come together, playing together and joining together – because we're all serving kids," said foster mother Julia Russel.

Parents enjoyed a picnic on the lawn with their children before making their way through the carnival games. While the day was warmer than hoped, everyone was grateful for the chance to grab a cold drink or a snow cone before the sun finally slipped behind the trees.

Serving vulnerable children and families was truly what Experiencing Hope was all about. For families and volunteers alike, the evening was a reminder that hope shines at Buckner. **BT**



# >> Shoes ministry celebration

On Sept. 14, more than 130 people gathered at the Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid in Dallas to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® and reflect on the profound impact of the transformative ministry.

Special moments from the program included impactful discussion with Natasha Potts, who received a pair of shoes while living in an orphanage in St. Petersburg, Russia, before she and her older brother were adopted. She talked about how special she was made to feel by having her own pair of shoes.

The program also included Ron Harris, who created the idea of Shoes for Russian Souls when working for KCBI Radio in Dallas. Harris discussed the growth of the program and why Buckner was asked to take over what was then an annual collection drive. Since then, Shoes for Orphan Souls has collected more than 5 million pairs of shoes for vulnerable children.

"It's amazing what God can do when you let go of what you think is yours," he reflected.

Following the program, attendees enjoyed a powerful worship



# brates 25 years of hope

concert with longtime friend of Buckner, Geoff Moore.

"Thank you for making Shoes for Orphan Souls one of the nonprofit programs you invest your time in and champion to your family, friends, and even strangers," said Shawn Spurrier.

"I believe Shoes for Orphan Souls has become a gold standard for the way humanitarian aid can and should be delivered. When combined with our Family Hope Centers, it becomes the beginning of a commitment we make to each child. We commit to protect them, to walk alongside their families, and to remind them they are loved by Jesus as well as by thousands of people like you." **BT**



[CLICK HERE](#) to learn more about 25 years of impact by Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®.



# A lot

# is riding on a

# simple

# pair of

# shoes

How full is your closet with shoes? Some of us have so many shoes we don't give them a second thought until we decide on which ones meet our fashion needs of the day.



## Reality check.

*“Some children have never owned shoes at all, much less received new ones.”*



Shoes are more than fashion accessories. To many children around the world, they are a critical necessity. This issue of *Buckner Today* shines a light on the hope that is found in a child when you donate a single pair of new shoes. The soles of shoes are significant to the hearts and souls, and the health of the children who received your gifts over the past 25 years.



### SHOES ACT AS A HEALTH PROTECTION BARRIER.

Even in 2024, there are still children who have no option but to walk barefoot. Unprotected feet are susceptible to cuts allowing parasites and worms to enter the body. These wounds lead to a series of infections and illnesses that can stunt a child's growth and development and are difficult to treat. A simple pair of shoes can change those circumstances.



### SHOES OPEN DOORS TO EDUCATION.

In many countries, children, even poverty-stricken ones, are unable to attend school without shoes. Without education and knowledge, a child who is already disadvantaged and vulnerable has a limited path to the future. Shoes mean a child can walk confidently into the schoolhouse with eyes focused on a brighter future.



### SHOES OFFER HOPE.

Something special happens when you wash a vulnerable child's feet and then place new socks and shoes on them. This act of kindness is transformational, showing a child they are loved. Some children have never owned shoes at all, much less received new ones. New shoes can improve confidence and security. Those shoes mean a child might jump higher and dream bigger.



### A NEW PAIR OF SHOES CREATES OPPORTUNITY.

Shoes connect families to holistic Buckner ministries. For many families, receiving shoes for their children is the first step to connecting them with critical services at the Buckner Family Hope Center® in their community. Family Hope Center teams support families through coaching, education, parenting and communication skills. These tools help put a family on a transformational journey that can change the course for future generations. All it takes sometimes is a new pair of shoes and some love. **BT**

## 1999 Heart and soles

The first Buckner shoe campaign collected nearly 20,000 pairs of new shoes. Filling two 40-foot shipping containers, the shoes were sent to Russia. Called "Journey of the Heart," Buckner volunteers traveled to Russia and shared shoes with thousands of children in 35 orphanages in St. Petersburg, Vladimir and Kostroma.

Buckner trustee Tom Stone and his wife, Margaret, were part of the team in St. Petersburg. The Stones, members of First Baptist Church, Longview, led their church to collect several hundred shoes for the drive.

"What I realized is that it's not what you put on their feet that makes a difference," he said. "It's what you leave in their hearts that matters most."



## 2004 Feels like a home run



On June 12, 2004, President Mike Cramer of the Texas Rangers Baseball Club presented Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® with its 1 millionth pair of shoes during the opening ceremonies of the Texas Rangers versus the St. Louis Cardinals.

Cramer and his wife, Christy, presented the 1 millionth pair of shoes to the Buckner team and orphan children from St. Petersburg, Russia, who visited North Texas in June.

Those shoes were generously given by more than 5,000 churches, schools and civic groups in all 50 states conducting local shoe drives that impact children in more than 30 countries.



## 2013 Barefoot experience

Volunteers of the Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid in Dallas can walk a mile in the shoes – or bare feet – of the children who are served by Shoes for Orphan Souls.

Buckner staff unveiled the Barefoot Experience in February. It features different terrain with soil and rock samples common in Peru, Ethiopia and Mexico so that volunteers can feel what it is like for children who walk without shoes.

Instead of just coming into a warehouse to sort shoes for distribution, the experience provides a physical and tangible resource where they can see and feel the needs of the different countries where Buckner supports vulnerable children.



**A history of**  
**BUCKNER**  
**SHOES**  
FOR ORPHAN SOULS®  
Hope shines here.®

**1994**  
KCBI Radio in Dallas launched its first-ever "Shoes for Russian Souls" campaign, appealing to listeners to donate new shoes for delivery to vulnerable children in Russian orphanages.

**1998**  
Donations increased so much that Buckner was asked to take over the annual drive. At the time, about 5,000 new pairs of shoes are collected each year.

**1999**  
Buckner launched its first-ever Shoes for Russian Souls campaign. The one-month drive far exceeded goals by collecting 17,500 pairs of shoes.

**2000**  
Buckner made the strategic decision to expand shoe distribution beyond Russia and changed the program name to Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®.

**2000**  
For the first time, annual donations surpassed 50,000 pairs of shoes. They were delivered to children in Russia, Romania and China.

**2001**  
Shoes for Orphan Souls went national with drives in more than 28 states. More than 100,000 shoes were shared with children around the world.

## 2015 Three million and counting

It was a moment of joy for 5-year-old Dulce Alquijay Raymundo, dressed in pink with pigtails bobbing as she jumped with excitement. On Jan. 12, Dulce received the 3 millionth pair of shoes distributed through Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls.

