



Steering Teens Toward Better Lives

School bus driver Michelle Harris, 52, said that growing up in New York as the only child of a single working mom, she lived a sheltered and somewhat spoiled life.

"We certainly were not rich, but because I was an only child, I had my own room and I wore nice clothes and enjoyed other little luxuries, and not many kids in our neighborhood could say the same," Michelle said. "From an early age, I gravitated to kids who were needy. I used to get in trouble with my mom because I was always giving my clothes and shoes to children who seemed to need them more than I did."

Today, in her home in Aiken, South Carolina, Michelle is an Epworth foster parent. She currently cares for two teenage girls and also cares for teens as a respite foster. As a

respite provider, she takes in teens for a night or a week or longer, while permanent placement is being found.

Epworth recruits single adults like Michelle, as well as married couples, to serve as foster parents. They must be able to provide children with a stable, safe and loving home. But like all foster agencies, Epworth has more foster families that prefer younger children than families preferring teenagers.

"It's true that sometimes teenagers can be know-it-alls, but often they have been through so much, that they are damaged and angry, and they can take their anger out on the wrong people," Michelle said. "So, to foster teens, you need to be someone with the emotional strength and patience to get past the prickly, defensive layer that teens in foster care often put up at first."



We May Face all Kinds of Storms in Life, but God is Always with Us

Summer 2024

A Message from Beth Williams
President and CEO

So far this autumn season, Americans living in the Southeast have experienced some very harsh storms. Hurricanes and their aftermath have brought loss of life and devastation of property all over the region, with South Carolina receiving a large share of loss of life and destruction of homes and communities. But in the face of these awful losses, we have seen neighbors helping neighbors, rescue organizations from states all over the country coming into the affected areas, bringing supplies, food, tools to help communities rebuild, and most of all, hope to those whose lives have been upended by the massive effects of such severe storms.

We have faith in God to guide these helpers as they bring much-needed support to victims in this autumn of tumultuous weather, just as we have faith in God to guide us through the “storms” that come to us in the course of our everyday lives. In Deuteronomy 31:8, we are told that “The Lord Himself goes before you and will be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” These words of encouragement and support help us not only in turbulent times, but in the events and challenges we encounter in the lives we lead daily. The word of God reminds us of His continual guidance and care.

Epworth has been extremely fortunate over the years to weather various “storms” in its own history. Frustrations that come with the challenges of serving all the children and families who need our help have sometimes confronted us. In those situations, we have depended on our faith, and the support of our faith partners, to help us find solutions to broaden our ability to provide service and programs to all who need

our help. The words from Isaiah 41:10 remind us of God’s own words telling us “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” These words have provided the wisdom and support through the years to help us meet all the new challenges that face many of the children and families in our state.

Epworth has always depended upon and highly appreciated the support of the United Methodist Church in the work that we do across South Carolina. Our own mission statement reads: “The mission of Epworth 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.” The United Methodist Church has helped us make our mission statement a reality for children and families for over a century. As we have expanded our programming and our services through the additions of new centers and initiatives to reach even more of our most vulnerable citizens, our faith partners in Methodist churches across South Carolina have been right there to provide both financial and spiritual support. You have also given us your time and your efforts as volunteers on our campuses and in our statewide endeavors in foster family care, kinship care, counseling centers, and Epworth’s other outreach initiatives across South Carolina.

We ask for the continued and abiding support of the Church and all its congregations. You have become not only our faith partners over the years, but also our financial and volunteer services supporters for generations. We depend upon all of you who are reading this in The Record

to keep our work at Epworth in your hearts and minds as we move forward in expanding our initiatives to increasing numbers of children and families in South Carolina who need our help. We continue to serve neglected children and youth in our state, as well as families who need support in regaining and sustaining a viable and nurturing family unit.

Just as actual storms have affected so many communities in our state this fall, as President and CEO of Epworth, I realize that there will be other kinds of “storms” that will pose challenges to maintaining and sustaining our work over the months and years to come. We ask for your continued financial support for the work we do to change the lives of increasing numbers of children and families. We look forward to working with our faith partners in the Church as we move into the future.

Scripture always provides wisdom and guidance and the message in Matthew: 27-32 offers us both. These verses relate the episode when Jesus offers Peter advice about trusting in God in the face of a storm:

“But Jesus immediately said to them: ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.’

‘Lord, if it’s you’ Peter replied, ‘tell me to come to you on the water.’

‘Come,’ he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. ‘You of little faith,’ he said, ‘why did you doubt?’

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.”

In these turbulent times in which we live, we must remember that the wind can blow and storms may happen but God is still in control. He has the power to calm the winds and command the water and he will bring Epworth through any storm we face. We remain faithful to His word.

Children Had a Ball at Early Intervention Center Fall Festival



More Fall Fun:
The Friends of Epworth
Food Truck Rodeo Fundraiser

**Thank you for
supporting
Christmas with
Epworth 2024!**





Fostering Family Ties

Gina and Albert, a South Carolina couple in their mid-30s, invited Amelia, now 16, into their rural home in 2021.

