

See inside for ways you can support families.

Buckner

The magazine of Buckner International | Winter 2019

Today



Joy

shining
hope in
Latin
America
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Age to age

Celebrating 140 years of a movement

When Rev. R.C. Buckner gathered a group under the shade of a sprawling oak tree outside First Baptist Church of Paris, Texas, in July 1877 the intent was to jumpstart the formation of an orphanage in Texas.

Many see that as the day things got started. After all, they did pass a hat and collect \$27. But in reality, that day was the culmination of years of work by Father Buckner. He had spent countless hours before that day paving the way by advocating for the care of widows and orphans through the pages of his newspaper, *The Religious Messenger*, later renamed *The Texas Baptist*.

What grew out of the years between 1873 and 1879 wasn't so much an institution but a movement.

That movement was spurred on with words written by Dr. Buckner. In 1876, he wrote, "There is but one kind of pure religion in the world and that is: 'To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction and to keep himself unspotted from the world.' Religion is piety and liberality – the heart given to God; the hand to man. What avails the offering of the lips when the light is withheld from the altar?"

But words wouldn't be enough. So Buckner visited countless friends, wrote an endless stream of letters, and took out a personal bank note to cover the cost of launching the orphanage.

On April 9, 1879 – 140 years ago – the charter of Buckner Orphans Home was filed in the Department of State with Secretary of State John D. Templeton.

Exactly 40 years later, Father Buckner died on April 9, 1919 – 100 years ago. He was 86.

Among the countless tributes that poured in upon his death, none summarized R.C. Buckner more than these words:

"Of some men great in the councils of their country, leaders in state craft or on the battlefield, heroic monuments remind us, but the finest monument this good man left behind is the monument of living men and women, who under his Christian care while girls and boys, have grown up into the estate of splendid citizenship, of sturdy manhood and sweet womanhood; have become living assets, in that great ledger of both assets and liabilities we call mankind.

"An undying memorial to how well this good man wrought the Buckner Orphans Home remains. As sparkling and sustaining as

dew is upon the grass, so were his good deeds."

I doubt the writer of that tribute knew the prophetic nature of those words. Buckner International is in many ways a "an undying memorial" to the work of Father Buckner. That's why today, the good works continue "as dew upon the grass."

For 14 decades, we have maintained a singular commitment to the mission God has given us. We've remained focused, not on an institution, but on a movement.

That movement is populated not only with lives we serve and employees who serve, but with so many co-workers like you.

That day in 1877 when R.C. Buckner passed the hat under the oak tree, it was obvious he was not alone. He was surrounded by like-minded friends who believed in the biblical admonition to care for widows and orphans; friends who gave of themselves when they gave their money.

"It is more blessed to give than to receive," Buckner wrote, quoting Scripture. "So it is more glorious to be a benefactor than a beneficiary. He is poor of spirit who is the beneficiary of all and the benefactor of none."

I like to think of it like this: If we were to throw a 140th birthday party for Buckner International, all of us, including you, would blow out the candles.

I'm grateful for the faithfulness of generations who have gone before us who have been part of this movement. All of us have been entrusted with a great gift and it takes all of us to keep it moving.

As we remember 140 years of ministry, we reaffirm our commitment to working together for the kingdom. Therefore, "Let us not become weary in doing good ... as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people." [Galatians 6:9-10]

Perhaps the best reflection on the ministries of Buckner is to say, praise be to God for his blessings and faithfulness and thank you for your partnership.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Albert Reyes".

Albert Reyes, President and CEO
Buckner International

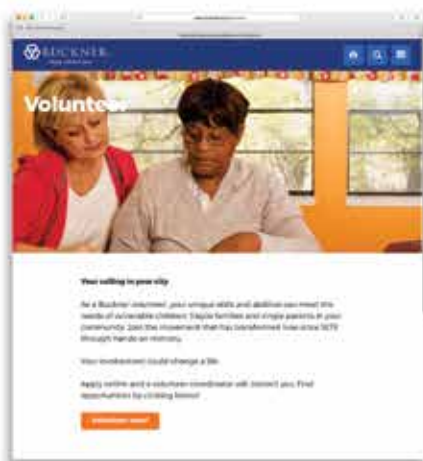
Visit my blog at www.bucknerprez.com

buckner.org



For 10 years, Buckner Mexico has served vulnerable children and families through aid, care for children and Buckner Family Hope Centers. Have you ever wondered why Buckner works in the communities it does? Hear about it firsthand as leaders share their approach. **Learn more at buckner.org/BucknerToday.**

Visit buckner.org/volunteer to find volunteer opportunities in the United States and around the world. Help organize fun activities for foster children, prepare boxes of aid or deliver shoes to vulnerable children around the world!



