

The Record

News from Epworth Children's Home



Family Values

By the time Mandy and her siblings were taken into foster care, the 16-year-old lagged nearly two grades behind her peers.

She often found herself simply too exhausted to go to school. Instability at home had left Mandy with the day-to-day responsibility of looking after her six brothers and sisters. The teen also worked a weekend job. She had accumulated a record of misbehavior, red flags to potential foster parents. This made it more challenging for caseworkers to find her a long-term foster home.

“Even when teens behave perfectly, finding good foster homes for them is tough,” said Kendra Faile, Epworth’s senior director of foster care. “Of the many inquiries we receive from people wanting to be foster parents, only a handful express interest in fostering a teen. It’s tragic, because teens are still

children and need the encouragement, guidance and stability of adult role models every bit as much as younger children.”

Thankfully, the S.C. Department of Social Services contacted Epworth to see if Hannah and Kyle Schroeder of Summerville would take Mandy at least temporarily. Hannah and Kyle have been licensed to foster through Epworth for several years. Hannah is a stay-at-home mom and Kyle serves in the Air Force. The young couple, in their twenties, were already caring for several young foster children and their two biological children when they got the call about Mandy.

Hannah hesitated.

“Our youngest child was just 3 months old at the time,” she said. “But we thought, well, it’s just a few days; we can manage.”

Continued on page 6



Thank You for Your Prayers, Support and Love

Winter 2024

A Message from Beth Williams
President and CEO

I hope all of you are enjoying a happy and healthy 2024. I want to begin by thanking all of you whose generosity, love, and compassion at Christmas meant so much to the children and families who Epworth serves. This year your gifts to Epworth, both in tangible presents to the children who live on our campuses, and financial support for Epworth's programs and services, were outstanding and proved once again the generosity and spirit of love you perennially demonstrate. I want to take this opportunity to thank you again for your kindness and thoughtfulness in making Christmas such a happy and blessed time for Epworth's children and families.

Throughout the holiday season, I was privileged to attend several Christmas events for Epworth's children, and it was such a pleasure to see them experiencing the love and warmth of the season. They, of course, loved the special gifts they received on Christmas morning and the Christmas parties held throughout the season. They also attended and participated in church services celebrating the true meaning of Christmas. It was at Epworth's Christmas Eve church service that I had an opportunity to ask one of the children what she wanted for Christmas. Without hesitation she answered, "I want to go back home to my family."

We have to remember that although most of Epworth's children have come from families that are dysfunctional, and where abuse and neglect have been constant factors, they still love their parents and other family members and miss them when they are away from home. Family ties are strong, and our aim at Epworth over time is to reunite as many of our children as possible with their birth families when the situation is healthy, safe, and sustainable enough to do so.

We have a current example of our progress in trying to achieve this goal of family reunification occurring right now in Epworth's foster care program. A young teen came to live at Epworth several months ago, after being placed in our care by the SC Department of Social Services. After being newly licensed at about the same

time, one of Epworth's foster parents was ready to take a child into her home. A two-year old little girl became her first foster child. This child's older sister was a young teen placed earlier at Epworth. We arranged for this young lady to be moved from Epworth and placed in the foster home, joining her baby sister. The first steps are underway in reuniting part of the family, as these two sisters are now reunited and living together in their new foster home.

As they thrive and grow under the care of their foster mother, the hope is that they will eventually be able to return to their family when it is determined that it is safe and healthy to do so. Epworth's care can come full circle, with our family stabilization programs like HOMEBUILDERS® and other after-care programs available to help the children and their birth family adjust and prosper after reunification.

There are so many compelling stories unfolding at Epworth every day. New children come to us throughout the year with traumas and need for our programs and services. Our children and families need your prayers, support, and love throughout the year. Your thoughtfulness lifts them up and helps them to know that they are appreciated and loved. This can make all the difference.

As we move through the rest of winter and await spring, we appreciate the help, support, and generosity you give to Epworth, not just at Christmas, but in all the months of the year. Your thoughtfulness helps us not only in tangible ways with your gifts and your service, but also provides us with the wonderful knowledge that you care about Epworth's children and their lives that we are all trying to make happier, more secure, and more stable. Famous clergyman Norman Vincent Peale once said, "We must find time to thank the people who make a difference in our lives and in the lives of others." Thank you for being a partner in helping to give Epworth's children the futures they deserve.

Christmas Memories 2023!



Encircling Parents with Love and Support

Ripley, a 35-year-old divorced mom from the Upstate, works 50-60 hours a week at two jobs to provide for her daughters, 7-year-old Ivy and 14-year-old Emma. She is also attending school part-time to improve her earning potential. Ripley struggles to balance financial pressures with the need to spend quality time with her children. Like many single parents with only a small support network, she often feels quite alone.