"Amelia was my cousin's child," Gina said. "Her mom died when she was very young, and her grandmother cared for her as long as she could. When it became too much for the grandmother, we offered to keep Amelia temporarily until something else could be worked out. But Amelia liked living with us and we liked having her here, so we ended up asking her to stay. She's doing great; she's a good kid."

Amelia's grades were all Fs when she arrived at the couple's home, mainly because she had not been attending school regularly. Now she's making the honor roll. Gina and Albert express pride in her accomplishments and have since been granted legal custody of the teen. When Amelia graduates next year, she plans to attend cosmetology school, and once she has saved some money, she hopes to attend college to become a social worker.

"Kinship care has always been a labor of love," said Erinne Rodgers, Senior Director of Growth and Program Development, at Epworth. "It is family helping family by standing in for parents who cannot care for their own children for any number of reasons. Kin caregivers say yes to caring for their relatives without prior notice and oftentimes without additional support."

Rodgers oversees Epworth's newly launched Kinship Navigator program, which supports and locates resources for kinship caregivers in the Midlands and Pee Dee regions of the state. Epworth was one of three charities awarded a grant by the S.C. Department of Social Services to establish a Kinship Navigator program. Two other grant recipients launched

similar services for kinship caregivers in the Lowcountry and Upstate.

These services are greatly needed. According to the S.C. Department of Social Services, more than 134,000 children are currently living with a kinship caregiver in South Carolina. Of those, 109,000 live with grandparents. Thirty percent of the South Carolina grandparents who are kinship caregivers also live with a disability. Fifty-six percent are in the workforce and 26 percent live in poverty.

The term kinship caregiver can refer to a relative by blood, marriage or adoption who is not the child's parent. It can also refer to a family friend, neighbor, a teacher, a pastor – the law classifies them as "fictive kin" – a non-relative who takes in a child when the child's parents cannot meet a child's basic needs, such as food, shelter, education, healthcare, and safety,

Gina and Albert fall into the first category. They were among the first kinship caregivers to contact Epworth's Kinship Navigator staff when the office opened in August. Although they are still raising 16-year-old Amelia, they had just stepped up to the plate for three additional children from their extended family – a 5-month-old, 4-year-old and 7-year-old. Because South Carolina is a kin-first state, the caseworker the couple contacted was happy to place the three children in their care. She also encouraged Gina and Albert to apply for the State of South Carolina's recently passed Kinship Guardianship Assistance Payment Program – or Kin-GAP.

The federally funded Kin-GAP program elevated the legal status of kinship caregivers who agree to long-term guardianship of a child. It also gives kinship caregivers the option to apply to



be formally licensed as kinship foster caregivers so that they can receive case management support and a monthly board stipend like other foster parents. Financial help is important because often, a relative or a family friend would love to care for a child whose parent cannot, but they simply lack the financial resources to do so. While the amount of the Kin-GAP stipend rarely covers all the costs associated with raising a child, it can make a difference in whether a family can afford to take in a child.

Already, according to the S.C. Department of Social Services, the Kin-GAP program is having a significant effect. In 2019, 6 percent of children taken into foster care in South Carolina were placed with kinship caregivers. Today, 22 percent are being placed with kinship caregivers.

Kinship caregivers who take custody of the child informally, as Gina and Albert did with Amelia, are not eligible for the new board subsidy. The couple could have been eligible for the Kin-GAP program for the three younger children because they took custody of the children after the S.C. Department of Social Services became involved. Unfortunately, because Albert served time for a non-violent offense when he was a teen, his criminal record disqualified them. Although Gina said Albert has lived an exemplary life since, social workers have no leeway to approve an exception to the licensing requirements.

No matter, Gina and Albert were determined to find a way to care for the three children. They needed whatever financial support they could find to supplement their \$40,000-a-year household income. They needed clothing, equipment and supplies for the children. They also needed to modify their home from a duplex to a single-family home and add central heating to accommodate the children. Albert did the renovation work, but there remain some expenses the couple cannot afford at this time.

When Gina first met with Epworth Kinship Navigator Family Advocate Allison Clapp, Allison gave her information on applying for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a federal program. Kinship families who are not licensed as foster parents or receiving a board stipend often may qualify for TANF assistance to help with expenses for the children in their care. Gina's TANF application was approved, and the family now receives just under \$400 a month.

"Research confirms that children do best in kinship foster care and that family connections are critical to healthy child development, minimizing trauma, and strengthening a sense of belonging. Kinship care also helps preserve children's cultural identity and relationship to their community."

Michael Leach

*Director of the S.C. Department of Social Services
Speaking at a press conference for passage of
South Carolina's Kin-GAP law last fall.*

It's about a third as much as they would receive as licensed kinship fosters, but it helps.

In addition, Gina shopped for clothing for the three children in Epworth's Katrina's Closet, which is stocked with clothing and shoes, baby and child equipment, hygiene products, and much more. Kinship caregivers enrolled in Epworth's program can select any items they need from the shop and as often as they need them at no cost. The new and very lightly used items are either donated or purchased by generous Epworth supporters.

