


See inside for ways you can support families.

BUCKNER TODAY

Winter 2017

The magazine of Buckner International



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driven and
dedicated:**

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overcomes
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You are my
refuge and
my shield, I
have put
my hope
in your
word
Psalm 119:114

BUCKNER TODAY

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Kalista, 6, has blossomed while living at Family Pathways with her mother, Tiffany Pangarakis. With the Family Pathways staff and the other families who reside on the campus, Pangarakis and Kalista have found the one thing missing from their life: a family. *Photo by Aimee Freston*

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Last Look: Backpacks of caring



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The fix is in

Like me, I'm sure you've had those times when someone says something you've been thinking or have said yourself.

That happened to me the other day. There was a newspaper headline that read **"Religious groups urged to help fix foster care."** The sub-headline said, "Texas first lady, CPS chief say donations, outreach are key."

In a letter to people and organizations of faith like Buckner, Cecilia Abbott and CPS head Hank Whitman wrote, "While not everyone feels called to foster or adopt a child in need, we are all called to do something for this vulnerable population."

I think they've been reading my mind. I do believe we are called to do something for the most vulnerable children in our society. That has been Buckner's mission for 138 years, and we will not waver from it. Our Buckner foster care ministry is among the best in the country.

But I think there is another question that has not been addressed: **What if we could fix the crisis before children even get into the foster system?**

After all, even a perfect foster care system only treats the symptom. The problem is not the child – the problem starts with the family. What if we could find ways to strengthen the family and offer creative fixes, allowing children to stay where God placed them in the first place?

At Buckner, we think the family is the key and we've created a solution that goes way beyond just treating the symptom. It's not complex, but I think it could be a true solution to the CPS crisis.

We're fixing the problem through Buckner Family Hope Centers. It's no accident we call them "Family Hope" centers. Our families are receiving intensive coaching, training, role modeling and resources to change the course of their lives and keep their children out of foster care.

Think of it as surgery for the family. We get involved, determine the problems and then help the family fix them. They become self-sufficient because we're not treating symptoms; we're fixing problems.

It's working! In Texas, we served more than 20,000 lives throughout Hope Centers last year. About 250 families received case management and family coaching. That means children in those 250 homes – maybe three per home – are not going into foster care.

We now have Family Hope Centers in 21 locations covering seven countries. Our international centers are working with over 1,000 people in their families each year through intensive family coaching. In addition, another 95,000 lives are impacted overall through these centers internationally.

While it's working, our resources are starting to be stretched pretty

thin. This year, we're opening a new Family Hope Center in Dallas and next year, we'll open a new one in Houston. Those additions will push our numbers served closer to 24,000 in the next few years.

Moving forward, we are making the Family Hope Center the "tip of the spear" for our ministry growth. As Buckner expands our work in the coming months, we will lead with this approach because it gives us the opportunity to see immediate impact in the lives of boys and girls as their families become what God created them to be.



Star of Hope Mission's new Cornerstone CommunitySM will be the new home of a Buckner Family Hope Center in Houston.

Because it's working, we're committed to stepping out in faith. We can't stop now. I hope you'll take that step with us because without our generous supporters, we can't provide the love and support these vulnerable children want and need.

We need to raise \$5 million this year to fund our Buckner Family Hope Centers. I believe God will make that happen and give us the resources we need.

The result is not that we raise \$5 million, but that children can stay where they belong.



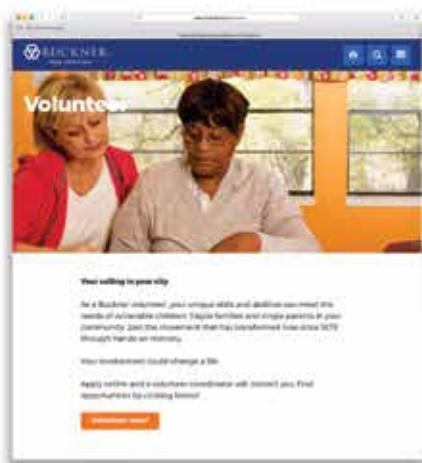
Albert L. Reyes, President and CEO
Buckner International
Visit my blog at www.bucknerprez.com

buckner.org



Maria Luisa Morales was hopeless. Her family of six was living in complete disarray in a small trailer. Her children were fighting with each other and threatening to drop out of school and run away. She constantly felt the weight of poverty tugging at her soul. Maria Luisa considered walking away from it all – her home and family. Then she found the Buckner Family Hope Center and her life changed forever. **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 orphans and 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 news@buckner.org.

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Image

Maybe you thought this was about the Buckner image. In a way it is, but probably not as you thought.

Christians may debate a lot of issues, from theology to social responses. But one thing we don't debate, at least from what I've heard, is that we are created in the image of God. We are God's reflection of himself in the world.

N.T. Wright says, "Our vocation is to be image-bearers of God."

The problem with bearing the image of God, however, is that sometimes we don't look very good. In fact, sometimes we can be downright ugly and that unattractiveness is what often repels other people. We all "fall short of the glory of God," meaning we don't look like him.

We all bear scars caused by life's pain. Our image, if not our physical body, shows what can happen when we fall short of reflecting God's image.

The children and families we serve at Buckner come to us suffering from serious "image" problems. Our role is to help them restore that image so it looks like God, who created them.

"We humans are called to stand at the intersection of heaven and earth, holding together in our hearts, our praises and our urgent intercession between the loving wisdom of the creator God and the terrible torments of his battered world," writes Wright.

I love that idea. Buckner stands at the intersection of heaven and earth, interceding in our work for the most vulnerable children and families imaginable. As we reflect the image of God into their lives, we begin the work of redemptive transformation. We show them what life can be like and what God intended for it to be.

So in a sense, I guess this is about Buckner. After all, our purpose as an organization is to reflect the image of God so that those we serve see him in us and want to look like God. That's called image restoration.



Scott Collins is Vice President of Communications at Buckner International.

3 REASONS WE'RE EX

The new Buckner Family Pathways in Longview is full!

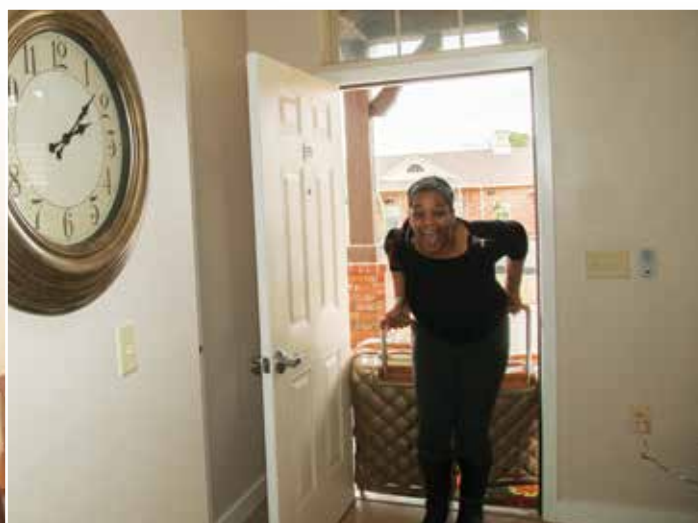


When we opened our newest Family Pathways location in the fall, we knew the need to empower single-parent families was immense. As soon as word spread about the new ministry, single mothers with young children flocked to the campus wanting to know more.