“On social media, from the outside looking in, everyone’s life is perfect,” Ripley said. “It’s so hard to see that anyone else is struggling or dealing with uncertainty over parenting or life decisions.”

Ripley and her daughters had visited Piedmont United Methodist Church a few times where she learned about a “Circle of Parents” support group that met at the church on Wednesday nights and provided childcare and supper.

Having now participated for over a year, Ripley said Piedmont’s Circle of Parents group has made her a better parent by helping her handle the stresses of single parenting and feel more confident in her parenting decisions.

“Our group is so, so welcoming,” she said. “The meetings are diverse – there are married parents, single parents, grandparents, parents from different cultural backgrounds. It is a great outlet for getting real advice and feedback from other parents. Whenever I’m dealing with something or want a second opinion about parenting, I talk it out and someone always has had some kind of experience with that situation.”

Epworth administers the national Circle of Parents network for the state of South Carolina and helps churches and community groups set up the groups as a ministry to parents and caregivers in their local community. Piedmont is one of about a half a dozen UMC churches and community organizations in South Carolina that currently sponsor Circle of Parents groups.

“Circle of Parents groups have been proven to help strengthen families by fostering social connections, emotional support in times of need, parental resilience, and knowledge of parenting and child development,” said Melanie Cannon, one of two Epworth Family Engagement Coordinators overseeing the Circle of Parents program.

The parent-led groups act as a pressure release valve – a safe space where parents and child caregivers can talk

through their parenting fears, concerns and challenges without judgement or blame. The meetings also function as a problem-solving tool where parents exchange practical ideas, successes, information, and strategies for raising thriving children.



“Circle of Parents is parent-led because it recognizes that parents and caretakers are the experts on their children,” Melanie said. “It’s also one of the most rewarding ministries a church can offer in their community. There is a tremendous need for it among parents and caregivers in South Carolina.”

Sponsoring churches and community organizations provide the meeting space, coffee, supper, and childcare – for the weekly or monthly meetings. Epworth staff trains a designated volunteer facilitator and a parent leader for each local group. The groups do not require any time from the pastor or church staff to run the meetings themselves. Among the groups operating in South Carolina currently, are general groups and specific groups for foster parents and Hispanic parents.

Piedmont UMC Senior Minister Rev. Dick Waldrep said the group is a wonderful addition to the church’s array of ministries.

“We want to reach and touch the people who need what we’re offering, and we’re constantly trying to expand that circle,” Rev. Waldrep said. “We definitely are seeing that Circle of Parents is benefitting those who are attending.”

Depending on its resources, a church may also offer parents in the group other support. For instance, Piedmont UMC made it possible for Ivy, Ripley’s

Continued on page 7

Tom Villiger's Fatherly Legacy

Thomas Edward Villiger's radiant aura and gentle, thoughtful manner made people – even strangers – feel cared for and seen.

"People who are religious used to describe my brother as having a 'what would Jesus do' personality," Tom's sister Rita Rao said. "He exuded something that most people simply don't have."

Born in 1938 in Dixon, Illinois – famous as the hometown of Ronald Reagan – Tom spent most of his 84 years on earth helping others. Starting as a social worker at the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, he retired decades later from the 90-office agency as deputy director with responsibility for statewide child protection and welfare programs, including foster care. Tom then moved to California, where he helped establish neighborhood councils that gave underrepresented groups in Los Angeles a voice on the city council. He created a social justice ministry at his Catholic church to help people in need of housing and legal help. In 2008, after a final move to Lake Keowee in upstate South Carolina to be near Rita and her husband, Tom continued helping disadvantaged people through his new church home, St. Andrews Catholic Church in Clemson.

Tom's lifelong passion for serving others, especially children, is why Rita selected Epworth as beneficiary of Tom's estate when he passed away from acute leukemia in January of 2023.

"Tom suffered terribly with Parkinson's in his older years and had to move to a continuing care community," Rita said. "When we last updated his estate plan, he asked me to search for a charity in South Carolina that focused on the causes he cared most about."

After Tom's death, Rita's neighbors, Judy and Roger Estep of Clemson, recommended Epworth as an excellent organization that helped children from troubled backgrounds. Rita used Tom's estate to establish an endowed fund at Epworth in Tom's memory.

It is a legacy well suited to Tom Villiger. Rita said Tom was especially sensitive to the mental and emotional needs of children because he struggled with shyness and insecurities as a boy.

"Tom was a twin to my sister Donna," Rita said. "At one point, he had to change grade schools because my parents and the teachers felt he was too attached to his twin and was really in her shadow. He was very shy. It was



only after he earned his master's degree that Tom really grew stronger."

