

# **Buckner brings hope to at-risk East Texas families**

December 16, 2015

LONGVIEW—Imagine living in a run-down apartment complex without air conditioning in the middle of a muggy East Texas summer. You want a job in order to move out of the apartment complex, but you can't afford child care without a job.

Many Longview residents face this reality. And thousands more families there live below the poverty line without education, jobs or resources.

Despite bleak circumstances, Buckner International offers a ray of hope.

Project HOPES—Healthy Outcomes through Prevention and Early Support—is a preventive and early-intervention federal grant from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. It allows Buckner and other social services agencies to educate at-risk families about parenting and child development.

**Initial doubts overcome**



Shi Edwards' son, Jermiah, 3, plays with other children in the Project HOPES program during a retreat at Camp Buckner in Burnet this past summer. Shi Edwards has been involved in nearly every program Buckner Longview offers, including Jobs For Life, Fit Life, and Faith and Finances, but she wasn't so sure about Project HOPES. As a busy single mother of two young boys, Trent and Jermiah, she just wasn't sure she had the time or energy to be successful.

She recalled when a Buckner caseworker said: "Hey, my friend, Travelle, is going to be one of the parent-educators. Just meet with her once and see how it goes."

She agreed to a meeting but told the caseworker, "If I don't like her, I'm going to call you back!"

Edwards credited the parent-educator, Travelle Robinson, with making a significant difference in her life.

"Honestly, if it weren't for Travelle, I wouldn't have stayed in the program, and I wouldn't have been successful," she said.

### **'Running out of options'**

Several years ago, Edwards moved back to Longview from Dallas, into a

low-income apartment complex. Her youngest son about to turn 1.

“It was either we move here or we end up homeless, because we were running out of options,” Edwards said. “I wasn’t working. I wasn’t going to school. Things were just a mess. I was doing really bad.”

Her family helped for awhile, but eventually they told her they couldn’t help any longer.

She found out about Buckner through its summer feeding program at an apartment complex and built relationships with some of the staff. From there, Family Hope Center Director Jane Ann Crowson invited her to attend a Fit Life class to learn about healthy living and healthy eating.

When she completed that program, she decided to see what else Buckner had to offer. Turns out, it was a lot.

“I actually got a job because of Buckner’s help,” Edwards said. “So, without it, I would probably still be struggling. Without a doubt, I think I would still be there. I might have gotten a job, but it wouldn’t have been one that was good enough to get me and my kids away from there.”

### **Connect at-risk families to parent education**

Gregg County, where Longview is the county seat, has one of the highest rates of reported child abuse in Texas, said Project HOPES Program Director Michelle Heflin.

Buckner Project HOPES is a free program that connects at-risk families to in-home parent education. Parent educators are the key to the whole program. They are adults, most parents themselves, who have been certified in a nationally recognized course called Parents as Teachers. The parent educator provides support and education for the parent while helping children with school readiness.

“What’s really helpful for families is that we come in and are able to provide assessments and screening for their children. So, if there are any early health risks or any other issues that are going on, we can help address those,” Heflin said. “We are able then to help connect resources for those issues the family needs to address more.”

All the families in the program start out with eight foundational visits. Those visits cover topics like child development and social and emotional skills. After the eighth visit, the parent educator tailors the home visit to whatever the family and child need, such as sleep schedules, routines and transitions.

### **Experience normal child development**

All of the subjects are prime opportunities for children to experience normal child development.

“Normal child development can often be frustrating for parents, like when a child is having a meltdown in the store or getting upset about not getting a specific toy,” Heflin said.

“But being able to recognize a child’s need and then being able to respond with, ‘Thank you for telling me that you’re wanting this toy,’ or ‘Thank you for verbally telling me that you’re tired and sleepy,’ can be very empowering for parents.

“The parent is then able to respond to the child’s need and not get caught up on the feeling of the child is purposefully trying to upset the parent in the store.”

Each educator has about 18 to 20 families in his or her caseload. In addition to the monthly home visits, there’s a monthly group connection—a time for all the families in HOPES to come together and enjoy a meal together. They can network with each other and build camaraderie.

“When you’re raising your children, it just feels so great to be able to normalize some of the challenges that arise,” Heflin said.

### **Making progress**

Since entering the program, Edwards found a job working for a local fast-food restaurant, got married and has seen huge changes in her relationship with her sons. The parent educator who worked with her noted her progress.

“Shi has always been driven,” Robinson said. “She’s always had that determination. She’s always said, ‘Oh, I’m going to provide.’ But I’ve seen more of a mom side come out with her children.”

Robinson has worked with the family to develop motor skills using objects in the Edwards’ home, which is a key strategy of Project HOPES.

“We’re not bringing in expensive toys that families can’t afford,” Heflin said. “We’re showing them how to use objects in their homes to help teach their children.”

Edwards also started reading more to her sons—a cornerstone of the program. She has seen many changes in her sons’ behavior, in part because they moved out of the apartment complex where they lived previously.

“I go back and volunteer there now once a week,” she said. “I think it’s really helpful, because most of the people who were living out there when I was living out there, the ones who wanted to make changes in their lives, they’ve gotten jobs and have started moving away. I think it helps to show others they can succeed, too.”