Like so many children who have received shoes through the years, Dulce's pair was another step along a larger journey toward health and wholeness with the help of the Buckner Family Hope Center® in Guatemala.

Dulce's mother, Maria Elena Raymundo, came to the Family Hope Center in 2012. Since that time, the family received help in numerous ways, including food assistance, spiritual guidance, parenting classes and other support.

"I have seen a positive change in Maria Elena through her time at the Family Hope Center," said Buckner social worker Perla Maldonado."



## 2021 20 years of Missouri Rotary

Missouri Rotary District 6040 celebrated an important milestone, collecting shoes for Shoes for Orphan Souls since 2001. Then newly elected district governor, Larry Lunsford, mulled about a way to unite what was then 54 Rotary Clubs in the North Missouri district while also creating acts of service.

"The magic of the Shoes for Orphan Souls project is the fact that it allows Rotarians to connect internationally while serving children," said Lunsford.

In 2001, their first year collecting shoes, Lunsford set a goal of collecting 2,600 pairs of shoes – one pair of shoes for every Rotarian in the district. They surpassed their goal by almost three times with 7,300 pairs of shoes collected.

By 2024, Missouri Rotarians went on to collect more than 435,000 pairs of shoes for Buckner.



## 2023 Taking a big step

With great fanfare, 8-year-old Rodrigo Correon Martinez received the 5 millionth pair of shoes distributed by Shoes for Orphan Souls since 1999. Dr. Lilibeth Santiago, executive director of Buckner Mexico, placed the bright red sneakers on his feet.

On Aug. 22, Rodrigo and 150 other children and their families gathered in the courtyard of the Buckner Family Hope Center in Xoxocotlán, Mexico.

Buckner volunteers and staff, including President and CEO Albert Reyes, ceremonially cleaned the children's feet before placing a new pair of shoes, selected specifically for each child, on them.

A new pair of shoes meant Rodrigo could walk safely to school. **BT**



### 2004

The 1 millionth pair of shoes was given by Texas Rangers President Mike Cramer during a Texas Rangers versus St. Louis Cardinals game.

### 2005

Buckner distributed more than 9,000 pairs of shoes and 15,500 pairs of socks to Hurricane Katrina evacuees in Dallas, Houston and Baton Rouge, La.

### 2007

Shoe collections now numbered 200,000 new shoes annually from all 50 states. The Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid opened in Dallas to accommodate the shipments of shoes.

### 2008

For the first time, Shoes for Orphan Souls offered individuals the ability to host online shoe drives.

### 2009

Shoes for Orphan Souls celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a Buckner ministry. Shoes for Orphan Souls accepted the 2 millionth pair of shoes.

### 2010

South Main Baptist Church in Houston celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> year of collecting shoes by linking 10,000 shoes together, earning a Guinness World Record.

### 2019

20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrated in Sept.

### 2020

67,025 shoes collected despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 2024

Shoes for Orphan Souls is celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

# Wednesday volunteers

*Regular crew serves Buckner, finds life enrichment*

Story and photography by Linda Goelzer

## RICK'S STORY

Rick McDaniel retired in January 2021. Dallas weather was colder than usual and the COVID pandemic was entering its second year. McDaniel thought he had planned for his retirement, the things he wanted and needed to do with his time. But after 60 days, he couldn't continue sitting at home alone after spending years working around other people.

"I was finished with what I needed to do before midday and I needed something else to fill the time," said McDaniel.

He found his next calling through an unlikely source. During a casual conversation with someone he met at the gym, the advice had a profound effect. The advice was that McDaniel needed to volunteer. That's how he found the ministry of Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®.

The headquarters, housed within the Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid on land that once belonged to the original Buckner Orphans Home, was on McDaniel's former route to and from work. For years, he had seen lines of cars forming in the parking lot when various distributions took place, and he decided to inquire about the warehouse he had once passed daily.

That was more than two years ago. Today, McDaniel volunteers three days a week processing shoes donations for Shoes for Orphan Souls. He also volunteers with Network of Community Ministries (Network)





in Richardson the other two weekdays.

“Volunteering at Buckner gave my life purpose,” McDaniel reflected. “I like what I’ve learned about their mission, and this is a way I can support that. I also met my best friend, Brian, here. I have since joined the church where Brian and his family attend.”

McDaniel’s friend, Brian Newton, volunteers two days a week and also volunteers at Network when he is not processing shoes. The two friends work efficiently together, such as the day they were unpacking a large shipment of shoes that arrived from the Moody Radio Shoe Drive in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

“I have volunteered with Buckner in several capacities since

about 2018. I started in this role three years ago,” said Newton. “The staff finds different ways for us to help out, whether it’s opening boxes and sorting shoes or moving pallets from one location to another in the warehouse.”

Every pair of shoes placed on a child’s feet begins with generosity and time donated by people who shopped for and purchased them, as well as delivered them to a drop-off point. The Center for Humanitarian Aid handles logistics of transporting shoes from drop-off points or shoe drives to its distribution center.

McDaniel, Newton and hundreds of volunteers descend upon the center annually to process the donated shoes. Without volunteers, it remains unimaginable how Buckner could acquire millions of shoes and place them on the feet of children in 86 countries around the world.

As with most things, volunteering is better when you do it with friends.

## CIRCLE OF FRIENDS

There are volunteers and then there are “the coaches.” That’s the name lovingly bestowed on the weekly Wednesday morning group of volunteers at Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls. After years of shoe processing, these volunteers now instruct others. Seven or eight of them, including McDaniel and Newton, gather at 9:30 a.m. most Wednesdays and as many as 14 can be counted among the “founding circle.”

Ed Wales has volunteered since his 2007 retirement and more recently recruited his neighbor, Dan Lundberg. Wales cherishes an earlier history with Buckner.



“My favorite memory is February 1999, going on a mission trip to Russia,” recalled Wales. “It was a joy to put shoes and socks on the children’s feet, to play with them, and to hug them.”

Wales asserts the shock of observing children with so little, was difficult to accept then and serves as a reality check behind his volunteer work today.

Rosemary Morice’s volunteer time precedes Wales. Morice traveled with her daughter, who works for Buckner, on a Buckner mission trip in 2004 to put shoes on orphans’ feet. The experience hooked her, and Morice began volunteering for Shoes for Orphan Souls on a regular basis in 2005.

They each play an important part in the process of preparing donated shoes for vulnerable children.



““““  
**Volunteering at  
Buckner  
gave my  
life  
purpose.**

**— Rick McDaniel,**  
*Shoes for Orphan Souls volunteer*



“The men tend to like opening boxes, breaking down boxes, and sorting the shoes into larger bins,” said Morice. “We women enjoy tucking in the shoelaces, attaching rubber bands to hold the pair together, writing notes of God’s love, and inserting them into each pair.”

