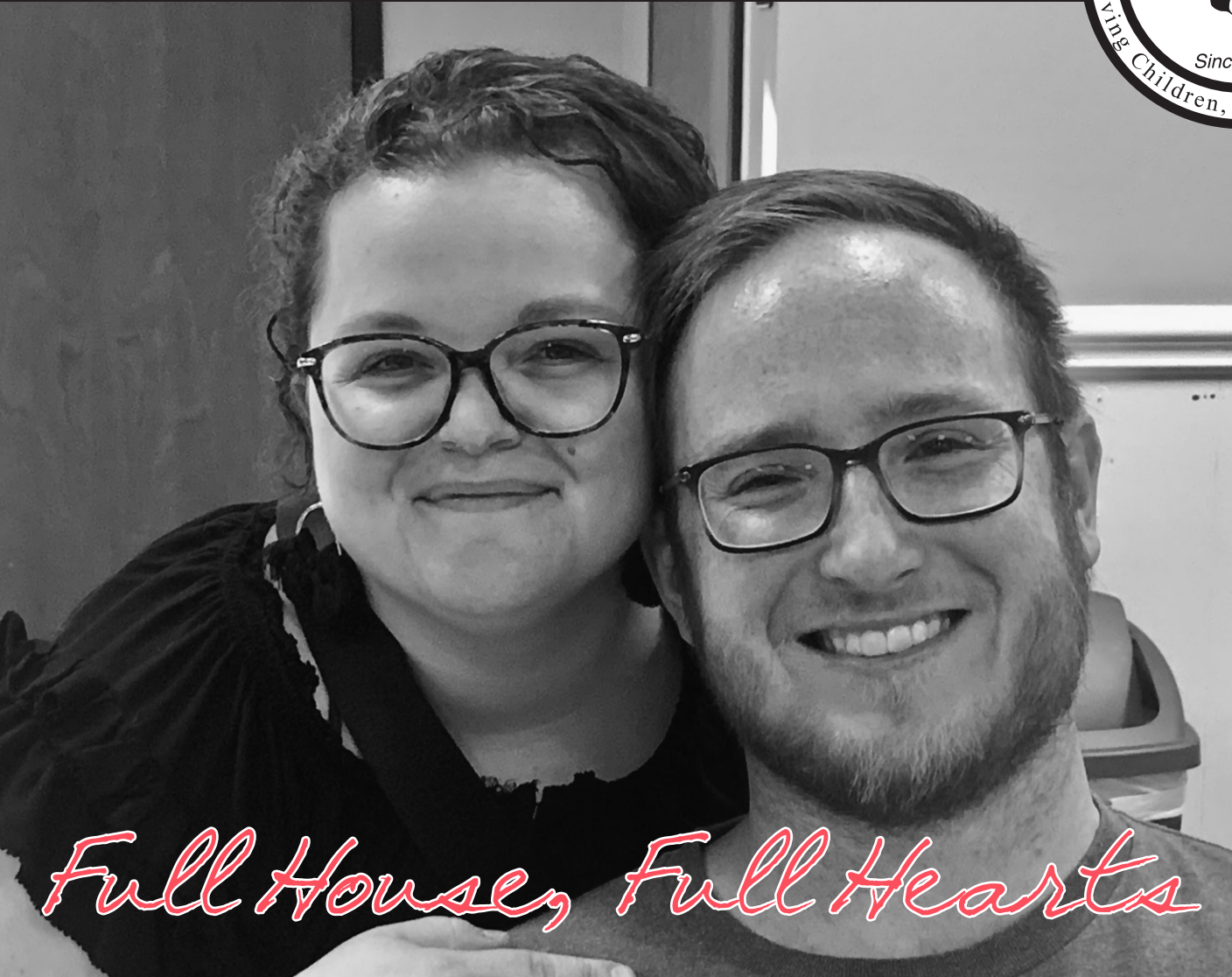


# The Record

*News from Epworth Children's Home*



## *Full House, Full Hearts*

During pre-marital counseling at their Baptist church, Sarah and Justin Weller were advised to think through where they wanted to be in five years as a couple.

"We realized we both wanted to live our mission, to serve, to be a light in our community," Sarah said. "We weren't sure how we would do this, but we knew it would be important to our marriage."

After the Wellers tied the knot in 2018, they became close friends with another church couple who were applying to become foster parents.

"Suddenly, there were children around our friends' table," Sarah said. "We watched and saw that while they had lots of challenges and it was very hard, they survived each situation as it arose. They told us they felt more joy than ever."

