



KARTER'S STORY

THERAPUETIC FOSTER CARE

When 4-year-old Karter was placed in the care of Embrace Alabama Kids, he found something he'd never had before: love.

His parents had neglected and failed him so badly that he was removed from their home. He was placed with a family friend, who was supposed to provide a safe place. In reality, it was anything but.

Karter was abused and had severe burns on his arms from being placed in scalding water. He was shaken to the point that he had a stroke, which caused a serious brain injury. As a result, he can no longer talk, walk, control his movements, eat or see.

Although this precious boy started his life in a very dark place and will likely never see again, he finally has light in his life. After being placed in our Therapeutic Foster Care with Enhanced Services program because of his medical needs, Karter lives with foster parents who have cared for and adopted another child with Shaken Baby Syndrome. They have opened their hearts to Karter, as well.

In addition to seeing a team of doctors regularly, Karter receives physical and occupational therapy. He can stand for a few minutes at a time with the help of a specialized device to support him, and he is beginning to sit up on his own. His burns have healed following skin grafts, and his emotional scars are healing, as well.

Although Karter startles easily, he immediately calms down when he hears the voices of his foster parents, who meet his every need and refuse to leave his side whenever he's in the hospital. For the first time, Karter can trust those who promise to keep him safe.

That's why we are so incredibly grateful to the foster parents and families who serve our foster children. Any kind of fostering requires love, empathy, perseverance and sacrifice, but providing the intensive care a child with special needs requires takes an even greater level of commitment.

Kids in Therapeutic Foster Care with Enhanced Services have specific medical, physical or other needs which require additional training and support for the child and family caring for the child. There are countless doctor visits, hospital stays, as well as therapy and counseling sessions, and meetings with school officials.

KARTER'S STORY CONTINUED

THERAPUETIC FOSTER CARE

But time and again, God has provided just the right people who are willing to do whatever it takes to ensure that His children are loved, protected, nurtured and equipped to reach their full potential.

Karter's journey will never be easy. He will most likely be on a feeding tube and be non-verbal for the rest of his life. But he will know, thanks to Embrace Alabama Kids, that love truly is the greatest of all things. And as 1 Corinthians 13:7 reminds us, love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."



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TALIA'S STORY

THERAPUETIC FOSTER CARE

As a deaf 4-year old, imagine the feeling of...being removed from your home...not being able to communicate even through sign language...not receiving the medical care you need...constantly moving between foster homes...

That was Talia's reality when she first came to Embrace Alabama Kids. She was developmentally delayed, she'd been diagnosed with ADHD, and her only means of communication was a few hand signals she made up herself. Once Talia was in Embrace's care, our amazing staff was determined to ensure that she finally got the help and intervention services she deserved.

Talia's Foster Care Journey with Embrace included:

- 1.Placing her with a loving and nurturing foster family.
- 2.Helping enroll her in an early intervention program at the Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind.
- 3.Learning sign language along with Talia and her foster parents, so we could all communicate with each other.

Talia receives occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech therapy, and although she was fitted for hearing aids, she prefers to sign.

Any kind of fostering requires love, empathy, perseverance and sacrifice, but providing intensive care for a child with special needs requires an even greater level of commitment. That's why we are incredibly grateful to the foster parents and families who serve our foster children.

Thanks to the love and care Talia received, she has blossomed. She's a fast learner, and since she is now able to communicate, she no longer has anger issues that caused her to act out. As a result, she has mostly stopped negative behaviors like hitting and throwing items. She also performs age-appropriate chores such as putting away her clothes.

In addition, Talia's mother was able to prove she was wrongly convicted and was released from prison. She began working with DHR in hopes of regaining custody, and she took parenting classes to better provide a safe and loving home for her and Talia. She also learned sign language and other skills necessary to meet all of Talia's needs.

TALIA'S STORY CONTINUED

THERAPUETIC FOSTER CARE

After several months of supervised visits and eventually overnight visits, Talia was successfully reunited with her mother. Her journey of healing and hope, which started at Embrace Alabama Kids, finally led her home.

At Embrace Alabama Kids, the kids we care for face different disabilities, social challenges or emotional and behavioral issues. There is a need for countless medical appointments, therapies and school meetings, but we've seen God consistently provide dedicated people who go above and beyond to ensure these children are loved, protected, nurtured and equipped to reach their full potential.



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LISA'S STORY

MARY ELLEN'S HEARTH

When Lisa first came to Mary Ellen's Hearth (MEH), a ministry of Embrace Alabama Kids, she carried the weight of financial burdens and the uncertainty of her future. With a credit score of 400, the future seemed to be daunting. But she persevered.

With strong will, faith and the support of the Mary Ellen's Hearth community, she started working hard to achieve financial freedom.

