

The Record

News from Epworth Children's Home



Tori Finds her Voice

The State House grounds were in perfect form a few weeks ago as a steady flow of teenagers filled the steps just behind the Governor and other officials. Wreaths and ribbons were hung and it seemed everyone in Columbia gathered around a towering, unlit Christmas tree waiting to kick-off the Christmas season. As the festivities began voices of the Governor's Carolighting Choir echoed down the steps and through the busy streets of Columbia. The sounds of Christmas had arrived, and among the choir there was one voice that sounded particularly sweet. The voice of a child from Epworth, a 15 year old young lady named Tori.*

Tori arrived at Epworth just after Labor Day of this year. Before arriving at Epworth Tori had experienced a very unstable childhood. She moved

from place to place, was forced to assume many adult responsibilities at a young age, and suffered physical abuse. These traumatic childhood experiences compounded over time, and by the time she arrived at Epworth she had become a very shy and reserved young lady. She rarely spoke, was very timid, and frequently withdrew from crowds to be by herself.

In those first days after her arrival, her Epworth cottage staff looked for ways to spend one-on-one time with her. One afternoon they took her for a walk around the Epworth campus so that she could become more familiar with her surroundings. As they went from building to building that afternoon, Tori showed little interest in seeing the cottages, the learning center, or even the gym. However, when they came out of the gym and the church steeple

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A Child is Born

Winter 2017

A Message from The Rev. John Holler
President

“The Herdmans were absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars (even the girls) and talked dirty and hit little kids and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker’s old broken down tool house.

“The tool house burned right to the ground, and I think that surprised the Herdmans. They set fire to things all the time, but it was the first time they managed to burn down a whole building.

“I guess it was an accident. I don’t suppose they woke up that morning and said to one another, ‘Let’s burn down Fred Shoemaker’s tool house...’ but maybe they did. After all it was a Saturday and not much going on.

“It was a terrific fire – two engines and two police cars and all the volunteer firemen and five dozen doughnuts sent up from the Tasti-Lunch Diner. The doughnuts were supposed to be for the firemen, but by the time they got the fire out the doughnuts were all gone. The Herdmans got them – what they couldn’t eat they stuffed in their pockets and down the front of their shirts. You could actually SEE the doughnuts all around Ollie Herdman’s middle.”

So begins one of my favorite books, Barbara Robinson’s *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. I read it every year as we enter the pre-Christmas season.

This wonderful little book is about a group of siblings who are always doing mischievous things, but who begin attending Sunday school because someone told them refreshments are served there. They then got involved in the annual church Christmas pageant - much to the chagrin of everyone else involved in the pageant.

It seems the Herdmans had never heard the Christmas story before, but in the pageant they see and hear the story in very different ways than many of us who have heard it year after year.

It was hard for most of the children in the church to believe the Herdmans had never heard the story before, but Alice Wendleken said she didn’t have any trouble believing it. “How would they find out about the Christmas story,” she said. “They don’t even know what a Bible is. Look what Gladys did to the Bible last week. While Imogene was snitching money from the collection plate in my class, Gladys and Ollie drew mustaches and tails on all the disciples in the primary grade Illustrated Bible.”

We don’t have any children named Herdman at Epworth, but we do have many children who have not heard the story of God’s love and grace and God’s wonderful work of transformation, and we do have an annual Christmas pageant. Some years it feels like a few of the Herdmans are participating (at least during some of the rehearsals). My first year here it seemed as if all the pageant participants had been given several cups of coffee. All I could say after the pageant was “Wow!” as I tried to suppress my laughter. On another year we had a darling pair of cussing angels (thank goodness just at rehearsal, but we all held our collective breath on pageant night).

Every year it is unique, sweet, surprising, humorous, poignant, and every year the story is read, sung, and demonstrated to children who have never heard the story before and who have no concept of a loving creator who invites them to live the abundant life. Then every day the story is acted out through caring adults who model God’s abundant love.

Merry Christmas!

came into view, Tori's eyes lit up and her posture straightened.

"When can I go to church?" she asked. "I haven't been to church in a long time and my relationship with God is close. When can I go?" Tori then immediately met "Pastor Meg," Epworth's minister who helped her start to open up about her life. From that afternoon, Tori began developing a deep bond with the Epworth staff.