## FROM VOLUNTEERS TO FRIENDS

The volunteers’ gatherings are equally about processing shoes and processing life’s ups and downs. They care about and for each other, celebrating the highlights and supporting the discouragements.

Today, Eva Turner brought a card for Caroline Griffiths, who is absent as she recovers from hip surgery and begins the journey of rehabilitation. They each signed it, then some left fun phone

messages to encourage her.

There’s a ritual of gathering for coffee in the breakroom after the shoe business is finished. It keeps the connection alive. Eva’s sister, Betty Threats, is celebrating her birthday and shares the homemade caramel cake her husband baked. The group’s consensus is that it is delicious!

The friendships here are deep. Not just smiles and courtesies. They carry burdens. “There is so much to be distressed about in our country and our world,” said Turner. “We have to keep in prayer. We just have to.”

And that’s the way they end each volunteer session – holding hands while lifting up prayers and finishing with arms around each other’s shoulders in a large circle hug. It’s a beautiful way to ensure children around the world have shoes and hope. **BT**

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“The coaches” gather for a prayer circle which ends each of their Wednesday volunteer sessions, including (from left to right) Rosemary Morice, Catherine Bates, Dan Lundberg, Eva Turner, Ed Wales and Betty Threats.





**S**hoes. Something so simple is also hugely powerful.

This year marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the transformative ministry of Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®. In that time, friends like you donated more than five million pairs of

shoes, plus socks, to help change the lives of vulnerable children.

When the future looks bleak, the carefree, happy smiles of childhood are missing.

Shoes give children access to education so they can be released from the cycle of



poverty. **Just \$15** covers the full cost of providing a pair of brand-new shoes to a vulnerable child.

Please help more children take their first steps to a brighter future in a new pair of shoes.

***Change a child's future by providing them with new shoes. [CLICK HERE](http://www.buckner.org/shoes) or visit [www.buckner.org/shoes](http://www.buckner.org/shoes).***

 **BUCKNER<sup>®</sup> SHOES<sup>®</sup>**  
FOR ORPHAN SOULS<sup>®</sup>

Hope shines here.<sup>®</sup>

# The little church that could

Story by  
Linda Goelzer  
Photography  
by Ty Johnston



## Big in spirit

“A small mountaintop church is doing big things, hard things to show love for their community and God’s kingdom.”

**N**ew Beginning Bible Church sits half a football field off the road and behind the welcome sign indicating its presence. The white steeple-less church nestles perfectly among trees on a sprawling grass-covered lawn in Menlo, Ga., near the Tennessee border. Perched atop Lookout Mountain with a 2,000-foot drop to the valley below, this is a place where you can breathe deeply and hear your thoughts tiptoe in. A space that draws your eyes upward, your body immediately overshadowed by towering trees and puffy clouds in a blue sky.



This is where Michael and Sheila Dunwoody, pastor and his wife of New Beginning Bible Church, raised their family and continue to make their home. The church began with, and is sustained by, heartwarming people with a humble faith in God. The church’s foundation is built on loving Jesus, serving one another, and any other in the community who needs them.

For 23 years, the church has contributed new shoes and socks to Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®, celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. Perhaps more profound, this small Christian congregation of merely 37 members, most with limited income, has donated more than 20,000 new pairs of shoes over those years.

“Think about that for a minute,” said Shawn Spurrier, director of Shoes for Orphan Souls. “This is a little church that can do big things, hard things. The church is among the upper tier of churches donating shoes, for its number of contributions, across the entire 25-year history of Shoes for Orphan Souls.”

## IN THE BEGINNING

Pastor Michael Dunwoody recalls their church donated about 10 pairs of shoes when they initially discovered Shoes for Orphan Souls through a Christian radio station, WMBW Moody Radio in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The broadcast team



## “I have seven grandchildren, and I couldn’t imagine them without shoes.” – Sheila Dunwoody, New Beginning Bible Church

conducts an annual, areawide shoe drive each August. Churches, businesses, and individuals travel far and wide to deliver shoes throughout the month; and on the last day, shoes come in by the car, minivan and truckload to a designated location with capacity to accommodate the volume of traffic and donations.

In subsequent years, New Beginning church steadily amassed more pairs of shoes, as then, Pastor Dunwoody encouraged members to double their previous year’s donations. One year, after amassing a 100-pair assortment, he asked the church if it would be too hard to consider giving 200 next year. And it was so.

### SHE HEARD IT ON THE RADIO

New Beginning church could not have predicted its future scope of shoe collections. Their world changed when Sheila said she “received a word from God.”

“I was listening to Moody Radio where some people were talking about a [mission] trip they went on. I can’t remember where they went. I was washing dishes, and the Lord spoke to me plainly. He’s not spoken audibly to me a whole lot of times, but he said, ‘You’re going to Russia.’ I turned around and I thought, ‘What? Nah. Not me. I may have flown on an airplane one time, but not a long trip like that.’ And he told me again, ‘You’re going to Russia.’”

When the pastor returned home from his farm-operations job, he found Sheila’s face covered in fresh tears and asked what was wrong. She coaxed him to listen to the stories being told on the radio. Then she informed her husband, “God’s telling me I’m going to Russia.” To which her husband matter-of-factly responded, “When are you leaving?”

Moody Radio’s mission trip, in 2005, was a chance for listeners to join Buckner staff on a shoe delivery to vulnerable children housed

in orphanages in Russia. Volunteers traveling with the group would place new shoes and socks on the feet of children who may not have any or might currently share a pair with another child. No one owned new shoes. They would also play, sing and pray with the children to share God’s love for them through Jesus Christ.

The following Sunday at the church’s annual homecoming, Sheila Dunwoody convinced her friend, who returned for the gathering, to join her on the mission trip to Russia. It would cost \$3,500 each (the equivalent of about \$6,400 today).

The women raised money through bake sales and requests to business owners and friends. Sheila even ran into a gentleman she knew at the post office who wrote a \$500 check to cover the \$250 deposits for both ladies. The church’s spaghetti supper helped them reach their goal.

### TO RUSSIA WITH SHOES AND LOVE

After the 19-hour plane trip, Sheila arrived in Russia and her eyes opened wide.

*Sheila Dunwoody treasures a handmade craft purchased from a teenager in a Russian orphanage.*



“For me, living out in the country like we do, it was just overwhelming because I couldn’t get over all the beautiful things that were there,” she reminisced.

“They took us sightseeing to buildings with the gold and all the mosaics. Just beautiful. But why were there so many kids in orphanages? They would just cry for you to pick them up and love on them,” Sheila recalled through tender tears. “And a teenagers’ orphanage was four hours away from the city.”