In early January, several more families moved into the program, filling the remaining units. Mothers shed tears of joy as they walked through their homes for the first time. One touched each wall of her new residence, thanking God for blessing her richly.

Lives already are being changed as well as the futures of children.

Will you join us in praying for them?



CITED AT BUCKNER!

The McCarthy family adopted 2-year-old Ashlyn and her 1-year-old sister, Addison, in December!



Last issue, we shared the story of David and April McCarthy's journey of being foster parents to young Addison following her birth and the discovery of a significant brain injury.

On Dec. 22, the McCarthys became Addison's and her sister Ashlyn's forever family. They are the first girls in the family, which also includes five adopted sons and three biological sons.

"We're so excited," April said. "Their adoption was a perfect Christmas gift for us."

Thank you for all you do to support Buckner foster families.

Want to know the latest news at Buckner?

Go to buckner.org/blog for the latest news, stories, photos and videos for all Buckner ministries.

Ventana by Buckner has named a contractor for the new Dallas senior living community!



Whiting-Turner, a national contractor with offices in Dallas, will lead the \$120 million construction project. Established in 1909, Whiting-Turner is one of the nation's largest builders of senior living communities.

Officials with Buckner Senior Living expect to break ground on the new community in April. The project, designed by Dallas-based D2 Architecture, includes two 12-story towers overlooking downtown Dallas and the Park Cities community.

"We're extremely pleased with the response from the community," said Charlie Wilson, senior vice president for Buckner Retirement Services. "There is a real excitement about Ventana from our future residents, and we are almost at our goal for deposits."

For more information about the new senior living community, visit ventanabybuckner.org.

Thank you Buckner supporters

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 2016.

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The Yarborough Foundation

Carrying on a legacy

Story by John Hall



Her picture is the first thing Art Weiner sees when he wakes up each morning and the last thing he sees before nodding

off to bed at night. She's his everything and always will be.

She is his beloved wife Alice.

"She was the most wonderful person I've ever known," Art says. "We were only married 71 years. We were more than the usual married couple. We were friends."

Alice Weiner lost her extended battle with Alzheimer's disease, but Art carries on fighting for the causes she was passionate about. He's particularly supportive of Alzheimer's research and caring for vulnerable children, including those Buckner serves in Southeast Texas.

Art is financially supportive of the ministry through Buckner Children's Village. His generosity and passion have helped minister to children at their most vulnerable.

"Children are simply drawn to Mr. Weiner," says Laura May, executive director of Buckner in

Southeast Texas. "He's made an incredible difference in their lives when they most need it. They gather near him to hear his stories and soak in his wisdom. He inspires children to do their best in school and reach their full potential."

Time and again Art creates memories for the boys and girls at Buckner. Most notably, the children came together with Art for an Independence Day party that included a local veterans group.

"It was a very memorable moment watching the children's faces as two of

America's finest demonstrated the folding of the flag," Art said. "They shared the meaning of the flag and the ceremony. Most of the boys and girls had never seen this before, and they loved it."

Art has connected with the children and enjoys providing opportunities that allow them to tuck away memories of special events they will never forget. The majority of the children he visits reside in the Emergency Shelter at Buckner for 30-90 days, and though he rarely sees the same child twice, he connects with each group he visits in the same way.

"They are kids who have gone through a tragedy," Art says. "Their lives have been disrupted and they aren't quite sure what's going to happen to them next. I just encourage them to get an education, study, work hard and choose to do



something in life that they enjoy doing ... then it's not work. The sky's the limit to what they can do with their lives."

Looking at the picture of his wife, Art smiles. She would have been proud to see the joy on the children's faces at Buckner.

"Everything I do is in her name," he says. "Everyone knows of her. I have a huge photograph of her in our bedroom. It's what I see before I go to sleep. It's what I see when I wake up. I talk to her all the time. I talk to her about what I'm doing on her behalf." ■



Dr. Charles
and Vernil Mitchell
Future Ventana Residents

Why people who truly appreciate life appreciate life here.

As doctor and nurse, they've nurtured a lifelong appreciation for living well and doing good for others. As husband and wife, their commitment to one another now brings them here to Ventana, the North Dallas community they will soon call home. As the first and only high-rise Life Care community in Dallas, Ventana by Buckner is attracting a lot of interest from a lot of interesting people.

Don't miss your opportunity to be one of them. Start your new life at Ventana.