Those initial conversations in her first few weeks led to deeper and serious moments where Tori shared her deep seeded worries about her circumstances. She shared the on-going concerns about what was going to happen to her and continued to dread the heavy responsibilities that were placed on her shoulders at such a young age. In those deep conversations, the staff at Epworth listened and comforted her. They encouraged her to let loose of those heavy worries that may be weighing her down and focus her attention on self-care. It was time for her to enjoy being a teenager. Tori heard this advice and took it heart.

A few days later, Tori unexpectedly signed up to participate in the campus talent show organized by a group of volunteers from Midtown Fellowship Church. Her cottage staff were shocked. She was beginning to open up to the adults in the cottage, but Tori was still very withdrawn among her peers. When the Friday night show arrived the entire campus gathered in the church for a night of celebration. Lots of small groups of residents shared their voices and special talents. Then, the host called Tori forward. Instead of a small group or even a duo, she stood at the front of the church all by herself. As the music started Tori belted out the most heartfelt and beautiful gospel solo of the night. The performance brought everyone to their feet and at the end of the song a smile beamed across Tori's face.

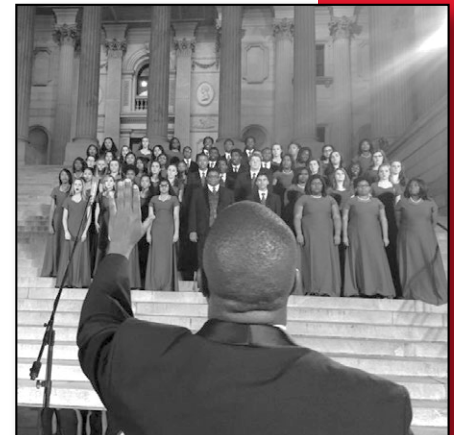
Over the next few months, Tori looked for other ways to get involved. She joined the JRTOC and choir at Dreher High School. She applied herself to her new classes at school and attended tutoring sessions after school at Epworth. She made time to attend a college fair at school and signed up for more information about almost every college she find. She attended life skills workshops to gain financial education with Wells Fargo and career and skills exploration with Goodwill Industries to prepare herself for life after high school. She plugged in to Epworth's church and started helping with worship, participating in a praise dance team, and even leading devotions and Sunday School lessons.

As she finds her new rhythm and begins to blossom in so many ways, Tori reflects on her young life in a way that few fifteen year olds can do. She looks at her childhood and wishes things were different, but is thankful that she is now in a place where she can change the direction of her life. She values education and the opportunities that it will present to her as she grows up. She wants to go to college and make a better life for herself. She wants her own family one day and she never wants her future children to experience the life that she once knew. She still loves her family very much, and some form of family reunification may still be possible for her one day, but for now she is excited to have a fresh new start.

"God has a plan for my life and this is just a season," she recently shared. "I am going to use the resources I have and make the most of it."

In these last three months she has seen so much positive change. She dances almost every week in worship, loves being in the choir at school, and is making the Honor Roll at school. In November, she marched in the Veterans Day Parade with her JROTC unit. She is doing all of these things with a smile and a spirit that is engaging and inspiring her peers and the adults at Epworth alike.

And a few weeks ago her new confidence was on full display for all to see. On that cool early winter night on the steps of the State House when the Governor announced the lighting of the tree, Tori stood proudly behind him singing perfectly on pitch. She wore a smile from ear to ear as the bright lights reflected across her face. As she sang, she knew that this is the Christmas she had finally found her voice.



The Beautiful Rewards of Foster Parenting

If Shannon and Justin Carter could tell you one thing about being foster parent, it is that it is hard - but it is so worth it. And that they would do it again in a heartbeat. Some of the best rewards in life come out of the hardest times, and being a foster parent is a perfect example of that.

Shannon and Justin decided before they were married that in addition to having children of their own, they wanted to adopt. They talked about it again after they were married, and even after the births of their three children (ages 8, 6 and 2). Thinking it was a foregone conclusion that adoption was the road they would go down, they never anticipated that hearing a speaker at a baptism for their friend's son would change the course of their lives forever.

The gist of the speech the woman gave was that yes, fostering a child is hard. It is a lot of work, and will challenge you constantly. *But it is not about you.* Those words had a profound impact on the couple, and stirred an awakening in Shannon and Justin's hearts. Justin came home from the baptism and told Shannon, "I don't think we should adopt. I think we should foster." And after six months of praying and soul searching, Shannon agreed.

