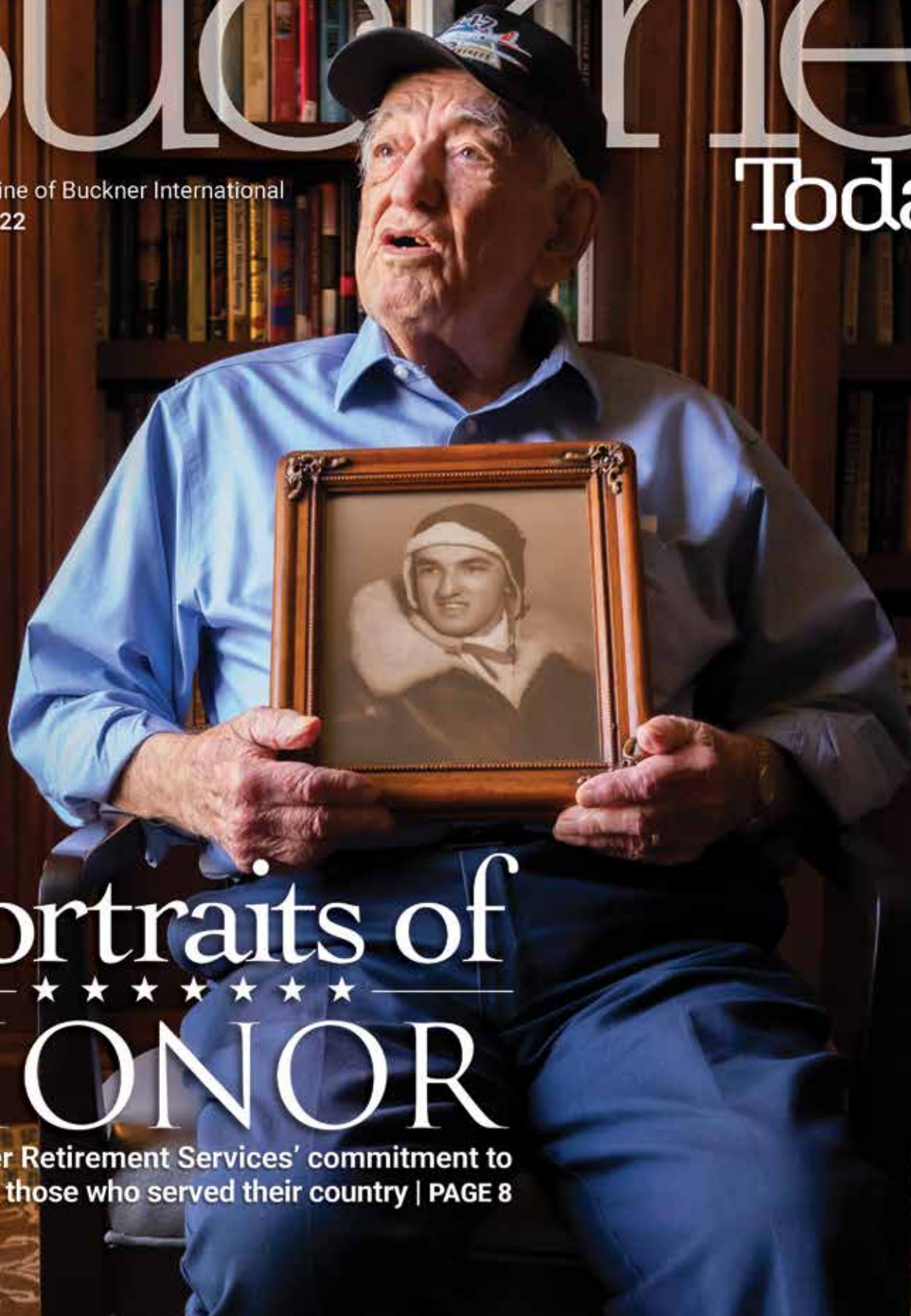


See inside for ways you can support families.

# Buckner Today

The magazine of Buckner International  
WINTER 2022



## Portraits of \*\*\*\*\* HONOR

Buckner Retirement Services' commitment to  
serving those who served their country | PAGE 8

# Buckner

A publication of Buckner International • **Volume 47, Number 1 • Winter 2022**

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## Perspectives on Buckner

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President/CEO  
Albert L. Reyes

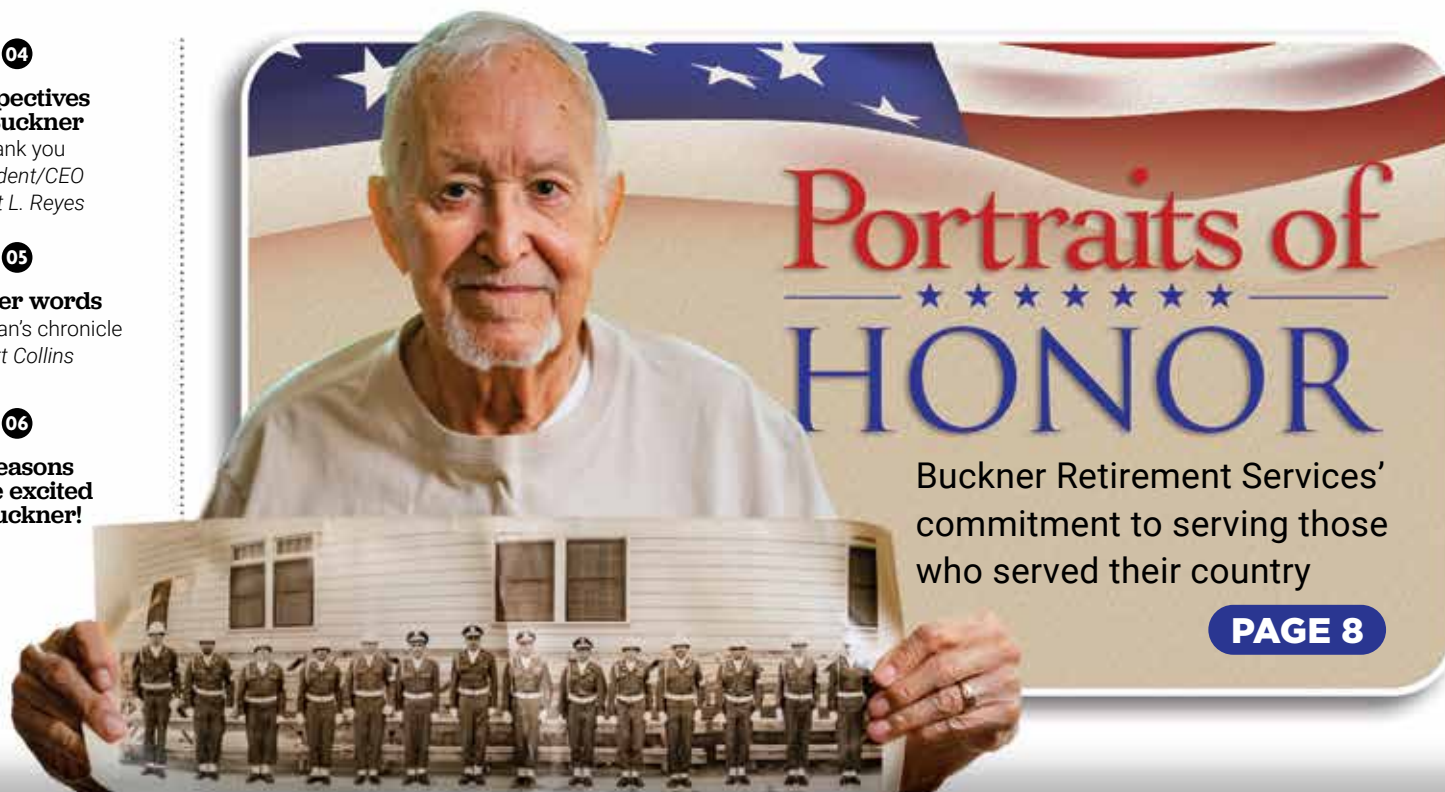
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Hope shines here.®



