

Buckner helps Lufkin single mom overcome obstacles

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LUFKIN—Nobody who knew Tiffany Pangarakis doubted her determination. Smart and hardworking, she could succeed at anything she put her mind to, they agreed. Nothing could stop her, they thought.

But life sure tried.

Her father died when she was 15, and her mother died two years later. She was legally declared an adult and was on her own. She struggled to get by but enroll in Angelina College in Lufkin. Then she became involved in what she now calls “a bad relationship.” Shortly after, her daughter, Kalista, was born.

Setbacks and desperation

School would have to wait, she thought. Her daughter was what was most important. She started working full-time, driving 100 miles round-trip to make a living.

As if Pangarakis didn't have enough to balance, Kalista suffered through health issues that required numerous doctor visits, forcing her mother to miss work one too many times. She lost her job. And she was desperate.

“I was a nervous wreck,” she said. “I didn't know what to do. I had a daughter. I didn't have a job. I had no hope.”

Hope rediscovered at Buckner Family Pathways

An uncle told her about Buckner Family Pathways in Lufkin, a ministry that empowers and strengthens vulnerable single-parent families by giving them

a secure place to live, help with child care and assistance in gaining life skills while parents work to reach their higher education goals.

The solid foundation Buckner offered provided the footing Pangarakis needed to take the steps to fulfill her potential. She quickly bonded with Buckner staff members who started out as professional caseworkers, turned into mentors and became what she desperately missed—family.

“They’ve really become a family to us,” she said. “My daughter’s gotten to grow up here. We came just before her second birthday. This has become her family.”

When Pangarakis experiences difficult times, Buckner staff members know just what to say to keep her moving forward. Once when she and Kalista were sick, staff members brought them homemade soup. On other days, she receives texts saying staff members are praying for her. Kalista has bonded with the other children on campus. She plays with them daily, her giggles filling her home.

“Seeing how these ladies work and seeing the difference they’ve made in my life, they’ve inspired me to want to work in social work. To be able to give back would be such a blessing,” Pangarakis said.

Demonstrating determination

Family Pathways in Lufkin Director Holly Valentine is amazed by Pangarakis’ ability and determination.

“She is a very smart young woman,” Valentine said. “She’s probably the only person I know who can function on no sleep and write a 14- to 15-page paper in a few hours and get a 98 on it. She’s done that again and again.”

Pangarakis completed an associate’s degree and then went on to work on her bachelor’s degree in social work at Stephen F. Austin State University.

She received some unexpected help one day when she was thinking about quitting school. As she walked through the social work building at the university just as she'd done hundreds of times, she noticed a plaque she hadn't seen before.

"This name just jumped out at me," she said. "It was my mom's name. It was her signature from the honor society in 1993 when she had graduated. To me, it was God telling me: 'Your mom sees you and is proud of you. Keep going.'"

She completed work on her bachelor's degree and graduated from the university in December. Now she has her choice of jobs to support her daughter as she begins her postgraduate work.

In preparing for the Family Pathways graduation ceremony the day before college graduation, Valentine struggled to find words to express adequately how she feels about Pangarakis.

"She's such a dynamo," Valentine said, unsuccessfully fighting back tears. "She's such a smart lady. I'm so proud of all she's accomplished."