



# FIRST FOUNDATIONS

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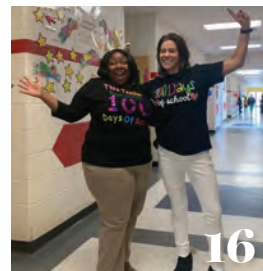
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About the cover: The cover art was created for this publication by Suzanne L. Vinson. Suzanne is a Richmond, VA based artist, author, and ordained minister who specializes in creating art that deepens the experience of life. For more of her creations, visit [silvertreeart.com](http://silvertreeart.com).

# Free to grow



For the past two years, we've been reading the same book every night before we rock Jennings to sleep. *You're My Little Honey Bunny*, by Nicola Edwards, was given to us by a friend, and little did we know what an integral part of our family life it would become. *Goodnight Moon*, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and countless other stories have come and gone, but for Jennings, there's just something about *Honey Bunny*. You can imagine that after seven hundred and thirty days of reading it, the text is permanently locked inside all of our brains.

One night in his dark nursery, I was rocking and reading. To my surprise, Jennings started finishing my sentences. The line in the book reads, "I love you, and I always will. You are my bright blue sky." I read, "I love you," and with the pacifier loosely dangling from the side of his mouth, Jennings whispered, "And I always will." I started again, "You are my—" and he finished, "bright blue sky." There are so many sweet lines in this little rhyming board book, but this one has become our new family mantra. Now, any time we say "I love you," Jennings perks up, exclaiming, "and I always will!"

I can't help but wonder if this is what it means to flourish: to feel so grounded and safe in God's abundant love for us that we are completely free. Free to grow, free to change paths, free to wander, free to create, free to just be. No matter what life circumstances may come our way, we know that we are firmly planted in God's immovable, unchanging, unflappable love.

In his book *Wishful Thinking*, theologian Frederick Buechner writes, "Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you."

This publication is all about flourishing from many life perspectives and journeys. You'll read about someone who decided to leave behind life as she knew it to chase a Disney dream, about a church member notorious for saying "yes" whenever a need arises in our congregation, about some FBC moms preparing to send their kids off to college, and more. Flourishing manifests itself differently in every individual. We hope you will find meaning in these stories of resilience and hope, of opportunity and overcoming. ✨

— Leah Reed



# Four weddings and a family

Holly Cook and Jeff Hobart

Some families evolve gradually, one generation at a time, fitting neatly on the proverbial family tree. Others come together more like a jigsaw puzzle, joining pieces from around the puzzle table to form a new whole. That's the kind of family we have, with members that fit snugly together, rooted in love and nurtured by ongoing commitment, prayer, and grace.

We – Holly and Jeff – met at our neighborhood Christmas party in December 2019. Holly had moved into the community in May 2018 after losing her husband in early 2017. Jeff arrived five months later after his 20-year marriage ended. We had not crossed paths until that fateful snowy evening. Little did we know just how much our lives were about to change!

As the weeks went on and our conversations deepened, our relationship flourished.



Our four adult children – Holly's two daughters, Colleen and Meredith, and Jeff's twin son and daughter, Keller and Leigh – all in their 20s, were always at the forefront of our minds. When we suspected that our partnership might be going somewhere, we knew we'd need to handle introductions carefully and sensitively.

We were delighted when all four kids greeted our news with encouragement and maturity. While it took all of us some time to fully grasp the many changes our relationship would bring to

our individual and collective lives, we eventually embraced this new concept of family.

As happens with adult children, the Cook-Hobart family has continued to evolve. Holly's two daughters each married in 2022. We celebrated our own wedding in November 2023, and Leigh married in June of this year. Four weddings in two years!

Reflecting on what has helped our "bonus" family flourish, we have had several insights:

- ✦ We credit our good fortune to hard work and God's grace.
- ✦ It is a privilege to be allowed entrance into another person's life. All our family members have opened their hearts to each other.
- ✦ We have four amazing children who genuinely care for each other because we have allowed them to define their relationships with each other.
- ✦ We have made a commitment to love and accept each family member for who they are. This commitment involves respecting one another and being accessible to each other.
- ✦ Time spent together, whether in person or in spirit, has been essential. Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, vacations, and countless meals, emails, texts, Facetime, and phone calls have all helped to bring us closer.

We acknowledge that our family will continue to flourish only if we continually work at it, especially as we face life's inevitable challenges and setbacks.