In just one year, she reached goals she thought would be impossible. Lisa's credit score went up by 180 points, reaching 580. Recently, she paid off her last debt, liberating herself from the obstacles that once held her back. She saved \$6,000 and used half of it to pay off her remaining debts.

But Lisa's journey is not just about numbers on a credit report. It's about the daily victories, both big and small, that show her strength and determination. She balances being a mom while studying in college and working full-time. She's truly a woman of great perseverance.

Next, her goal is to save \$3,000 to buy a car, one she also considers a symbol of financial freedom.

Mary Ellen's Hearth helps women and children regain independence by helping families obtain stability through housing, education and one-on-one care. The ultimate goal is to help them transition to an independent and safe environment where mothers and their children are able to live successful, purpose-filled lives.

Lisa's story is a powerful reminder that great things can happen through our faith and can-do attitude, and with the right support. And we're honored and blessed to be part of Lisa's journey as God continues to pave the way toward a brighter future for her and her daughter.



DAVID'S STORY

THE SETTLEMENT

David was a teenager when he found the structure and stability he needed at The Settlement, an Embrace Alabama Kids group home for teenage boys in South Alabama. He went to the local high school, played sports, attended prom and earned his diploma. Most importantly, though, he formed deep ties to the staff, whom he trusted, respected and grew to love.

After graduation, David joined the military, and the Embrace staff sent him care packages - cookies, encouraging notes and small gifts - during his deployment. They prayed for him and kept in touch, and those relationships continue to this day.

One Embrace staff member, who has mentored David throughout those years, made a promise to him back when he was in high school: if he earned his bachelor's degree, she would buy him a pair of cowboy boots when he graduated. After his high school graduation, they met at Sikes and Kohn Country Mall to pick up some essentials, and David fell in love with a pair of cowboy boots. Recently, David texted her, saying, "I'm going to take you up on that promise you made me back in 2016." His mentor said, "This was one promise I was happy I made and delighted to keep."

The support, lessons and skills he learned at The Settlement, coupled with the discipline, teamwork and loyalty he found in the Army, helped shape him into the person he wanted to be. After falling in love and getting married, David recently earned an associate degree in management and is now pursuing a bachelor's degree, with plans to graduate in early 2025.

One skill David learned from The Settlement, among others, was nurturing strong relationships with other teen boys and Embrace staff members. For David, the gesture of receiving the cowboy boots is one he'll never forget. Many promises made to him early in life were never fulfilled, making this act of keeping a promise especially meaningful.

David's new boots aren't just boots - they are a symbol of the promises we commit to and the importance of embracing children exactly where they are, honoring the trust and connections we build with them.



JEREMY'S STORY

THERAPUETIC FOSTER CARE

Jeremy was 7 when the physical and sexual abuse started. By the time he was 12, he'd bounced from foster home to foster home a dozen times. It's no surprise he showed signs of being suicidal, and he had a history of mood swings, impulsive and destructive actions, and aggression toward his peers. Because of all he'd endured and the struggle to cope with it, he wet the bed and suffered from depression. Jeremy was diagnosed with a speech disorder and intellectual disabilities that were likely impacted by the childhood trauma he experienced. His future seemed as frightening as his past.

Then he was placed in the care of Embrace Alabama Kids and everything changed for the better. The ministry's Therapeutic Foster Care staff took great care in selecting Jeremy's foster father because they wanted to ensure they set him up for success and not just another failed placement.

Their prayers were answered. Not only did his foster father love and care for Jeremy, he adopted him a few years later. Thanks to Embrace Alabama Kids' ministry, Jeremy has learned what "family" really means.

That's why we are so incredibly grateful to the foster parents and families who serve our foster children. Any kind of fostering requires love, empathy, perseverance and sacrifice, but providing the intensive care a child with special needs requires takes an even greater level of commitment.

Kids in Therapeutic Foster Care may have physical or intellectual disabilities, social maladjustment, or emotional and behavioral issues. There are countless doctor visits, hospital stays, as well as therapy and counseling sessions, and meetings with school officials.

But time and again, God has provided just the right people who are willing to do whatever it takes to ensure that His children are loved, protected, nurtured and equipped to reach their full potential.

JEREMY'S STORY CONTINUED

THERAPUETIC FOSTER CARE

Jeremy continues to receive counseling and psychiatric services, as well as school enrichment. He participates in therapeutic recreation activities and has discovered pursuits he enjoys that build his confidence. Other programs have helped him learn to interact appropriately with his peers. Although he continues to have significant special needs, Jeremy now has a loving father, a sense of community and a dedicated team that has his best interests at heart.

Embrace Alabama Kids' involvement did not stop with Jeremy's adoption. We continue to support our adoptive families for as long as they need our help. We provide emotional, educational and financial assistance, which may mean covering dental and medical expenses. For other families, it could be providing gifts and meals at Christmas or attending school meetings to help advocate for the child.

