



## An Expanding Circle of Love

**G**rowing up in Tennessee, Brittney Conroy's home life was riddled with divorce, addiction, and mental health struggles. The conflict and confusion left Brittney feeling lonely and different from kids who came from stable homes. The thing that saved her, she said, was her knack for finding good families to latch onto.

"These families, usually my friends' parents, would wrap their arms around me and let me stay at their home a lot and go to church with them," she said. "I would go to church and see families like the Lillard's who fostered over 40 children. I naively thought they were the perfect family and longed for that in my own family. What I didn't realize until later was that was God planting a seed in my heart that would stay with me forever."

That seed bore fruit. Now 41, Brittney and her husband Frank, 42, are the proud adoptive parents of four sisters they first cared for as Epworth foster parents. The sisters are Gia, 5, Renny, 7, Taalyiah, 18, and Monica, 20. The girls joined the

Conroy's three biological children – Crosby, 6, Sully, 10, and Cash, 14 – to create the circle of love that is their family today. Their home is lively and chaotic in a good way, and all the children are thriving.

The couple overcame a few obstacles in their quest to create their big, beautiful family.

"Frank is from a large Irish Catholic family," Brittney said. "When we were dating, I told him that I wanted to be a foster parent, and he said I was crazy and that he would never do that."

Famous last words. After they were married, they had their three sons, and eventually Frank's job as a U.S. Marshall brought them to Columbia. They wanted more children, but the complications Brittney had suffered with her three pregnancies led them to revisit the foster care topic in 2020 when their youngest son was six months old. By this time, Frank had changed his perspective and was on board 100 percent.



# Putting God's Word Into Practice

**Fall 2025**

A Message from Beth Williams  
*President and CEO*

If you go outside on one of these early autumn nights, there is one sound you will probably hear that is the same nighttime sound that would have been heard in prehistoric times. One living creature filled the night with its songs alongside brontosaurus and is still here today making the same music. Scientists tell us that the common cricket has been around an extremely long time without changing the sounds of its chirp at all. Some things exist and thrive throughout time.

I am happy to say that Epworth is one of those things that has indeed thrived through time. For over a century since its establishment in 1896, Epworth has remained steadfast in its mission to serve children and families who have been abused, neglected, or abandoned. Now in 2025, 129 years after Epworth began, it has expanded its services to reach more children and families than ever, with regional offices all over South Carolina, serving communities statewide.

Like the steadfastness of the cricket's chirp, Epworth's core mission is the same as it was in 1896—to provide stability, safety, a loving environment, and opportunities for enrichment and success to children and their families. This tradition of growth and increased capacity for programming and service reached another milestone in September 2025 when the Family Resource Center opened on Epworth's Trenholm Road campus in Columbia to serve the citizens of Richland County. For many years, Epworth has realized that often families on the brink of dissolution and collapse can be rescued from this brink with direct hands-on assistance.

Epworth's Family Resource Center provides a myriad of services that enable families to receive the resources, assistance, and support they need to stabilize the lives of both children and their parents.

A close working partner with Epworth, the South Carolina Department of Social Services will co-locate some of its services within the Family Resource Center to offer services to families like WIC (the Women's Infants and Children Nutrition Program) and SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). Families can receive assistance with these programs at the same time and in the same place they receive support and help from Epworth's staff.

Epworth staff members will work with families who are facing immediate financial crisis with assistance in paying utility bills to keep their homes intact; transportation to and from medical appointments and other essential places they need to visit, assistance with repairs in their houses that cause safety and security concerns, and addressing other essential needs like this that will give families stability in challenging times. Often families in crisis need legal assistance to handle custody issues or other ramifications of their situations. Epworth's staff will assist in linking families with these legal services.

The Family Resource Center also serves as a repository of supplies that fill crucial family needs. The Center provides a "resource closet" in which families can find baby furniture, car seats, clothing, supplies for health and hygiene, food items, and other pertinent supplies needed for day-to-day living at no cost to them.