We are hopeful that God will continue to bless this new family and that we will continue to grow closer and count each other as both friends and loved ones. 🌻

*Jeff joined First Baptist in 1992 and currently serves as a deacon. He recently retired from a 32-year career as a financial advisor with Wells Fargo Advisors. Holly came to First Baptist during the pandemic. She works in nonprofit communications, most recently with local organizations SAFEchild, Raleigh Rescue Mission and Grace Raleigh. They enjoy cycling (especially with Team Hoover at the MS Bike Ride!), hiking, traveling and visiting with their four adult children. They are members of the Journey class.*



# OF Okra AND children

CHRIS CHAPMAN

**W**e have always loved okra in the Chapman home, mostly fried okra, though Ron Maness introduced me to the concept of roasting okra in the oven. It leaves the okra crispy without the negative health impact of fried food. Okra is grown throughout the South, which is not surprising, since it was first grown in parts of Africa and then made its way to America through the transatlantic slave route. It thrives in warm weather, and we have plenty of that in our region.

But while okra is grown throughout the South, good okra is not always easy to find in grocery stores. So when we lived in Winston-Salem, we decided to grow our own okra. The fenced-in backyard was full of wild rabbits, squirrels, and rambunctious young human critters. So we decided to plant the okra in a tiny strip outside our fence between our driveway and our next-door neighbor's driveway. Though the soil was mediocre at best, it got plenty of sun. So we felt like three plants would give us all the okra we could eat, even in that soil.

We were wrong. One plant would have sufficed. The plants flourished, and once they started producing okra, we had plenty to share with friends. It grew like out-of-control kudzu or wisteria. You could almost see it growing. The best okra is smaller; big okra is fibrous. So we tried to pick it before it grew too big.

It does make your fingers itch, which is why Dana's father doesn't eat it. He says if it does this, it must make your stomach itch. But I have not found that to be true. I love it and I love the fact that it thrives, even in poor soil, as long as it gets plenty of sunshine and is protected from rabbits and deer. We learned the latter requirement when we moved to Raleigh. Screens are required here to keep the critters away.

But it's not just okra that thrives, sometimes even in poor soil. People can thrive too, even flourish, in less-than-ideal circumstances. We seek to provide a nurturing environment for children because they will have an easier path toward contentment if they grow up in one. Families don't have to take any one given form. They just need to provide love, healthy boundaries, opportunities for education, and a context for faith development. These qualities, along with heavy doses of affirmation and grace, go a long way toward enabling young people to flourish as they mature.

But I have known people who did not have such a beginning who still managed to thrive. Resilience is built into human character. Simply witness the people of Ukraine standing up to Russian aggression, and we know this is true. I have also seen resilience at work in people

who grew up in housing projects, people who were raised in homes filled with addiction and abuse, people who live in third-world contexts with poverty on a scale well beyond anything we see in our poorest neighborhoods and yet still manage to live joy-filled and purposeful lives.

How do they do this? What enables them to flourish? Someone who takes an interest in them and cares about them; people who love them, whether they are family members or not; the resilience of the human spirit – these things enable them to flourish like okra planted in mediocre soil that receives enough sunlight.

It also helps if there is some analog to screening around a garden, some barrier to the worst threats to survival. That is not easy to find in today's world, where drugs and guns are as available as five-flavor Life Savers and the internet exposes us to everything imaginable. But if we want young lives to grow into flourishing adults, we'll do as much to care for the children in our families and communities as we do the okra in our gardens. God provides the sunshine of love. The least we can do is try our best to hold back the critters that devour. 🌻



*Dr. Chris Chapman has been the pastor of FBC since 2009. When he's not preaching, Chris enjoys reading, running, and rock & roll.*

***Families don't have to take any one given form. They just need to provide love, healthy boundaries, opportunities for education, and a context for faith development.***

## FACES IN THE PEW



## Myra Brickell: Planting the seeds of the church

Claire Willmschen

**“D**id you know I bake the bread Dr. Chapman breaks on communion Sundays?” Myra said. “Someone on the worship committee gets to take it home after. It’s a perk of getting there early to fill up all the little juice cups.”

Sure, this feature is called Faces in the Pew, but Myra Brickell’s face is more commonly seen in the choir loft, or the church office, or the preschool suite, or the Clothing Ministry. She is a mainstay across the entire church campus, and has been for decades now. She works to keep the heartbeat of the church ticking, even though you may not always see it.