As a teen, Tom considered becoming a priest, but realized he was more interested in serving people in need than in doctrine or day to day church affairs. His first job in high school and throughout college was at a state residence for people with mental illness. He served patients so well that his supervisors recommended him for a full State of Illinois scholarship to grad school to encourage him to stay in public service.

Rita said Tom's caring, decent character was shaped by the family's small-town upbringing.

"Our father owned the local drugstore and he always helped people in need," Rita said. "We were lucky because we were raised in the ultimate, traditional American family. We had food on the table and happily wore hand-me-downs. It was important to our mom that we were well behaved, got good grades, attend church, were courteous to teachers and all adults, and did nothing to tarnish our father's good reputation."

While Tom never married, his kind and caring personality led two widowed coworkers to ask him at different points in his life to step in as a male role model and father figure to their young sons.

"To this day, those young men – we call them Tom's bonus sons – say that Tom was the only father they ever really had," Rita said.

Tom's generous bequest to Epworth also leaves a fatherly legacy that will provide wise guidance, compassionate care, and many kinds of lifechanging assistance to a multitude of children for years to come. Rita is certain her brother would be pleased.

If you would like to learn more about creating an endowed fund benefiting the children of Epworth, please contact Lisa Fusco at (803) 256-7394 or lfusco@epworthsc.org.

When Mandy first entered their home, she seemed genuinely happy to see the baby and the other children.

“She told us how much she loved kids, and we could see immediately that she was so good with them,” Hannah said. “We all had a really good time and Mandy told us a lot about herself.”

Strands of Mandy’s stories reminded Hannah of the frustration, confusion, and pain she, herself, had experienced as a teen.

“I’m from a good family, but a very strict one, and I went through rough patches where things were not great and there was no communication with my parents, like when I started dating Kyle,” Hannah said.

The emotional connection between Mandy and Hannah was so strong, she and Kyle soon asked Epworth to place Mandy in their care.

Hannah said that one of her own personal strengths is that she understands that not everything is as it seems at first. In reading over Mandy’s case history, she realized the teen’s troubled behavior, including Mandy’s occasional use of marijuana, could create problems in the family.

“But the more we got to know her, the more we saw clearly that she was just broken...she had never been allowed to be a kid,” Hannah said. “Drugs are one thing we can’t tolerate in our home, and we talked to her about that. Mandy told me how she had used drugs in part to cope with her responsibilities and home situation. I feel that with foster kids or any kids, a big thing to understand is the why.”

Hannah said that like many traumatized children in foster care, Mandy arrived with little belief or expectation that anyone valued her life.

“Kyle and I set out to do all we could to give her a sense of control and build her confidence,” Hannah said.

Hannah enrolled Mandy in counseling, and in consultation with the doctor, took the teen off heavy medication she was on.

“Getting her to go and sit in the classroom was the first big challenge,” Hannah said. “At first, every other day, Mandy would tell me she was sick. She was not motivated and had a tough time making friends. But we provided incentives, gave her reasons to go. Within months, she was at least going to school. We used the same approach to encourage her to improve her grades. With all Bs, for instance, she might earn the privilege of attending the high school football games. I talked to her and praised her a lot.”

Mandy’s grades rose and she began making friends. But she was still way behind her peers.

“I asked her if she wanted to graduate,” Hannah said. “If so, I told her, you have two choices: Remain in school an extra year or take extra online classes and course recovery classes at the same time you are attending regular classes and on holidays and in the summer. Mandy chose the second option. She caught up completely and is now on track to graduate this spring with her age group.”

As the months passed, Mandy grew very close to Hannah and Kyle and the children, and she settled into the rhythm of the lively, stable, and loving home. She began to trust that the Shroeder’s had her interest at heart. The couple’s trust in Mandy grew similarly.

It was put to the test just once.

“One night, Mandy said she was going to a girlfriend’s house, but she called me about an hour later and told me she had been smoking pot,” Hannah said. “She said, ‘I don’t know why I did it and I’m sorry. I know it means I’m getting kicked out.’”

Hannah picked her up from her friend’s house, and Mandy stayed silent throughout the drive home. Once they arrived home, the teen went to her room and packed up all her things.

“She came downstairs and hugged me,” Hannah said. “She said ‘Thank you for picking me up. What time will my case manager get here?’ I told her no case manager was coming.”

Forty minutes later, an inconsolable Mandy put her belongings on the front porch and went outside to wait. Hannah finally had to ask the caseworker to call Mandy to tell her to go back inside the house.