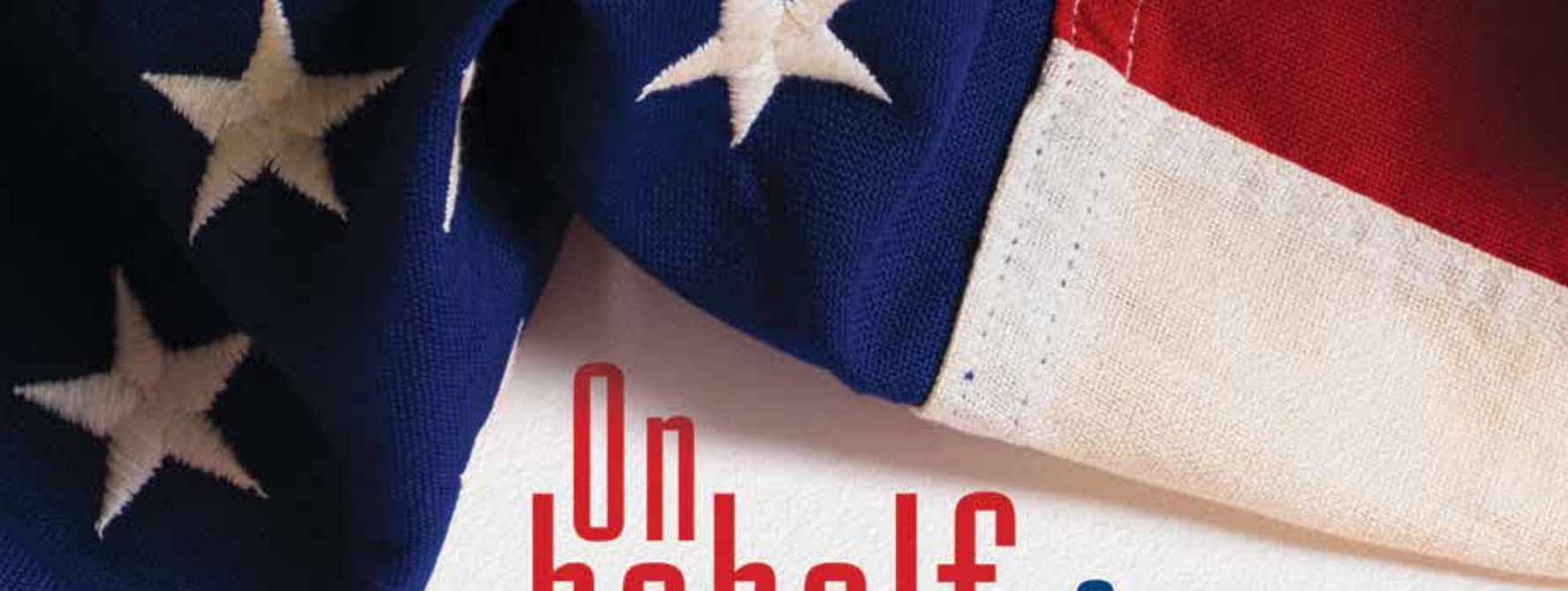
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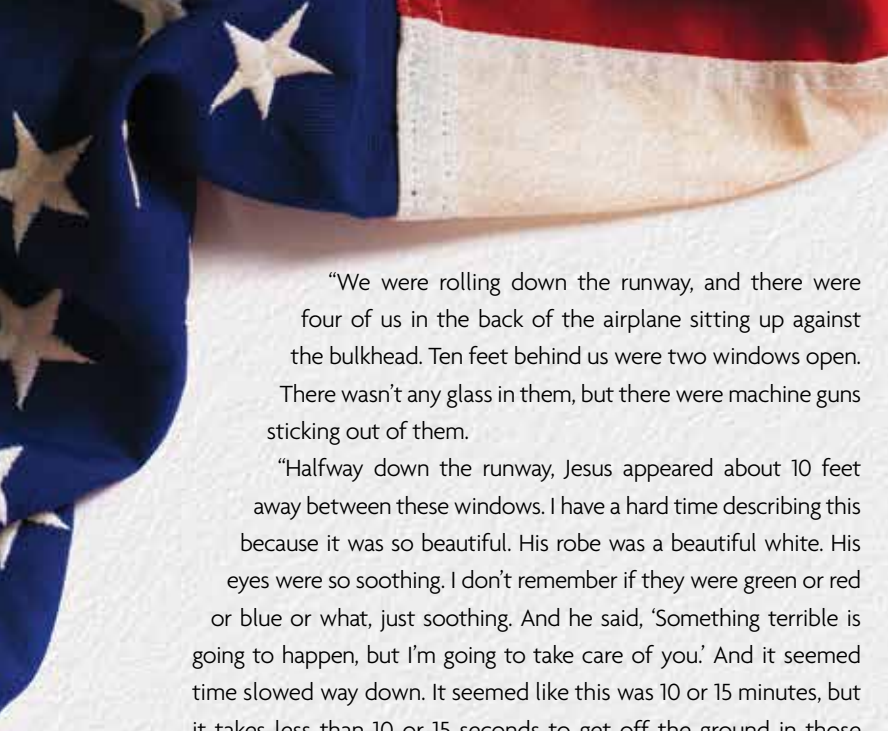




Story and photography by Elizabeth Arnold

On May 10, 1944, a 19-year-old ball turret gunner from Longview, Texas, sat in the rear of a B-24 aircraft, just 17 days away from his 20th birthday. He and nine other crewmen were flying out of Italy toward Austria, the last of 1,000 planes in their squadron to leave the base. The young gunner, Puett Willcox, should have been afraid of what lay ahead, but instead he sat stunned, speechless as the aircraft quickly gained altitude. He had seen a vision, one that would shape the rest of his life.





“We were rolling down the runway, and there were four of us in the back of the airplane sitting up against the bulkhead. Ten feet behind us were two windows open. There wasn’t any glass in them, but there were machine guns sticking out of them.

“Halfway down the runway, Jesus appeared about 10 feet away between these windows. I have a hard time describing this because it was so beautiful. His robe was a beautiful white. His eyes were so soothing. I don’t remember if they were green or red or blue or what, just soothing. And he said, ‘Something terrible is going to happen, but I’m going to take care of you.’ And it seemed time slowed way down. It seemed like this was 10 or 15 minutes, but it takes less than 10 or 15 seconds to get off the ground in those takeoff runs. And then he was gone.”

Six hours later, after 29 minutes of air combat, German fire slammed into Willcox’s aircraft at 28,000 feet. The plane split in half and exploded while he was still putting on his parachute, knocking him unconscious. Willcox woke up upside down, hanging off the wing of the plane, with control cables and ammunition tangled around his legs, spiraling toward the ground at hundreds of miles an hour. He was the last of his crew out of the aircraft. After several seconds of free falling, Willcox kicked loose, released his parachute and landed, only to be taken captive by German soldiers and declared a prisoner of war.

Willcox would remain a POW for 357 days.

Today, Willcox, now 92, is believed to be the last surviving World War II POW in East Texas. In October, Rep. Louie Gohmert honored Willcox for his service with a special medal presentation at Buckner Westminster Place, where Willcox is a resident. Willcox received nine different awards for service in WWII and the Korean War, including

the Purple Heart and an American flag that flew over the U.S. Capitol in his honor.

Though visibly touched by the accolades, Willcox remains exceedingly humble, just a man who served because he needed to. Because he wanted to.

“My dad told me when I was young, ‘Son, you’re going to have a lot of bad things happen to you in your life, and you’re going to have a lot of good things,’” Willcox said. “Don’t dwell on the bad things. Forget them. Just remember the good things.’ So that’s the way I do.”

As a POW, Willcox lost 82 pounds. He lived on sauerkraut “soup,” buckets filled with water and dehydrated sauerkraut the men divided amongst themselves. The day the British Second Army liberated Willcox and his fellow prisoners, they were 90 days into a 700-mile death march toward Brussels. He’d seen hundreds of men die from starvation, cold, fatigue and brutality. Even so, Willcox was never afraid.

“I remembered Jesus’ eyes and his voice telling me he was going to take care of me,” Willcox said. “I never was frightened or scared the whole time. I’m still not and haven’t been since, frightened or scared of anything. The Lord is still taking care of me.”

Willcox didn’t harbor resentment against his captors either. He saw everyone as a child of God, regardless of the letters on their uniform. No matter how much horror he witnessed, no matter how much cruelty, he chose to forgive.

“I remember the Bible saying, ‘Love your enemy as yourself,’ or something like that,” Willcox said. “And to forgive your enemy, so that’s what I do. When they were treating me bad, I’d forgive them.”

When he finally returned home to Longview in June 1945, Willcox had only one thing on his mind: reuniting with his sweetheart, Dorris



Jean Foster. She was working at the local Sears Roebuck at the time, so Willcox, wearing his uniform, took a cab to meet her there soon after arriving home.