Letters to the Editor
If you have any questions or comments about the articles you've read in *Buckner Today*, e-mail us at communications@buckner.org

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IN OTHER WORDS | SCOTT COLLINS

Inspiration

Nayron's story is beautiful because Nayron is a special little boy. And his story is made even more beautiful because of Shain and Cheryl Welch. (See article on page 26)

I met all of them in Amarillo on a chilly, gray evening in December, about a week before Christmas. We were in their home shooting a video for our annual "Heart of Amarillo" fundraising event.

A lot of words describe this story. Shain and Cheryl are self-sacrificing, humble, kind, dedicated, courageous. You name it and if it's a positive word, it fits. But Nayron has his own story. Some might look at him and dub Nayron a survivor, but he is so much more.

As soon as he was engulfed in love, Nayron began thriving in a way no one thought possible. He was never supposed to be the boy he is today.

At the event in Amarillo, we showed the video we eventually called "Nayron's Beautiful Story." We had planned for Nayron to be there with Shain and Cheryl, but circumstances intervened and they weren't able to attend.

After showing the video, I shared briefly about Nayron and the Welches. It's stories like this that get me up every morning energized to tell the Buckner story. I mentioned that on Jan. 24, I had received a photo of Nayron and the Welches taken in a courtroom the day Nayron was adopted. It was a powerful photo for me.

After the event Nita and Bill Hamker sought me out. Bill is an attorney in Amarillo. He told me, with a lump in his throat, that he had done the legal work on Nayron's adoption. He went on to say he has done almost all the Buckner adoptions in Amarillo over the years. That gave me a lump in my throat.

Every point along the journey, the story of Nayron Welch is filled with hope and inspiration. I am reminded again that it does take a community to care for children.



Scott Collins is Vice President of Communications at Buckner International.

3

Reasons
we're
excited
at
Buckner!

Full house, fuller hearts participate in Buckner Amarillo event



Nearly 200 people attended the fourth annual Heart of Buckner Amarillo fundraiser at the Amarillo Botanical Gardens. The evening featured a conversation between Houston Astros catcher Robinson Chirinos and former Amarillo Globe-News sports editor and columnist Jon Mark Beilue.

Chirinos discussed his childhood and the impact of baseball on his life. He also shared his thoughts on the importance of faith, community and service, as well as his work over the years with Buckner International.



All proceeds from the event will stay in the Amarillo community to benefit the children and families there. Buckner offers a wide variety of services to children, families and single mothers with a goal of building the necessary skills and knowledge they need to succeed in life. Buckner Amarillo's programs include Buckner Family Pathways, Buckner Foster Care and Adoption and the FYi Center.

"We are so extremely thankful for every single one of our sponsors, for everyone in the community who came out, and of course for Robinson Chirinos and Jon Mark Beilue," said Kathy McGee, senior executive director of Buckner Children and Family Services in Amarillo. "The evening was a tremendous success, and the funds raised will help us continue our more than 30-year history of serving vulnerable children and families in the Amarillo area."

Construction is underway in Dallas



Years of planning and dedication are coming to fruition as construction has officially begun on the Buckner Family Hope Center at Bachman Lake in Dallas.

Workers are clearing way for the \$11.5 million 21,795-square-foot Family Hope

Center on approximately two acres at the corner of Lombardy Avenue and Geraldine Drive. This tract of land is the first property purchased in Dallas by Buckner to serve children and families since 1880, when founder R.C. Buckner purchased land in East Dallas for the original orphans home and is still being used today to serve children and families.

Family Hope Centers are child-centered, family-focused places where families go to find hope, support and empowerment in their community to reach their fullest potential.



Baptist Retirement Community dedicates chapel as part of \$8.4 million renovation



Residents of the Baptist Retirement Community recently came together with Buckner Retirement Services staff to dedicate the Elsie Gayer Chapel.

The renaming of the chapel after Elsie Gayer is part of an \$8.4 million renovation project to Baptist Retirement Community, announced in October 2018. The planned updates include renovations



to the high-rise independent living apartment building and the Sagecrest nursing building while also providing for road repairs and added curb appeal to the community, which has served seniors in San Angelo since 1951.