Upon her return to Lookout Mountain from Russia, the seeds of God’s love for the most vulnerable children were firmly planted in Sheila Dunwoody’s heart. Having experienced the hope provided by a simple gift of new shoes, she and her husband agreed there was more work to do.

“I just knew we needed to get more shoes. Because I knew if there were kids like that in Russia, there had to be others all over. I have seven grandchildren, and I couldn’t imagine them without shoes,” said Sheila.

## ON THE MOUNTAIN TOP

The pastor’s wife shared her Russia experience through stories, photos, and homemade souvenirs crafted by the children in Russia. She fueled a fire within the hearts of the congregation to collect as many shoes as they could, as they were able, throughout the year.

Their community responded powerfully to the church’s stories about Shoes for Orphan Souls. There were years when the church collected 500, 1,000, and 2,000 pairs because their faithful pastor invited them to give sacrificially. It became a year-round process of scouting shoe sales and sharing the intel with others.

Perhaps the most notable story involved a trip to Walmart after receiving advance notice of a sale. When Sheila arrived, an employee in the shoe department suggested the store manager would probably discount the shoes further if she asked him and explained what she was doing. Request granted. Sheila left the store eight hours later with more than 800 boxes of shoes.

“Can you imagine checking out 800 pairs of shoes? We filled up Michael’s truck,” said Sheila.

That was the year the church delivered 2,300 pairs of shoes to Buckner through the Moody Radio Shoe Drive in Chattanooga.

“People really want to help. You just have to ask them,” said Pastor Dunwoody. “I mean, I go in the feed store

where I buy cow feed and say, ‘Hey, we’re collecting shoes for Shoes for Orphan Souls for Buckner out in Texas. Would you like to help?’ And they say ‘Yeah, we’d like to help’ and they just hand me a \$100 bill.

“I thank God for Moody Radio and for them giving us this chance to help others. That’s how we heard about it,” said the pastor.

## ORDINARY PEOPLE

New Beginning church’s commitment to collecting shoes is but a symbol of their deep devotion to people, demonstrated by the actions of this small body of Christ-followers. They monetarily support dozens of global missionaries; replenish food for their hand-constructed Blessing Box erected on the side of the road for hungry passersby; and pack basic necessities into hundreds of shoe boxes for another ministry. A former children’s Sunday school room, no longer used by the aging congregation, is the store house for school supplies, diapers, and sundry other provisions of daily living – ready for gifting when the opportunity arises. None of these individual actions is extravagant. Yet, over time, their small acts of care and kindness, practiced in unity, lead to amazing things.

“No one in our church has gone hungry because they decided to pick up another pair of shoes,” said Pastor Dunwoody. “We care about people and we’re trying to follow the examples of Jesus. In Matthew 25:40 Jesus says, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

“I love the theological concept that God uses ordinary people, in ordinary stations of life, in often ordinary means, to love and serve his world,” Spurrier shared. “Without meetings or committees, in a world that often expects big and extravagant, New Beginning Bible Church is an example of how God still uses ordinary people.” **BT**



WMBW 88.9 FM host Tabi Upton dons a shoe costume during live promotions of the Moody radio station's annual shoe drive for Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls.



# The power of radio

Story and photography by Linda Goelzer



**B**efore the existence of audio streaming services, the internet, or even television, there was radio. Radio provided musical entertainment, storytelling, and news. It added sound and left room for imagination. All you had to do was turn it on, tune it in, and listen. Radio opened a door to the world and the voice on the other end of the microphone seemed like a friend.

The uncomplicated way radio delivers information is so powerful it remains with us today.

So powerful, in fact, it made a profound impact on one of Buckner's ministries—Shoes for Orphan Souls®.

“Radio is one of the most intimate forms of mass communication,” said Ron Harris, former general manager of KCBI radio in Dallas, one of the country’s leading Christian radio stations. “When you broadcast on the radio, you are speaking directly to the person listening. The listener might be with a group, but the listener hears the message individually, coming from one other person.”

Harris is the inventive mind behind Shoes for Russian Souls,

the ministry that preceded Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls. On a trip to Russia, Harris saw the orphanages and learned of the critical need for shoes.

In 1994 KCBI used those powerful airwaves to invite its listeners and others to donate new shoes and socks during a shoe drive for children in Russian orphanages. The donations increased year over year, and Harris saw the ministry's growth was unsustainable for a radio station and its small staff who also sorted, processed and readied the shoes for shipment. At Harris' request, Buckner assumed the ministry in 1999 to continue the work. The name changed in 2000 to reflect Buckner's global reach beyond Russia.

"Sometimes we need to take our hands off our projects and let God do something with it that is more than we can hope or imagine," Harris reflected.

Like KCBI, other Christian radio stations across the country serve as platforms to share Jesus' love with the world. They are also valuable sources for learning about opportunities to demonstrate Jesus' love to others in your community and the world. Harris believes radio's power of one-to-one communication contributes to the reasons people respond when a radio broadcaster presents a call-to-action.

"Donating shoes is a simple thing we can do in a young life half a world away. Look at the simple things and let God do God's work," Harris said.

Now in its 25<sup>th</sup> year, Shoes for Orphan Souls has placed more than 5 million pairs of shoes on vulnerable children's feet in 86 countries. Christian radio stations continue to supply power-of-voice behind the ministry, introducing the Buckner brand to hundreds of thousands of people outside of Texas. The stations also host shoe drives and tell their listeners how they can host a drive, and donate shoes or money, to help vulnerable children.

WMBW 88.9 FM in Chattanooga, Tennessee, part of the Moody Broadcast Network, has hosted mission trips with Buckner, inviting their audiences to travel and experience what it feels like to place new socks and shoes on the feet of children and share God's love for them.

Brent Manion, WMBW station manager, traveled to Oaxaca City, Oaxaca, Mexico with his listeners and Buckner staff. Many of the volunteers from Chattanooga have traveled up to 10 times to the Mexican city, and now consider the families and children of Oaxaca their friends.

Cindy Popovich traveled to Oaxaca City five times with WMBW and Buckner. She saw firsthand how shoe distributions are a catalyst for introducing people to critical services Buckner offers that can transform families.

"People are so wonderful, friendly, loving and kind. It's remarkable to observe the progress as Buckner has provided opportunities for women to learn how to create economy from the talents they already employ through beautiful handmade crafts," Popovich said.

"Even if you don't travel on a mission trip, the simple act of donating shoes gives people here in Tennessee an opportunity to affect the lives of children around the world," said Manion. "It is an ordinary expense that provides an extraordinary impact."

Donors, through their churches, businesses, civic organizations and on their own, contribute to WMBW's annual August shoe drive. This year, donors provided 13,486 pairs of shoes. When combined with financial donations, the drive provided an equivalent of 14,283 pairs. Contributions to the drive consistently reach these totals, highlighting the community's ongoing generosity. Manion said many of the donations come from neighboring states and beyond.