# ner Today

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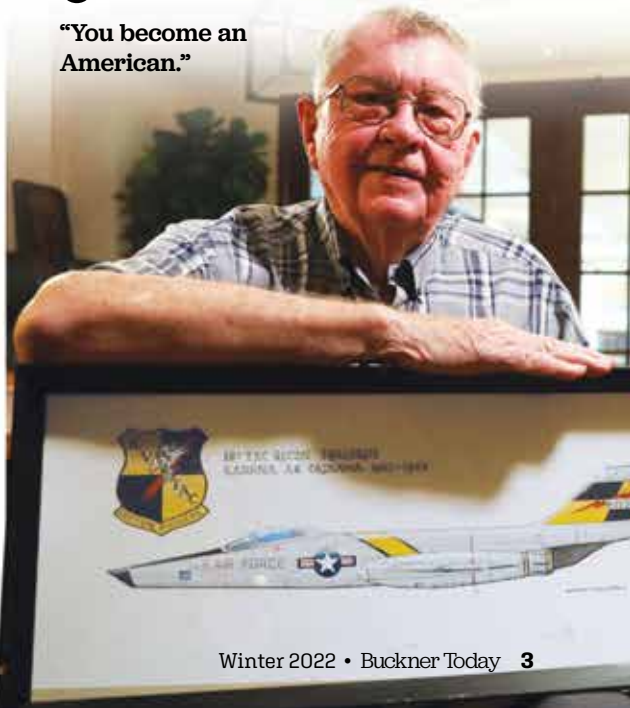
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"You become an American."



**On the cover:** Clyde Defrates was drafted during World War II at 18 years old. Without any fear, he jumped into the ball turret of an Army Air Corp bomber and flew his first mission in 1944. Celebrate the seniors who have served on page 8. *Photography by Mark Sandlin.*

# Thank you

**O**n Jan. 15, 1897, a fire broke out on the Buckner Orphans Home campus in the boys' dormitory while all the children and workers were sleeping.

Mrs. Sallie Britton, the boys' matron, awoke to find the floors beneath her bed ablaze. When she rushed to call for help, the door behind her slammed shut and the floor of her room, along with her three sons, fell through. Sallie jumped over the second story railing to the ground below, rescuing five boys.

Other adults arrived and attempted to help, but there were 19 casualties from the fire.



*In the only known photograph of the original buildings, children pose with R.C. "Father" Buckner (at left), on the Buckner Orphans Home campus. The building at right burned in 1897.*

The fire was so tragic, Father Buckner contemplated closing the home completely. But he didn't. Encouraged by friends, he resolved that such a tragedy would never happen again. He went to work, determined to rebuild the entire campus, replacing the wooden buildings with brick ones. In less than a year after the fire, a new home had been built for the boys.

That fire, 125 years ago this year, remains the greatest crisis in Buckner's 143-year-history. Today, we face a crisis of global proportions. COVID-19 is sending record numbers of people to hospitals around the world.

Buckner responded to the tragedy of that devastating fire 125 years ago by rallying to become a better organization. Staff, volunteers and donors answered the call to rebuild for a better future.

More than a century later, friends like you are once again rallying and responding to the needs around us.

Whether we realize it or not, we are being defined by our response to the coronavirus crisis. And like those who went before

us, we are answering the call. Our staff has risen to the occasion, going above and beyond normal duties to serve.

You are stepping up in unprecedented ways, enabling us to set an all-time record in 2021 for the most money ever given to Buckner, with over \$20 million in cash gifts to support our work. We are grateful for your continued support to meet the ever-growing requests for our Buckner ministries.

Unfortunately, pain doesn't operate on the calendar year. Simply changing years at midnight doesn't change the needs of so many vulnerable children, families and senior adults.

I remember growing up in the 1960s. The decade started with great optimism. John F. Kennedy had been elected president and exciting new ideas were emerging everywhere. We literally set our sights on the moon.

But optimism simply wasn't enough. The 60s would see President Kennedy assassinated and the country entered the Vietnam War. What the world needed was hope. Optimism is based on circumstances, but hope is rooted in God's faithfulness – regardless of our situation.

The Apostle Peter expresses the reason we have hope. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." [1 Peter 1:3]

Jesus gives us a "new birth into a living hope." That's why, 125 years ago, this ministry rose from the ashes of a tragic fire. And it's why, in 2022, we are confident that even this pandemic will not overwhelm us. Our hope for this year and for years to come is in Jesus Christ.

I am so thankful you share that hope. Because of your faithfulness and desire to serve children, families and senior adults, together, we are making a powerful difference in thousands of lives.

While there are countless words expressing gratitude, perhaps the most profound are also the simplest – Thank you.

God bless you as we serve together in the New Year. **BT**



**Albert Reyes, President and CEO**  
Buckner International  
Visit my blog at [www.AlbertLReyes.com](http://www.AlbertLReyes.com)

# One orphan's chronicle

*Promise fulfilled*

IN OTHER WORDS | SCOTT COLLINS

**W**hile I don't remember the first time I met Billie Juanita (Jerre) Simmons, I'll never forget the impact she had on my life. Jerre died Dec. 3, leaving a legacy that outlives any of us.

I came to Buckner in 1994 and Jerre became my portal to Buckner's past.

Steve Blow, Dallas Morning News columnist, introduced readers to a story they probably thought was fiction on May 19, 1996.

"Her father was a raging alcoholic. The desperately poor family moved from one dump to another. And when she was 10, her father finally carried out his threats. He shot her mother to death right in front of all five children. And as they ran for their lives, he turned the gun on himself."

Front page photos in The Dallas Times Herald on Aug. 5, 1943, the very next day, showed five solemn-faced children with the headline, "Home Sought for Children After Slaying."

One of the fondest moments in my Buckner career is sitting across from Jerre for a video interview. With a twinkle in her eyes, Jerre remembered the knock.

"It was Bro. Hal Buckner. He told my grandmother, 'If you will let me have those five children, I can promise you they will have opportunities that you cannot imagine. And he was right.'"

Despite the tragedy of what she witnessed, Jerre never became bitter or gave into self-pity or guilt. I always saw that twinkle in her eyes.

Jerre called me one day about 20 years ago asking if I would help her publish a book. Jerre and the BOH Alumni Association wanted to collect and publish memories from people who had grown up at Buckner. The book would be called "Buckner Memoirs: The Orphan Chronicles."

Working with Jerre on the book, I found three important lessons that continually energize me. First, I saw the life-altering impact Buckner has on children who become adults. Second, I saw a

deep love for Buckner in return. Third, hearing and reading their stories, I saw the power of storytelling.