In South Carolina, there are approximately 4,000 children in foster care and only 1,400 homes to meet this need. With such a huge shortage, Shannon and Justin knew that even though there would be a wait

as they went through the process, a child would be placed with them eventually. Their first step was to reach out to Epworth, since they had volunteered at Epworth before and liked what they already knew about Epworth. The Carters also heard about the Foster Care Program at Epworth Children's Home, which had been started to assist and identify families who would like to become foster parents. They called Erinne Rodgers, the Foster Care Director at Epworth, and with that they started down the road to becoming foster parents.

Then, four months ago, came the phone call that they knew would come. "I have a 3 year old girl and her 1 year old little brother that both need a home. We really don't know much about them yet. Are you ready?" Erinne asked Shannon and Justin. They were



ready, but they were also nervous. Preparing for a foster child is not like the nesting process while awaiting the arrival of a newborn during pregnancy. You cannot shop for clothes or diapers since you do not know the child's sizes, preferences, or really much about them beforehand. Shannon and Justin had a room set up with a crib and bunk beds, and plenty of toys and children's gear from their three kids, so they were as prepared as they could be.

The first day the 3 year old girl and 1 year old boy siblings came to their home, Shannon and Justin's children started playing with them immediately. The Carter kids had been eagerly anticipating the day when their new residents would arrive, and were thrilled they were finally here. While the initial interaction amongst all of the children was great, the first week was rough, especially for the 3 year old girl. She was having a hard time adjusting, and would act out and push limits. Feeling overwhelmed, Shannon would dread when Justin would leave for work because it was so hard to be solo with all five children.

The Carter's six year old daughter was also having a difficult time adjusting to the dynamic of having another girl in the house around her age, with whom she now had to share the attention. The fostered one year old boy was not used to positive loving touch, and would be stiff as a board if you tried to hug him, comfort him or even put lotion on after a bath. There were so many moments when Shannon thought to herself, "Did I make a mistake?"

About the initial adjustment period, Shannon said, "it was one of the hardest things we have done, and it put us on our knees. We fully had to rely on God every single day just to get through. But we have seen incredible changes in the kids – and ourselves. We have grown together as a family in ways I could have never imagined, and we have all grown closer as a family. It's hard. But I would totally do it again because through this experience we have seen God work in amazing ways."

Four months later, their daily life has reached a new normal, and it is hard for Shannon and Justin to remember a time before the siblings lived with them. The past four months have flown by, while feeling like forever at the same time. All of the children act like siblings and do not differentiate between biological and foster child. And the two foster siblings have grown in leaps and bounds. "It's like they have been given permission to be children again. It is a beautiful reward."

The one year old boy giggles and laughs when you play with him now, and will come climb on Shannon and Justin's lap to be closer to them. Their six year old daughter has taken on the role of older sister to the now almost four year old girl, and they have a great relationship. In watching how the Carters interacted with her little brother, the almost four year old has become more caring and even somewhat maternal to her one year old brother. These were traits she never displayed before, and they were learned after being modeled for her by the Carters.

There is no way to know how long the siblings will be with them, and sometimes it is hard to make plans. But Shannon and Justin just take each day as it comes. They have a great support system in their church, Epworth's Foster Care Program, and their friends who have also fostered children. Shannon says she does not know what she would do without her village. Just to be able to call and talk to people who have been through the same process has been amazing.

If you are considering being a foster parent, please come to one of our monthly information sessions or contact Erinne Rodgers at erodgers@epworthsc.org. Even if being a foster parent might not work for your current circumstance, foster parents need all the support they can get, and there are always ways to get involved and help. And if there is one thing that can be learned from the incredible story that Shannon and Justin have shared, it is that you are not likely to regret it.

Follow-up: Derek Gets a Job!



In the Spring 2017 issue of The Record we introduced you to Derek*, who at age 17 came to Epworth after a series of troubling childhood experiences. At that time he was just settling in at school and earned a part-time job in the Epworth dining hall after school. Since then, Derek has really come into his own at Epworth. He continues to finish his high school studies, but he has moved on from his part-time job in the dining hall. He took his experience in food service at Epworth and upgraded to a job at a locally-owned restaurant just a few blocks away. His work ethic and friendly outlook have earned him a promotion to a front of house position where he works directly with customers. He also has job shadowed another restaurant owner to learn more about the many responsibilities of running a business. He enjoys working in the restaurant world so much he has decided to explore this as a future career path, with a dream of opening his own place one day!