The Wellers, in their twenties, did not see themselves as foster parents, but they were happy to babysit their friends' foster children on weekends while they spent the next few years focusing on their careers. Sarah worked for a church and Justin maintained computer software systems. Life was good, but as time went on, the commitment they'd made to their five-year marriage goals weighed on their minds.

"We were happy, but we felt like something was still missing," Sarah said.

In 2021, the couple went to a Christian concert where a children's charity made a brief presentation.

"They told a compelling story about giving of yourself to make it possible for a child who is

*Continued on page 7*



# New Beginnings

## Summer 2023

A Message from Beth Williams  
President and CEO

Summer is here, and with it, all the seasonal festivities—cookouts, family reunions, vacations, festivals, vacation Bible school, and our famously hot weather. Our yards are filled with explosions of colorful flowers; our gardens provide delicious fresh vegetables; and there is a general sense of celebration and opportunities for fun and relaxation. That's what summer is all about.

Here at Epworth, we have ushered in this new summer season with a series of new beginnings, fresh starts, and doors of opportunity opening for many of those we serve. When we think of this time of year, we normally think of graduations—primarily for those leaving high school or college and moving into new lives. We congratulate those in our Epworth family who recently completed high school, as well as those who completed GED degrees, job training programs, and those who will begin post-secondary education opportunities. We are gratified to have been a part of the success our older youth have experienced, and we are proud of their hard work, sense of responsibility, and their commitment to lead successful adult lives.

But we are fortunate also to be able to celebrate many other types of graduations that mark milestones in the lives of the children and families we serve. An alternative word for graduation is “commencement.” This word originated in the 13th century in France and literally means “to begin or to start fresh.” It is a perfect word to use to describe the success of many Epworth serves. Just as our older youth are ready to begin lives as young adults, other Epworth children and their families have recently experienced their own types of commencements. We share their pride and enthusiasm.

In the Epworth Early Intervention Center (EEIC), a program that Epworth developed more than 40 years ago, preschool children who have developmental delays, diagnosed disabilities and those who are at-risk for developmental delays, receive programs and services to address their needs, including the development of unique, individualized plans for each child in the Center. A key component of the EEIC is our work with the families of these children, including the Home-Based Early Intervention Program, in which an early intervention specialist visits the child and family in his/her natural environment, such as the home, to provide personalized services.

This summer we are very happy to celebrate the “graduation” that children in the Center have accomplished as they move out of the Center and into regular school programs at their local elementary schools. We are so proud of the children, along with their families, as they worked together with Epworth's staff to graduate into a regular school setting with the skills they need to be successful. We are also proud to announce that Epworth has plans to open a satellite Early Childhood Intervention Center in the Upstate, serving children who live in multiple counties. The need for such a program is great in that region of the state.

We also have graduates in our Family Care Center (FCC). The FCC is a residential program at Epworth for mothers with substance use disorders. In a secure and comfortable environment, mothers and their children live together for six months while working towards long-term recovery and family stability. The mothers receive counseling, life skills

education, parenting classes, job market assistance, and other services they need to live healthy, successful lives as providers for their children. We are delighted that several mothers successfully completed the program over the past few months, demonstrating their ability and readiness to move into regular life. The word “commencement” applies especially well to these women, as they are indeed prepared to begin a new start in their lives. A separate article in this issue of *The Record* shares the story of mothers who recently graduated from this program. All of us at Epworth are very proud of their success.

May was Foster Care Awareness Month in our state and we celebrated the success of our foster care program at Epworth with even more types of graduation. As one of the largest foster care providers in the state, we recognize the vital importance of preparing families to serve as foster parents, as well as providing them with the support and training they need for sustained success. We could apply the term “graduation” almost daily to many of the milestones that foster families help their children attain. They provide the love,

support, safety, and general sense of wellbeing that foster children need to feel secure and thrive.

One example is particularly pertinent. One of Epworth’s foster families includes an 18-year-old foster child who has experienced several setbacks and challenges in his young life. New regulations allow foster children to remain in foster care after they turn eighteen, so this family has the opportunity to have this young man continue to live in their home, as they help him receive the attention and structure he needs to be successful as an adult. This young man has a sort of “graduation” each day as he lives in a home that supports and encourages him daily to grow and flourish as a young adult.

As this summer progresses, I hope all of you and your families enjoy the bounties that this season provides. I congratulate all of you who have graduates in your own families this year, and I appreciate the continuing support you provide Epworth and all of its children and their families as we work to help them “graduate” into new horizons with the skills and character they need to be happy, healthy, and successful.

