

The Record

News from Epworth Children's Home



Anna's Prayer Wall

When Anna* first arrived at Epworth over a year ago, she was a seven year old girl in turmoil. She came to Epworth after the SC Department of Social Services removed her from her home following the discovery of severe neglect of the little girl. Even at just seven years of age, she was accustomed to caring for herself.

When Anna arrived in her cottage at Epworth, she struggled with her behavior. She was aggressive and often threw tantrums if she did not immediately get her way. When her staff members tried to help her or give her direction, she was very oppositional and lacked a respect for adults. She worried about almost everything she experienced, which created anxiety that limited her ability to heal and grow.

Over the months that followed, Anna's behavior changed. The once anxious little girl began to trust the adults who cared for her needs. The tantrums and aggression nearly disappeared as she learned to think before she acted and

reacted to situations. The change was remarkable and everyone at Epworth took notice.

Of course, there were many components of her care that led to Anna's behavioral transformation. She blossomed in the care of trained and caring staff in her cottage. She received regular counseling sessions and academic tutoring. There were numerous elements that led to her changes, but one particular component of her care stands out among the rest.

One day just a few weeks ago, Ms. Linda, one of her cottage staff, was helping Anna clean her closet. When the staff pushed aside the hanging shirts and dresses she was surprised at what she discovered. She found a piece of paper taped the wall that said, "My Prayer Wall."

Ms. Linda immediately knew what she discovered. For months she and the other staff had been talking to all of the girls about asking for God's help through prayer.

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It Is Changing Again

Fall 2015

A Message from The Rev. John Holler
President

Child care is changing again in South Carolina. Many of us recall that a few years ago a new state director was appointed to head the South Carolina Department of Social Services. The principal mandate for the state director was to improve the performance of the agency. A major element of a performance improvement plan that was implemented was to remove as few children who had experienced abuse or neglect as possible from their homes and instead implement “safety plans”. When it was deemed necessary for a child to be removed from his or her home the child was to be placed with a relative or someone connected with the family. The next choice was to be with a foster family and the last place considered was to be a residential group home, like Epworth.

Under this plan children who were already in a residential group home were to be removed from the group homes as soon as possible and placed with a foster family, a relative, or back with parents. Adoptions were also fast tracked.

The improvement program quickly became a numbers game. Many Social Services workers felt pressured to meet the numbers set by DSS leadership. Many resigned, others complied with the program mandates, and agency morale plummeted. The results were predictable. Child abuse cases increased, adoption failures increased, disrupted foster family placement increased. There were legislative investigations, and the state director resigned.

For many children who were experiencing abuse or neglect there were few viable options for quality care except in residential group homes. There was, and is, a shortage of quality foster families, and there were and are few quality community based services in many areas. Everyone knew this, and yet the reforms proceeded at a rapid pace. Children paid the price.

The South Carolina Department of Social Services now has a different director. She is hard working, organized, thoughtful, and faces the same challenges as her predecessor faced. Her mandate is to improve the organization and the quality of services provided by DSS; however the stakes have been raised even higher. Not only is the legislature watching closely, but there is a new entity in the mix, and the pressure for results has increased.

On January 12, 2015, Children’s Rights Inc., filed a class action suit in federal court against our governor and the director of DSS. Children’s Rights Inc. is an organization based in New York State that bills itself as a watchdog organization that advocates on behalf of abused and neglected children in the

U.S. They often use class action lawsuits to attempt to reform state welfare systems.

Once the lawsuit was filed a decision was made not to contest the lawsuit as some other states had done. In early June of 2016 a settlement agreement was signed by all parties. The agreement carries the weight of federal law, and court appointed monitors will be in place for years to ensure compliance with the settlement.

Children’s Rights Inc. is fundamentally opposed to the use of Residential Group Care as is practiced at Epworth, and the organization makes removing children from places like Epworth a cornerstone of their lawsuit in spite of the excellent outcomes that Epworth and other homes like it produce. There is no empirical research that demonstrates that kinship care, or foster parent care is better for children than residential group care provided by children’s homes.

The sections of the settlement agreement that will effect Epworth, and homes like Epworth to the greatest extent are: 1) children under the age of seven, except in unusual circumstances, shall not be placed in any non-family group home. 2) The number of children in residential group homes who are 12 and under shall be drastically reduced.

The preeminent question associated with the settlement is, “Will the pressure to meet the settlement numbers rapidly be too great to actually make decisions in the best interest of each child, as happened three years ago?” Careers, reputations, and significant federal penalties are on the line.

Two new regulation changes may give us a troubling hint here. The first is, up to eight children will now be allowed to reside in a foster parent home. At Epworth eight is the average population of a cottage. Each cottage has six adult, full time care givers who care for the children.

The second change is the use of therapeutic foster parent homes to house level one or low management children in order to avoid placing children in a residential group home. Therapeutic foster parents are paid the higher therapeutic rate to house low management children, but when a therapeutic home is needed all the therapeutic beds may be filled and a child may be placed inappropriately.

So, it is changing again. Many of the changes are needed and welcomed. Others will prove to be ill advised, but be assured Epworth is ahead of the curve here, and will continue to adapt and serve each child in the best possible ways.