Jerre and her husband of more than 50 years, Bill, have been my constant friends. As I read what Bill wrote about Jerre for the funeral program, not only did I feel Jerre in the words, but I also saw Bill's love and respect for his wife. "Jerre bravely overcame the drastic change in her young life. Through the grace of our Lord, she grew into a loving, stable wife, mother, friend, and gifted teacher."

Sitting in the packed sanctuary, I remembered Hal Buckner's promise of opportunity Jerre quoted during our video interview.

Promise fulfilled. **BT**



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



**Visit [buckner.org/volunteer](http://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, email us at [bucknercommunications@buckner.org](mailto:bucknercommunications@buckner.org).

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# 3 Reasons we're excited at Buckner!

## Buckner Family Pathways continues to strengthen families



Lisa's life since childhood was filled with drugs and crime. Now a mother herself, she wanted to be there for her daughter but didn't know how. Following in her mother's footsteps, a wedge was created between Lisa and her daughter Alissa.

"I was in a situation in life where I needed hope now," Lisa said. "Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but right now. And Buckner gave that to me."



Lisa found acceptance and healing at Family Pathways, and a way to strengthen her relationship with her daughter.

**Watch Lisa and Alissa share their story here:**  
[buckner.org/strengtheningfamilies](https://buckner.org/strengtheningfamilies)



## New year, fresh start

2

While you may have already let a few goals or resolutions waver, there's still plenty of time to implement a new way to give back. You have the power to change a life through Buckner in 2022. Whether it's a foster care child experiencing transition, a family working together to overcome hardship, or a parent striving to break the cycle of poverty, you can be a source of encouragement in their journey.

**For ways to serve in your community in-person or virtually, visit [buckner.org/volunteer](https://www.buckner.org/volunteer).**



## Brightening futures with the help of Halliburton

3

Halliburton has been a longtime supporter and friend of Buckner. In 2019, staff from Halliburton walked the halls of the Buckner Family Hope Center at Aldine and were inspired to help brighten up the space. Their total donation was \$130,000. Thanks to their support and dedication, the Family Hope Center was able to purchase two new 12-passenger vans as well as renovations throughout the buildings, including murals in the main areas and teen portable in the back.

They brought in three different volunteer groups to achieve these updates.



"Halliburton and their great volunteers have been instrumental in helping Buckner provide excellent service to our families in the Aldine community," said Shonice Reed, director of the Family Hope Center at Aldine. "The newly renovated areas allowed our youth and teen program participants, who've endured virtual learning with limited social connections throughout the pandemic, to walk into a space that's exciting and inviting to all. Children and teens in the Aldine community now have a welcoming space designed to make learning fun and to unlock their potential and creativity in a meaningful way." **BT**



# Portraits of HONOR

**BUCKNER RETIREMENT SERVICES' COMMITMENT  
TO SERVING THOSE WHO SERVED THEIR COUNTRY**

STORY BY RUSS DILDAY • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK SANDLIN

**W**hen Americans picture the men and women who are serving or have served in one of the branches of the United States military, we form a portrait of them in our heads. We see young men and women dressed in crisp dress uniforms embodying the best qualities our country offers. We use aspirational words like loyalty, commitment, courage, honor and sacrifice to characterize them and their service.



At Buckner Parkway Place, a senior living community in Houston, a wall of honor dedicated to veterans makes those portraits literal as viewers walk past the service photos of residents who served in all of the military branches.

Throughout Buckner Retirement Services, serving the veterans who served their country is an extra – and revered – privilege, said Brian Robbins, BRS vice president and chief operating officer.

“We consider it a sacred honor to serve them,” said Robbins, a U.S. Navy veteran himself. “These are people who either for an entire career or a brief season of their lives sacrificed their all for the safety of our country.”

In the spirit of honoring veterans, the following

pages offer a portrait of elder warriors, residents who, after serving their country went on to live remarkable lives as civilians and patriots.

It’s a gallery of individuals who, as Robbins commented, includes some who “endured the hardships and danger of war and combat, while others gave their talents and energy to supporting, training or advancing those we entrusted with our national security. But they made it possible for all of us to live in freedom and safety in America and across the globe.”





“I’ve never flown.  
Let’s try the Air Corps.”



**After being drafted** the night after high school graduation during World War II, the Army gave **Clyde Defrates**, now a resident of Parkway Place in Houston, a choice: “Do you want to go into the infantry or the air corps?” His answer? “Well, I’ve never flown. Let’s try the Air Corps. I flew my first mission on Dec. 30, 1944, as a ball turret gunner,” on a bomber over Europe.



## “I learned respect.”



When the Army learned **Joseph Chaves**, who lives at Buckner Westminster Place in Longview, Texas, had a knack for languages – he speaks English, Spanish and French – they sent him to The Presidio in San Francisco where he studied at the Army’s Criminal Investigation Division (CID) and later investigated military-related crimes as a sergeant for the CID military police. He said his time in the military taught him the importance of “respect.”



## “I wanted to serve my country.”



**“I volunteered.** Even though I was drafted, I wanted to go,” said **James Haas**, a resident of Parkway Place in Houston. And even though he could have used a position on the railroad as a draft deferral and a bout with rheumatic fever slowed his entry, he insisted on serving. “I wanted to serve my country. I wanted to serve in the military.”

After the Second World War, he was stationed at an air base in Europe with a unique assignment: Camouflaging American aircraft on the ground with man-made fog.

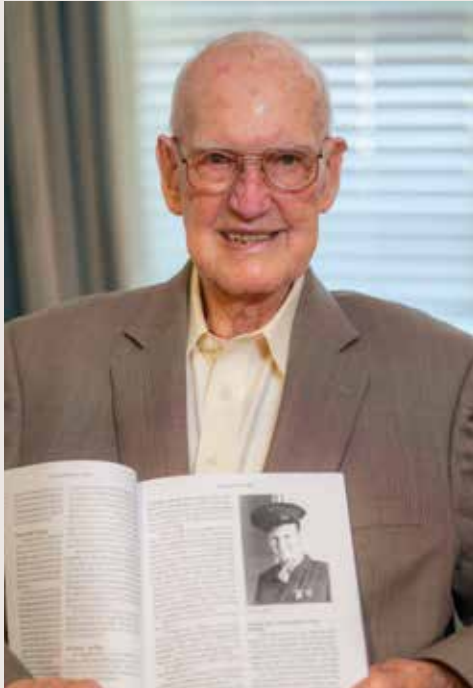




## Deferred service



**Jewel Maxwell**, a resident of Buckner Westminster Place in Longview, Texas, said he “ended up in Munich, Germany, for a year,” at the end of World War II. “I was supposed to be in the service during the wartime. I got to stay out [of the service] three months out of high school, on the count of four brothers that were in at the time.” The decision reflected an Army sole-surviving-son exemption policy that was eventually passed into law by Congress in 1948 and made widely known in the Steven Spielberg movie, “Saving Private Ryan.” Maxwell is wearing his original uniform, tailored for a recent veteran Freedom Honor Flight he took over Washington, D.C.