The Family Resource Center houses a type of education center for families, providing referrals to mental health counseling centers, job training classes, parenting classes and support groups, and educational sessions for life skills development and wellness. The Center's mission is like Epworth's—the provision of programs and services that allow children and families who have been abused, neglected, or minimized to receive the help and guidance they need to lead successful, healthy, and happy lives.

Recent studies in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services indicate that families who receive help to stabilize their lives and homes in physical, mental, and emotional capacities have a 60%



greater chance of future stabilization and success than do families for whom there is no intervening help or aid (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024). Epworth is proud of the new Family Resource Center that will provide these intervening, realistic, and much-needed initiatives to assist families in crisis.

We all remember the scripture from our childhoods when Jesus said, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you invited me in; I needed clothes and you clothed me; I was sick and you took me in; I was in prison and you came to visit me. Truly I tell you whatever you did for one the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

Those of us who work at Epworth, as well as our volunteers, various professionals in our community who help provide services, churches and their members, and other organizations, agencies, and individuals who are partners with Epworth, will have the opportunity to put Jesus’s words into practice everyday in the new Epworth Family Resource Center. It is truly a place where God’s work and God’s word can be put into action.



## Fall Fun!

**T**he Epworth Early Intervention Center Preschool held its annual fall festival recently, and a great time was had by all! The preschool and Epworth’s In-Home Early Intervention services help children ages 1-5, with developmental delays or disabilities, get ready to succeed in kindergarten and elementary school.



# New Beginnings

**T**he number of mothers in South Carolina who have a substance use problem and give birth while under the influence of illegal substances is significant. The South Carolina Department of Social Services recorded nearly 1,600 reports of substance-affected newborns in 2022, the last year for which statistics are available. Not only can this possibly affect the health of a mother and child, it can also pose serious legal issues for the mom.

Between June 2022 and June 2023, the legal advocacy group Pregnancy Justice documented over 200 criminal charges against pregnant women in 12 states, with South Carolina being one of the six states with the majority of these cases. Most cases concerned use of illegal substances during pregnancies.

In 2023 *The Post and Courier* reviewed nearly 200 cases between 2006 and 2021 where South Carolina women were charged with unlawful neglect of a child or homicide by child abuse for alleged perinatal drug use. South Carolina is noted to have one of the highest rates in the nation for this problem.

But not all the mothers and babies connected to these statistics end up facing misfortune. Serena, a young woman who was directed by the S.C. Department of Social Services to Epworth's Family Care Center for support and help, is a resounding success story.

The 30-year-old mom from Rhode Island gave birth to a baby girl in a Columbia hospital in April. Baby Janie sported a headful of dark hair and weighed just over 7 pounds. Serena had gone into early labor while on a visit to see her own mother in South Carolina.

When a routine blood test at the hospital detected trace amounts of an illegal drug, a hospital social worker and a case worker from the S.C. Department of Social Services informed Serena she would not be allowed to leave the hospital or the state of South Carolina right away with her baby. Instead, the baby would go into temporary foster care while Serena got help. Distraught, Serena asked if there was anything she could do to keep her child with her.

"There might be one option," the hospital social worker said.

She said that if there was a vacancy and Serena was willing, she could enroll in Epworth's six-month residential Family Care Center program.

"When she told me about the program, I couldn't believe it," Serena said. "There's nothing like that where I'm from."

Epworth's Family Care Center allows single moms who are recovering from substance use or addiction to reside in a supportive Epworth cottage with their children. Staff members help care for the children while the moms complete substance abuse counseling and take courses in parenting, job readiness, and financial management. The goal is to give mothers in recovery



the kind of intense support and training that can help them succeed.

The social worker contacted Epworth and helped Serena apply. She felt utter relief when she and her baby were accepted into the program.

Serena arranged for her two older children, ages 10 and 12, to reside with a friend in Rhode Island while she completed Epworth's program. She appreciated the helpful, kind manner of Epworth's staff and the clean and comfortable home-like environment. Early in her stay, she made the decision to apply herself wholeheartedly to the program.

"Although I was upset about what happened at first, I realized that this program was something that could help me take my life and my children's lives in a better direction," she said.