“I got right up behind her, she turned around and almost passed out, but I caught her,” Willcox laughed. “We got her squared away and all these employees were looking over rails and watching everything.”

Four months later, on Oct. 14, 1945, they married at the preacher’s house behind Mobberly Baptist Church. They were married 63 years, three months and three days.

“But who’s counting?” smiled Willcox, his eyes still shining with mischief as he talked about his late bride. “We had a very, very loving life. We spent a lot of time separated because the Air Force and the jobs I had. She raised the kids and worked, usually at a jewelry counter or Sears Roebuck.”

After WWII, Willcox re-enlisted in the Air Force and served a total of 25 years. He and Jean had three children and six grandchildren. They moved back to Longview from California in 2004 to be closer to their youngest grandchildren. Today, Willcox shares his experiences freely.

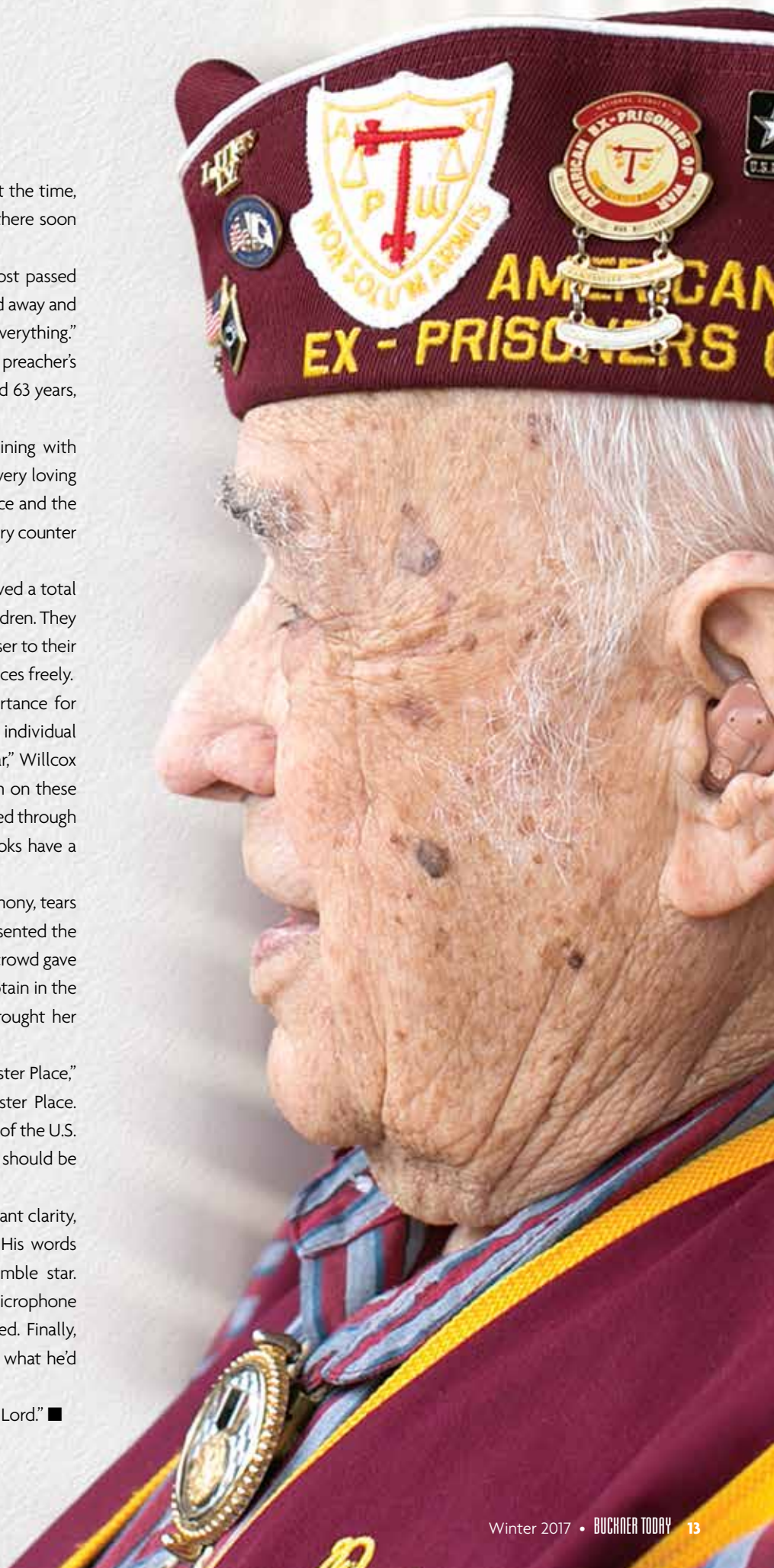
“I am 92 years young, and I believe it is of vast importance for veterans to share their stories so that people know our individual experiences and what happened during those times of war,” Willcox said. “Many young children don’t have a formal education on these wars in their history books. There is one history book I looked through that only had one sentence devoted to WWII. Other books have a page, maybe two that discuss the war.”

When Willcox received his medals at the October ceremony, tears streamed down his face as American Legion members presented the very colors he fought to defend. The standing-room-only crowd gave him a standing ovation and Gohmert, himself a former captain in the U.S. Army, saluted the honoree. One local mom even brought her homeschooled children to witness the occasion.

“We feel privileged to honor Puett at Buckner Westminster Place,” said Wes Wells, executive director of Buckner Westminster Place. “This ceremony could just as easily be held inside the halls of the U.S. Capitol. Puett’s story is so dynamic and compelling that it should be made into a movie. He’s truly a hero.”

Willcox addressed the crowd, sharing stories with poignant clarity, pausing between sentences to get the details just right. His words were simple and without airs, the man himself the humble star. As Willcox looked for the right closing remarks, the microphone shook in his hands, his eyes watered and his voice choked. Finally, after dotting his eyes with a Kleenex, he said in 10 words what he’d experienced in a lifetime.

“Teach your children history. And teach them about the Lord.” ■





Symbol of faith

Tania lived with her father and three older siblings in a home that was falling apart. Tania's father became acquainted with the staff at the Family Hope Center and learned he could participate in classes and family coaching to help his family toward self-sustainability. When Buckner Domestic Missions built them a new home, volunteers wrote Bible verses on the beams, symbols of the faith their home and lives are built on.

Come as you are

Buckner Family Hope Center in Peñitas, Texas celebrates five years of transforming lives



A mom on the verge of walking out on her family. A young lady whose teachers have given up on her. A father trying desperately to provide for his family. Parents who are simply struggling to

care for their children.

They're all at the Buckner Family Hope Center, and plenty others like them. For the past five years, the Hope Center has been a source of strength, encouragement, assistance and coaching for all who pass through its doors.