## Courage through faith

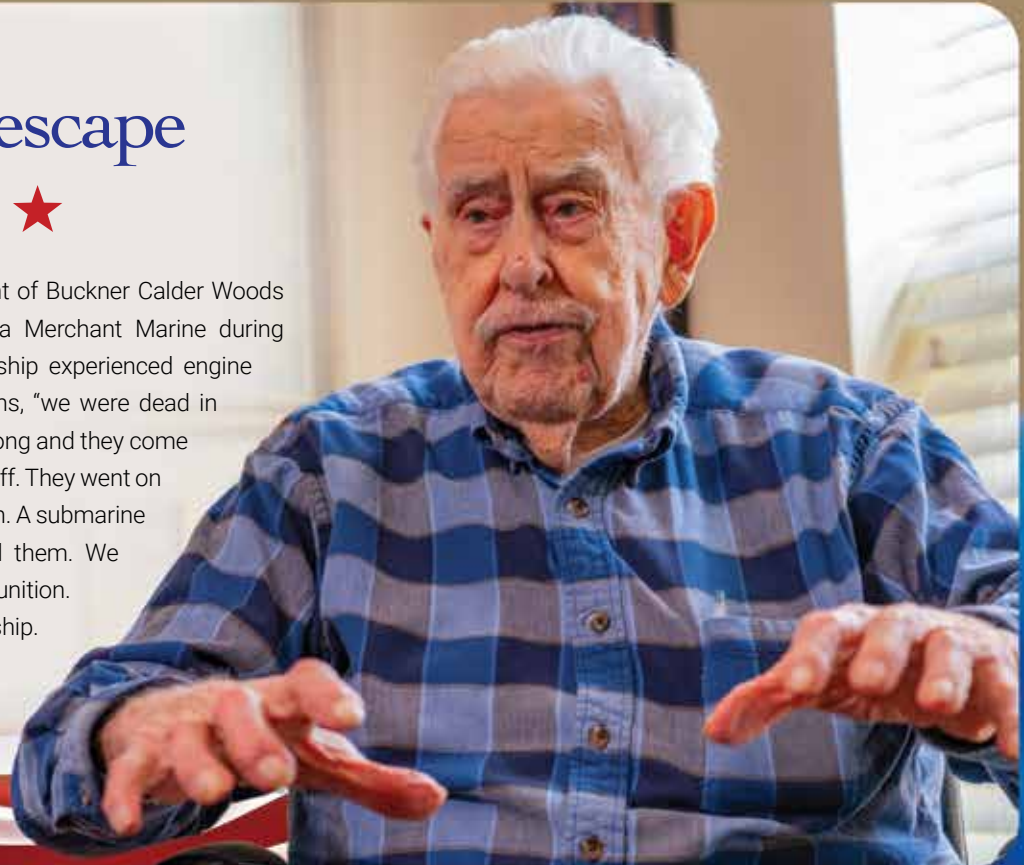


**As a World War II** Marine infantryman, **Murray Anderson** of Buckner Calder Woods in Beaumont, Texas, saw intense combat in the South Pacific. During one battle, he said, "Out of 20 ships in the 2nd Marine Division, we lost seven ships in three hours by kamikaze bombers. They sent us in. It was supposed to be high tide, but guess what? It was low tide. They dumped us on a coral reef 500 yards from the beach. We had to wade in through dead marines and them shooting everything in the book at us." Anderson said he looked to his faith for comfort during battle. "I said, 'God, you're not answering my prayer.' And it was like he put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'I can't answer the prayer you're asking for, but if you ask me for the strength and courage to face what you have to face, I can answer your prayer.'" Anderson immediately felt a calm and resolve to move forward. "All of a sudden, my fear was gone."

## Narrow escape



**Clement Douglas Mohr**, a resident of Buckner Calder Woods in Beaumont, Texas, served as a Merchant Marine during World War II. He said when his ship experienced engine failure while transporting munitions, "we were dead in the water. And this ship ... came along and they come close and catcall us and all that stuff. They went on their way and went over the horizon. A submarine was waiting for them, torpedoed them. We were the ship that had the ammunition. They thought their ship was our ship. That was a scary deal."





Engineers do “whatever  
is necessary.”



**Bob Spooner** of Buckner Westminster Place in Longview, Texas, said he learned valuable, life-long lessons as a U.S. Army combat engineer. “A combat engineer is on the front lines. He builds bridges. He lays mine fields. He puts in barbed-wire fences to keep people from coming in ... he builds roads, airfields, whatever is necessary.” **BT**



BT

## Love and support despite COVID-19

*When Kaylah and Darius\* were placed in the Holloway home, the pandemic was at an all-time high. With court delays and uncertainty, the love and stability at home meant even more.*



# Two paths, one loving home

STORY BY EMILY AHRENS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK SANDLIN

**F**rom the outside looking in, Rob and Emily Holloway found their foster care and adoption path through Buckner. For them, their journey walked two paths that parallel - but couldn't be more different.

We enter their home in a season they would probably rather we didn't – smack dab in the middle of a remodel. Despite the furniture moved all over to make room for the renovations, the Holloways laugh and smile together without missing a beat. Their warmth is undeniable, and it's clear they don't let anything deter them from welcoming someone new into their home.

Their first path into foster care and adoption began with Buckner in 2019 with 8-year-old Kaylah. Rob and Emily prepared their three biological children: Baxter (12), Hazel (10) and Phoebe (8) for the newest addition to their family.

"When Kaylah came to our door, it was like a tiny tornado came into the house," Emily said with a smile. "There was not a shy bone in her body."

Rob laughs when he reminisces on the day of Kaylah's arrival.

"Watching this little girl have free reign over the house ... was just better than we were expecting," he said. "She came in; she was upbeat and was just 90 to nothing immediately. As soon as she got here, she went into the kids' room and put on dress-up clothes and makeup, and started playing with toys. It was like a kid at Christmas at a toy store."

Over the next few months, Kaylah improved her language skills and the ability to express herself. The family watched her transform and settle into the home.

## But then, another path through their home emerged.

The Holloway family grew again in September 2020, just over a year after Kaylah had been placed. Darius\* (12) joined the Holloway team and bonded with Baxter immediately.

The ability for the family to adjust to five children in the home is a testament to the heart Rob and Emily have for the ministry and the families.

Add in a pandemic.

Kaylah had been placed with them for over a year when COVID-19 became a reality in the U.S. The traditional court process was delayed. Darius entered their home at the peak of the pandemic in Texas. But the couple was dedicated to offering their home to children who needed it. While the children grew together, Kaylah and Darius' paths through foster care offered different challenges – including the added risk of the coronavirus.

"These kids need people to pour into them and they need a home without judgment, and a home where they can thrive," Rob said. "And the other part of that is the parents need acceptance also. The parents are in a bad spot, and they need encouragement too."



"When Kaylah came to our door, it was like a tiny tornado came into the house ... there was not a shy bone in her body."

*-Emily Holloway*





Reunification had always been their goal. But both paths weren't headed in that direction. Whatever route the two paths took, Rob and Emily felt prepared by the training they received through Buckner foster care and adoption.

"Buckner prepared us and didn't hold back anything," Rob shared. "They wanted you to know what was out there and that was helpful going forward, even if it was a little scary."

The Holloways' ability to adapt and keep an open heart was key for these two very different journeys.

"Our role is just to step in through that time and pour into that child, and in our case, that was Kaylah," Rob said. "It took a little bit for us to come around to the idea of adoption, but she was making so much progress. Right around the time the process got extended due to COVID-19, we started talking about possible adoption."