Elsie Gayer, RN, founded the Baptist Memorials Geriatric Hospital in 1951 and served as its administrator until 1968. The hospital later pivoted into senior living and was renamed Baptist Retirement Community. **BT**



HOME GROWN

Family Hope Centers focus on keeping families together through opportunity

Story and photography by Russ Dilday





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It's about the economy

Families often disintegrate when parents leave to find better jobs. Buckner is reversing that trend by incubating businesses.



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By learning new agricultural methods through the Buckner Family Hope Centers, families have a new way to support themselves as well as a source of healthy food. As a result of the new economic opportunity, families remain together.

It's late September and the immigration debate on both sides of the Mexico/United States border has started to reheat prior to the U.S. mid-term elections. Much of the conversation on the north side of the line is political and involves the issues of Dreamers, amnesty, labor and national security.

In the small community of Zegache in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, the issue is no less controversial, but it takes a personal turn: Community members say they've lost fathers, husbands and sons looking to the north for economic opportunity they can't find at home.

Aida Hernández Díaz, an advocate for the community, describes the immigration problem in terms of "family disintegration." When you experience migration, there is a lot of family disintegration.

"There are many children who suffer, because sometimes some of the men find another wife over there," she says. "They forget the mother of their children and that woman struggles to be both a dad and mom. He has to work, so he abandons the children."

That abandonment leads to other issues, she adds. "That is why many young people fall into alcoholism and drug addiction or

crime. This is what we want: No family disintegration. That the family always be united."

Many of the younger community members who walk by address her as Doña Aida, a title reserved for more mature, respected female community members. Waving them on, she admits there "is a lot of discouragement ... and I tell you, young people leaving high school.

They do not want to continue studying. Most of them go abroad.

They leave as immigrants."

She breaks into a grin as she sweeps her hand across the scene in front of her that includes a water collection system and two large greenhouses provided by Buckner supporters. She emphasizes her next words: "But, thanks to Buckner, hope shines here."

She animatedly talks about the agriculture project provided by funds and training channeled by the Buckner Family Hope Center in Oaxaca earlier this year. In a dry valley dependent on seasonal rains for crops, the greenhouses and water collection system, as well as water filtration and poultry locations nearby, mean new life and new opportunity for families learning new skills



through the Family Hope Center.

Lilibet Santiago directs Buckner ministries in the Oaxaca region. She says the projects provide year-round food and economic opportunity for families.

"This kind of project ensures no matter what the weather is, they can have a harvest, she says. "For that reason, we're appreciative for our donors and that we can provide that training and opportunity."

In addition to start-up funds for the hardware, Buckner donors also provided agricultural education to ensure the project thrived. Diaz and others, mostly mothers, attended training provided by Family Hope Center family coaches who, in addition to spiritual enrichment, mentoring, parent education and other life skills, brought in agricultural teachers to get the group started.

"We are discovering we cannot only plant the corn, beans, chickpeas and peas which we have been accustomed to. There are other alternatives to produce our own food and not have to buy fruit that sometimes comes contaminated from other areas," says Diaz as she leans over a tomato seedling in the large greenhouse. "Here, we are going to produce our own food with our own water that is clean. And that's why we look for training, and we look to people like you to guide us and help us to get ahead."

Juan Carlos Millán, Buckner International's country director for Mexico, says that economic development opportunities like the greenhouse play a large part in cracking the code to strengthening families through Family Hope Centers not only in Mexico, but in other countries, including the U.S.

"While we offer many programs that strengthen their faith, their family communication and their parenting, we must also help them find ways to give them opportunity, or they will not stay together," he says.

While Diaz and others show off the greenhouse project, Sylvia Mendoza Velasco, a 32-year-old mother is across town tending to dozens of chickens owned by the community of Family Hope Center families.

"The chicken house project has been very important because it has benefited many people," she says. "It is very beautiful because we are learning. It's like a school. We are perfecting what we did not know. We have worked with animals all the

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The opening of new projects brings together the entire community.



Buckner Mexico celebrates an 'excellent' 10 with Oaxaca gala

Albert Reyes, president and CEO of Buckner International, praised Buckner Mexico for its 10 years of service to vulnerable children and their families during a September celebration in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Since the NGO's founding in 2008, it has served more than 123,000 people through aid, residential care for children, health programs and Family Hope Centers.



Reyes spoke to more than 120 Mexican supporters at the gala held at the Quinta Real Hotel and said Buckner Mexico is "shining hope to the most vulnerable families in Mexico."