Among other goals, Serena used her time at the Family Care Center to study for a General Equivalency Degree (GED). She said she has always regretted dropping out of high school at 16.

That is when her life spiraled out of control, Serena said. She became homeless, and then, pregnant. A friend's mom took her in, but two years later, she became

pregnant a second time. At 20, with two young children, she took a job at a store, where she eventually worked her way into a management position. She worked hard to provide the children with a stable home.

As Serena watched her children grow up and excel in school, her lack of a high school diploma bothered her even more. Although she had once imagined going to college, her adult responsibilities made that dream seem unlikely.

Her time at Epworth gave her a sense of hope that she could move forward in life.

“I don’t think I could have done this at 21, but I’m ready for it now,” she said. “I’m learning how to manage my anxiety and take care of myself, and all of this is changing my life.”

Serena also said the difficulties she faced as a young person led her to stray from the religious grounding of her childhood even though one of her fondest memories is that of her beloved grandfather praying for her.

“He could not read or write, but he knew the Bible from front to back from listening in church and watching religious programs on TV,” she said. “I loved him so much.”

Serena said she wants to cultivate that same kind of unwavering belief in God. She sees God’s hand in the twist of fate that led her to Epworth.

At the Family Care Center, in addition to completing the required courses and trainings and preparing for her GED Serena worked full-time to help support her daughters and save money for the future.

“I’m thinking this was meant to be,” she said. “I could have lost my baby girl! Instead, the social workers helped me get into this program, and everyone with Epworth has been wonderful.”

When she graduated from the program Epworth staff and the other residents honored Serena with a graduation luncheon. She cried as she expressed how much the love and kindness of Epworth staff and Family Care Center program has meant to her and her children.

## Broken Heart, Loving Spirit

**H**er friends remember Florence native Cindy Stone Garcia as personable, highly intelligent, a great cook, frugal, and organized. They recall her grace and radiant smile. Now, in her passing, they will also know her as a generous benefactor to Epworth, someone who truly made a difference in the lives of others.

Before she passed away in March of this year, Cindy bequeathed one-third of her estate to support Epworth’s crucial work protecting and nurturing children, teens, and young adults. She had never donated to Epworth before but learned all about Epworth’s work in the months leading up to her death through two Methodist friends, Brian Lee and Terry Campbell.

Dennis Malatek, another friend and a financial consultant, spent hours listening to Cindy’s wishes and answering her questions.

“Cindy was just a wonderful person, and she wanted the wealth that she and her late husband Mark had saved to go to help children and teens,” Malatek said.

Both Cindy and Mark were career Information Technology professionals. They met through their jobs, in fact. A graduate of Winthrop University, Cindy worked for decades at SCANA. That is where she met Mark, who worked for Blue Cross Blue Shield of South Carolina and came to SCANA in the 1980s to perform consulting work.

After the couple were married, they spent almost all their time outside of work with one another. They never had children but doted on a succession of West Highland Terriers. They loved to travel and spent many vacations taking cruises to different countries.

“Mark would decide on the place, and Cindy would take care of the details,” Malatek said. “He was the one who loved to go out and do things, and he pulled Cindy out of her shell to accompany him. They stayed very active.”

When Mark retired in 2022, the Garcias were planning to take another cruise. But first, Mark, an avid golfer, was to take a bucket list trip with friends to play the St. Andrews golf course in Scotland. Tragically, he passed away in his sleep the night before he was to fly out to Scotland, and Cindy found herself alone for the first time in 33 years.

Malatek said the sudden loss shattered Cindy, who was in her seventies at the time.

“Cindy had a hard time when Mark passed away,” Malatek said. “Her neighbors and friends rallied around her, but the loss was devastating for her.”

Eventually, encouraged by those same friends and neighbors, Cindy joined a book club, a ladies lunch club, and a dance exercise class. But within a year, two falls that left her with broken bones seemed to also break her spirit. Cindy’s health declined and she moved to an assisted living facility in 2023. She passed away in March of this year. Malatek said the medical cause was sepsis, but he suspects the true cause was a broken heart.