Shawn Spurrier, director of Shoes for Orphan Souls, was in Oaxaca City when 8-year-old Rodrigo Correon Martinez received the 5-millionth pair of shoes from Buckner. His family, according to Spurrier, faced a choice between food and clothing, causing the Martinez children to fall behind on their education. They couldn't attend school without shoes, and education is often pivotal to a family in rising above poverty.

"Our ability to do this is directly connected to the excitement and engagement of countless people who have made 5 million pairs of shoes possible. It's just reflective of a lot of people who have engaged with this activity and this project," he said.

Over the last 25 years, much of the engagement comes from radio listeners. Radio stations have boosted the volume on the message that shoes mean health, by protecting children's feet against disease and infection. They mean hope by demonstrating a child's worth and God's love. Shoes remove a barrier to school attendance for children, and they provide opportunities by connecting families to critical services, programs and mentoring at Buckner Family Hope Centers® around the world. **BT**



*During Tom McElligott's live, on location broadcast for WMBW 88.9 FM, he tries to connect listeners to stories of the children they are helping.*

# Shoes Helped Buckner Take a Big Leap

By Scott Collins

*Senior Vice President of Communications, Buckner International*

I've heard all the pithy sayings over the past 25 years. Even been guilty of using them. "Shoes help kids take big steps." "New shoes give a child a leg up." "Step into hope with a new pair of shoes." Or, maybe my favorite, "Shoes give a child a foot in the door."

Here's one: "Shoes helped Buckner take big strides."

One of the side effects of the Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® ministry has been its ability to open doors for Buckner International, allowing us to walk into new places of ministry and becoming the first step for donors, volunteers, churches, and civic organizations. See, I did it again.

## **CREDIBILITY**

I'll never forget our first shoe distribution trip to Russia in November 1999. Earlier that year on a trip to orphanages in the St. Petersburg region, one of our leaders promised orphanage directors that Buckner would return later in the year with more than 5,000 shoes for their children. Those directors politely smiled and nodded.

When we showed up that November with more than 10,000 pairs of brand-new shoes for Russian orphans, those same directors admitted they hadn't believed us. Other Western nonprofits had made countless promises to help their children, only to disappear and never return. And yet, here was Buckner, with two busloads of volunteers ready to put those shoes on the children's feet.

We gained instant credibility with government officials, who subsequently opened their doors, allowing us to introduce innovative programs and train their staff. That's especially true for our Buckner nongovernmental organizations in other countries as well.

It's been like that everywhere we've delivered shoes. Shoes for Orphan Souls® catapulted Buckner to the top of the list as a trusted humanitarian organization.

## **AID AND MORE AID**

Speaking of humanitarian aid, the 45,000-square-foot Buckner Humanitarian Aid Center in Dallas was built because of Shoes for Orphan Souls.

During the early years of Shoes for Orphan Souls, it was ironically an orphan ministry. It had no home and moved several times from a

mall location in North Dallas to an old furniture store before landing in a leased warehouse on South Buckner Blvd. As more and more shoes came in from around the country and more volunteers asked to help, it became apparent something had to be done.

Today, the Ruth and Don Buchholtz Humanitarian Aid Center is a modern building employing the latest technology and a highly qualified team. When it opened, the center also welcomed an expanded client assistance program that had operated from Buckner Children's Home for decades, offering domestic aid to thousands of people. And while shoes still occupy the majority of the space, the team ships everything from medical supplies, water filters, and furniture to Buckner nongovernmental organizations in seven countries.

And a final note about the center. While we often shortcut its name to just "the warehouse," we have been careful to say the building is not a warehouse, but a distribution center. The last thing we want is to hold onto what's in there.

## **HELLO!**

Shoes are an easy ask. We all get it. Everyone knows people need shoes. It's a concept a lot easier to grasp than our other programs at Buckner. I've been here 30 years, and I don't fully comprehend the depth and density of some of our work.

It's also a lot easier to ask someone to give a pair of shoes than to open your home for therapeutic foster children. It's less jarring for you to donate a pair of new shoes than to write a six-figure check the first time you hear about Buckner.

So, it's time for another pun. Shoes are the first step for a lot of people. It's how we introduce newcomers to our 145-year-old ministry. From sermons in churches to social media, thousands of people have taken their first step with Buckner by donating a pair of new shoes.

It's the same with the people we serve. We've heard countless stories of families becoming deeply involved in one of our Family Hope Centers® after their children came to the center for a new pair of shoes. The skeptical parents see their children being served and ask what else we do. A pair of shoes leads to stronger families. Said another way, a simple pair of shoes enables families to take bigger and bigger steps.

## WWJD

I can't write about Shoes for Orphan Souls without mentioning what for me has been most inspiring. In February 1999, as Buckner was about to inherit the program from KCBI Radio in Dallas, I traveled to Russia for the radio station's last mission trip to give out shoes. I was the Buckner scout to see how the ministry worked and to get some video and photos we could use later that year.

I said it then and I still say it – watching someone kneel, remove a pair of old tattered shoes and dirty socks from a child and then wash the child's feet is deeply moving. Not only is it what Jesus would do, it's what he did.

## FOOTNOTE

When was the last time you allowed someone to wash your feet? Right. When you think about it, you know why Simon Peter refused to let Jesus wash his feet. While it takes great humility to

wash someone else's feet, it also takes humility to let someone wash yours.

I think about that every time I wash a child's feet, and it humbles me. **BT**



# Connecting Buckner ministries



Volunteers from Ventana by Buckner sort shoes and tuck notes of love inside prior to shipment to locations where they are shared with vulnerable children.

## *Buckner seniors support Shoes for Orphan Souls®*

*Story by Kayla Salzman*

For 25 years, Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® has brightened the lives of children in the United States and internationally with a new pair of shoes. At the heart of the ministry are people giving the gift of hope by purchasing a pair of shoes, making a financial contribution, and volunteering their time.

Some of those who volunteer time and resources are no strangers to the Buckner mission, but rather live it each day.

Buckner Retirement Services communities provide senior adults with a vibrant, active and independent lifestyle. One of the ways Buckner enriches the lives of senior adults is through community involvement, including in the ministry of Shoes for Orphan Souls. Seniors help in a variety of ways, such as donating shoes and socks, championing the ministry, and volunteering their time to help sort and prepare shoes for shipping to vulnerable children who need them.

Buckner's senior living communities participating over the years include Parkway Place in Houston, Calder Woods in Beaumont, and Ventana by Buckner in Dallas.

At Calder Woods, Shoes for Orphan Souls hosts an annual luncheon for residents to learn about the ministry and its shoe distribution events to vulnerable children around the world. Residents participate in their local shoe drive each year by bringing

their own donations, and by writing letters to family and friends to encourage their donations too.