Juan Carlos Millán, Buckner Mexico director, echoed Reyes. "Be excellent," he said. "We always have to be excellent because the people we serve need us to be. It's what we encourage them to do as well. We tell them you can change toward excellence."

The gala evening was attended by local dignitaries and supporters, including the president of Oaxaca. Local entertainer and recording artist Ana Diaz gave a post-dinner performance. **BT**



time (learning from) our grandparents, our parents. But it's not the same. Now we are learning how to make things better, thanks to Buckner."

Velasco proudly says she has been a part of the poultry team "from the beginning. We are one of 18 families who are participating and we take turns each day to take care of the chickens. We have learned to work as a team, to organize ourselves better. We are all mothers of a family. We have to find the time to come to the chicken coop to take care of our children, take them to school and we are even more active in our work."

It's a different setting than when each family worked on its own, she notes. "Well, before, I was only dedicated to my children. We had animals, but very few and it was not the same. Now, we are learning that we can."

"The effect of seeing the change in families' lives on the rest of the community has been striking," says Diaz. "Everyone is very interested. There are more people who are assimilating and want to get support."

"People are very motivated and grateful and every day there is more interest because they say, 'This is a reality. No one is deceiving us; it is not just a promise.' Before they thought, 'No, who knows when it (help for the community) is going to get here.' And now they go plant and are well-motivated. That is what we want." **BT**



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Changing an entire community

Through Buckner Mexico, people have eggs (above) to sell and clean water to drink (left). That's cause to celebrate (right) as families grow strong. Much of the water systems were donated by Buckner Mexico Board Member Ezequiel Godinez, pictured. Godinez owns a water purification company.





The work of Buckner Family Hope Centers in six countries, including the United States, is dependent – and successful – because of support from your gifts. To explore ways you can engage with families in need of strength through Family Hope Centers, go to buckner.org.



Story and photography by Russ Dilday

The uniting of Tenango





High in the mountains north of Oaxaca, Mexico, the small town of Santiago Tenango consists of small cinderblock homes lining gravel roads that spiderweb out, following the ridgelines of the hills. It's an isolated, quiet, rural area with few services and a high level of poverty.

A year ago, most of the residents would have said it was a town marked by disunity. No one could quite put a finger on the cause for the lack of community: It wasn't politics, or religion or family feud. It seemed like no one got along. As one observer said, "There was a lot of fighting."

But that was before the shoes.

Before the food.

Before the life skills classes.

Before they discovered a purpose to gather and built a place to do it.

Before Buckner came to town.

Resident Noemí Olivera Castellano remembers the day life began to change for the community, the day shoes donated through Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® arrived.

"One afternoon, we gathered when Pastor Marcos (Castellanos) called us all. He told us they needed 150 children the next day. We finally got everyone to agree to come, after visiting all afternoon and part of the night with parents, telling them they were going to give shoes to the children."

The shoe distribution was a catalyst, said Buckner Mexico Project Coordinator Lidia Juan Chimal. "We came to the community of Tenango a year ago and made a preliminary assessment of the community needs. We wanted to host an event and invite the volunteers who help

us to give away shoes to children of the community.

"It marked the first time the whole town gathered in one space. Some people did not want to come because they thought it was a church event and they would be asked to come to church."

Even though Castellanos helped spearhead attendance efforts, he kept the emphasis on families' need for aid.

"Our purpose here is to serve God by helping people. My family is also involved in helping people," he said. "My wife and my two sons also serve. But we do take that role of shepherding, of caring for the flock and trying to bring more people to God. We now are sharing material things with them. It helps us show people what God is really like, not only the spiritual part, but also the physical and the material."

Many, including Maria Gomez, were skeptical of the offer. Promises from government agencies and NGOs for aid are not often kept. But





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Uncovering a feast

The men of Santiago Tenango uncover chicken they cooked underground for a town celebration.

the shoe distribution was followed by distributions of MannaPack food packages. Then workshops.

"After the shoe giveaway, the people of the community were very interested in what else could be done," Chimal said. "We worked hard in the community not only to provide material things for the people and to resolve some problems, but we equipped a team to help the community."

The Buckner workshops also marked a shift in the community's feelings for each other – and the start of a community building that would welcome all.

"We did not have a place with a covering," Gomez said. "A shaded area that can be used here in the community. The people now have a network of friends here. They have learned to work with each other and to share with one another.