Myra and her husband, Sterling, first visited First Baptist Church more than 35 years ago. Myra grew up going to church, but hadn’t latched onto any local church after moving to Raleigh. The Brickells’ initial reason for visiting FBC was generally transactional – like many other families with young children, they were looking for a preschool for their daughter, Jessica, and wanted to get on the FBC Infant-Toddler Center list. However, after hearing then-pastor John Lewis preach, the Brickells knew FBC would become their church home.

*‘Mrs. Myra is my GA buddy so she gives me hugs every time I see her at church. She brings me cookies at Christmas and Valentine’s Day, and she even let me ride with her to the buddy breakfast, just us. Sometimes I feel like she’s a second grandma to me. I love her back like she’s my family.’*

—Meg Foster, age 10

“You know how people will sometimes join the church just to get married and you’ll never see them again? I think there are some people who thought that of us with the Infant-Toddler Center, but I don’t think that ended up being true,” she said, laughing.

The entire laundry list of ways Myra has continued to make a difference in the church over the years is too long to include here, but she mentioned a few roles that have been especially important to her, including her many years as a volunteer cook on annual youth retreats at Kure Beach. (As a former youth, I can attest that the meals on our beach trips were highly regarded.)

Every Tuesday, Myra answers the phone in the church office. “I really enjoy being there and hearing the staff. They make me laugh and I make them laugh,” she said. She loves answering the questions people call about, especially when they ask about the various ministries of the church.

Myra also works weekly with FBC’s children on both Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. Through her preschoolers, she gets to foster connections with younger families that are on a similar road to FBC that she and Sterling took.

The examples of Myra’s ministry in the church are abundant. However, when asked how she helps FBC flourish, Myra responded, “I’m not nearly that important.”

Her humility comes from a lifetime of working behind the scenes. Several years ago, before she retired from her career as a pharmacist, Myra participated in an organization called Filling in the Gaps (FIGS), which helps provide prescription medications for people who can’t afford to pay for them.

“That’s how I feel my role at the church is, if someone asks me to do a job and I can fulfill a need or fill in a gap, it’s something I want to do,” she said.

Now that she is retired, Myra spends more time at FBC than nearly anywhere else. Lucky for her, her frequent visits to the church often come with the bonus of seeing her two grandsons, Asher and Ryder.

“It’s so exciting,” she said. “I like to see them act like this is their second home. They just seem so comfortable here, and I really love that.”

Outside of FBC, she spends time gardening, something she’s adamant about teaching her grandsons as well.

“I like to be outside rather than inside. I like to get my fingernails full of dirt. I like to teach my grandboys that beautiful things can grow from little tiny seeds.”

This quote is a perfect metaphor for the many ways Myra contributes to the ministry of FBC. She plants little seeds everywhere she can throughout the church. Though she might not consider herself to be the most “important” member of the church, the seeds she is continuously planting are essential to helping the church grow into a flourishing garden.

The Brickells have witnessed a lot of change over their 35 years at FBC, but in the end Myra is a constant. “I don’t know what our lives would’ve been like if we hadn’t come to church,” she said when asked how the church has helped her flourish. “It’s been a huge influence on what we do and who we do it with.”

Then she added, “I love this church. I am so proud of all the things we do to help our neighbors. And being proud of my church is a big, big deal for me.”



# MAKING THE DREAM A REALITY

Claire Willmschen

**W**e all know Mickey Mouse. Mickey is the most recognizable cartoon character in the entire world. He's a leader. He's friendly, humble, kind, magical, and all the other good traits you can name.

Last fall, I got to know Mickey Mouse really well. He taught me lessons like how to be brave and work through the grit; how to be joyful and never be the first to let go of a hug; and most importantly, how to be confident in myself and the skills I share with the world.



It's no secret that I adore Walt Disney World. I was lucky to take a few family trips as a kid and the childlike infatuation continued into adulthood. Even as a kid, I always dreamed of working "for the Mouse."



Walt Disney World is a ginormous operation. It takes thousands of hard-working staff members to make it function all day, every day, 365 days a year. Many of those employees (deemed "cast members" at Disney parks) are members of the Disney College Program (DCP). The DCP is the best way to get a foot in the door at Disney. However, the COVID-19 pandemic paused the program during my college years. Instead, I graduated and moved on from college life feeling slightly like I'd missed out on a dream.