## Celebrating Our High School Graduates

Four Epworth residents graduated from high school this Spring!

Eighteen-year-old Daisy was one of them. The coastal native excitedly walked across the Colonial Life Arena stage to accept her diploma, and she took special pride in the graduation honor cords she was awarded for college readiness and ROTC participation.

“I know I wouldn’t have graduated had I not come to Epworth,” Daisy said.

Daisy’s early childhood was spent moving from town to town with a parent who was suffering from substance use disorder. Like so many youth placed at Epworth, she experienced abuse before coming into care midway through her junior year.

“I was scared the first month or so I was here, but since then I’ve been able to have a life,” Daisy said. “I got to hang out with the Cottage Partners, go on trips, spend time with the other girls. It’s been kind of like a family. I’m living life!”

Daisy said “pushing through” to accomplish her goal of graduating has given her confidence and hope. She is

working a food service job this summer and will join the military in the fall. She plans to use the military’s tuition benefits to help pay for college.

Congratulations, Daisy, and to all our graduates...we’re so very proud of you.



This is the 11th year in a row that 100 percent of high school seniors residing at Epworth for at least 90 days either graduated from high school or earned their GED. It is an amazing statistic that far exceeds the state’s graduation rate.

# Honoring Ken Nelson

**K**en Nelson was born in Beaufort, S.C., in 1968, the fourth of five children. His birth mother died when he was 5 years old, and Ken experienced abuse until he was placed at Epworth Children's Home when he was 10 years old.

"My Epworth family took me in during one of the darkest times of my life," Ken said. "They not only provided for my earthly needs - shelter, food and education - they nurtured me. They lifted me up, made sure that I knew that I was a unique child of God, a person of sacred worth. My time here at Epworth called forth in me my God given potential and worth. While living here I experienced the love of God that refused to let me go. This experience filled me with a sense of gratitude that compelled me to share the faith and work of Jesus Christ with others. It was during those years at Epworth that I first experienced my call to ministry. Ten years after I left this loving home, I was ordained a deacon in the United Methodist Church."

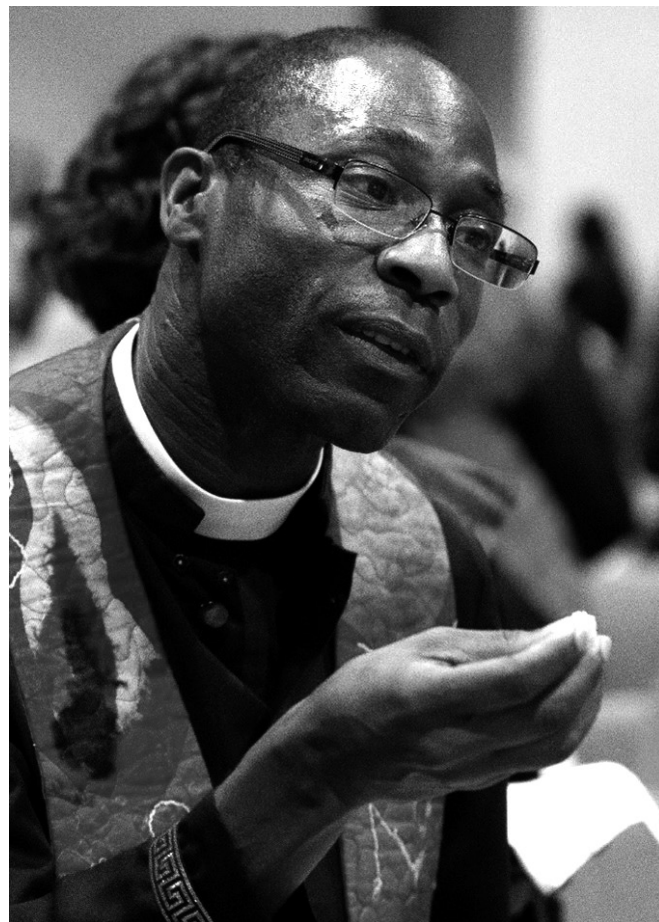
Ken lived at Epworth until he graduated from high school. He went on to graduate from Newberry College and Duke Divinity School. Ordained as a deacon in 1993 and as an elder in 1995, he has now served as a minister in the South Carolina United Methodist Annual Conference for more than 30 years.

During these years Ken has emerged as a caring pastor, dynamic preacher, a trusted and meticulous administrator, and a humble servant of God who brings a deep and abiding faith along with the gift of neighborly compassion to every situation.