On July 16, 2021, Rob donned the same shirt he wore for the birth of each of his three biological children to celebrate the adoption ceremony and the forever addition of their fourth child. Kaylah joined her forever

family after 893 days in care.

And on the other path, the Holloways had the opportunity to celebrate alongside Darius and his mother as they reunited.

"It was an incredible thing we got to witness, to see her, and how much she loved her boys," Emily said. "And how much she was willing to do anything to get them back. She is an awesome woman, and it was a blessing for us to get to work with her."

This connection emerged into a strong relationship that continues today between the families.

While the two paths looked so different, there was no doubt of the love that was given along the way for Kaylah and Darius.

"It is really terrifying, understand that before you get into it," Emily said. "You don't know who is coming into your world, who is coming into your life. How is this going to change things? What's going to happen? But God is so faithful to take you where you're supposed to go."

God led the Holloways down two parallel paths with two different, yet beautiful, results. **BT**

*\*Name has been changed*





# 2022: A critical moment.



The number of children and families in need has hit unprecedented levels. The numbers in need are soaring.

The impact of the pandemic has left so many children and families at a crisis point. Pressures from all sides — financial hardship, health concerns, relational strife and disrupted education — have taken their toll on both parents and children.

**Your response today matters.**





Let's give as many hurting children and families as possible the very best quality care, giving them a true hope and future through the love of Jesus.

Generous friends have stepped forward to offer a \$100,000 Challenge Grant — which means **whatever you give today will bring twice as much hope to children in 2022.**

To give, use the envelope at left.



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# FROM EMPTY NEST TO full house

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY AIMEE FRESTON

“I don’t want to get attached.” The phrase is uttered too many times as a reason to not be a foster parent.

But for Daryl and Sandra Wright that is exactly why they foster. They want to get attached.

“As we pretty much do what a parent would do, we just get attached. And the thing is that’s why we keep doing it.” Daryl said. “They’re victims. It’s not their fault they’re in foster care. You just have to give them the love and support they really need. Every kid needs an environment where they have somebody that loves and cares for them and just wants to do that. So yes, we grew attached to doing foster care.”

In the last five years, Daryl and Sandra have fostered more than 25 children, and no matter the reason for why the children were placed in

foster care, Daryl and Sandra made sure to provide them with nothing but love and support.

“My favorite thing is getting to know them,” Sandra said. “You know, making them laugh and treating them like a regular family, whether that’s us doing housework or playing games.”

With grown biological children, Daryl and Sandra ought to be empty nesters, inching ever closer to retired life. Instead, they’re dedicated to helping children. So much so, they decided last year to move to a home on the Buckner Children’s campus so they could have the space to have more foster children at one time.

“I always like to see a child leave better than the way they came in,” Sandra said. “I want them to leave with some life skills.”

BT

## Genuine connections

*From outdoor sports and board games to night-time reading and genuine conversations, Daryl and Sandra Wright make a point to connect with each foster child placed in their home.*



"It's one of my favorite things just knowing that they have learned something and remembered something you've told them," Daryl added.

Daryl and Sandra's servant spirit and genuine care for children is evident when you see them interact with the children placed in their care. Whether they are there for a few months or much longer, the Wrights make a point to connect with each child.

They sit down with the younger ones and read books. They genuinely talk to the teenagers about their day at school or their field trips. They dance with the kids, play basketball, help with their homework and do chores together.

And probably most importantly, they laugh.

"I like to be the fun foster parent," Sandra proudly admitted.

A favorite pastime is circling around the table playing games, talking, joking, laughing. One of their favorite games is called Chicken Foot – a type of domino game. But other times, they'll play card games their teenage foster children teach them. Sometimes, Daryl suspects they play with made-up rules that benefit the kids, but they just shrug, laugh and go along with it.

"[Foster care] is rewarding," Sandra said. "But it's also a lot of work at times. Don't get me wrong. You get frustrated some days and want

to throw in the towel because you want to reach a certain child, every child, but you can't reach every child the same way. You have to be creative and kind of try to think what you can do to try and redirect."

It also takes patience and understanding. Sandra said once, she was upset at a child who never remembered to flush the toilet. She felt the Lord lay on her heart that maybe the child grew up without running water. She asked the case manager about it and discovered the child did live in a home where the utilities were turned off. It was this experience that taught her each child comes into foster care with a different story.

"They come from a completely different home than yours," Daryl said. "You have complete structure, but they have no structure. So you know, you just keep praying that whatever it is you've taught them, that they learn it, and that it will stick with them."

How much longer will Daryl and Sandra be foster parents? They say they don't know. They're here until God tells them to do something different.

"You always have something that pops up and makes you keep going. A kid will give you a push to keep going. You just never know," Daryl said. "That's why I say it's a calling. You can do it for as long as you're here on Earth." **BT**





Making a difference ...

# one child at a time

BT

## Life on the farm

*The Johnsons could see the door to empty nesting in front of them, but jumped in with both feet to foster and adopt three under 3 years old instead.*

STORY BY EMILY AHRENS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK SANDLIN

**T**he Johnson family farm is no stranger to going with the flow. From goats and chickens to alpacas, life on this Amarillo farm is hard work but never a dull moment. One minute a child is laughing and feeding the alpacas, in the next minute, they may be bullied by a goat for the food. And over the course of six years, Matt and Chrystal Johnson have had 20 Buckner foster care placements in their care. It's been hard work, but never a dull moment.



Chrystal didn't always feel the call toward foster care – or even toward being a mom. But when she and Matt married, she knew he was the love of her life, and that truth created a shift in her. Not always sure about having babies, she was now positive she just wanted to have kids with Matt.

They have two biological children, daughter Bailey, 17, and son, Logan, 15. The family of four felt solid, but incomplete.

As a child, Matt was raised by much more than his biological family. He had support from many family members and friends. That support spurred him to continuously give back to his community as an adult, offering guidance and support to any child who needed it. Stepping into traditional foster care was an extension of that mission.

"I had known God called me to be a dad a long time before he called me to be a husband," he shared. "I had looked into fostering or adoption even before getting married."

Since 2015, 20 children have found the Johnson home a safe place to lay their head. Each child left a hole in their hearts, and it was hard to watch them go sometimes.

While some were reunified with biological family, three children had the chance to find their new forever home with the Johnsons.

Finn, now 3 years old, Jace who is also 3, and Rylen, almost 2 years old, keep Matt and Chrystal young. While the idea of empty nesting was close,



***“Teenagers and toddlers,” Chrystal said with a laugh. Children a decade apart in age creates unique opportunities and challenges for the Johnsons.***

these three under 3 changed everything – for the better. While biologically these three aren’t siblings, they are now Johnson brothers and sisters.

Finn was adopted in July 2019. Jace, who is six months younger than Finn, was adopted six months later in early 2020. Rylen was adopted the following year.

“Teenagers and toddlers,” Chrystal said with a laugh. “They can be a handful on different levels, and they follow each other through growth stages.”

Having children nearly a decade older than the three kids could have been a challenge for any family. But all the Johnsons, including Bailey and Logan, jumped in with both feet for each and every placement.