“Mandy was crying and almost seemed to have a kind of breakdown,” Hannah said. She said, ‘I broke your rule, why do you want to keep me?’ We talked for over four hours. She hasn’t failed a drug test since. “

Mandy will graduate from high school in May and plans to either study cosmetology or nursing. While finishing up her final semester, she is also working weekends at a restaurant.

Hannah said Mandy is like their daughter now...they are that close.

“You can tell when you visit their home, Mandy is so family-oriented and it’s a very good, healthy environment, and she has developed a great bond with the Schroeders and her foster siblings,” said Epworth Clinical Coordinator Sarah Willard. “She

has recognized that Kyle and Hannah have been there for her and are not abandoning her.”

Sarah said that Mandy’s 1-year-old foster sister can’t wait for Mandy to get home from school each day. When Mandy walks in the door, the toddler’s eyes light up in delight and she calls out her sister’s name.

The couple have reserved a cabin in Tennessee to celebrate Mandy’s graduation this summer. They taught Mandy to drive, and they’ve invited her to continue living with them while pursuing a vocation.

The couple are very grateful they took a chance on the teen. As a bonus, the journey, so healing for Mandy also healed Hannah.

“When I was growing up, I needed grace, I needed forgiveness,” Hannah said. “I think for Mandy, I’ve been the parent I needed at that time in my life.”

If a child was on your doorstep, needing care, would you take them in? Currently hundreds of S.C. children and teens need temporary foster homes. If you’d like to know more, please reach out to our supportive foster care staff by calling (803) 828-7724 or visit www.epworthchildrenshome.org.

Encircling Parents Continued

7-year-old daughter, to enjoy a week at Asbury Hills summer camp last year.

“Some of Ivy’s friend’s parents were talking about sending their kids to multiple summer camps,” Ripley said. “Ivy had never been to an overnight camp, and I couldn’t afford to send her without working even more hours and spending less time with my kids.”

In talking to her Circle of Parents group about her sadness at not being able to easily provide this memory-making experience for Ivy, Ripley was surprised at the wealth of suggestions. The group identified Asbury Hills, the Upstate UMC camp, as a great possibility. But tuition was hundreds of dollars.

“They told me that Asbury Hills had a scholarship program that I could apply for with a United Methodist Church pastor’s recommendation,” Ripley said. “The facilitator of our group asked Pastor Waldrep if he would write the recommendation, and he agreed. Then, when the camp gave Ivy a partial scholarship, the pastor said that the church would be willing fund the other half of the tuition.”

Ripley was overjoyed to be able to give Ivy the opportunity to attend camp at Asbury Hills.

“She had the best time...she has so many stories of her week at camp,” Ripley said. “She loved what she called the dance parties which I think were the worship times, and the pool and she especially loved learning archery; she is really into that now.”

Ripley and Ivy now attend Piedmont UMC regularly. Ivy even stood in front of the congregation to tell church members how much she loved the camp and thank them for making it possible for her to attend. Rev. Waldrep said plans are already underway to make it possible for Ivy to attend Asbury Hills again this coming summer.



Ripley said she is so grateful to have found Circle of Parents and Piedmont UMC.

“I realize that the idea behind most churches is that they want you to feel you can bring your problems to the church,” Ripley said. “But usually, that’s not the first message that is conveyed. Most churches are just more formal than that. The wonderful thing about the Circle of Parents group is that it showed me right away that this was a church that cared about me and my children.”

If your church would like to know more about establishing a Circle of Parents group, please contact Melanie Cannon at (864) 412-4774 or mcannon@epworthsc.org.



Epworth
Children's Home

PO BOX 50466
COLUMBIA SC 29250

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Columbia, SC
Permit No. 424

Invest. Care. *Transform.*

(803) 256-7394

www.epworthchildrenshome.org

Beth Williams
President and CEO

© 2023 Epworth Children's Home

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

In an effort to be good stewards of God's gift, please help maintain current records to help with mailing costs. Make corrections on the label and mail it back to us.

- ☐ Name Change
- ☐ I receive more than one copy
- ☐ Address change
- ☐ I'd like to receive this publication by email
- _____
- ☐ Please remove me from the mailing list

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.

A thoughtful way to honor or remember a friend or loved one is with a gift to Epworth. The honoree or designee will receive a card notifying him or her of your very kind gift. The form below is made available for your use.

My gift is in ☐ Honor or ☐ Memory of:

(Check one. Please print clearly the way you wish all names to be listed.)

Please notify:

(Addresses required for acknowledgments.)

Name

Name

By

Address

City, State, Zip

Please include this form when sending in your donation. Donations may be mailed to PO Box 50466, Columbia SC 29250. Thank you!

Follow us on Social Media



Epworth Children's Home



@epworthchildrenshome



@epworthch



@epworth-children's-home