I moved into my own apartment, got a dog, and began working at a local marketing agency. Everything was working out just fine, but I still couldn't get rid of the Disney itch. When the company eventually announced the return of the DCP, it also extended eligibility to people who were affected by the program's suspension. Now, you could apply for the DCP up to two years after graduation. Lucky for me, I was just shy of the two-year mark.

For months, my head was full of both grand ideas and anxieties. I would have to quit my full-time job and leave my partner, my apartment, my dog, my family. I wasn't sure what kind of job I would be assigned. One thing was certain though - I would be working at Disney World.



My decision was made a good bit easier when I found out what my role would be. After my initial application, I was invited to an in-person character performer audition. I took a short trip to Atlanta and threw myself in front of Disney casting directors. Beyond all odds, I got the job. Once I received that call, I knew there was no room for questioning anymore - going to Walt Disney World was something I had to do.





## EVEN AS A KID, I ALWAYS DREAMED OF WORKING 'FOR THE MOUSE.'

On Main Street in Magic Kingdom, there's a door labeled Casting Agency. On it, there is a quote from Walt Disney: "It takes people to make the dream a reality." For me, the meaning is two-fold. Working for Disney made my dream a reality in the same way that Mickey Mouse made dreams come true for thousands of kids who came to meet him last fall.



When I graduated from college, I was wary about what path lay ahead of me. Would I be working the same, boring desk job until I retired? I grew up surrounded by creativity and big dreams, and I wasn't sure how to make those come true. It took a big, scary leap for me to get to Disney. I left home and the people I love most in the world, but I am eternally grateful that I found the courage to do it. 🌻

After months of waffling between feeling excited and anxious, last August I quit my job and trekked down Interstate 4 to start a temporary gig living and working at Walt Disney World. There was so much unknown ahead of me. I experienced tearful goodbyes and promises of "it'll go by quickly," but I wasn't sure if I wanted it to or not. Frankly, I was terrified.

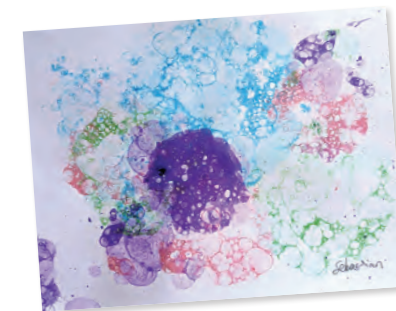
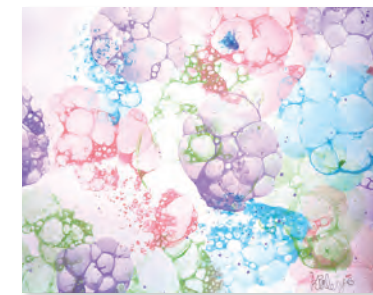
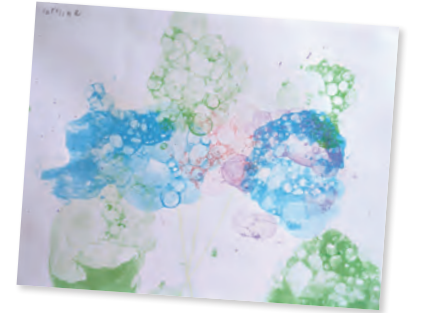
As a character performer, there are many things that you have to keep secret. Essentially, I spent a lot of time last fall hanging out with some of our favorite Disney characters – think Mickey, Minnie, Donald, and more. It was a job unlike any I could have imagined. As soon as I began training, I knew all I had left to come to WDW would be worth it. My job's objective was simply to make people happy. Yes, being a character performer was physically exhausting (Florida is HOT), but it was extremely rewarding for the soul. I spent the days making people laugh, blowing kisses, signing autographs, and hugging wide-eyed children. And I was pretty darn good at it. Can you imagine a better way to get paid?

My time at Disney turned out to be one of the most meaningful experiences of my life so far. I was far away from home, but Disney quickly became a second home. I made incredible friends who care about me still. Being completely out of my comfort zone (in both my job and my life) forced me to grow in my own confidence.

# ART FLOWER

One sunny spring morning, the elementary age Sunday School classes combined to create art around our Flourish theme. They blew bubbles into paint for hydrangeas, formed air-dry clay into 3D flowers, and used coffee filters and ink for a tie-dye effect. They even got to display their works for the whole church on Easter!

Thank you to these young artists for sharing their gifts with the congregation: Asher, Caroline, Colt, Eleanor, Elizabeth, Eller, Jackson, Kinley, Meg, Rae, Remi, Sebastian, Will.