"We now hear the testimony of several families that what Buckner Mexico has in this community has made a great impact on their lives because they remember that special day and they say, 'Family, do not look for me at home today. In the afternoon I will be at Buckner, and I'm going there to participate in my workshops.' It has become that space to share, to play and to have fun. Families no longer have to dedicate themselves to television or, sometimes, fighting." **BT**



Stronger families in Central America mean a stronger U.S. border

By Albert Reyes, Buckner International CEO and president

The migrant caravan has arrived, and months of anticipation couldn't prepare us for the viral image of a mother fleeing tear gas with two girls in tow. Why would a mother put her daughters in danger like that?

With the caravan here, it's time to look beyond our border at the situation that brought thousands of desperate migrants to our border. Parents were willing to endanger their children to escape even worse conditions, and it's time we look carefully at these families and these countries to understand their reasons and find solutions.

Knowing what motivates migrants to undertake a dangerous journey is key in helping them remain and prosper in their countries of birth.



For decades, the narrative has been that Mexico is responsible for most of the illegal immigrants residing in the U.S., but that is no longer the case. According to the Pew Research Center, immigration dropped for Mexicans, but it increased 25 percent from 2007 to 2015 for people escaping Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

Migrants from these countries are motivated by economic downturns, political corruption, gang-related violence and misleading messaging from north of the border. Homicide rates make the region one of the most violent in the world with El Salvador recording a murder rate of 81.2 per 100,000 people, followed by Honduras at 59. This is well above the much-publicized murder rate for Chicago, which is 17.52 per 100,000.

Two-thirds of Honduras' population lives in poverty, according to the World Bank, as a day's wage on a farm will pay at most \$5. Meanwhile, half of Guatemala's population of nearly 17 million is under the age of 19, yet roughly 12 percent of those teens have been completely excluded from receiving a formal education, according to a United

Nations Development Programme report.

I have seen this poverty firsthand on many occasions, and the statistics can't relay how heartbreaking it is – but people's stories can: Maria Elena Raymundo lives in Jocotenango, Guatemala with her husband and four daughters. When I first met the family, they were renting a small dwelling made with wooden sticks, a dirt floor and a tattered tin roof – a structure I have a hard time even calling a house.

While praying with Maria Elena and her family, I learned she had three desires: a home of their own, help for her husband's alcoholism, and learning to read the Bible for herself. She didn't want to leave Guatemala; she simply wanted hope for her family.

Two amazing donors to Buckner International were with me during Maria Elena's prayer request, and they immediately returned to their Texas church and raised enough money to buy the family property in Guatemala to build a home on, which a missions team constructed.

The home is located near one of our Buckner Family Hope Centers in Guatemala, where our faith-based ministry was able to help address Maria Elena's other two aspirations. Buckner Family Hope Centers are child-centered, family-focused places where families go to find hope, support and empowerment in their community through programs around family assistance, education, financial empowerment, child and youth development, family coaching, counseling and spiritual enrichment.

Last year, Buckner impacted the lives of 23,925 children and adults in Guatemala, 4,694 in Honduras, and 31,575 in Mexico.

Now imagine the impact we could make as a country if we focused more of our nonprofit and government efforts into similar family-focused programs in the region. Strengthening families in their home countries and giving them hope is perhaps our strongest strategy to stem the flow north.

Buckner makes families, like Maria Elena's, stronger – and stronger families make stronger communities.

I'm not saying that strengthening families in Central America will solve all the issues faced by citizens of these countries, but it is a starting point. And when nonprofit services are partnered with government resources, such as the \$750 million Congress provided in 2016 directly to the region, we can create real, lasting change in Central America, while strengthening our southern border and immigration policies at the same time. **BT**

This article originally appeared in the Dallas Morning News and is published here in an edited form.

Every child deserves a strong family

It doesn't matter if they live in Mexico, Guatemala or the United States, every child deserves a strong family. One that will pour into their lives and help them reach their God-given potential.

You can be hope for vulnerable children by strengthening families today through Buckner. **Just like Sam's family.**

 **BUCKNER**[®]
Hope shines here.[®]



Sam's mom, Sue,* served two tours in Iraq with the U.S. Army. But when she came home, Sue struggled. She suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and became chronically homeless.

Sue ended up in a shelter with her infant son, Sam. She was frightened, alone and hopeless. Then the staff introduced her to Buckner.

Sue shares: "Everyone before Buckner said, 'Sorry, we can't help.' But here, absolute strangers gave Sam and me grace, compassion and caring. They backed us up every time we needed help."

Thanks to friends and partners who care and give, Buckner equipped Sue with classes and counseling, helping her secure a stable job.