Friends of Epworth Palate Party

The Friends of Epworth are proud to announce the 6th Annual Friends of Epworth Palate Party to benefit Epworth Children's Home on Saturday, March 10, 2018 at Hay Hill Market in Columbia. As the signature event for the Friends of Epworth, this event raises awareness and funds for Epworth and the children who call Epworth home.

Most children in our community have all they need and more. This makes it possible for them to dream big, knowing that someone along the way will help them reach their goals - but not all children are so lucky. The children at Epworth come from environments where poverty, neglect and abuse derail childhoods. Instead of dreaming of bright futures, these children face daily nightmares. Thankfully, their lives and dreams transform by the love, security and care given to them at Epworth.

The buzz around town is that the Palate Party is already earning the reputation as the "Best Pairings Party in Columbia." We expect 2018 to be the biggest party yet! Attendees come ready for a good time. The event includes live music, a large dance floor, and an elevated menu to please the most discerning of palates, all located within the beautiful atmosphere at Hay Hill.

Join us for a night of fun as we celebrate the promise of bright futures for children at Epworth! For more information, please visit our website at: www.friendsofepworth.org or email Jessica Umbach at jumbach@epworthsc.org.



The Season of Giving Lasts All Year Long

Christmas is such a special time of year at Epworth! The children in the cottages awaken on Christmas morning to the joyous scene of a beautifully decorated tree, surrounded by heaps of perfectly wrapped gifts nestled underneath. It is what every child dreams of and anticipates for weeks leading up to the holiday, but for some of the children at Epworth, this will be the first time they experience a traditional Christmas morning along with the tree and gifts surrounding it. Here at Epworth, we make it our mission to ensure Christmas is special for every child.

The planning and preparation begins all the way back in September, when we sit down with each child and ask what is on their wish list. From there, the wishes are printed onto cards and matched with donors who shop for the specific items for the children. During specific days in December, the items are dropped off on campus at “Santa’s Workshop,” where each gift is expertly wrapped and tagged for the child for whom it has been chosen. The support and efforts from the donors and our community to provide for the children on Christmas morning is absolutely breathtaking!

For some of the children at Epworth, emotions at Christmastime can run high. This may be the first holiday they have spent apart from their family, or they may have memories of a previous year’s disappointment that occurred on Christmas morning. Each of the staff in the cottages, who themselves are working on Christmas, go above and beyond to make the day special and look out for opportunities to make extra phone calls or additional letters to family possible.

While we are always looking for ways to make Christmas special, Christmas is just one day a year. The ultimate gift is that our community is ensuring that these children also have everything they need for the other 364 days of the year. In-kind donations such as body wash, alarm clocks or new outdoor furniture provide items that both support the children in necessary ways as well as limit the expenditures needed in the Epworth budget. Monetary donations, no matter how large or small, provide those things that make caring for the children on Epworth’s campus possible.

Through the support of our donors, we are able to provide things like tutoring for a middle school boy who is struggling in math. It has provided exercise classes for one of our cottages of high school girls, who have taken on a new “healthy living” approach. It provides a skating trip for the boys and girls cottages when school is out for winter break. Without your support, we would not be able to provide some of these little things that make childhood special.



Christmas is a joyous and special time of the year, but during this Season of Giving, we at Epworth give thanks for the many people near and far who give generously to provide for the children all year long. It is because of your generosity that there is not just one, but 365, joyful mornings at Epworth every year.



Epworth
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.

10th Annual Cook-Out for Kids BBQ

presented by the Epworth Alumni Association

Hosted by the Epworth Alumni Association



Saturday, April 14, 2018
11:00AM - 3:00PM at Epworth
BBQ, Music & Fun for Everyone!

BBQ
Fundraiser

*Pork, Chicken, & Kids Plates
Whole Boston Butts
Bake sale & more!
Dine-in or use the drive thru!*

Mark your calendars save the date for the 10th Annual Epworth Cook-out for Kids Saturday, April 14. Award-winning BBQ chefs will be selling pork and chicken plates as well as whole Boston Butts to go. There will be classic cars, live music, a bake sale and fun for the entire family. The event makes a great outing for church groups and civic clubs, so put it on your groups calendar, load up a bus or van and come celebrate with us this Spring!

For more information email
epworthalumniassociation@gmail.com