



Akira is Making a Difference

Akira stood over the stove, frying bacon for herself and her cottage mates. After everyone filled their plates, she placed leftovers in the refrigerator, washed the pan and wiped down the kitchen surfaces. Her cooking and housekeeping skills were honed by years of helping her parents take care of her younger siblings.

It was her last full day at Epworth, and her housemates and cottage staff felt sad at saying goodbye to the sweet-natured, soft-spoken Akira. But her bags were packed and she was looking forward to National Guard training school, and afterward, her first semester of college.

At just 18 years of age, Akira had already served a year in the Guard. With a parent's written permission, she had joined and completed basic training the summer between her junior and senior year. Basic training had taken her away from home for the first time.

"While at basic training, I told someone what had been going on in my home," she said.

Akira told an investigator about the abuse she had experienced since she was 12 years old. She had been repeatedly warned by a family member not to talk about the abuse and was told that doing so would destroy the family she loved so much. So, for years, she remained silent. She controlled what she could in her life by working hard to get good grades, joining the softball team, and participating in ROTC. She endured.

But as she grew older, she learned more about the psychology of child abuse and realized that her younger siblings were also in danger. She realized she needed to expose the abuse to protect her siblings as much as herself.

The investigation that followed revealed that the accused parent had spent time in prison for a similar crime earlier in life. The authorities removed Akira's siblings from the family home to live with foster families. Following basic training, Akira came to live at Epworth.

At Epworth, she finally felt physically safe. Although she missed her siblings terribly, she was relieved to know that they, too,



Faith in Abundance

Summer 2025

A Message from Beth Williams
President and CEO

The message written on the top of the graduation cap of an Epworth resident graduating from high school this spring said it all. Her message read: “I did my best and God did the rest.” This simple sentence makes a profound statement. From a difficult background, this young woman found a new path when she came to live at Epworth. She discovered her own worth and developed confidence in her abilities.

I have seen many other young people who live at Epworth develop this new sense of self-worth and who come to recognize that they have a pathway to happiness and productivity in life. I have also perceived that one of the best things we can help them receive at Epworth is the development of faith in themselves and their own potential. With this comes the confidence and resolve they need to become happy, healthy, and secure young adults.

This burgeoning faith in oneself is not limited to only the youth in Epworth’s on-campus residential programs. In this issue, you will read about a foster parent who was able to adopt the two children in her care and who had enough faith in herself to know that she could take on permanent motherhood even though she is middle-aged. As a foster parent in Epworth’s foster family program, she benefited from direct assistance, in-home support, and in the various training programs in parenting that Epworth provided to her. She gained not only knowledge, but more importantly, faith in herself that she could be a strong, loving parent.

Often when we hear the word “faith,” the first thing we think of is our faith in God. And according to Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, the first definition of faith is “belief and trust in and loyalty to God.” A secondary definition of faith the dictionary provides is “something that is believed especially with strong conviction.” I am happy to see that Epworth’s residents develop not only a strong faith in God, but also a belief “with strong conviction” in themselves and their own potential.

In fact, Epworth’s own mission statement has a major component that includes both of these components of faith. Our mission statement reads: “Epworth’s mission 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.”

That last phrase about faith is what our recent graduate captured on her graduation cap when she mentioned her own hard work and faith in herself but also recognized that God was very involved in her success as well.

In all of our programs and centers at Epworth, we have staff members who have faith in themselves to provide the best, most astute, and most compassionate care for the children and families to whom we provide our services. Across all of Epworth’s offices and centers, staff work together to provide “interdisciplinary services” that reach our children and families to address their specific needs. Epworth brings layers of programming and assistance to help those we serve develop their own sense of self and their own confidence in themselves. The confidence of our staff comes from their inherent faith in God, and in their faith that Epworth’s children and families are developing their own sense of self-worth and potential for goodness in their own lives.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 17:20 that “Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” And in John 7:38, He tells us that “Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” These words of Scripture remind us of the power God gives all of us when we place our faith in Him.