“There have been lots of times where I felt like we couldn’t do this anymore. I’m heartbroken; we need to step away,” Chrystal shared. “But both Bailey and Logan, at different times, have said, ‘Mom, if we have

the ability, we need to help who we can.’ Their hearts are in it. They fall in love; they have the heartbreak. They walk through all of it with us.”

Journeying through foster care and adoption as a family opened their eyes to so much more. Both Matt and Chrystal agree that their upbringing seems sheltered now, but through this journey, it has expanded their perspectives.

“It has expanded beyond just us. I didn’t know about all these things kids face, or how big the foster care community is,” she shared.

Matt agreed this has given them the chance to see more what the real world is like – and have a chance to minister to that.

“We’ve had the chance to see generational change in families,” he said. “When you can make a difference, and model what should and shouldn’t be happening, and even going to church, they can show their parents that. And then the difference is so much bigger. It’s not just about the kids – it’s about entire families.” **BT**



# Becoming a family of eight was a challenge, but everything the Copelands dreamed about

STORY BY EMILY AHRENS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK SANDLIN

**T**he Copeland family home feels like a movie. Six children are laughing together with joy. Some of them are playing in the backyard together on the trampoline while the others play with the new puppy, Rosie. Mom and dad laugh and play alongside them. You can't help but smile.

From this brief peek in, you would never know the trauma the children or the parents have walked through. Both journeys have been difficult and challenging – but that ultimately created the Copeland family seen laughing today.

Steven and Rachelyn Copeland are raising six children, 11 and under. There is Misty (11), Lucas (10), Addison (9), Benjamin (5), Jayden “JJ” (4), and their youngest and biological son, Sawyer (3). They are inseparable. Thanks to Steven and Rachelyn, the five siblings didn't have to be separated for long.

Steven grew up in a broken home. Both parents struggled with drug abuse, and when he was 11, his grandmother officially adopted him. His sister went to live with the other set of grandparents.

The way his grandmother took him in as her own planted a seed.

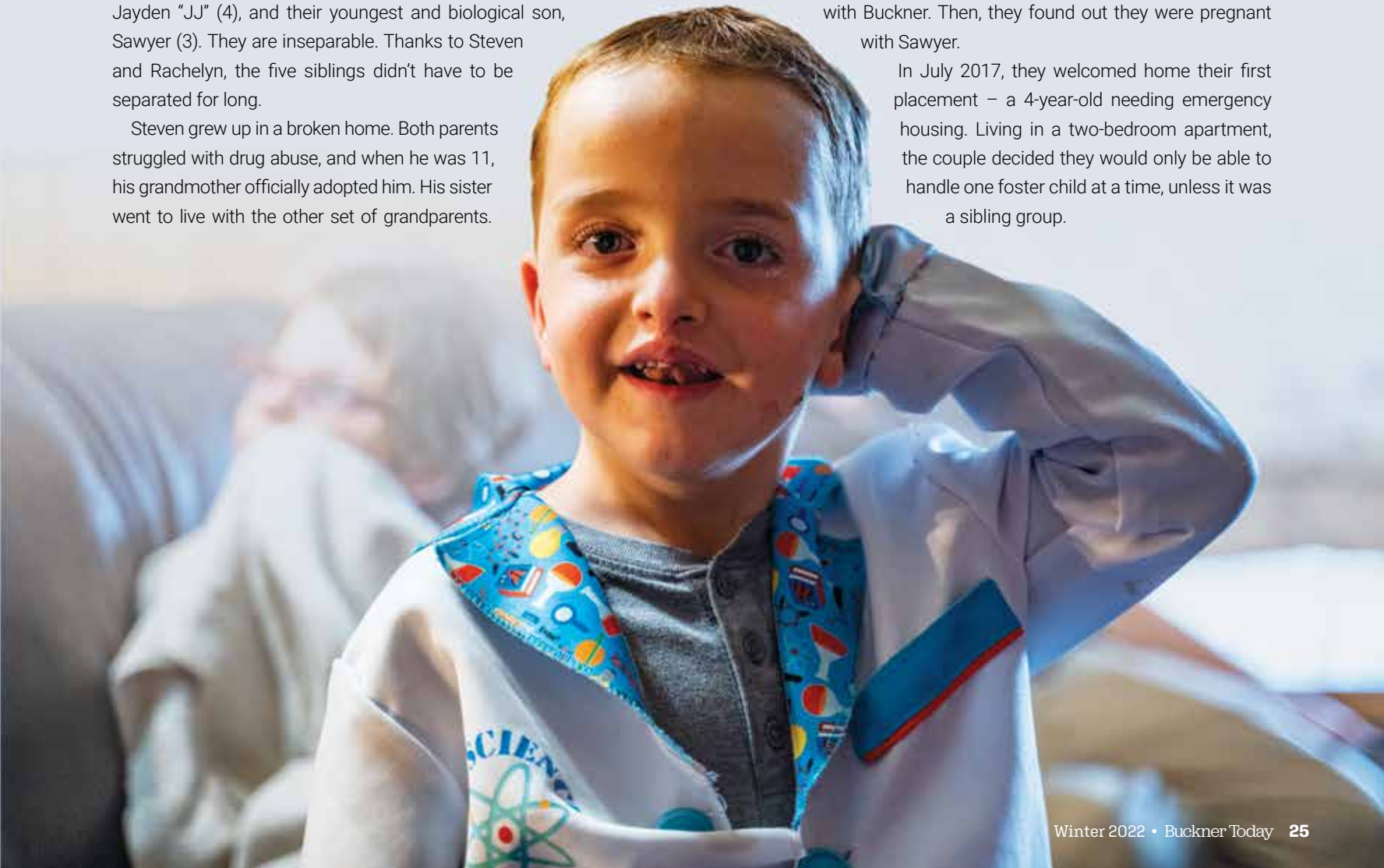
“I have always wanted to adopt, but truly we wanted to get into foster care to support foster children more than jump into adoption,” Steven shared.

Rachelyn and Steven were married for three years but didn't have any children.

“But I knew God wanted us to have children,” Rachelyn said. “I really started to feel the confirmation that foster care and adoption was God's will.”

The couple began paperwork and training in Odessa, Texas, with Buckner. Then, they found out they were pregnant with Sawyer.

In July 2017, they welcomed home their first placement – a 4-year-old needing emergency housing. Living in a two-bedroom apartment, the couple decided they would only be able to handle one foster child at a time, unless it was a sibling group.





“We didn’t ever want to break up siblings. Keeping them together was the most important,” Steven said. “My sister and I got separated and lived with different grandparents. Keeping siblings together was always a big thing for me. We saw each other, but it’s so different from the way you see each other when you live together.”

In 2019, the Copelands received a call in the middle of the night that would change the rest of their lives.

“We get a call if we can take an emergency placement of a 3-year-old boy that’s at the hospital right now,” Rachelyn said. “He had been picked up around 10 p.m. and we didn’t get home from the hospital until about 5 a.m.”

“We found out he had siblings,” Steven continued the story. “Three were

placed at a shelter and the other little one, Jayden, didn’t have a placement yet. He had stayed the night at the hospital and then the CPS office.”

While the agencies were looking to place the siblings, there was a home available in College Station, a seven-hour drive away. The couple decided if they could find a way to make it work, having all the siblings in the same city would be the best option. With the help of Buckner and other foster families, the Copelands were able to keep all five children within the same town and in only two foster homes.