As part of that lesson, they gave each girl a prayer journal and some crayons. They told them that anytime they wanted to talk to God but did not know exactly what to say that they could just draw God a picture. The girls were thankful for the journals but the staff often wondered if the lesson was sinking in.

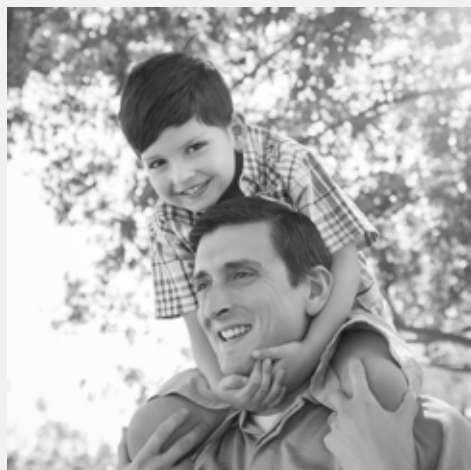
For Anna, the lesson resonated, but she never told anyone. Under the sign of “My Prayer Wall” were dozens of colorful pictures which had been ripped out of her journal and taped to the wall. Here in the back of her closet was the place that Anna let go of the anxiety and aggression and gave those thoughts to God.

Ms. Linda smiled at the sight of the wall but quietly and carefully pulled the clothes back over the wall, respecting the privacy of Anna’s prayers. She helped rearrange other areas of the closet and then closed the closet door without saying anything to Anna.

Before that moment, everyone knew that Anna’s transformation included physical, emotional and academic healing. Now, it was abundantly clear that even though it was hidden from sight, Anna was healing spiritually as well.



Epworth Receives Child Placing Agency License



Epworth Children’s Home was licensed as a Child Placing Agency on May 24th of this year. This license is in addition to the Child Caring license that has been in effect for many years. This license is a major step in establishing the Epworth Center for Excellence in Foster Care and Adoption.

Through this center Epworth will concentrate on recruiting, equipping, and providing the support systems to foster parents, adoptive parents, and in some cases relatives who provide kinship care. For the purposes of this article these families will be referred to as “Resource Families”. The term “resource family” refers to anyone who provides a safe, stable, loving home for a child when the child’s birth parents are unable to provide one.

In South Carolina there is a large gap between foster families and children who need a stable loving family. Epworth and places like Epworth fill part of that need for many children, but we need additional options in our state. That

is one reason Epworth is embarking on this mission. Another reason is when Epworth children are ready to transition to a family, and their biological family is not an option, there will be families available that can provide a good home.

When the center is fully functioning it will include: Recruiting and training of foster families that have the essential traits that predict successful placements, assistance during the complex licensing process for foster parents, support and case management before, during, and after child placement, guidance and support for foster families that seek to adopt foster children. This ministry program will focus on enlisting congregations as bases for recruiting, training, and supporting of nurturing, stable, faith related families.

Epworth is now searching for a program staff (director, recruiter, and case managers) for the Center for Excellence in Foster Care and Adoption. For additional information on these staff positions please visit the Epworth Children’s Home website.

Once in place the staff will prepare potential foster parents for their role as resource families for the children. The plan is to begin in the midlands of South Carolina and grow through our churches into other regions in the state. If you are interested in learning more about being a resource family please visit www.epworthchildrenshome.org for more information.

A Busy Summer



Making summer memories is an important part of any childhood. So when the school year ends in early June, the daily routine at Epworth heats up just like the weather!

The children at Epworth kicked off summer with a celebration for our high school graduates. Celebrations included a special worship service where all eight were honored (and presented gifts from Epworth and the Epworth Alumni Association!) and a special party for the graduates and their families following graduation.

Then in early June the staff and residents packed the Epworth buses for the annual week-long beach trip to Garden City, South Carolina. This trip is a special activity reserved for those residents who maintained good grades and behavior all year. As with the case in other years, for many this was the first time they had ever seen the ocean, much less had the opportunity to play and enjoy the fun of a beach vacation. In addition to spending time at the beach, the residents enjoyed time shopping, at the aquarium, and especially a day at the water park.

For the older residents the return from the beach was met with the opportunity for summer jobs. Through a partnership with the Columbia Urban League, all high school residents are able (and expected) to have a part-time job at a variety of local businesses. These teenagers enjoy the spending money they earn working four hours every week day, but more importantly they are learning lifelong skills and experience they will use for the rest of their lives.

Those same older residents, along with the college students that were home for the summer, also attended life skills seminars where they learned things like how to prepare a resume and interview for a job. They also received instructions on the responsibilities of driving and car ownership. Local State Farm Agent, Mr. Larry Lucas, helped explained the financial

costs of ownership but also ways that young people can save money for their first car. These lessons in young adulthood were just in time for many residents. Two residents bought their first cars this summer. Three more are planning to get theirs by the start of their fall semester at college.