Two famous men of faith, ministers in their own right who lived centuries apart, also remind us of the power of faith. Martin Luther once wrote that “Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times.” Over 400 years later, his namesake, Martin Luther King, Jr., offered another definition of faith in a sermon he delivered. He said, “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” Both of these astute quotes are especially apropos for our recent Epworth graduates and for the other children and families Epworth serves who are taking that first step, even though they can’t see the whole staircase quite yet.

It seems that faith is the theme of this letter to all of you and it’s fitting to remember that just as we place our faith in God, He places faith in all of us to serve Him well and to find the insight and strength to become better servants to those around us and importantly, to ourselves.

Words of Wisdom

from a 2025
Epworth Graduate

Five Epworth teens graduated from high school this year, marking the 13th year in a row that 100% of Epworth seniors graduated with their age group. Here are remarks made by one of the graduates at the Senior Sunday service held at Epworth Memorial United Methodist Church.

First, I just want to say thank you. I want to thank every staff member who pushed me, listened to me, and even the ones who gave me a hard time, because whether y'all knew it or not, it all helped me grow. Every challenge, every correction, every moment taught me something. And I'm better because of it.

I also want to thank everyone I met here. Thank you for being part of my story, whether you encouraged me, challenged me, or just gave me a reason to smile. You mattered to me more than you know.

A year from now, I'll remember this moment, me standing up here, talking to you all – living proof that no situation, no past, and no person can block what God has already set up for us. What He has for you is for you, and nobody can take that away.

Don't let anybody tell you what you can't do. People will try, life will try, but don't listen to that noise. Don't let your current struggle make you lose sight of who is really in control.

What feels heavy right now? One day, it will feel like a pebble when you look back. But you've got to trust God. Keep moving forward, even when your shoulders are tired and your heart is heavy. God's strength kicks in exactly where yours runs out.

Remember Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me."

That's not just a verse – it's a reminder that we are never alone."





Lifelong Connections

Bernice Porter Riggs of Lexington remembers the cold December day in 1951 when her father dropped her and her three sisters off at Epworth. At the time Bernice, nicknamed Bunny, was 10, and her sisters were 7, 8 and 12 years of age.

Until then, the girls had spent most of their lives with their grandparents in a dilapidated rural home. Their mother worked long hours at a textile mill. Their father, a soldier, spent most of his time on base. When at home, his alcoholism created chaos. Bernice remembers it as “awful.” The children had no toys, and the home lacked running water. Most years, they received no gifts for Christmas.

Everything changed when Bernice’s mother asked her father for a divorce. Although her father had physically abused her mother, a judge awarded him sole custody of Bernice and her five siblings. Everyone in the family, including her father, knew he could not care for the children on his own. So, Bernice’s grandfather contacted a Methodist pastor, who helped arrange for Epworth to take the four girls. Two older children went to live with family members.

Bernice was relieved to be away from the turmoil of home. She recalls thinking that the 250 or so children living at Epworth must be rich because they had their own swimming pool. Once settled in a cottage, Bernice made friends easily and threw herself into her schoolwork and chores. She had fun learning to crochet, sew, play chess, swim and cook. She enjoyed and appreciated the church services she attended. Starting in the 8th grade, she worked part-time in the Epworth kitchen, where she “learned the trick to making good biscuits.” Her mom visited Bernice and her sisters regularly.

An Epworth house parent noted in Bernice’s permanent record that she was a polite, positive child and easy to care for.

“Bernice gives us no trouble,” the note said. “She gets along well with the other girls and frequently does them favors.”

Bernice remembers the thrill she and other children felt receiving a silver dollar each Christmas from a local businessman. Along with the other residents, she wrote Christmas wish list letters to Santa that were forwarded to Columbia College so student groups could purchase one or two modest gifts from each child’s list.

“When I was 13, I wrote a letter to Santa asking for a beautiful teal blue sweater and skirt set, knowing full well I wasn’t going to get it,” she said.