Today Sam is happy, healthy and thriving. And Sue found her God-given purpose in life: helping other veterans find housing ... and giving them hope.

"I know what it's like to be where they are. I had Sam. I was homeless. And now, I'm living proof that there's hope. Buckner saved our lives

I can't say thank you enough!"



**Strengthen
families
and protect
children today!**

*Names changed to protect privacy.

‘Walking evidence of people pouring into him’

Story and photography by John Hall

In between raucous Vacation Bible School songs near Antigua, Guatemala, John Wiggins catches his breath and surveys the scene. Children are laughing and smiling all around him. They’re lining up to receive a new pair of shoes and a backpack full of supplies so they can go to school.

“As we’ve been serving these kids, you don’t know what kind of impact you have – whether you’re planting a seed, watering a seed or seeing the fruit,” Wiggins says before nodding at the young man next to him. “He’s walking evidence of people pouring into him. We don’t know what kind of change that has brought about in him, whether that’s reading to him, giving him a hug, giving him gifts, praying over him – that’s probably the most powerful thing – that’s prepared him to be our son. That’s a lot of extra work to mold him into who he has become today.”







A hulking teenage boy kneels on one knee before a young girl sitting on a white plastic chair in the middle of a church courtyard. He gently removes her ragged faded pink sneakers and tattered socks and cleans her feet.

As he places new socks and footwear on her feet, a string of thoughts flood his mind:

I remember this.

Someone once did this for me.

And it was incredible.



Juan Pablo Wiggins is on as much a Buckner mission trip as he is returning to his roots. He was born in Guatemala. A gas explosion burned his face when he was 18 months old, forcing him to spend the next six months in the hospital recovering. Later, he came to a Buckner International-run group home for small children.

Mission teams regularly served young children there – many of whom had significant medical issues – conducting activities,

distributing shoes donated through Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®, giving presents and leading Vacation Bible Schools – anything that would shine hope into the children's lives and remind them they are loved by many people.

Several women on the trip with Juan Pablo today visited him many times over the years when he was in Buckner care. They held him. They sang to him. They prayed over him. Serving alongside Buckner staff, these ladies were the closest thing to family Juan Pablo had.

That's when John and Emily Wiggins first met "J.P." Shortly after, the Indiana couple felt called to adopt Juan Pablo through Buckner, overcoming numerous obstacles to finish the process before the Guatemalan government closed international adoptions from the country.

"We would come on our own to visit Juan Pablo," Emily says. "There would be mission teams. I can remember mission teams coming and holding kids and praying for them and singing 'Jesus Loves Me.' I can remember thinking people have done this over Juan Pablo. We're part of the answered prayer. We're just humbled



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Forever family

The Wiggins family – John (l-r clockwise), Emily, Juan Pablo and Sam grew closer together by serving in Guatemala. The trip helped the family remember all that God did to bring their family together.



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A sight to behold

Juan Pablo was struck by the beauty of his native country. Here he takes in the view of an active volcano from the a window at a church where he helped lead a Vacation Bible School for vulnerable children.



God chose us to be the answer to that prayer.”

Since then, J.P. has grown tremendously. He underwent several facial surgeries and overcame a cancer scare when he was little. The 5’7” nearly 200-pound high school freshman loves baseball, is in the band and is the goalie on the soccer team. He’s a leader in his church’s youth group. His presence is even larger than his frame. People young and old are drawn to him.

“He has done that since he was a little boy,” says Emily. “I can remember going into the market. He walked up to the security guard and they had a secret handshake. I think it’s because when he was very young, people would come, mission teams would come, and pour into him, play with him and love him.”

Even here, the language barrier can’t stop people from circling around him. At one point, dozens of children surround him on a basketball court. He interacts with each one with a smile on his face, attempting to encourage them as best he can.

The moment has deep meaning for the teenager. Ten years ago, he was in their shoes.

“I know how they feel. I remember when I got my new shoes when I was younger. I was excited. I didn’t know they were doing shoes. I didn’t know what was happening. When the new shoes came

out, I was so excited,” he says.

“I used to be in that spot. Now I’m giving them new shoes. It’s new hope for them.”

In a few short days, it’s easy to see why he connects with people. He genuinely cares for every person he encounters, and his natural curiosity pushes him to ask others about themselves.

“He always has a great attitude, always sees the best in everyone. He won’t ever say anything bad about anyone,” Emily says. “His outlook on life is just great.”