Ken served for 12 years as a pastor of four South Carolina churches and for seven years as a congregational specialist. He also served for two years as assistant dean and director of Religious Life at Duke University Chapel. He currently serves as the Orangeburg District superintendent and as the secretary of the South Carolina Annual Conference.

Ken was elected to serve on the Epworth Board of Trustees at the 2023 Annual Conference. In gratitude for his excellent service in the South Carolina Annual Conference and in honor of his election to the Epworth Board of Trustees, Epworth established the permanent Ken Nelson Endowed Fund using donations from generous anonymous donors.

If you would like to honor Ken while simultaneously strengthening Epworth's work with children and



families in South Carolina, you are invited to contribute to the Ken Nelson Endowed Fund at Epworth by designating your gift to be invested in this named fund. Proceeds from the fund will be used to support the work of Epworth in perpetuity.

Ken continues to bless numerous committees, boards, and agencies with his wisdom and boundless energy, so we say, "Thank you, good and faithful servant."

*For additional information about the Rev. Ken Nelson Endowed Fund, contact Lisa Fusco at (803) 256-7394 or [lfusco@epworthsc.org](mailto:lfusco@epworthsc.org).*

## Moms Graduate to New Possibilities

We recently celebrated two life changing graduations from our Epworth Family Care Center (FCC), the only program of its kind in South Carolina. The six-month residential program helps single moms who are recovering from substance use disorder become healthy in mind, body and spirit through counseling and parenting, life skills and financial literacy education. Moms are allowed and encouraged to bring their children to live with them at the FCC cottage while they complete the program.

Michelle, a single mom in her 30s, was one of our recent graduates. Soft spoken and sweet-natured, Michelle had struggled with drug addiction for years. It had robbed her of the ability to work, maintain healthy relationships and function normally. Michelle left the FCC with the first real job she'd ever had and moved into the first apartment of her own in more than 15 years. Best of all, her one-and-a-half-year-old child, Micah, moved with her. He had been removed from Michelle's care a year earlier. But Michelle's compassionate caseworker, who could see she loved her son, arranged for her to enroll in Epworth's FCC.

"This program saved my life," Michelle said. "It taught me how to be a mom. The people here didn't judge, they supported me. They made it possible for me to keep my

child, which gave me motivation and strength. These people are my family."

Twenty-year-old Alex was our second graduate. At age 11, while her peers were studying for tests and hanging out with schoolmates, Alex was introduced to drugs. At 15, she became pregnant and had to drop out of school to support her baby, Dylan. When she experienced an accidental overdose at age 18, her son was removed from her care, and Alex sunk into almost suicidal despair.

"I cried every day after they took Dylan away," Alex said, fighting to hold back tears at the memory. "He was the only reason I was still living."

After Alex spent six months in an in-patient medical treatment center, Dylan was returned to her and the two of them moved into Epworth's FCC cottage.

Alex is proud that she managed to save \$2,000 from the part-time job she held while completing the FCC program. She said she is deeply grateful to Epworth staff for their support, for teaching her how to be a good mom and reliable employee, and for encouraging her to set goals and expect the best from herself.

Upon leaving the FCC, Alex and Dylan went to live with stable relatives in another city. There, Alex plans to continue working, earn her GED and eventually train to become a counselor or nurse.

## Epworth Alumni Share a Meal, Memories and Gratitude

More than two dozen Epworth alumni - many of whom spent most of their childhoods with us - came back to campus in June to attend the Epworth Alumni Association's annual reunion.

Accompanied by family members, they shared a potluck meal, renewed childhood friendships, reminisced, and paid tribute to the role that Epworth Children's Home played in their lives. Rev. Will Brown, who became a Methodist minister after a childhood spent at Epworth, led the day's prayer, giving thanks for Epworth's "sheltering arms."

Most of the reunion attendees lived at Epworth in an era when hundreds of children from around South Carolina resided at our Millwood campus.

It was a true joy to see them and hear their stories, and we are so grateful that they continue to stay in touch and share their lives with us.



Chris Maw with Josie Smoak McLeod. At 96, Ms. McCleod was the oldest reunion attendee.

# Thank You, Margaret!



In 1980, 10-year-old Margaret Brabham became the first student to enroll in Epworth's groundbreaking Early Intervention Center for students with special needs, developmental delays and/or disabilities. Until then, the crucial support services the EEIC provides were not available anywhere in the Midlands.

Margaret's parents and her grandfather played an instrumental role in the EEIC's founding.