Every Sunday, the families would get together for dinner and quality time. By November 2019, the children were needing a more permanent home. Finding a home that can fit five more kids is no easy feat. Steven and Rachelyn began throwing around the idea – all while still living in



“We didn’t ever want to break up siblings ... my sister and I got separated and lived with different grandparents. We saw each other, but it’s so different from the way you see each other when you live together.”

*-Steven Copeland*



their two-bedroom apartment.

“We can’t even fit them all in one car,” Steven said with a laugh. “We live in Odessa where places large enough for these kids are out of our budget.”

Adding to the puzzle, COVID-19 had also recently shut down the country.

“Then my grandmother got cancer and decided to move to the Dallas area with her daughter,” Steven said.

Yet again, his grandmother poured out what Steven needed. She signed the deed of her house in Brownfield, right outside of Lubbock, over to the Copelands. And through Steven’s birth father’s support, they were able to purchase a large van.

Everything seemed to be falling in place for this future family of eight.

With the pandemic, they were able to start the process of slowly

moving and transitioning to Buckner in Lubbock. Steven even found a job teaching math in Brownfield.

“At first the only opening they had was special ed, which I don’t have much experience with,” he said. “But the day I went in for my interview, they called me and told me a fourth-grade math position also opened up. That’s literally what I’ve taught for the last five years.”

In June, after being re-licensed with Buckner in Lubbock, the other three children moved in with the Copelands from the previous foster care home. The five siblings were under one roof again.

The last puzzle piece to the family? Adoption.

On October 28, 2020, the Copelands welcomed Misty, Lucas, Addison, Benjamin and JJ into the family forever. **BT**

# 40 years of combined service to vulnerable children and families rooted in faith

Celebrating Kathy McGee's dedication to Buckner Children and Family Services

STORY BY EMILY AHRENS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK SANDLIN



BT

## The importance of family

*Over the past 40 years, Kathy has seen how important it is to have a strong, healthy family in both her personal and professional life.*

**T**he crosses that line Kathy McGee's office wall tell a story. Over the past 25 years at Buckner, someone has given her a cross, or she's found one, or even painted one. While the pieces may seem to be just decorations from an outsider's view – Kathy lights up as she shares about each one.

Each cross represents a relationship and each one is unique, just like the last 40 years Kathy has spent serving children through different agencies and positions. As she steps into retirement, these crosses will be physical reminders of the beautiful memories she has experienced throughout her career. Her journey discovering the importance of family began at just 12 years old.

***"The battle is not yours, but God's."***

"My mom died when I was 12 years old, and from that moment on, I think I realized – maybe not at that moment, but by college, I understood how important family was and still is," Kathy shared. "I had a great extended family. They supported my dad, wrapped around us and it goes to show how important family is.

"It's important for families to be healthy and strong," she continued. And for families to be supported and encouraged when they don't feel so healthy and strong.

***"Let everything that has breath praise the Lord."***

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After graduating college, Kathy jumped into supporting families by working with the state of Texas. She worked in eligibility, supporting families with dependent children who needed assistance. Three years later, Kathy transitioned into working at Children's Protective Services. While she enjoyed working with the children and families, she felt something was missing. Kathy dreamed of working with families on prevention, rather than stepping in when something had already gone wrong.

"A friend of mine who had previously worked at CPS with me was working at Buckner, but her husband was transferring locations for work," she said. "So, she called me and asked – well, really she told me – that I needed to come take her job."

She was in shock. She had been with CPS for 15 years – could she really leave? That phone call changed the next 25 years of her life.

But this change marked the answer to prayer: To help families stay together and to become healthy and strong. Throughout her career at Buckner, Kathy was able to impact children, parents and families through prevention programs. She worked in community-based services, foster care and adoption, youth aging out of care, became the executive director for Lubbock and Amarillo, and eventually even senior executive director.

"At Buckner, I feel like we have the chance to support families with a more holistic approach," Kathy shared. "When I first started working here, I finally had the chance to work in community-based services which were preventative. We were hosting after-school programs, parenting classes and many different things to strengthen the family."

And 25 years later, Buckner is still working to support and encourage families to stay together through preventative programs and offerings.

"I believe the mission and vision of Buckner never changes," she shared. While internal structure or direct reports may have shifted, the overall goal of Buckner hasn't wavered.

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***"So many people come into our lives then leave the way they came. But there are those precious few who touch our hearts so deeply we will never be the same."***

---

In the 1990s, Buckner programs in Lubbock were still primarily working with children in foster care placements on the campus. Over time, programs expanded outside the space of the physical location. Kathy has seen programs such as Buckner Family Pathways and the Buckner Family Hope Center start its beginnings and flourish within the last few years.

"I've had the chance to see Buckner expand in these 25 years, even worldwide too," Kathy said. "And I believe Buckner will continue to grow and expand, particularly in the quality and depth of the work with children and families."

The biggest gift Kathy recalls over the nearly three decades, and will likely miss the most, is her Buckner family. There are many staff she has

grown up alongside over the years, learned from and even mentored.

"Buckner became my family. They're going to always be a part of my life, that's going to be the hard part," she shared through tears. "For all of the people that I have been able to work with, my prayer is that I've been able to help a few."

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***"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"***

---

While this may be a hard goodbye for Kathy, and the many families and staff she has impacted at Buckner, she has much to look forward to in retirement - including her seven grandchildren.



She and husband Randy have been married for 42 years. Together they have a son and two daughters.

"Our grandchildren range from 3 years old to almost 20," Kathy shared. "I'm excited to spend more time with them and get to go to all their activities."

Another thing she is looking forward to in this retirement chapter? "No reports, no deadlines!" she said with a laugh.

Kathy knows she is going to miss this season of life and can't express enough gratitude for the people and memories she's experienced.

"I've learned how important it is to have faith and that I couldn't have done any of this on my own," Kathy said. "It is really by the grace of God and his will that I have been able to accomplish the things I have accomplished with Buckner."

"I am living proof that God doesn't call the qualified, but he qualifies the called," she said with a smile as she referenced the Scripture from 1 Corinthians.

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***"God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God." BT***

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BT

## Not another statistic

*Jasmin shows her family what it means to chase dreams and goals by example.*

# A hand up during life's lows

Jasmin Herrera, Buckner volunteer engagement coordinator, offers the same hand up to others

STORY BY EMILY AHRENS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK SANDLIN

**J**asmin Herrera grew up with big ambitions. Seeing the generations before her pave the way instilled a determination in her. When she became pregnant in college, Jasmin made the promise to herself she wouldn't end up another statistic.

Jasmin began her college journey at Midland College in Midland, Texas, and after two years, she felt it was time for a transition. She transferred to Texas Tech University in Lubbock. As a junior in college and studying psychology, she was in an unhealthy relationship with a baby on the way. Jasmin packed up and moved back home to Midland with her parents.

For the next few years, Jasmin worked endlessly to make ends meet and try to climb the success ladder to set an example for her daughter, Armani.

"I was working at Verizon, but I needed something else," she said. "I needed something with better hours to work with my schedule so I could be with Armani. But I started



to feel like wherever I worked, I could only move up so much because I didn't have my [college] degree."

A fateful afternoon at Barnes & Noble with a few friends changed everything for Jasmin.