As the old hymn says, "Come as you are, that's how I want you." **Let transformation begin here.**



'I think God put it in my way for a reason'

Story by John Hall • Photography by Chelsea Q. White

New to town with few friends, Abigail Garcia didn't know what she was getting herself into when she followed a classmate's recommendation to go to the Buckner Family Hope Center in Peñitas, Texas. But she was struggling through her sophomore year of high school and the center's after-school program offered help.

The moment she crossed the threshold, her life changed more than she could possibly realize.

"I met wonderful youth," she said. "I started getting more into it. I told friends, 'I think I like it. I think God put it in my way for a reason.'"

With the encouragement and assistance of Buckner staff members – and plenty of hard work – Garcia's grades improved. Staff members saw her dedication and rewarded her with a scholarship after high school. She used it to attend Kaplan College where she became a certified nursing assistant.

Garcia's parents were initially skeptical of the Hope Center, but quickly changed their minds after they saw how much it helped their daughter. They investigated the other offerings and enrolled in classes such as financial management and fatherhood. Soon, they'd earned enough points for a mission team to build them a new house.

One of the teams that constructed the house was from First Baptist Church in Gatesville, Texas. Garcia connected with several of the team members who work in the medical profession. They encouraged her and offered some guidance for her next steps.

"I am really, really blessed," Garcia said. "We have such a great Buckner family."

Now Garcia teaches the anger management class for youth at the Hope Center. Stepping in front of the class brought back old memories. "It kind of reminded me of the first time I came to Buckner. I saw all the new faces, seeing them talk to each other. I remembered what it was like when I first came. It's a privilege."

Garcia hopes to bless students through the class, including her sister. So many people have invested in her life through Buckner. She wants to do likewise to those who are coming behind her.

"When I came here, you see all these new faces and they don't just look at you and turn around. They look at you and try to help you out. My family and I see all the changes they've made in the community, it makes me want to be part of it. It makes me proud to say I go to this center." ■

Hearts that help

Story and photography by Aimee Freston

It was an unusually cold winter in Peñitas, Texas. Marcela Alanis' two sons, ages 3 and 6, needed showers, so she bundled them up in blankets, stepped outside their warm one-room home and carried them to a little trailer on their property, the only place they had water or a kitchen.

After their showers, she carried them back to the warmth of their home. But when her boys got bronchitis, transporting them back and forth between the two dwellings in the cold only caused their illness to linger. They needed help and they needed it fast. That's when Marcela found Buckner, and their lives have never been the same.



Marcela and her husband, Horacio Treviño, are not afraid of hard work. They came to Peñitas from Mexico to avoid the crime that was increasing rapidly where they lived. They already had relatives in Texas and saw the opportunities if they were willing to work for them. Horacio worked as a mechanic, and eventually they bought a plot of land. They lived in a trailer until they could afford to build a permanent home. It leaked when it rained and the flimsy walls did little to keep out the cold.

Slowly, they started to build a home. They finished one room and started the kitchen but had to stop when they ran out of money. Though there wasn't any water or a kitchen, their one-room home was a better living situation than their trailer. They lived and slept in their home and went to the trailer to cook and bathe. It worked – until the boys got sick.

"Back then, I wasn't forgetting my faith, but I was slipping," Marcela said. "I wondered if God was still working for us."

That's when she met Gabriel Flores, who serves Buckner in the area. He was passing through the neighborhood and introducing people to Buckner programs. He connected the family with a volunteer group who helped them finish building their kitchen. Shortly after, the family began taking classes at the Buckner Family Hope Center.

"When we went to the Hope Center, I felt like somebody cared for us," Marcela said. "They get involved with people, and you know it's genuine what they do for you because they care. And they showed me that God loves us. Now, I have a lot of faith in God, and he always takes care of us."



Today, five years later, Marcela and her family are still actively involved

with the Hope Center, giving back as much as they receive. Marcela takes classes at the Hope Center – she has learned to sew and how to build a garden. In some of the classes, she assists the teachers and helps moms who are in the situation she once was. Her husband now owns an auto repair shop, is a graduate of the Hope Center's fatherhood class and helps Marcela with their children.



Through the classes and family coaching program, Marcela also discovered another talent: baking. Thinking she would like to start a home bakery, she bought an industrial grade Kitchen Aid mixer with points she obtained volunteering at the Hope Center and completed DreamBuilder, an online tutorial about operating a business. In addition to the interactive courses, she was given access to tools and templates to use for her own business venture.

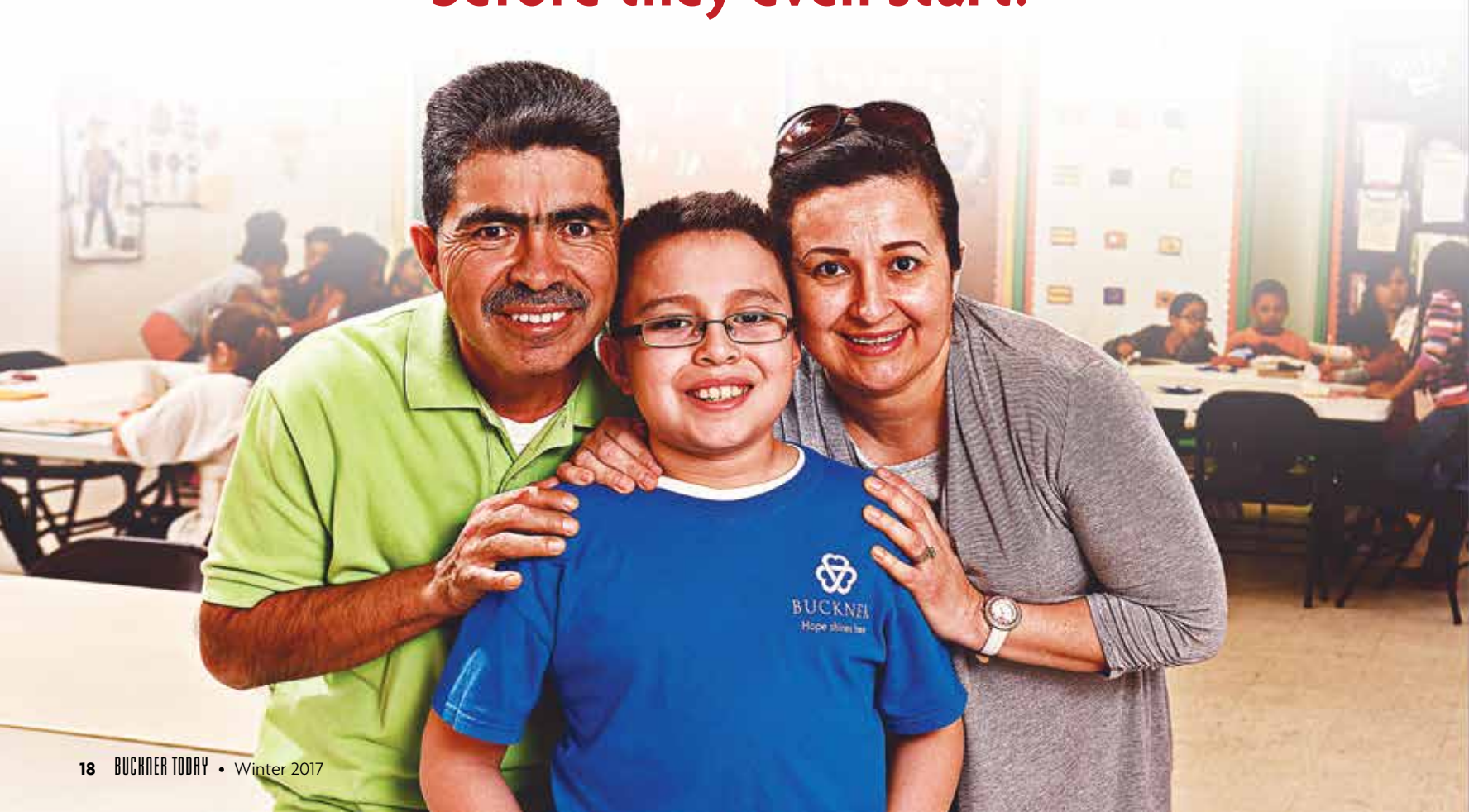
Now she is starting to bake cakes and other pastries to sell. Her hard work is already reaping rewards.