The trip is a growth opportunity for Juan Pablo. It gives him the chance to exercise and share his faith while making a difference in the lives of children. John and Emily pray it’s another step in the incredible journey that has been his life.

“Thinking back on Juan Pablo’s story, there were a lot of miracles that happened,” John says. “We know God has a special plan for Juan Pablo’s life.”

Juan Pablo is energized by his time back in Guatemala. He tries to soak in as much of the scenery as possible.

“It’s a beautiful place,” he says. “People should come here and see for themselves.”

Beautiful enough to want to come back?

“Yeah,” he says with a broad smile. “Next year.” **BT**



BT

Always smiling

Nayron's (left) warm smiles and infectious laughter fill the Welch household.



‘The happiest baby in the world’

Story and photography by John Hall

Ask anyone about 2-year-old Nayron, and they’ll typically respond in the same way: “He’s the happiest baby in the world.” They might just be right.

Nayron fills the Welch home with laughter – his own and that which he causes to erupt from others.

“Nayron’s just a loving little boy,” his father, Shain, said. “I love to be around him. He’s always smiling. He’s always happy. He loves to arm wrestle. He loves to do all the things a little boy does.”

Nayron is almost as unique as he is happy. He’s one of dozens of primary medical needs children who come through the Texas foster care system each year. He was shaken at three weeks old,

which caused a brain bleed that led to a stroke. Half his body is paralyzed, he suffers seizures and has a shunt to drain fluid off his brain.

Primary medical needs children often are among the hardest to place in family care. If homes cannot be found for them, they live in institutions. Some never know the love of family.

“When you get a baby with shunts and all this, it is kind of scary. But once you get them in your home and start playing with them, they’re really no different than any other kid,” Shain said. The Welch’s have cared for several primary medical needs children.

“He was made in the image of God. He was made to be who





Nayron is. For us to receive that blessing of taking him into our home means everything to us."

The blessing goes both ways. Nayron has grown tremendously since coming into the Welches' home.

"When we brought him into our home, we noticed he started thriving and gaining weight and doing well just with us holding him and loving him," said mom, Cheryl. "He's continuing to make progress. Even Buckner caseworkers are like 'He was like this and now he's like this.' That's what a little bit of love will do for these children."

The changes are startling to Cheryl and Shain.

"He calls us Mamma and Daddy at the strangest times," Cheryl said. "He'll be in his bed calling, 'Momma, Dadda.' We're amazed he's even talking to us and verbalizing and communicating."



Buckner Foster Care Case Manager/Home Developer Melanie Rice loves Nayron and the Welches nearly as much as they love each other. She praised the Welches' commitment to Nayron.

"Cheryl, Shain, [brother] Caleb and Nayron are simply incredible," she said. "They're meant to be together. You can feel the love when you walk into their home. Cheryl and Shain have gone beyond the extra mile to invest into Nayron's life, and it's a joy to be able to see all that's happened here."

Cheryl and Shain adopted Nayron in January, solidifying them as a forever family.



"The Lord adopted me in his family through all the blemishes I have," Shain said. "Why shouldn't I do that for someone else? He welcomed me with open arms. I feel like I should do the same thing if I have the opportunity."

"He's just the sweetest little boy," Cheryl said. "I've had a lot of children around. We've fostered several. He, for some reason, is the sweetest. His little soul just grabs everybody. For what has been done to him, he is the happiest baby. He doesn't realize

the trauma he has been through. He doesn't realize anything that has ever happened to him. He's perfect to us." **BT**

Buckner Villas celebrates art from the heart

By Chelsi Smith

The arts inspire many people, including Barbara Miles, LaNelle Butler and Martha Waggener. The three women are members of Buckner Villas senior living community in Austin, who recently celebrated Inspire Your Heart with Art Day.

The community hosted an all-day art show with residents' artwork on display, as well as a Music Memories class, where residents listened and sang along to music of different genres, generating memories from their past.

Martha Waggener is an avid painter who enjoys creating scenes and elements from the outdoors such as flowers, trees and birds. Her other talent? Cross-stitching. At this year's art show, she debuted her four-piece Celtic series that took a decade to complete.

"I have worked diligently, and it's satisfying to know others enjoy my work," Waggener said. "I have painted and cross-stitched for many years, and these are hobbies I truly enjoy. I attend painting classes at the community and the number of attendees grows each time. It's a fun class and a perfect opportunity to socialize with others."

Niles and Butler especially enjoyed the Music Memories Class.

They like singing along to songs from their past, specifically their childhood and college days in the 1940s and 1950s.