To Bernice’s shock, she did receive the outfit of her dreams along with every other item on her list courtesy of a childless Methodist couple from Aiken named Fred and Sarah Ponder. In that era, families could volunteer to ‘sponsor’ one or more children at Epworth. When one of the two girls that the Ponders sponsored left Epworth, Bernice was chosen to take her place.

For Bernice, this was an extraordinary turn of events. From that point on, the Ponders showered her with wonderful Christmas and birthday gifts, a giant chocolate egg at Easter, and new clothes each fall. They took her to their home on every holiday, and Bernice remembers what a talented cook Sarah Ponder was and how at Christmas, the home, filled with scrumptious treats, felt comforting and warm. The Ponders also took her on a two-week vacation every summer.

"The way they treated me made me feel special," Bernice said.

The Ponders nurtured and supported Bernice even after she graduated from high school and enrolled at Winthrop College to become a social worker. To help pay her tuition, Bernice returned to Epworth each summer to assist in the cottages.

After obtaining her bachelor's degree, Bernice worked for 28 years as a child protection case manager and administrator for the South Carolina Department of Social Services. She married and had three children, passing the values she absorbed from Epworth on to them. She made sure they went to church regularly. When her children grew up, one became a college dean, another a high school math teacher, and another, an engineer.

Bernice perfected the cooking skills she learned at Epworth, winning multiple prizes at the State Fair for her culinary creations. She also won prizes for her crochet projects. Once, she won first prize for her delicious biscuits.

Although Bernice visited the Ponders in Aiken every few years following college, she eventually lost touch, which she regretted. But when she was 59 and retired, a former colleague, a social worker employed by Methodist Oaks assisted living facility in Orangeburg, called her out of the blue.

The former colleague told Bernice that by coincidence, she was talking to a couple in their mid-80s at Methodist Oaks and it turned out that they knew Bernice. Their names were Fred and Sarah Ponder.

With no children of their own, the Ponders were struggling to obtain the documents required to apply for Medicaid nursing care for Fred, who was in the early stages of dementia. The social worker wondered if Bernice might have time to lend them a hand.

Bernice could not say yes fast enough.

"We were overjoyed to see one another," she said of her first meeting with the Ponders after many years apart. "They looked older, and Sarah had lost a lot of weight. But they were the same sweet people they always were."

Bernice helped the Ponders with their needs, and from then on, for nearly a decade, she visited them once a week to take them shopping and out to eat.

"On one of our Thursday outings, Fred said something I'll never forget," Bernice said. "He said, back then, all those years ago, the Lord knew you needed us. Now He knows we need you."

Fred was 93 when he passed away, and Sarah was 95.

In her mid-80s herself now, Bernice rarely misses the annual Epworth reunion. This year, she brought along her children and grandchildren. As they do every year, she and her sister Linda led the other alumni in singing the Epworth alma mater.

To honor Bernice Porter Riggs and her sisters on Bernice's 75th birthday, her children established the Porter Sisters Endowed Fund to provide scholarships for Epworth residents. The goal was to ensure that future generations of Epworth residents are able to continue their education. If you would like to discuss ways to honor or remember loved ones, please contact Lisa Fusco at lfusco@epworthsc.org or by phone at (803) 256-7394.

Alumni Reunion 2025





Answered Prayers

Lowcountry resident Qwan Butler, 46, grew up in a large extended family and knew from an early age that she wanted children. In 2020, after moving to a larger home, she applied to become a foster parent with Epworth.

Soon after the first foster child placed in Qwan's home was reunited with her birth family, Epworth placed a playful and affectionate 5-year-old named Brianna with her. Qwan fell in love with Brianna almost from the start.

"She fit right in," she said. "She seemed instantly comfortable, which was unique."

Qwan loved spending time with Brianna, playing with dolls, painting, and playing outside. When Qwan's relatives met Brianna for the first time, they all remarked how much Brianna looked like Qwan had as a child.

As soon as she learned that Brianna had become available for adoption, Qwan started the pre-adoption process. To be approved, applicants must submit a great deal of paperwork, pass background clearances, and sit for in-person interviews. While Qwan was taking the steps needed to qualify, Brianna was sent to a foster family who had already been approved for pre-adoption.