"I really like baking," Marcela said. "And now I have clients. And I won second prize for a business plan so I got awarded \$500 to invest in my business. I make sure to keep learning new techniques and take online classes as I can." ■

Protect children. Strengthen families. Support Buckner Family Hope Centers.

Buckner Family Hope Centers are community-based places where families go to find hope, support and empowerment to reach their fullest God-given potential. The key to the Family Hope Center's success is found in combining effective programs and passionate people to help families who are experiencing poverty, family issues and lack of services.

Family Hope Centers prevent many problems before they even start.



FAMILY HOPE CENTERS



ENGAGE FAMILIES



EQUIP FAMILIES



ELEVATE FAMILIES

BE A VOICE FOR FAMILIES

1,300+

Families found strength
to carry on

6,000+

People embraced hope
for better lives

Limitless

The impact you can have by supporting
Buckner Family Hope Centers

\$118

Empowers a family
for a year

\$1,180

Empowers 10 families
for a year

\$29,500

Empowers 250 families
for a year

Give now to help
families thrive.

Coming to life:



Single father discovers joy in new beginning

Story and photography by Chelsea Q. White



Hector Flores' home in the middle of June was hot, dusty and cramped. Tattered bed sheets tried to block the blazing South Texas sun coming through the small square windows. Dirty dishes piled high in the sink, spilling over onto the counter and the stove. As a single parent with four children, it's hard to find time to keep up with the housework.

Flores has been a single dad of Hector Jr., 14, Rene, 11, Sandy, 7, and Tania, 6 for the past five years. He used to live in a tiny, trailer-like home he slowly assembled by himself in an attempt to give his four children a safe place to live.

Raising four children alone is hard but not being able to work because the youngest isn't school-aged made it even harder. A trained mechanic, he did odd jobs when he could but struggled to make ends meet.

Flores heard about Buckner International from his neighbors in Peñitas, Texas. It took him a long time to muster up the courage to ask for help, but when he did, he found it immediately.

He caught Ricardo Brambila, who was serving as director of the local Buckner Family Hope Center, one day in the parking lot and explained his situation. Brambila talked to him about being a single dad, the classes offered at the Hope Center and volunteer opportunities.

"It's so rare for a man to come forward and admit he needs help, especially in Hispanic cultures," Brambila said. "We could see that he was determined to help his children."

The following day, Flores went to the market at the Hope Center. Later, the family also attended a Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls® back-to-school distribution, where the children each received a new pair of shoes. Shoes were the first step to life transformation.

"I came to life," Flores said. "I felt more youthful. Because Buckner brings shoes and clothes and many things, you start thinking. Those are new things, but they are not little things; they are big things, incredible things, the things Buckner does."

Weaving God's story

Vanessa and Sergio Guzman have supported Buckner for the past five years in a variety of ways to make their South Texas community stronger.

The Guzmans, along with their 4-year-old son, volunteered at the Shoes for Orphan Souls back-to-school shoe and backpack distribution and were randomly paired with the Flores family to help them find shoes for the new school year. They found perfect fits for all the children except Tania.

"After the event, my wife bought some shoes for her," Sergio said. "We tried to figure out who the family was but they hadn't registered at the Family Hope Center yet so they weren't able to tell us the name of the family."

Vanessa tucked away the shoes and prayed some day she would find the little girl.

At Christmastime the following year, the Guzmans wanted to bless a struggling family in one of the Buckner programs. They were paired with a family and the Guzmans purchased tools, clothes and toys for them.

As they pulled up to the home to deliver the gifts, Vanessa instantly recognized the children running to greet them. Among them was the little girl she bought the shoes for.

"I saw them and I actually started crying because I knew then that it was God's hand in their story," Vanessa said.

Fatherhood 24/7

Flores enrolled in family coaching and classes at the Family Hope Center to become a better father. He completed the Fatherhood 24/7 Initiative course, which teaches men about their identity, discipline, how to work with their wives and how to leave a legacy in their families.

Since Flores completed classes and family coaching, he earned enough points to qualify for a new home built by teams working through Buckner Domestic Missions.

New home, new beginning

During a three-week span last summer, Flores' story came full circle. His old house was torn down and a new and improved one was built in its place.

The Guzmans brought 40 staff members to help construct the home. They started by laying the foundation and putting up beams and trusses.

The following week, more than 100 members of Woodlawn Baptist Church in Austin spent a week putting up walls and the siding of the house. They painted walls, installed sinks and toilets and set up beds in each of the rooms.

At an emotional ceremony at the end of the build, tears streamed down his face as he thanked Buckner for helping him transform his life and give him a hope for the future.

"I am very grateful first to God and to all the people who have helped me. Since I met them I've had enough support," Flores said. "I am going to be a good father now thanks to [Buckner]. Now that we have a new home, the children and I will live better. When the chill arrives, then we will be more protected with the house, because we will already have hot water for the children and many things that we never had." ■

Did you know?

Buckner serves more than 250 families domestically through family coaching at Family Hope Centers. Through one-on-one coaching, financial and parenting classes as well as after-school programs, families are equipped to expand their knowledge and develop practical skills to empower their families for self-sustainability.

Learn more at buckner.org.



After successfully fulfilling their Family Hope Center family coaching goals and completing classes at the center, Hector Flores' family (**right**) qualified for a home build by Buckner Domestic Missions. Over 100 volunteers from Woodlawn Baptist Church in Austin helped construct the house (**far right**) with help from the Flores family (**above**). At the moving in ceremony, Flores was overwhelmed with gratitude (**below**). "I am very grateful first to God and to all the people who have helped me," Flores said. "I am going to be a good father now thanks to [Buckner]."