"I have always been a fan of the arts, especially reading and singing," Miles said. "It is lovely each time I attend the Inspire Your Heart with Art event. We have a lot of talented people that live here. When I attend the Music Memories class, I always leave happy and uplifted. I hear songs that remind me of my past, and we get to socialize with others." Painting and music are just a few of the many activities Buckner Villas offers residents, and both have many positive benefits for senior adults. Along with reducing anxiety, blood pressure and pain, listening to music can improve sleep quality, mental alertness, mood and memory. Painting can help with hand-eye coordination, cognitive abilities and concentration.

"Our Inspire Your Heart with Art event is very successful each year because of the talented residents living here," said Janet Burnett, life enrichment coordinator at Buckner Villas. "Our painting and Music Memories classes are very popular, and we've loved seeing residents get out of their comfort zone and try new things." **BT**



Photography courtesy of Buckner Villas



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Love by the letter

By Sarah Jackson

Handwritten letters are a scarce form of communication in an age of instant connection at the touch of a button. But for residents of Buckner Westminster Place and second graders at Longview Christian School, handwritten sentiments back and forth are building unique intergenerational relationships through a pen pal program.

When school started in the fall, students in Salena Goza, Julie Strait and Michelle Waldow's classes paired up with 26 residents at the community to practice writing in cursive and learn from their pen pals at the community.

"It is very sweet to see how the students react to receiving their letters," Goza said. "They experience what it's like to wait for something patiently and feel the excitement of learning about another person."

The students wrote their first letters before Thanksgiving and have exchanged them with Westminster residents since. They enjoy sharing stories about their own lives, and in return, learning about the lives of residents at Buckner Westminster Place.

Goza was inspired to start the program by her in-laws who lived at Buckner Westminster Place, as well as members of her church who call the senior living community home. Her original goal was to facilitate the use of cursive, but the idea morphed into an opportunity for the students and residents to create lasting bonds and make a difference in one another's lives. The first letters included photos and a personal introduction. For residents like Bettye Knighton, this is a fun way to express her story and share it with others.

"It is incredibly rewarding helping these children learn," Knighton said. "Like me, my pen pal has a twin brother, and it's sweet to learn about her relationship with him and think about my own twin. I know the ultimate benefit is for the kids, but it's been so meaningful for all of us too because we get to interact with someone new and share our personal stories. The letters help me reflect on the importance of sharing with my own grandchildren, knowing that I can connect with them in a very similar way."



Like Knighton, Gail Smith has found commonalities in her story and that of her pen pals. Her letters are addressed to a pair of twins in the classroom, which is especially meaningful to her as her granddaughter will soon give birth to twins. Little connections like these have made each letter more meaningful and special.

"I taught second grade during my first year as a teacher, and this brings back a lot of memories from that time," Smith said. "As a child, I remember going to a different school about midway through the year and being disappointed the students had already learned cursive. It was always one of my favorite subjects as a teacher and as a student."

Recently, the residents and students met in person for the first time to celebrate the holidays together. The students and the residents were excited to meet their pen pals and further strengthen the bonds of friendship.



"We've enjoyed seeing the joy the residents experience as they write and receive their letters," said David Sims, executive director of Buckner Westminster Place. "Hand-writing a letter is deeply personal, especially when writing in cursive. Many can agree that it's a lost art, and we're humbled by the residents taking the time to help these students learn and develop a new skill. The program is only in its beginning phases, but we look forward to seeing how it will benefit the residents and students at Longview Christian School for years to come." **BT**



Photography courtesy of Buckner Westminster Place

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Pedaling success

In early 2013, Laurencio Luis started a bicycle repair shop in Xoxocotlan, Mexico, just outside Oaxaca. He had recently returned from the United States, where he was a cook, to care for extended family with no employment prospects in his hometown. Laurencio and his family soon began taking life skills and business classes at the Buckner Family Hope Center in Xoxocotlan, where the gears started turning in his head to begin his own business. He also volunteered to teach English to help others expand their business horizons.



Laurencio was hopeful his new business would create opportunity and a living for he and his young family. On a small, quiet side street, the shop was essentially a one-car garage he was renting.

The startup has paid off. Today, Laurencio has moved into a larger storefront located

at a busy intersection on a main street, where he not only offers repair services but also has racks of bicycles for sale in front of his store.

He smiles as he greets people at the shop. His business is providing for his family in ways he never would have thought just five years ago. He says he owes his success to God and to the Family Hope Center just down the street. **BT**



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