# They know they are loved

Crystal Bacon, Amy Galvan, Rebecca Sasser

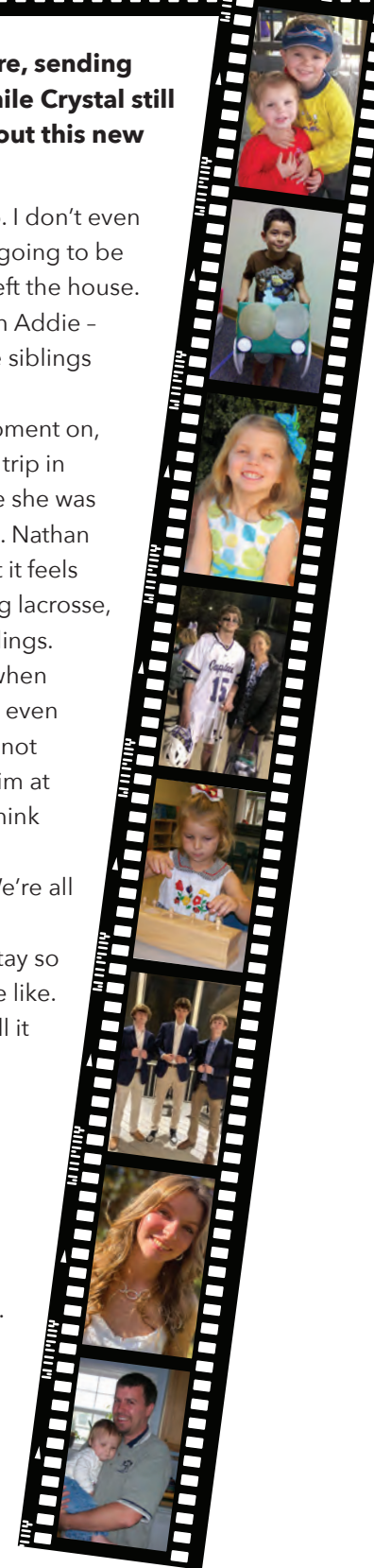
**S**ending a kid off to college is a uniquely challenging and wonderful season of parenting. First Foundations sat down with three moms who are preparing to do just that: Crystal Bacon, mom to Savannah; Amy Galvan, mom to Riley; and Rebecca Sasser, mom to Nathan. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity, but one theme shines through: our young people are flourishing thanks to the love and care of so many in this congregation.

**FF - It's a big transition you're facing: a big change for you as a mom, and a big change for your kiddos to be leaving home for the first time. Tell us about their plans for the future.**

**Rebecca** - Nathan's going to UNC-W; it's the only place he wanted to go. He wanted to be near the water; he wanted to be near boats and be able to fish. He plans to go into sales, maybe boat sales. We toured a lot of colleges and he felt good there.

**Amy** - And Riley is going to Elon; it's not what he or we thought would happen. We were pretty sure he was bound for NC State, but he saw Elon and fell hard for it. He wants to go into strategic communications.

**Crystal** - Savannah is going to Meredith. She applied early decision so she was locked in from the start. She wants to pursue dance in some form, maybe the business side like opening a dance studio. She's also thought about transferring to New York to do more dance training after a year. I really don't know where she'll end up but the sky's the limit and whatever she wants to do, she'll do.



**FF - You're in different places because Rebecca and Crystal, you've done this before, sending your first kids to college. Rebecca and Amy, you're both facing the empty nest, while Crystal still has several more years ahead with one child in the house. How are you feeling about this new phase?**

**Crystal** - Savannah's been my assistant teaching dance, so we're together a lot at the studio. I don't even have to tell her what to do - we read each other so well, she knows what I'm thinking. So it's going to be a big transition for the two of us, probably even more than when her older brother Nathan left the house. And logistically it's hard, too! Having another driver in the house to do carpool and help with Addie - she's such a great backup plan. We're a little terrified about having just one kid at home. The siblings were always there for one another and Addie is really going to miss having them.

**Rebecca** - (laughing) Eddie and I are going on a kid-free trip! No, we're not cheering this moment on, but we both really like each other and we're looking forward to that period. We're planning a trip in October. When Ella left, I was a mess. A total mess. I was trying to hold back my tears because she was nervous herself and I didn't want to make that worse, but I sobbed the whole way back home. Nathan is just such a different kid - maybe it's because he's a boy and our relationship is different, but it feels different. And all of this "last" stuff is getting to me right now. We enjoy him so much, watching lacrosse, whatever he is doing. We are doing a little preliminary grieving because I'm sad at all the endings.