In 2024, Calder Woods residents collected 19 pairs of shoes and 20 pairs of socks for Shoes for Orphan Souls.

At Ventana by Buckner, residents are given the opportunity to help sort shoes for distribution to children. They write notes of God's love and insert them in each pair of shoes for the children who will receive them. Members have also visited the Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid for shoe sorting volunteer events.

Not only does this volunteer work help vulnerable children, but it also builds community between residents and builds a sense of purpose in themselves, explained Holly Yates, lifestyle director at Ventana by Buckner.

"I think volunteering at any age brings joy and a sense of purpose, but especially in your later years when loneliness can be prevalent," she said.

Volunteering as a senior adult can have many benefits mentally and socially, such as cognitive stimulation and creating a sense of purpose.

The Buckner mission to follow the example of Jesus by serving vulnerable children, families and seniors is prevalent in all areas of ministry. From providing shoes to vulnerable children to serving senior adults, service is woven into the fabric of Buckner International. **BT**

# Little step. **Big hope.**



The gift of a pair of shoes is often the **first step in the transformation** of the life of a child and a child's family.

## What can you do?

### 1. Host a shoe drive

Register to collect new shoes and socks for vulnerable children. Hold one yourself. Gather friends at book club or kids in the scout troop. Ask your church to take action.

### 2. Volunteer

We need volunteers to sort, pack and write notes of God's love to tuck in shoes before they're shipped to communities in Texas and around the world where vulnerable children lack shoes.

### 3. Celebrate your birthday

We'll send you the invites, a birthday shirt, confetti and more! Use your special day to celebrate the gift of giving by asking friends and family to gift new shoes.

### 4. Make a donation

No time to party or organize a shoe collection drive? **Just \$15** - the price of two specialty coffee drinks - buys a new pair of shoes and transports them to a vulnerable child in need of shoes.



## What steps will you take?

[www.buckner.org/shoes](http://www.buckner.org/shoes)

# Better together

Buckner Guatemala and Buckner Honduras celebrate milestone anniversaries | Story by Chris Ruth • Photography by Tim Miller

**“On a cloudless morning in a quiet village, Samuel returned home with his mother, siblings, uncles, and grandmother. Jenifer displayed a big smile at the sight of his family reunion,” said Dr. Albert Reyes, as he recounted the story of Margarita and baby Samuel to a room full of Guatemalan church leaders, government officials, and employees of Buckner Guatemala.**

The president and CEO of Buckner International traveled to Guatemala City to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Buckner Guatemala’s registration as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in the country.

Rather than list off the hundreds of thousands of children protected or families served since 2004, Reyes talked about one story. A story that made national headlines in Guatemala. The story of a baby stolen from his mother before she could ever hold him.

“Margarita Gomez slowly stirred in a dark room with aches and pains, a day after childbirth,” began Reyes. “Her hands glided up and down the bed around her, but she could not sense the body of her newborn.

“Sitting up, she called to those who had been taking care of her and asked for her newborn child. ‘You have no child,’ they responded.’ Margarita knew that was a lie, but her life was threatened if she ever professed otherwise. Her baby was gone.”

The audience of more than 100 people listened closely as Reyes detailed the police investigation into the missing child, the discovery of baby Samuel, and the arrest of those responsible for his abduction. But the story did not end there. It was just the beginning of Margarita’s six-month ordeal to get her baby back – a journey supported by Buckner.

Reyes explained how Jenifer Montes, a Buckner caseworker





with the Semillas de Esperanza project was notified of Margarita's situation by Guatemala's national judicial court. Montes performed the investigation and legal casework necessary to determine Margarita was the mother and reunite her with her baby.

The story illustrated the impact of Buckner over its 20 years in Guatemala, as well as the way its team collaborates with government agencies and nonprofits throughout the country to serve more children and families.

The constant emphasis on collaboration is why the Buckner Guatemala team chose "Juntos es mejor" as the theme to represent its anniversary celebrations. It translates to "Better together."

After Reyes reminded the audience of the strength in working together, Rocío López, the senior director of international operations for Buckner International, took the stage to speak about the shared vision Buckner has across all six NGOs from Latin America to Kenya.

"We are an international organization of people with servant hearts. And just by being here today, everyone in this room is part of our mission," said López. Her point was reinforced when video messages from each of the Buckner Latin America national directors

played to congratulate the Guatemala team and emphasize their commitment to a shared mission.

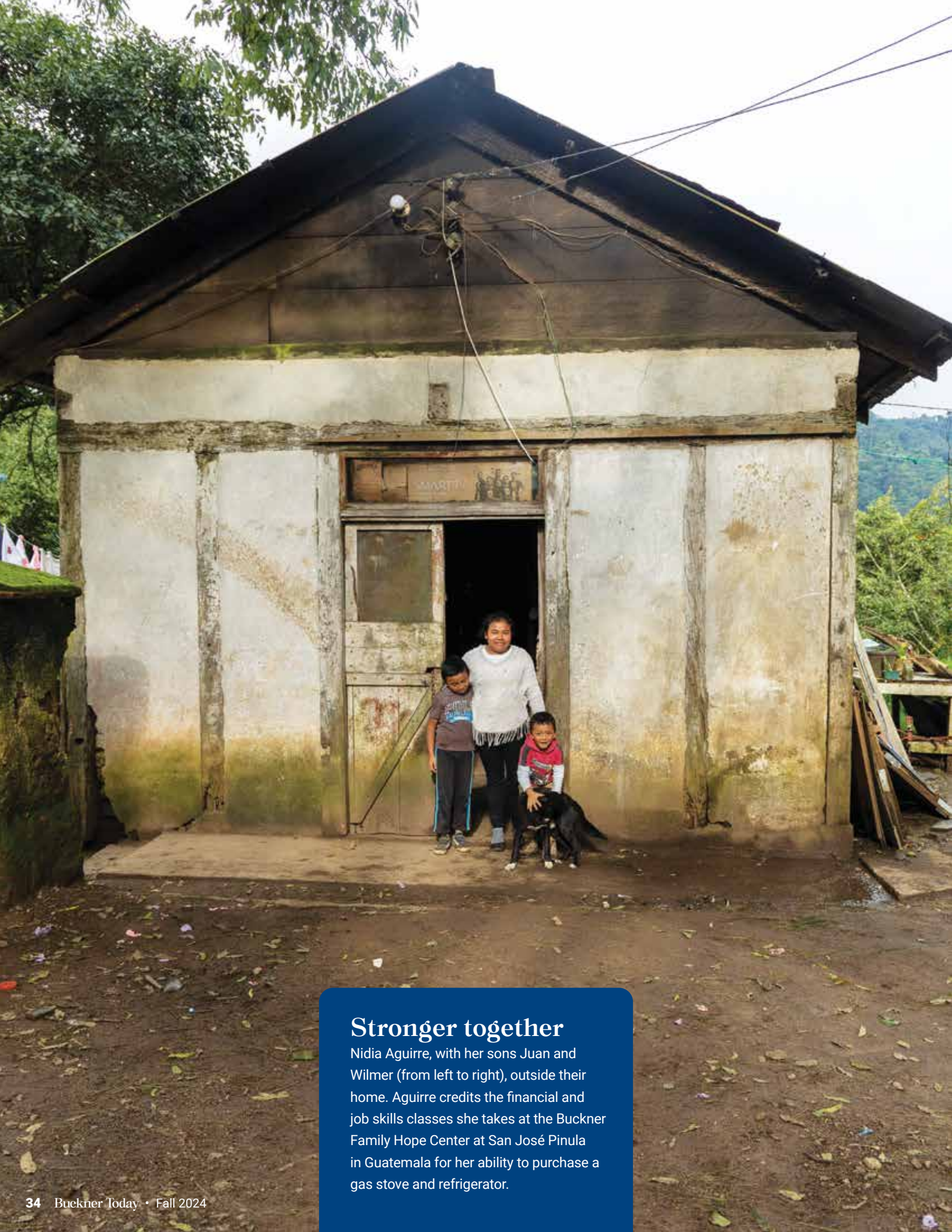
One of those congratulatory messages came from Moritz Hoffman, the director of Buckner Honduras, which celebrated its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year since becoming an established NGO in 2009.