Yet however despondent she felt over the loss of her beloved husband, Cindy never lost her kind, compassionate spirit. The resources she bequeathed to Epworth will nurture children who have been abused, neglected and traumatized. They will also give teens who have aged out of foster care a stable home so they can concentrate on a college or vocational education.

In these ways, Cindy’s generous legacy will carry the couple’s loving spirits far into the future.

*If you would like to learn more about including Epworth in your estate plan or honoring a loved one with a gift to Epworth, please contact Lisa Fusco at [lfusco@epworthsc.org](mailto:lfusco@epworthsc.org) or by phone at (803) 256-7394.*





## An Unexpected Outcome

**E**vie was 16 when she and her siblings were removed from their Lowcountry home. At her age, she should have been a junior, but she was listed as a 9th grader in school records due to a lack of credits. She had failed many of her high school classes due to chronic absences and failure to complete assignments.

She recalls spending many school days sleeping in or working in her mom's business.

"I have been working since I was 8 years old," she said with quiet pride.

Evie said she had made up her mind that she would not bother earning a high school diploma. She figured that since neither of her parents had earned a diploma, and they were making a living, she could do the same. She said her chronic absences were not strictly her mom's fault. At one point, after being warned by school authorities of the legal consequences of truancy, her mom tried to ensure Evie went to school by dropping her off by car each day instead of allowing her to walk.

"But I would go in the front door and out through a back door and walk home while my mom was at work," she said.

One day when Evie was skipping school along with her sister, there was a knock at the door.

"It was two ladies who came to see if we were alright," she said. "They were from DSS."

The school had called in S.C. Department of Social Services caseworkers after teachers noticed bruising all over the arms and legs of Evie's younger siblings. The children told the caseworkers they had hurt themselves in accidents.

But abuse was suspected. Evie later said that her mom had inflicted the bruises in anger over misbehavior, believing in the adage, "spare the rod, spoil the child."

The case of Evie and her siblings is sadly not unusual. In 2024, the South Carolina Department of Social Services investigated over 4,874 different cases of abuse and neglect involving 11,049 children in households across the state (SC Department of Social Services Investigative Services Dashboard).

Evie and her younger siblings were brought to live at Epworth and an investigation was launched. Their mom was charged with and convicted of child neglect and is serving a sentence in prison. Although Evie was scared when she and her siblings were relocated, she settled into Epworth life with ease.

"When Evie first came to Epworth, she was withdrawn, but she did not rebel against going to a new school," said Christy Mooneyhan, Epworth's Director of Academics. "In fact, she went to school every day and worked hard. She was very engaged in the after-school tutoring we offered and in addition, she took online classes in the summer in to get herself on track to graduate with her age group."

Once Evie pulled her grades up to Bs and As, she got a job on campus and worked extremely hard.

"She is focused and determined," said Mrs. Mooneyhan. "She very much looks out for her younger siblings and enjoys helping them financially, giving them money so they can buy little things they want. The siblings have a very strong bond."

In May, Evie graduated from high school, the first person in her family to do so. Over the summer, she moved out of Epworth's residential cottages into Epworth's supportive Independent Living Center for young adults who have aged out of foster care. There, she is pursuing a business degree from Midlands Technical College and hopes to one day become a realtor.

Mrs. Mooneyhan said that Evie is a good example of how a person can take a bad situation in life and work hard to make a better future for themselves.

"It would have been easy for her to give up because she was so behind in school and resentful because she had not had the support she needed," she said, "But she worked extremely hard and in doing so, took the first big step toward a fulfilling, self-sufficient adult life."

Evie said she could not have predicted how things would turn out for her, but she is grateful Epworth encouraged her and through tutoring helped her to catch up in school. She still misses her mom, but she is optimistic about the future. To other young people facing similar challenges, she simply says, "It gets better."

"I asked God to send me signs if He really wanted foster care to be a part of our life and I couldn't deny the clear messages," Frank said.