**Amy** - A couple weeks ago, I picked up the doughnuts for youth on Sunday morning. And when I got home, Jaunffrey asked, "Is this the last time you'll get doughnuts for youth?!" I wouldn't even let him say that! There are so many lasts. I was relieved he chose Elon because it was close - not Raleigh-close, but we can get there if he needs us. I'm trying not to think about not having him at home every day. I don't have the experience of doing this before, and I'm just not ready to think about it.

**Rebecca** - I'm not sure doing it once prepares you any better for doing it for another kid! We're all in the same boat.

**Crystal** - I would agree, Rebecca. It still feels really fresh and raw, the emotion of it all. You stay so busy during the year, I'm not sure I've really given myself time to process what it will really be like. Well, other than when we toured Meredith. I was sobbing, and she was totally mortified! "Pull it together, Mom." (laughs)

**FF - What are some of the things your kids have been involved with in the church community? What has shaped their church experience?**

**Amy** - I've read a lot of essays in the past few months, and Riley has written a lot about the different mission experiences: Toy Joy and mission trips and volunteering at the Wilmington Street Shelter on Christmas Day. It's had a big impact on him that's been neat to read about. Because he doesn't talk - be thankful y'all have girls who will talk to you. He tells me nothing. (laughing) But he writes! And I'm thankful for that and that he's shared the perspective it's given him through his college essays. And I think having that network of peers has been so significant - Savannah has definitely been one of those for him, but the whole youth group, really.



**Rebecca** - Nathan's youth group experience has probably been a little different than Savannah and Riley's. He was tight with the older ones, with Ella's class. When they left, he hadn't formed those bonds with others his age, so he's never felt as close. It's never felt like his core group of friends. If I have to be completely honest, that was hard for me. That was Ella's core group of friends, and it still is. Youth group has made an impression on Nathan, but I think just growing up in a church that welcomes him has really been the biggest thing. No matter what age they are, he can talk to a 2-year-old as easily as a 92-year-old. And it's not because he's Nathan; it's because he's church family. He went hunting with Hayden James and Chuck Nichols for a weekend. He would buddy up with Dan Bacon in the hall to talk sports. He feels comfortable in this community, and I value that so much.

**Crystal** - I think Savannah's experience has been similar. She's a little more reserved but has this core family here that she can count on. When she had her hip surgery last year and got her prayer shawl, that was a big deal to her. Knowing she was prayed for, that people wrote her notes, she felt this sense of having a whole bunch of grandparents. She has a core in the youth group and I think she's realizing this year that people are looking up to her the way she looked up to Ella and other youth ahead of her. And that's neat to watch her take on that responsibility, to realize that she matters to others. The trips to Kure Beach are so formative, and each adult that interacts with the youth group has really made a difference. It's not just relationships with other youth kids, but all ages within the church are building these strong connections, and I love that about our church.

**Amy** - Listening to y'all, it's really a comfort to me to think that not only can Riley call on his youth peers, but also those young adults who volunteer with the youth group. When his parents are too old and out of the loop to understand what he's feeling, he's got young adults who have been involved in our youth ministry and his life for years. And those are people who are still connected to the youth program and he might feel comfortable turning to them.

**Crystal** - Oh, yes! When Savannah decided to go to Meredith, she said, "Isn't it cool I can come back and help with the youth?" I hadn't even thought about that.

**FF - Give me a memory from their younger years - all three have really grown up in this church "from their earliest days of memory." Can you tell me about how you've seen them change and flourish over time?**

**Amy** - Riley was always one who wanted to read. When they went off to Passport children's camp or even in worship, he'd always have a book and be a little annoyed that he had to interact with other people. Even his first year or so in the youth group, he was more interested in his books than his peers. But in high school when they were able to go on a retreat, he came back with a new understanding that he was a future leader of the youth group and needed to step it up. It was no longer a struggle to convince him to go; now he wants to go to Bible study and youth events. It's important to him to carry on the legacy of the youth group, and I've loved seeing that change.