"Epworth's Kinship Navigation program exists to stand up for caregivers who are standing in the gap," Rodgers said. "Our program is young, but we are learning quickly from our caregivers about what their needs are and what affects them the most. Sometimes this is help with navigating systems, connecting to community partners, or providing tangible emergency resources like a child's bed. All the time it is about lending an ear and offering some emotional support to caregivers whose life drastically changed when they said "yes" to taking a child."

Epworth's program helps kinship caregivers go through the kinship foster care licensing process if they want to go that route. But it also helps kinship caregivers who either do not qualify for licensing or decide not to go through the process. Gina and Albert are thankful for the help the program has provided.

"Allison and Epworth have been so helpful," Gina said. "Allison either helps me get what the children need, or she points me in the direction to get help."

Regardless of the financial pressures they face, Gina said she is deeply grateful to have the children safe in her care. She suffered five miscarriages in years past, and for her and Albert, the four children are a cherished blessing. She is certain that taking the children was the right thing to do. Should the children's parents decide to relinquish custody of the siblings, Gina and Albert have already decided they will apply to adopt them.

To learn more about Epworth's new Kinship Navigation Program, visit <https://www.epworthchildrenshome.org/what/kinship-care/> or call Epworth's Kinship Helpline toll-free at 888-561-2932.

Thank you to the more than 1,300 volunteers who donated 4,500+ hours to Epworth in 2024!



Michelle has fostered both younger children and teens, and she said she actually prefers teenagers. They are less demanding physically, and when treated with respect, most teens can be reasoned with and end up being enjoyable and rewarding company. She said 90 percent of the teenagers she has cared for have been fine once she spent time with them and made them feel comfortable and safe.

"I've found that a lot of these kids are simply scared to death," she said. "They've seen younger kids getting placed with families, but so often, no one seems to want them or is willing to stick out the tough times with them. They are overlooked and misunderstood. Also, I speak very respectfully to teens and set out the ground rules clearly. I think they appreciate that I am fair and that I talk straight with them."

That's not to say that she doesn't have moments when she wonders if she's taken on too much. But Michelle is not above asking Epworth foster care staff to find a respite caregiver when she needs a few days' break from the teens. She said Epworth staff are always happy to find respite care so that she can replenish her spirit.

Michelle said she is often asked how and why she does it. Along with the teens, she also cares for her elderly mom who has early-stage dementia. She continues to hold a job as a school bus driver. In response, she tells them about how she felt as a child, instinctively drawn to children in need.

"In high school, one of my best friends was a girl who was in foster care," Michelle said. "I was very interested in her situation and asked her a lot of questions about it. She told me that her mom had a problem with drugs, so she lived with a foster family. She was a good person and knowing her and learning about her situation made a big impression on me."

As an adult, Michelle raised three children of her own and eventually moved from New York to South Carolina. As a single mom, she struggled financially at times and had to accept subsidized housing to keep a roof over her family. This deepened her compassion for struggling families.

Michelle's first experience as a foster care parent came after her own children were grown. One day out of the blue, she received a phone call from a social worker back in New York who told her that three siblings, the children of Michelle's goddaughter, had been removed from the home and that they were going to have to be split up in different foster homes. The social worker did not want to see that happen and she wondered if Michelle might consider taking the children as a licensed kinship foster parent.

"The social worker said that if I wanted to take them, I had 4 days to return to New York to apply for licensing and get the children," Michelle said. "I also had to stay in New York long enough to establish residency. So, I did it, almost on impulse. I gave up my apartment in South Carolina and went to live for a while with my mom in New York so I could qualify as a kinship foster parent and get the three children."

Eventually, Michelle brought the three children back to South Carolina. For three years, Michelle cared for them, cooking healthy meals and enrolling the boy in school sports, which helped him slim down from an obese 130 pounds at 7 years of age to a healthy weight. The children were about 3 years behind in school, and Michelle made sure they attended classes daily and received the extra help they needed to catch up with their peers. The children's biological mom visited them regularly. At the end of three years, Michelle's goddaughter regained custody of the children, and they returned to New York.

Michelle had grown to love the three children, and she admits it felt devastating at first to lose them. She wasn't sure if she would be able to foster again. But when a job at a children's home brought traumatized children back into her line of sight, she made the decision to try it again. She says her love of young people and her innate desire to help children in need won out. Eventually, she signed up to foster through Epworth.

"I wasn't satisfied with the foster care agency I signed up with at first, so I started calling around," Michele said. "Within two hours on leaving a message, I received a response from Epworth."

Michelle said Epworth foster care staff members have been incredibly supportive and responsive to her concerns and needs as a foster parent.

"Everyone I've dealt with at Epworth has just been wonderful," Michelle said. "Because of them, things run smoothly. They keep me posted and I keep them informed of everything. I feel that I can get help from them whenever I need it. You need that support as a foster parent. It's because of Epworth's support that I've been able to get over any temporarily tough moments to continue fostering teens."

Epworth has launched a campaign to license 100 new foster families by July 31, 2025. We want at least 30 of them to be families open to caring for teens. If you would like to learn more about the rewards and realities of fostering, please call us at (803) 256-7394. Remember, it's a conversation, not a commitment.



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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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