After hearing good things about Epworth, the couple applied to become foster parents. Once their foster care license was approved, the Conroy's were asked to take in then 11-month-old Gia and 2-year-old Renny. The sisters were part of a family of 9 children from a home where there were complicated problems.

"Gia was so tiny, she almost looked like a newborn," Brittney recalled. "She was an angel. Renny was terrified and did not talk. She screamed. She screamed for months, in fact. We soon realized she had speech delays and cognitive issues."

Fortunately, Brittney's job as an emergency pediatric nurse allowed her to stay at home with the children most of the time. She traveled to California once a month to work multiple hospital shifts over a long weekend, earning as much as she would in a full-time nursing job. Frank stayed home with the children on Brittney's work weekend.

Brittney began lining up the therapeutic services the girls needed. She became friends with the foster parents who cared for the girls' older siblings and arranged playdates.

"The girls also had two teenage sisters living at Epworth – Taalyiah and Monica – and in time I arranged for Gia and Renny to visit them," she said. "After the first sibling visit I knew I had to meet them. Gia was turning one and both girls came home with an armload of gifts. I was told the sisters saved their Epworth allowance to purchase them."



Brittney and Frank started picking the teens up on weekends and holidays to spend time at the Conroy home with their sisters.

"They had never been on holidays, and we took them to Carowinds, the beach, and other fun places," she said. "Eventually, they made it clear that they would like to live with us too. Frank and I prayed and ultimately arranged for them to come live with us as fosters."

Taliyah was a helpful child from the start. But after a honeymoon period, older teen Monica rebelled over rules. Epworth staff helped Brittney navigate the challenges of this period and even helped arrange for Monica to attend a high school that was a better fit.

About 18 months after the children came to live with the Conroys, a judge ordered that all the children were to be immediately returned to their parents with no transitional period. The parents seemed to have improved their living conditions and circumstances. But once back in her old environment, Taalyiah used a cell phone to record incidences that showed that in fact little had changed. After 12 weeks, the children came back to the Conroys' home.

Soon, the biological parents voluntarily relinquished parental rights of the teens, and the Conroys applied for full custody of the younger siblings. Their adoption of the four girls went through in March of this year. It was a joyful day, Brittney said.

"As soon as Taalyiah received her new birth certificate, she went the very next day to have her name on her driver's license changed to Conroy," she said.

Today, Monica is in her junior year at the University of South Carolina, where she is majoring in international business. Fun, outgoing, determined, and very bright, Monica dreams of traveling the world while working in business.

Kind, helpful Taalyiah is in her senior year of high school.

"She came to us at 14 and we did not think that college would ever have been on the horizon for her," Brittney said. "But she has maintained a 3.6 GPA in high school and has been accepted to attend Spartanburg Methodist College next year."

Today Renny, 7, is in the first grade. The child who could do nothing but scream the first few months is now known for something different.

"She is our calm leader of the pack when it comes to the three littles that we call the triplets," Brittney said. "She's come so far and brings us all together with her kindness. She loves music, dancing, tumbling, and all things girly."

Gia is now 5 and in kindergarten. Brittney describes her as "the typical baby of the family...sweet, nosy, bossy at times, very girly." She said Gia loves dancing, singing, pink, and purple.

The Conroy boys are also thriving. Six-year-old Crosby is in kindergarten.

"Mom is his favorite person, but second to that is Renny," Brittney said.

Sully, 10, is in the fifth grade and Cash, 14, is in the eighth grade. Both boys love singing and theatre.

Sadly, Brittney's mother and both older brothers passed over the last few years. The most recent death happened this past July. Brittney admits that juggling all the responsibilities of mothering seven children while she grieved has not been easy.

"But I believe God told us it was going to be like this, because many stories in the Bible are of people whose lives are pretty hard and messed up," she said. "It hasn't been easy, but what great things are? I think that God put us on earth to live an extraordinary life and that is a hard life. By accepting this, you open yourself up to so much more."

*Were you made for more? Many South Carolina children need loving foster parents. To learn more about fostering, contact Epworth foster care staff at (803) 256-7394.*



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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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