"We had been living in Charlottesville, Virginia, and they had a great enrichment program for children with developmental delays," said Margaret's father, Dr. Angus Brabham. "But when we moved back to Columbia – there was nothing here for Margaret. My father, Rev. McKay Brabham, who was a Methodist minister, told Epworth that his church – College Place United Methodist – would donate the space if Epworth would staff it."

The timing was perfect, as Epworth was exploring the development of a ministry for children with disabilities.

The EEIC has since served hundreds of children and families. Now housed on Epworth's main Columbia campus, it has also advocated for children with developmental disabilities and has served as a training site for government and university programs.

Margaret Brabham's impact on the EEIC went beyond its establishment, however. After she turned 21, she joined the EEIC staff as a teacher's assistant. She worked in the EEIC preschool for 25 years.

"Margaret and I taught together, and she was always so supportive of the children and an excellent role model for them," said Jessica Mearns, a former EEIC director. "She has always been a very bright spot, and she means the world to us. She has touched so many lives."

Margaret recently retired from her teaching career to focus on art. Dozens of people attended the campus reception to honor her career and her historic significance.

Congratulations, Margaret - and thank you.



lost to be found,” Sarah recalled. “Later I looked at Justin, and I said, ‘There’s something I just can’t get off my mind,’ and he finished my sentence and said, ‘fostering.’”

It turns out that for months both Sarah and Justin had been thinking about fostering and praying for guidance, but each had been nervous to share their thoughts with the other in case that’s not what their partner wanted.

They soon chose Epworth as their foster care licensing agency.

“We wanted to go through an organization that had a focus on the Gospel, but we also wanted to be licensed to offer therapeutic foster care,” Sarah said. “Some faith-based fostering organizations do not offer that option, but Epworth does. And we heard that Epworth provided a lot of support to foster parents.”

Within days of being approved for a foster care license, a post appeared on the Facebook page of a foster care group that the Wellers were following.

“A foster parent posted that a 2-year-old boy in their care needed to go because he didn’t fit in with the other kids,” Sarah said. “I felt bad for that baby.”

They arranged to have the child transferred into their care until he was returned to his biological mom four months later.

Soon after, in July 2022, Epworth asked the couple if they could take in two elementary school children. They agreed, and when they learned that the two children’s two older siblings – adolescents – were being placed in Epworth’s group cottage, Sarah and Justin asked to take in those children as well.

At first, the Wellers feared they’d overcommitted. All four children were in counseling for trauma and other diagnoses, one needed speech therapy, and each had an Individual Educational Plan at school. On average, the Wellers had to coordinate about 15 appointments a week. The two older children were “a bundle of emotions” and even made a halfhearted attempt at running away shortly after moving in. Sarah ended up quitting her full-time job a few months later to stay home with the children.

“At the time, we weren’t sure how we could make it without my salary...but we stepped out on faith,” she said. “Soon after Justin was offered a new opportunity that made up for the lost income.”

The Wellers have since worked hard to guide the four children into steady routines and wholesome activities. They all eat together at the table each evening, and they focus on providing a nourishing diet, which has helped one child who was greatly overweight lose 30 pounds.

“It took some time for them to realize that this was all out of love,” Sarah said. “But they went from trying to run away to considering us their family. Consistency is what pays off.”

Sarah said one key to fostering is having people “holding the ropes for you.” The meals that churches deliver, the babysitting offered by friends, the laundry help offered by Justin’s mom – all make a difference.

Today, their home is filled with the bustle and hum of family life - children yelling and joking as they bounce on the trampoline, dogs barking, and Sarah and Justin directing traffic. They go on lots of walks and the children enjoy helping in the backyard garden. Negative behaviors have diminished.

“It is very clear to them now that they are loved, not just by us but by Epworth ... by the therapists, the caseworkers, all the people involved in their care,” Sarah said.

She and Justin know it will be hard when the children are reunited with their birth family, but they are at peace about it.

“God has a vision for families, and it is restoration,” Sarah said. “We tell the children that even after they go back to their parents, they will always be our kids too.”

Not only has fostering brought the couple joy, it also helped them meet their five-year marriage goals.

“Bringing the nitty gritty of ministry into our home escalated our growth as a couple and deepened our love,” she said.

If a child was on your doorstep, needing care, would you take them in? Currently hundreds of S.C. children need temporary foster homes. If you’d like to know more, please reach out!

**(803) 828-7724**

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Beth Williams  
President and CEO

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*\*Children's names and pictures have been changed for confidentiality.*

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

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