While the older residents were getting ready for young adulthood, the younger residents were having their own fun. Each of the younger cottages attended local day camps where they learned about art and science while having fun with activities and crafts. About a dozen Epworth residents were able to attend a full week of overnight camp at Asbury Hills in the mountains of South Carolina. As a group of six boys headed into the mountains, three of the boys gasped at their first ever sight of a mountain. As they drove up the mountain roads they gazed out of the window with amazement at the sheer size and beauty of the mountains.

As the dog days of summer set in, the elementary students received four weeks of half-day academic enrichment services at the Barnes Learning Center on the Epworth campus. These weeks are spread throughout the summer so children maintain and enhance their reading and math skills even though school is out. Some of the cottages had so much fun with the reading program, they spent many afternoons at the local branch of the Richland County Library.



er at Epworth!



While Epworth continues to support things like summer jobs and academic programs, there were still plenty of great times to just be a child and have fun! There were days with special treats like cotton candy from Cromer's Peanuts and shaved ice from Pelican Sno-balls. Epworth residents were guests at the University of South Carolina's Softball stadium where they played a game of kickball with volunteer college students. A few weeks later volunteers from the Richland County Sherriff's Department came to Epworth one Saturday morning to play a game of softball with the children. There were plenty more activities as well including going to the Gilbert Peach Festival for fireworks on Independence Day.

The summer activities are designed so that the children at Epworth can have fun and enjoy their childhood summers, but are also a part of the comprehensive care that each resident

receives at Epworth. In the summer months alone, there are over 200 planned activities for children to participate in fun and new experiences that bring joy into their lives and broaden their world views. Just as summer reading develops academic success and summer jobs expand skills for independence, a trip to the beach or a game of kickball nurtures the enjoyment of life that we strive for every child at Epworth to experience.



Epworth volunteers staying busy too!

In addition to providing activities for residents at Epworth, the volunteers from the community and churches have been busy at Epworth this summer. Stokes Cottage received a full cottage renovation thanks to a partnership by Chapin UMC, Covenant UMC (Greer), and The Home Depot. Real estate professionals from Keller Williams Realty beautified campus with fresh paint, flowers, and a variety of projects that increased the “curb appeal” around campus. And volunteers from Trenholm Road UMC and Epworth employees helped plant a vegetable prayer garden to not only provide fresh food for summer but teach residents lessons on the beauty of God’s creations.



Did you know?

Mail Your Chickens to Epworth!

In the early 1900s, life at Epworth was very different than it is today. For several years, we had many more children than today, sometimes as many as 300 at a time. During one of those busy years, the resources at Epworth were stretched very thin. Many days the food for a day was little more than a couple of slices of bread and an apple per child.



As Thanksgiving approached, a group of supporters wanted to give the children at Epworth a proper Thanksgiving dinner. To accomplish this, they wrote donors around the state pleading for chickens. Refrigerated transport really was not an option so they asked donors to please “Mail your live Chickens to Epworth.”

And so, the people of South Carolina responded. They reached into their backyard coups, pulled a prized chicken, locked/nailed it into wooden crates and took it to the post office marked: “To Epworth Orphanage.”

Soon mail trains and wagons were flooding Epworth with live chickens. Legend has it that so many came that not only did they have enough for a proper Thanksgiving meal that year but there were enough chickens remaining to have chicken dinners throughout the winter.

Providing for the children at Epworth comes in many forms and sizes. It is a faithful tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation. While we do not accept shipments of live chickens (at least, not at the moment), there are plenty of ways to donate needed supplies or monetary contributions to help the children at Epworth. Visit www.epworthchildrenshome.org for our current Wish List of needs or to make an online gift.

Establish a Legacy Gift at Epworth

Just like the story of the chickens for Epworth program, faithful people for many generations have found creative ways to provide for the children in Epworth’s care. One valuable way is through making a legacy gift. Through stocks, estate plans, gifts of property or other assets, you may be able to make a significant gift for children at Epworth. These gifts can be as simple as a bequest in one’s will or a transfer of appreciated stock or retirement funds. Many legacy gifts provide significant tax benefits to the donor while ensuring that children at Epworth have everything they need today and in the years to come.

For more information on legacy giving, please contact Andrew Boozer, Vice President for Development at 803-256-7394 or aboozer@epworthsc.org.



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Children's Home

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Rev. John. E. Holler, Jr.
President

**Children's names have been changed for confidentiality.*

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The mission of Epworth Children's Home is to serve children, youth and families through a caring, accepting and safe Christian community, where hurts are healed; hope is nurtured; and faith in God, self and others is developed.

Update from Khalilah



As featured in Spring 2016 issue of The Record, Khalilah spent much of her teenage years at Epworth and is now entering her final year of college at Claflin University. Her feature story from that issue was a captivating story of what Epworth has meant in her life, but the story keeps getting better!

Over the summer she was selected as a Program Advisor for Clemson University's Emerging Scholars program for high school students coming from economically disadvantaged regions of South Carolina. As part of the program she is helping teenagers overcome their own adversity in their lives just as she is doing.

Additionally, when she returns to Claflin for her senior year, she will hold the title of Claflin's editor-in-chief of Odessey, and online social media platform for sharing news among the millennials. All of these steps are moving her toward her goals of a career in marketing and communications.