**Rebecca** - That's a hard question. He always wanted to do RAs and always wanted to do basketball. He never wanted to do choir and we eventually stopped suggesting it because he just doesn't like to sing! He's always been active and moving, and now he's more quiet and thoughtful. The biggest change I've seen in Nathan is watching his faith become more his own, not just playing RA games. He can definitely sit still now, and that's something his VBS teachers may not have expected!

And Amy, I'll tell you who's always got great things to contribute in Bible study is Riley Galvan! He may not talk to you, but he thinks deeply and likes to share in that setting.

**Crystal** - Well, I remember Savannah never really wanted to go to church, and somewhere along the way there was a switch. Maybe it was the doughnuts in Sunday school, I don't know. But I didn't have to argue and beg or deal with grumpy kids in the car - she took it on herself. Amy, I also noticed that growing sense of responsibility when her brother was gone. She embraced that leadership role within the group.



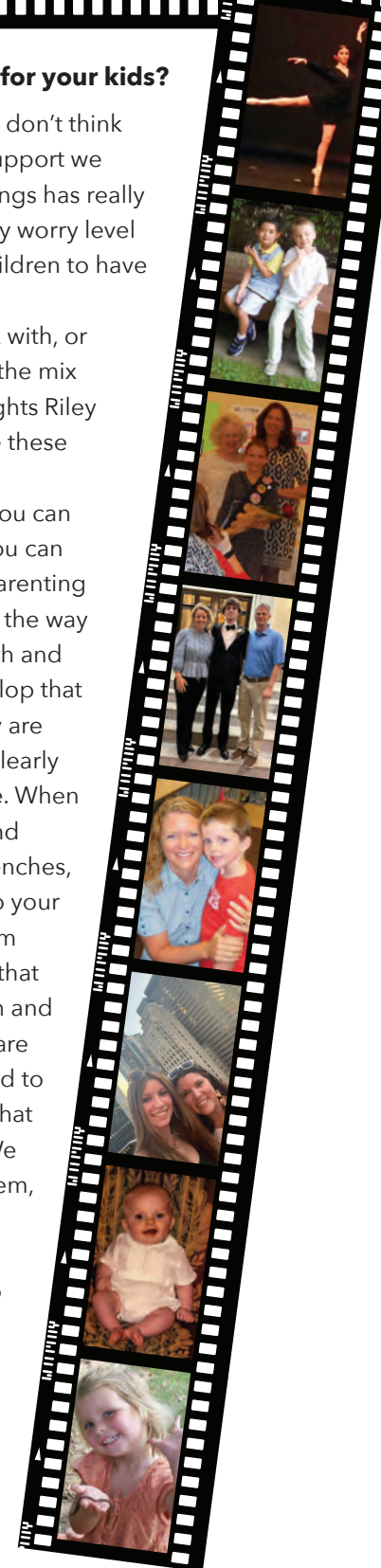
**FF - Anything else you want to share as you think about this next step for you and for your kids?**

**Crystal** - I can say that the church support for me and my husband has been so significant. I don't think we'd feel as comfortable as we do with all of this transition and change if it weren't for the support we have from our church family. Being able to watch other parents and see how they handle things has really helped. Seeing the things I worry about work out for other families has really helped ease my worry level in general, but especially with this change of seeing kids go off to school. I'm glad for my children to have this support, but I'm also glad for the parent support.

**Amy** - There's nowhere else like this. So much of our lives is surrounded by people we work with, or parents of our kids' friends, or people we went to school with. But nowhere else do you get the mix of people that we get at church in different stages of life. I think about all the Wednesday nights Riley rode home with Austin Connors when I was at choir practice. It's such a special thing to have these intergenerational relationships and you just don't find that anywhere but church.

**Rebecca** - I agree with you both. And you know, I think often that the days are gone when you can control what they wear on Sunday mornings. Long gone. The days are forever gone when you can control what they do or what they think or what they choose to pursue in life. I'm glad that parenting lets you face that gradually. I'm just struck by how good life is, how it's designed to unfold in the way it does. That at the end of the day, things are good. For me, that's very much a part of my faith and my relationship with God. Our church family has been a big part of that, of helping me develop that sense of goodness in the world. And my kids have been there with me as I figure it out. They are wonderful years, and they go by too fast. Now that our kids are grown, I see so much more clearly

God's guidance. When they are little and you're in the trenches, it's hard to wrap your mind around. I'm just so grateful that God loves them and God is taking care of them. I'm glad to be in a church that nurtures that. We can't control them, but they know they are loved. And they are so lucky to have grown up at First Baptist. 🌻





# LIVING INTO HOPE

Cara Lynn Vogel

**A**kevia Wilson arrived at the Family Care Unit of Baptist Children's Homes near Ahoskie after the death of a loved one. Grief caused her to relive earlier trauma in her life, and she was in a dark place. She described herself as a deeply depressed college dropout who could not work or function daily. She was, she said, "homeless, pregnant, and hopeless."