Only 250 miles separate Hoffman and his team in San Pedro Sula from Guatemala City where Buckner Guatemala's main offices are located. The two NGOs have much in common, from a shared country border to their mission, but there are also stark contrasts.

Guatemala owns the largest economy in Central America, while Honduras is the second poorest country in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Guatemala is known for its volcanoes, Honduras for its pristine beaches. Both countries believe their coffee is the best.

More than 30 people are employed by Buckner Guatemala. Together they operate two Family Hope Centers®, foster and kinship care, family permanency services, and humanitarian aid. The Buckner Honduras team is composed of four people who operate one Family Hope Center and humanitarian aid services.

Despite these differences, Guatemala and Honduras each have



## Stronger together

Nidia Aguirre, with her sons Juan and Wilmer (from left to right), outside their home. Aguirre credits the financial and job skills classes she takes at the Buckner Family Hope Center at San José Pinula in Guatemala for her ability to purchase a gas stove and refrigerator.

children needing protection and families needing strengthening.

Hoffman said the Buckner Honduras team relies on a robust volunteer network and strategic allies to serve more people through the Family Hope Center and build community. His team has long embraced the mentality of “Juntos es mejor,” and so have the families they serve.

“The truth is that we support each other,” said Silvia Patricia Murillo Gomez, a single mother who works hard each day to stay sober for her daughter. “We have a group among the mothers to keep an eye on each other and to call each other. And we also support each other.”

Gomez said it’s the combination of Buckner family coaches, volunteers, and a strong community of families that has made an impact on her daughter, Milagros, Spanish for miracle.

Spending time at the Family Hope Center helped Gomez become more active as a parent, and in turn Milagros improved at school, better managed her time, became disciplined, and set goals.

“Milagros has also become quite interested in the devotionals and in being close to God,” said Gomez.

When asked about the future she imagines for her daughter, Gomez replied she wants her daughter to be supported so she can have a dream and pursue it.

Since their beginning, the Buckner teams in Guatemala and Honduras looked for the gaps in the families they served and worked to fill each, whether it be reuniting a mother with her abducted son or counseling a mother to be a better parent to her daughter.

The countries are also linked through the Family Hope Center model, which Buckner Guatemala Director Victor López proudly reminds people, started in Guatemala. “We started to develop this model that works through different partnerships to serve the community,” said López, “And now you can find that model in Kenya, in the U.S., and in Honduras.”



**Top left:** Volunteers play games with Honduran children outside the Family Hope Center. **Top right:** Nidia Aguirre helps her sons with their homework. **Bottom:** Clients of Buckner Honduras’ Family Hope Center prepare dough to bake quesadilla, a traditional holiday cake. The women, including Silvia Patricia Murillo Gomez (second from right), also learn about ingredient costs and budgeting.

Despite that claim to fame, it's not what Lopez said he is most proud about when it comes to Buckner Guatemala's 20-year history. It's all about the results for him.

"For the last 20 years, we have seen how God has opened doors," said López. "That's why our greatest accomplishments include seeing lives restored, families brought together, hope come alive, and

also the seed of the gospel within the families, within the children, and within the governmental authorities, and even in places that you would think it'll be really hard to see God at work."

Hoffman echoed that sentiment regarding the accomplishments for Buckner Honduras over 15 years, but he is already looking to a future that includes a 10-year plan for growth. "We want to set the



## Supporting families

Left: Buckner Guatemala team members stock boxes of cereal in their Humanitarian Aid Center.

Below: Rosa Judith Romero Garmendia stands in front of her house with her children. Despite living in an impoverished neighborhood under a bridge, Garmendia is proud of keeping a tidy home.



standard of excellence in everything we do as a team, together with the volunteers and in the services we provide.

“There is a great opportunity to find people and companies that have a desire to support us by volunteering or giving donations and through activities so that Family Hope Centers can expand in

Honduras and reach more families.”

Stronger families in Guatemala and Honduras mean stronger communities and increased opportunities, and that is worth celebrating. **BT**



## *Because of your generosity, lives are being* **TRANSFORMED**

Buckner wishes to thank the following corporations, foundations and other organizations for their charitable contributions of \$1,000 or more during the third quarter of 2024.

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# The pathway from doubt to strength

Story and photography by Melissa Grych

**L**isa Olgin wasn't convinced Buckner should take a chance on her. After hearing from a friend about Buckner Family Pathways®, she was interested but apprehensive.

"I didn't think I would be worthy of it or accepted. When you come from a lifetime of rejection you don't think you're worthy of something like that," Olgin said.

Family Pathways helps single parents become self-sufficient, strengthen their families for their children and create generational change. As part of the program, parents earn a degree while redirecting the family's future through education, counseling, financial coaching, and job training. While enrolled in the program, families are provided with safe, affordable housing.

Olgin explained how the program is family focused, empowering her and her daughters to strengthen their relationships.

"When I came to Buckner, I had two smaller children, and I was pregnant with my youngest. My oldest daughter and I had been separated for many years because of decisions and choices I made earlier in life. But when I got to Buckner, the staff helped support me through the unification and renewal of our relationship," she said.

## Community of love

Throughout her time with Family Pathways, Olgin said she received incredible support from Buckner staff, but what was especially helpful and unique was the family created by other mothers and children in the Family Pathways program.