Living on a shred of hope



Maria Luisa Morales felt hopeless.

Her family was in disarray: Her 16-year-old son threatened to run away from home. Her 13-year-old daughter wanted to drop out of school. Her 10-year-old son displayed fits of anger.

Story and photography by Aimee Freston



A changed life

Maria Luisa Morales constantly felt the weight of poverty tugging at her soul. Their family of six lived in a small trailer, where piles of toys, blankets and cans of food were stacked in corners, often blocking the tiny windows. There was barely room to sit down. Maria Luisa considered walking away from from it all — her home and family. Then she found the Family Hope Center and her life changed forever.



The trailer they called a home was in shambles: It was small, too small for a family of six.

The trailer they called a home was in shambles: It was small, too small for a family of six. Most of the day, the trailer was dark; its tiny windows allowed little light to enter. Clothes, toys, and cans of food were shoved and stacked in corners, and there was no room for the baby to play. It felt like living in a storage unit.

Maria Luisa constantly felt the weight of poverty tugging at her soul: Both she and her husband were willing to work, but they could not find jobs. They were barely scraping by. It felt like a never ending cycle of despair.

Maybe she should leave, Maria Luisa thought. Just walk away from her family and give up. Tears flowed down her face. She just needed a shred of hope to keep going.

That's when Maria Luisa found the Buckner Family Hope Center in Peñitas, Texas.

She walked into the Hope Center with low expectations. The school counselor at her children's school referred her to the center, but she wasn't sure if anything could help. She was on the brink of giving up.

Sharon Rueda, a Hope Center family coach, sensed Maria Luisa's frustration. They worked on a family plan to identify goals to build self-sustainability for their family. They discussed classes the whole

family could take at the Hope Center, and they prayed together.

Maria Luisa walked into the Hope Center defeated, but left with the hope life could change for her family, if they were diligent in working for it.

"Before she left, we sat and held hands to pray for God to intervene on her behalf," Rueda said. "I shared the Bible story of Ruth's faith and steadfastness while she waited to see God provide for her. Later, Maria Luisa returned to tell me God had answered our prayers and provided jobs for her husband that very next week."

Little by little life changed. Maria Luisa signed up for her first class: Jobs for Life. She learned how to cope practically with day-to-day issues in the home. Then she took a parenting and financial class. Her husband, Alberto, took a fatherhood class, where he learned about his role and impact in the family unit.

Their children started attending a youth class where they learned how to communicate confidently with their teachers and motivated them to continue in their school work. Her younger son took an anger management class and learned skills to control his emotions.

"God has blessed me plenty ever since I entered this place, spiritually and economically," Maria Luisa said. "In the past year, we were struggling with multiple debts, but now in less than two months [of taking the

[Continued on page 30]



Through the parenting, financial and youth classes, Maria Luisa and her family took at the Family Hope Center (right), they began to change the makeup of their family both emotionally and financially. Upon successful fulfillment of their family coaching goals, they qualified for a home build through Buckner Domestic Missions. Two teams from Woman's Missionary Union of Texas helped build the home (bottom and top left). And Alberto, Maria Luisa's husband, and their children rushed home from their job and school to also help with the construction (top right).

Photo by John Hall



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support through Buckner can help these



percent of Peñitas residents live below
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financial class], we have been able to get out of two of them. The Hope Center has shown how a person can be useful in life. They have taught me that not all things are free. You have to earn it for yourself.”

Still, their cramped living situation troubled Maria Luisa. She shared her frustration with Rueda.

“She changed my way of thinking,” Maria Luisa said. “She told me to look at it differently. She said, ‘You have a roof over your head. Look at it as your castle.’ And that began to change me. I shared it with my children. I told them it was a wonderful place and a gift from God. [This way of thinking] began to change things.”

And change it did. It started with Maria Luisa, who now felt like she had a purpose in life, and worked through her entire family. Alberto started spending more time with their children. Rosbel, their oldest son, worked through his depression. Instead of threatening to run away, he started helping out at home and caring for baby Eric Elias when his parents were at the center taking classes. Carolina became more excited about school because of the youth classes. She’s determined not to drop out of school and motivated to get good grades. Rolando didn’t cry anymore, and he has learned to calm himself down to relax

instead of throwing tantrums. Even the baby smiled more.

“I felt peace,” Maria Luisa said. “But thank God our four children have gone through a big change. It was something marvelous, something only God can do. That is what I can say about my children. The center has helped them a lot. My oldest has been helped the most.”

“I want to give thanks to God first and secondly to Buckner for the way each person I have met has been a blessing and seeking to help, moving beyond themselves to give to others and give to our family,” Alberto echoed his wife’s sentiments. “Our family is stronger and better for it.”

Now that Maria Luisa felt this peace, she wanted to help others experience it too. She started volunteering at the Hope Center.

“I like to help,” she said. “I like for others to feel the same way I feel. I want them to feel useful and learn they can succeed if they want to.”

By taking classes, volunteering at the Hope Center and successfully fulfilling their family coaching goals, the Morales family qualified for a home build through Buckner Domestic Missions.

In November, two mission teams through Woman’s Missionary Union of Texas worked from sunup to sundown to build the Morales family a new home. They raised the walls, built the roof, painted the



siding and even helped furnish the home when it was complete, but even more important, they spoke truth to the Morales family. They hugged the children, encouraged Maria Luisa and shared their favorite Bible passages. They became friends.

When it came time to raise the first wall, they let Maria Luisa hammer the first nail into her new home. She could barely see past the tears that flooded her eyes as she pounded the nail into the beam, a symbol of what hard work and prayer can do for a family.

"I just can't believe this day has finally come," she said. "The relief I have and the overwhelming sense of love and compassion is pouring out of me in tears."

Alberto rushed home from work to help with the construction.

melds with the light shining out of the family room window, but it pales in comparison to the glow on the Morales family as they giggle with glee from their game. Even baby Eric Elias claps his hands while sitting on Alberto's lap watching the family play.

When it is too dark to see anymore, the family goes inside. Eric Elias plays in his jumper while Maria Luisa makes dinner. The boys settle down to play a game of chess, moments of concentration broken with smiles as they move the pieces across the board. And Carolina sings her favorite Christmas carol: "Silent Night."

With three bedrooms, a bathroom, family room, kitchen and laundry room, their home is a vast improvement from the small trailer they once shared, but even more, the house is a reminder



He carried wood panels, drove the construction trucks and painted walls. In the early morning before going to school, the children greeted the volunteers with hugs. They begged to stay and help instead of going to school.

"It means so much that a group of strangers would come from far away, leave their families, their jobs, their comfort zone, to show such love and generosity to my family," Alberto said. "This feeling of gratitude mixed with relief and undeserving is making me cry like a little boy."

A few weeks before Christmas, the Morales home was complete. Outside, the family plays volleyball together, laughing as the ball goes astray. As the sun sets, the soft glimmer of the porch light

of what prayer and motivation can do. The children are free to dream again. Rosbel dreams about becoming a story board creator. Carolina wants to become a judge or a singer, and Rolando wants to help Rosbel create games.