"A friend of a friend met us at the bookstore and started telling me about how she was working and going to school and had a daughter. I was so curious how she could do this while living in Midland as it's so expensive," she explained. "And then she told me about Buckner Family Pathways in Midland."

Family Pathways provides resources to single parents such as affordable housing, child care, counseling and more, to help set them up for a successful future. That sounded like a fantasy world to Jasmin.

But the fantasy became even sweeter when she discovered a Family Pathways location in Lubbock, where Jasmin had dreamed of coming back to finish her degree. The whole family road-tripped to Lubbock to find out more.

"My dad wouldn't let me leave without coming to check it all out," Jasmin said with a laugh. "He asked questions about curfew, who was

allowed in the buildings."

This program offered Jasmin the stepladder she needed – a way to finish her degree, provide a safe home for her and 2-year-old Armani, and set them both up for success.

Jasmin's second adventure away from home was another steppingstone. She learned the value of having a voice, standing up for herself and being true to her convictions.

In December 2017, Jasmin graduated from Texas Tech with a bachelor's degree in psychology. She began a position with a local Recreational Treatment Center in Lubbock. But for the next year, Jasmin was weighed down by her job. She was working late hours and rarely spending time with her family.

Again, she prayed.

The Buckner Family Hope Center in Lubbock was in the process of being built. Jasmin excitedly jumped in with both feet as the community coordinator, connecting with and supporting families. This next transition was the most exciting yet. In June 2020, she applied and was promoted to the volunteer engagement coordinator for West Texas.



BT

## A home built on learning

*Raul, Jasmin's fiancé, and Armani (8), pictured here, often play video games, practice magic tricks and learn about their reptile pets together.*



“[Working at Buckner] has been what I’ve always wanted to do, to help people and give them the tools to better themselves.” -*Jasmin Herrera*



“This all has been what I’ve always wanted to do, to help people and give them the tools to better themselves,” she shared.

The secret to how this family continues to succeed? They never stop learning. For many families, when COVID-19 hit and shut down many activities, this was a special opportunity for Jasmin and her family. Raul, her fiancé, decided to learn magic tricks and perform virtual magic shows.

A few years prior, rather than adding a dog or cat to the family, Raul brought home two lizards. From there, it has now grown into a reptile community.

“We feed them about once a week, and now it takes about three hours,” Jasmin said with a smile.



Jasmin and Raul started offering animal shows and teaching children about the many different types of reptiles and animals they own.

“They all have their different personalities, but I always advocate that they can be such good therapy animals,” Jasmin shared. “I would love to take these animals to libraries and nonprofits and show how they can support kids. Just another way I would love to help families at the same time.”

At the heart of everything they do, it’s clear how much Raul and Jasmin value their family and their community. From the hand up Jasmin received a few years ago, she consistently looks for ways she can give a hand up to someone else. **BT**

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## “You become an American.”

During a low-altitude reconnaissance mission in Vietnam, Air Force aviator **Burton Waltz**, who now lives at Buckner Villas in Austin, was targeted by enemy anti-aircraft fire, and ejected when his plane was shot down. With a hole in his parachute, he landed in the tall jungle tree canopy, falling nearly 100 feet to the ground and breaking several bones. He was extracted by friendly forces before enemy searchers could locate him. He spent the next several months recuperating in a military hospital. “I went into the military to fly airplanes, and then after you’re there, you become a little more interested in our country and what goes on with our government ... and you become an American more so than ... I was as a young man. You become more dedicated to service.” PHOTO BY RUSS DILDAY



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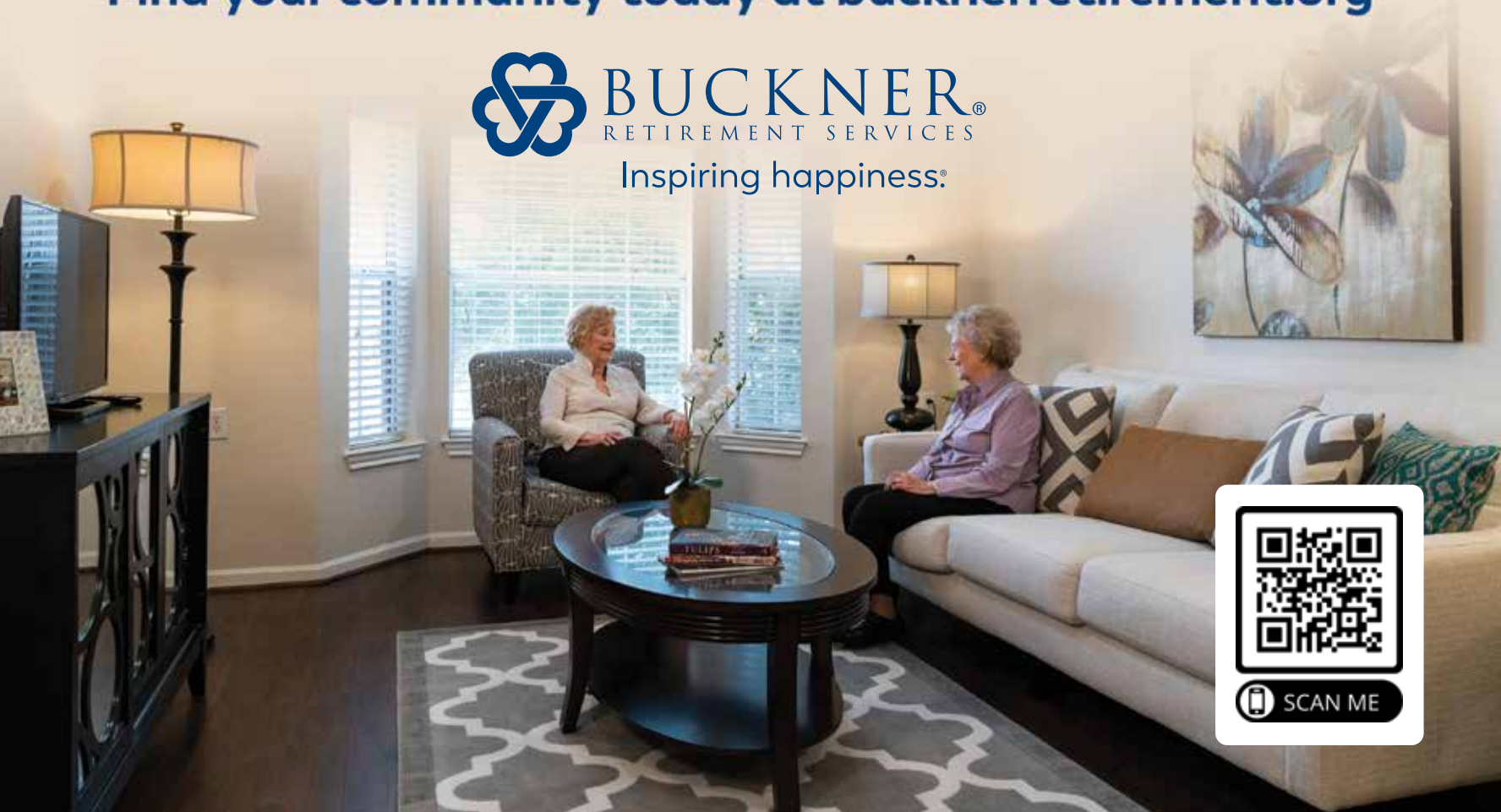
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