"We became a family, and we all leaned on one another. We were all very united. We found a family and a community there," she said.

While at Family Pathways, she met the man who is now her husband. As a place of new beginnings, it was fitting that Olgin's engagement photos were taken at the Family Pathways campus.

## New beginnings

In April 2021, Olgin graduated from Family Pathways a week before tying the knot. She earned her degree and is now a social worker at a local nonprofit. Currently, she is working toward a graduate degree at Texas A&M University Commerce.

Olgin's four daughters are now ages 7, 10, 15 and 24, and with her husband and his children, their blended family numbers 10 in all.

Olgin occasionally volunteers at Buckner as a guest speaker to share her testimony of strength and faith. Most recently she was the featured keynote at a Family Pathways graduation ceremony in June.

## You get what you give

If a single mother was considering Family Pathways, Olgin said with no hesitation that she would explain how the program offers a path to healing, but it will take some work, she added.

"For me it's all about level of commitment you're willing to give. If you're looking for a place that is going to help your family thrive and teach you what boundaries look like and be in a community of women that's safe; if you experienced trauma that made you not feel safe; if all these things are you, then you're in the right place," Olgin said.

"Buckner is going to stretch you, but they'll do it with arms wrapped around you. Buckner is a place where you're going to see your family come alive." **BT**



Surrounded by family is where Lisa Olgin (far right) feels at home, including daughters (from left to right) Alissa Campos, 24, Ilyanna Olgin, 10, and Zoe Olgin, 7. Not pictured is daughter Nevaeha, 15.

*In her own words. Lisa Olgin graduated from Buckner Family Pathways® in April 2021. Still in contact with each other today, Lisa's family coach, Jessica Marroquin, asked Lisa to write about her experience. These are Lisa's own words.*

# Spring Flowers *By Lisa Olgin*

## A wave of beginnings

Someone once told me that the balance in life comes in waves of beginnings and ends. As I sit here pondering that, I think of my time at Buckner Family Pathways.

Almost seven years ago exactly, I walked through the doors of the campus to interview for a place in this program. I can still see the droplets of rain on the ground as I walked toward the doors, and the flowers of spring beginning to peek out of their shell, anxiously waiting to bloom.

It was almost as if the campus was sizing my heart up, evaluating my spirit, and ushering me in. I can still see the glowing smile of the front desk attendant, Ms. Dora. She was small in stature but mighty in spirit, and she welcomed me with a smile. In years to come, my family would come to trust that smile and glean hope from her.

The hall seemed to go on forever, and each step I took felt heavy with anxiety. Would they love me, as broken as I was?

You know, as I think back to that day, the interview never felt business like. When I think back to all my conversations with the staff, it has always been like visiting family. It was safe, light, and full of love.

I would go on to be accepted to this program while pregnant, not sure of a major and bringing a colorful background. However, even with all the baggage, I was given a chance, and I was not going to squander what had been graciously gifted to my family.

After four years, I would exit the program with a strong relationship with all four of my children, a degree, a fiancé, and a family to blend on the horizon.

Even I would not believe the story that God was writing. It seemed to be out of my scope of understanding. That's the grace of Jesus though, he takes your life and writes a story of his amazing love and redemption, if you let him.

Of course, life isn't a fairytale and there have been valleys. I took a break from my graduate degree program to lean into my new family and got a little further behind than I hoped.

However, God honors the obedient and in all things. As I surrendered my life, will, marriage, family,

and children to him, doors began to open. Tonight, as I sit here in my bed and look around, I can see the fruits of what God had for me all along. He is good and his provision was good.

## Life after Buckner

In honor of the structure of the program, I want to highlight the people and things my family and I learned at Buckner Family Pathways.

We were taught that relationships are important. My children were seen walking the campus from quad to quad making friends because they felt safe. That is not taken lightly in society today, where safety is an exception, not a rule. Buckner Family Pathways understands the importance of that and provided it through security and patrols.

We were taught responsibility and boundaries. When coming from displacement, boundaries are not peaceful or accepted, yet Buckner taught us to protect our peace.

Sitting at my dinner table while my family prepares for bed, I marvel at life after obedience. I give honor and glory to the people of Buckner International, and to me, that is the body of Christ. Without the faithfulness of donors and believers, my family's success story would not be heard to impart hope to the hopeless.

Through the fine lines of each smile gifted to my family, we found fruits of the holy spirit. We trusted, we believed, and we freely welcomed grace. We are all academically driven now, because one of us paved the path.

In my family, Buckner gave us the power to break generational curses amidst the storm, and we will forever be grateful. If you are looking for a place where hope shines, consider taking a seat at the table of Buckner International, where lives are changed, and families find a home. **BT**

**[CLICK HERE](#) to read about Lisa Olgin's experience at Camp Buckner, making memories while strengthening her relationship with her daughter.**

# Buckner International

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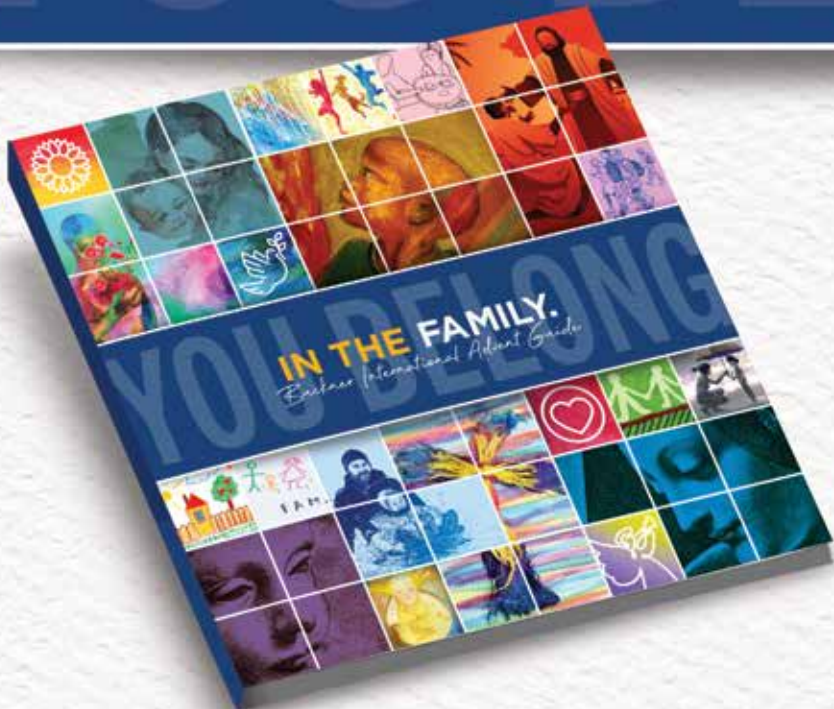
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