And Maria Luisa marvels at the change.

"If I had given up and walked out on my family, I would have missed out on the wonderful ways God has transformed my marriage, my children's outlook and self-confidence, and my own sense of purpose and meaning, and most of all the faith building miracle of seeing our house being built before our very eyes," she said. "My heart is so full. It is my hope to continue serving at the center and being a blessing in return." ■

Determined,
driven and
dedicated:

Lufkin
single mom
overcomes
obstacles
to succeed

Story by John Hall
Photography by
Aimee Freston



Tiffany Pangarakis was determined. No one ever doubted that. Smart and hard-working, she could succeed at anything she put her mind to. Nothing was going to stop her.

But life sure tried.

Her father died when she was 15. Her mom died two years later. She was legally declared an adult and was on her own. The Lufkin resident struggled to get by but managed to enroll in Angelina College. Then she became “involved in a bad relationship.” Shortly after, her daughter, Kalista, was born.

School would have to wait. Her daughter was more important. Pangarakis started working full time, driving 100 miles round-trip to make a living. As if Pangarakis didn’t have enough to balance, Kalista suffered through health issues. It required numerous doctor visits, forcing Pangarakis to miss work one too many times. She was fired. And desperate.

“I was a nervous wreck,” she said. “I didn’t know what to do. I had a daughter. I didn’t have a job. I had no hope.”

An uncle told her about Buckner Family Pathways in Lufkin, a ministry that empowers and strengthens vulnerable single-parent families by giving them a secure place to live, help with child care and assistance in gaining

“Seeing how these ladies work and seeing the difference they’ve made in my life, they’ve inspired me to want to work in social work. To be able to give back would be such a blessing.”

Family Pathways in Lufkin Director Holly Valentine is blown away by Pangarakis’ ability and determination.

“She is a very smart young woman,” Valentine said. “She’s probably the only person I know who can function on no sleep and write a 14-15 page paper in a few hours and get a 98 on it. She’s done that again and again.”

Pangarakis finished an associate degree and her bachelor’s degree in social work at Stephen F. Austin State University in December. Now she has her choice of jobs to support her daughter as she begins her postgraduate work.

In preparing for the Family Pathways graduation ceremony the day before the SFA graduation, Valentine admitted she was struggling to come up with words to express adequately how she feels about Pangarakis. Valentine has become like a second mother to her.

“She’s such a dynamo,” Valentine said, unsuccessfully fighting back tears. “She’s such a smart lady. I’m so proud of all she’s accomplished.” ■



life skills while parents work to reach their higher education goals.

The solid foundation of Buckner provided the footing Pangarakis needed to take the steps to fulfill her potential. She quickly bonded with Buckner staff members who started out as professional caseworkers, turned into mentors and are now what she desperately missed - a family.

“They’ve really become a family to us,” she said. “My daughter’s gotten to grow up here. We came just before her second birthday. This has become her family.”

When Pangarakis is having a difficult time, Buckner staff members have known just what to say to keep her moving forward. Once when she and Kalista were sick, staff members brought them homemade soup. On other days, she receives texts that staff members are praying for her. Kalista has bonded with the other children on campus. She plays with them daily, her giggles filling her home.

Strengthen a family

Buckner Family Pathways relies on the support of generous donors to change the lives of families like the Pangarakises.

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Visit buckner.org/donate to change a life today.

Committed endeavors

Story by John Hall • Photography by Aimee Freston

Lisa Schaefer isn't much of a shopper. It just doesn't excite her. Unless it helps vulnerable children through Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls.

"I'm a woman who really doesn't even buy shoes," she said. "I'm not a shopaholic. I probably only own five shoes. I'd rather shop for them any day than shop for myself."

For the past decade, Schaefer has hosted Shoes for Orphan Souls shoe drives, each time working with friends to transform the lives of children through the gift of a pair of footwear. Her largest shoe drive netted about 250 pairs of shoes, and over the years the drives have impacted hundreds of children.

Shoes for Orphan Souls has become a family passion for the Schaefers. They've helped sort and pack shoes at the Buckner

team," Schaefer said. "It made me all that more passionate about shoes."

Shortly after she returned from the trip, the school she teaches at, Grace Covenant Academy in Frisco, Texas, was considering which outreach project students could do together this year. Schaefer immediately suggested Shoes for Orphan Souls.

The school recently held a 5k/Fun Run at a local park where participants donated shoes and also raised money to purchase footwear through the ministry. Later, students sorted shoes at the Humanitarian Aid Center and learned more about how the shoes help children globally.

"I think it's an amazing ministry," Schaefer said. "It's a way for us to do something beyond collecting shoes. It's a way to bless people who need blessing."

Shoes for Orphan Souls Director Rachel Wallis said Schaefer's desire to positively impact the lives of children around the world is an inspiration.

"I love how Lisa has taken her gifts in teaching and organizing and used them to impact kids all over the world. So often, we wonder if and how God can use us, and Lisa has just thrown herself into every opportunity he has placed in front of her." ■

Host a shoe drive!

Shoe drives can take place at any time of the year, in any location. No matter where you live or what you do, you can help make a difference in the life of a child by hosting a shoe drive at your school, church, office or club. **Learn more at buckner.org/shoes**

Center for Humanitarian Aid in Mesquite, Texas. They collect the shoes together. They've seen what can happen when people work together for the cause of Christ.

God cares about every child, Schaefer said. He loves them and protects them. One of the ways he does that is through Shoes for Orphan Souls.

"Buckner uses shoes to bring the gospel to kids," she said. "Buckner uses shoes to protect kids' feet so they can go to school. It sends a message that they are special."

Last summer, Schaefer was part of Shoes for Orphan Souls mission trip to the Dominican Republic, where the teams conducted Vacation Bible Schools for children and distributed the shoes collected by the Buckner ministry.

Seeing first-hand the joy on the children's faces when they received the shoes was inspiring.

"It was a great experience for me to see the other side of what happens and be part of that





Students collect backpacks of caring

When children are removed from their home due to neglect or abuse, it often happens quickly. As a result, children many times leave most of their belongings behind. What they do take with them typically accompanies them in a plastic trash bag.

It's a time of uncertainty and fear for children. No one and nothing seems familiar. Comfort is hard to find.

But athletes at an East Texas high school are helping change that. Athletes Who Care is a growing group of teens who are collecting backpacks and stuffed animals for children served

through Buckner foster care. The teens have collected more than 300 backpacks and animals, and the effort has started in Dallas as well.

"We just thought having a backpack would help move their stuff and introduce them into a foster home. When we spoke to a lady at Buckner, she said that could really help," LeAnn James, 13, said.

"We've had a lot of stuffed animals when we were younger and still do," Joelle Newton, 15, said. "They're a symbol of comfort." ■

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