Qwan missed Brianna intensely. She prayed daily, asking God to take care of Brianna and send her the child she was meant to have.

Three months to the day after Brianna left, Qwan received the answer she was looking for. The adoptive family had determined that Brianna was not a good fit for them. Qwan rejoiced when the little girl was returned to her. She reactivated her application

to adopt and was approved. A court procedure made everything final.

For the next year, Qwan took a break from fostering to give Brianna her entire attention and time. Her mom, Gail, who lives with Qwan, cared for Brianna while Qwan worked each day.

Three years later, Qwan started taking in respite (short-term) foster placements and was asked to care for a 3-month-old infant. The baby, it turns out, was Brianna's biological sister. Her name is Ariella.



By then 8 years old, Brianna loved holding and bottle feeding the baby. Qwan did not tell Brianna right away that the infant was her sister, because she didn't want to cause her distress when Ariella was returned to her birth family. She took lots of photos, knowing that the baby might not be with them for long.

"Brianna was such a good big sister from the start," Qwan said. "She was very protective, coming into my room at night to make sure I was awake whenever the baby started to cry."

Within months, Qwan learned that Ariella, too, had been freed for adoption. She applied immediately.

On court day, Qwan was so anxious that Charleston traffic might cause her to be late, she left her home hours early. But Qwan's court procedure went smoothly and her application to adopt Ariella was approved.

Today, as the forever mom to two beautiful little girls, Qwan says her home life is lively, fun, and full of gratitude and love.

"There were some bumps along the way, mostly to do with navigating the foster care and adoption system, but I would tell anyone interested in fostering or adopting that the rewards greatly outweigh any difficulties," Qwan said.

She said Epworth did a wonderful job advocating for her and the children and helping her resolve any issues that came up.

"I always knew they were in my corner," she said.



Continued from cover

were safe. It helped that a caseworker with the South Carolina Department of Social Services was able to create an arrangement for the siblings to spend time together each month.

Still, Akira struggled with the news that the parent who harmed her had been arrested. Even more painful to Akira, her other parent chose to defend and remain in the relationship with the abuser.

She pulled out a photo of herself as a fourth grader, her arms wrapped tight around the parent who later harmed her. She flipped through photos of each of her siblings. Despite frequent moves and financial stress, she said family life had in some ways felt secure and comforting in her younger years. She felt loved. She and her siblings spent every Sunday in church.

"As I grew older, the difference between what was being said on Sundays and what was happening at home made everything even harder to cope with," she said. "I knew it wasn't God's fault, but it made it hard for me to trust God with my troubles."

While the year she spent at Epworth could not erase that traumatic link completely, it made a start by exposing her to faith that is protective and comforting, and one in which actions matter. It offered her hope that one day, she would be able to fully trust God again, she said.

With the help of counselors, house parents, tutors, and faith formation and activities staff, Akira was able to spend her senior year of high school concentrating on

her schoolwork and her future. She took steps to make herself as self-sufficient and independent as possible.

"I don't know that you could find a harder working, more focused, or determined individual," said Christy Mooneyhan, Epworth's Director of Academic Advancement. "Akira recognized that she was capable of being successful despite circumstances and she took advantage of every opportunity that she had."

Akira completed several college classes during her senior year and even earned a professional healthcare certification that gave her the ability to make a living in the short term should it be necessary. She also worked part time. She spent a weekend each month with the National Guard. She applied and was accepted to college.

Akira says that once she earns her bachelor's degree, she hopes to attend graduate school for a health-related degree. The Guard will pay most of her educational expenses.

In the future, Akira may have opportunities to help others who have experienced child abuse.

With Epworth's help, she is moving forward with hope, filling up her life with the kind of accomplishments that will help her feel safe in the world. She is building good memories to help outweigh the bad ones. Day by day, she is creating a strong, successful adult life for herself so she can help her younger sisters and brothers. She has already made a difference in their lives.



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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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