From childhood, Akevia had been described as an at-risk student. She lived in poverty in a single-parent home and attended schools that were described as failing. Despite all the negative words that had been spoken to and about her, Akevia still longed to become a teacher. She recognized it as her giftedness, her calling. But with nowhere to live and a baby on the way, that dream felt impossible.



Twenty-five years ago, a small group of individuals decided to bring the work of Christian Women's Job Corps (CWJC) to North Carolina. CWJC, where I work, is a ministry of Woman's Missionary Union that addresses poverty as a system of broken relationships. We believe that people can be transformed to health and well-being only through restoration of relationships with self, others, resources, and, most importantly, God.

The structure is based on a model that uses the resources of a community to alleviate poverty. Intentionally, Bible study and Christian mentoring are key elements at each site.

As executive director for CWJC of NC, I've had the opportunity to watch women flourish when they work to address the poverty in their lives through our programs. These women meet weekly with their Christian mentor, also known as a journey partner, to restore their relationships. Some women will participate in classes or have one-on-one instruction to achieve the goals that they have set. Classes range from healthy eating to parenting, from English as a second language to web design, and from basic banking to business finances.



After her son Mark Jeremiah was born, Akevia enrolled with the Roanoke Chowan CWJC and returned to community college to complete her associate's degree. Partnering with the other mothers in the Family Care Unit and working multiple part-time jobs, Akevia graduated with a 4.0 grade point average. Her next goal was to complete her bachelor's degree. She began searching for a college that would be the right fit for her.

Akevia initially told her CWJC mentor that she didn't dare hope to gain entry to a place like Chowan University, but her mentor reminded her, "Akevia, we're in the hope business around here!" Through scholarships and continuing to

work while attending classes, Akevia completed her student teaching in a nearby elementary school. She was inducted into honor societies for teachers, made the President's List, and finished in the top 10 percent of her class. Throughout her college journey, Akevia continued attending classes through CWJC and helping other participants with classes and their own GED work.

At her CWJC graduation, Akevia shared how the experience had shaped her. "I can't [completely] explain how Christian Women's Job Corps has helped me ... but most importantly, CWJC has helped me rebuild my relationship with God. I began to give my grief, my hurt, my depression, my hopelessness to the Lord. I thought it was impossible, but with God all things are possible. I am now eight days away from reaching my goal of becoming what and who I was destined to be: a teacher! Because of CWJC, my son and I will have a better life. He will not have to worry about where his next meal will come from or if the lights will stay on.

"Generational poverty ended with me because of you."

Since 2018, Akevia has been teaching third grade in the school where she completed her student teaching. She is serving as a beacon of hope to the students in her classroom. She is able to tell her students that she once sat in a chair just like theirs and heard the labels that they may hear. She shows them that they, too, can overcome harsh words and negative predictions if they choose to keep working toward their goals.

I think it's easy to see how Akevia has flourished. Like a seed, she was transplanted to a place where she could grow. Akevia doesn't seek to draw attention to herself but instead to the work of God and God's people. ✨

**'GENERATIONAL POVERTY ENDED WITH ME BECAUSE OF YOU!'**

*Cara Lynn Vogel has served as the executive director of Christian Women's Job Corps of NC since January 2007. She is grateful for the opportunities that she and her family, Jamie and Jesse, have had to flourish, in ministry and worship, with FBC for more than 30 years.*





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*A place of grace, a place of challenge, a place for you.*

# *‘The mountains are calling, and I must go.’*

— Naturalist John Muir

Members of the FBC family who took part in the spring churchwide retreat in Black Mountain would almost certainly endorse Muir’s sentiment.

Sacred Stories was the theme for the gathering April 19-21 at the YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly. Participants young and old shared their own stories, discussed the significance of stories from the Bible, worshiped together, shared meals, and enjoyed fellowship in electives that ranged from hiking to handbells. Some even practiced storytelling skills, enhanced with guidance from professional musician, storyteller, and author Jennifer Armstrong.

*(Photo by Asher Helms, age 8.)*



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