Our team does whatever it takes to help provide homes, healing and hope to vulnerable children and families. Because "Embrace Alabama Kids" is not only our name, it's our mission.



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JACKSON'S STORY

BABIES FIRST

Chances are, each one of us here has a memory about cotton candy, whether it's eating it ourselves and letting it melt in our mouth, or having our children or grandchildren craving it. You'll find it at places where kids have fun – baseball games, football games, amusement parks and the circus.

That's why one mother was surprised when Jackson, her newly-adopted 6-year-old-son, told her he remembered eating cotton candy at Disney World. She was baffled, because their son had grown up in foster care. His birth mother was 14 and had suffered a significant amount of trauma in her life. She'd been abused, neglected and abandoned herself. She was scared, she was angry, and she was ill-equipped to raise a baby.

It's not exactly the back story that conjures up images of happy children eating cotton candy at Disney World. Jackson's adoptive mother was a little worried that her son was imagining it or had conjured up a childhood experience he wished he had.

Then, by happenstance, she learned that Jackson had spent his first four and a half years at Babies First, Embrace Alabama Kids' safe haven in Mobile for teenage mothers and their children.

The more she learned, the more she was able to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Babies First serves young mothers ages 14-21 who are pregnant or have a young child. The staff mentor the girls, teach them how to parent, and help them get an education and job skills so they can break the cycle of poverty. It's one of only two facilities in Alabama that provides residential group care for pregnant teens and young mothers, so the need is tremendous.

Jackson's mother, a longtime supporter of Embrace Alabama Kids, just happened to be at an open house for the new facility when she mentioned to a staff member that Jackson had joined their family. The more they talked, the wider the eyes of the staff person got. "Are you talking about JR?" she asked? "We raised him, and we've been praying for him for years."

You see, Jackson was Embrace's baby. His birth mother came to Babies First when she was pregnant, and it was his very first home. The staff had loved them, nurtured them, thrown birthday parties for Jackson and celebrated his first steps, his first words and all those other milestones. He was potty-trained there, he learned his colors and his numbers, and he grew to be a happy, healthy, loving little boy.

JACKSON'S STORY CONTINUED

BABIES FIRST

The staff also worked hard to get his birth mother to a place of stability and to help her heal enough to make a life for herself and her son. In this case, God's plan for their lives was for Jackson to be adopted by a family who could love and care for him in a way she couldn't, so she eventually signed over her parental rights.

Once that happened, JR was placed in another foster home and the staff lost touch with him, despite many attempts to remain in his life. They worried about him, prayed for him, and comforted themselves with the reminder that the Lord loved him more than anyone.

As soon as the connection was made at Babies First that day, a longtime staff member began to share with Jackson's mom what he had been like as a child – about his personality, what he'd been afraid of and what brought him comfort. She shared baby pictures and stories – including one about how Jackson and his mother went to Disney World and ate cotton candy.

We live in a world that can be scary at times. We've all felt it ourselves. Things are out of our control, and we don't know what the next few weeks or months will bring. Think about the struggles our foster kids face – a loss of control, fear of what the future holds, feelings of uncertainty and helplessness.

That's why the work of Embrace Alabama Kids is so critical. They provide children who have very little hope with a safe place to live. They give them warm beds, nutritious meals, a spiritual foundation, an education and everything they need to heal physically, emotionally and mentally.

But they also provide cotton candy. They take them on trips, and let them participate in extracurricular activities just like every other child. They play football and basketball. They're cheerleaders and softball players; they're in the band. They go to the beach and the lake. They participate in mission trips. They go to church, they go to camp, they go to prom. They roast marshmallows, play ping pong and splash in the rain.

Jackson's mom has said she is grateful for the strong foundation and unconditional love her son experienced at Embrace Alabama Kids. These days, he spends his time exploring, climbing trees, catching frogs, clowning around and playing with his two sisters who love him dearly.

Jackson's life is full of cotton candy. Thank you for helping to provide it.



ELLIOT & CALEB'S STORY

HIGHER ED HOME

Elliot and Caleb's early years were filled with challenges. Their father left when they were 3 years old and has never attempted to reconnect. Their mother, who struggled with alcohol and possibly substance abuse, was in and out of their lives. Most of their childhood was spent living with their maternal grandmother, who did her best to care for them but faced her own struggles with housing, jobs and stability. Sadly, both boys endured emotional abuse and neglect during these formative years.

In October 2021, their mother passed away, likely from kidney failure, though the boys are unsure. Elliot and Caleb found a mother figure in a family friend, but she passed away unexpectedly in July 2023 from a pulmonary embolism. Later that year, their grandmother also passed away. By their senior year of high school, Elliot and Caleb were homeless with no family to turn to. A family friend from church stepped in, offering them a place to live and much-needed support.

Today, both Elliot and Caleb have found stability and a fresh start through Embrace Alabama Kids' Higher Ed Home in Tuscaloosa. This home provides not just a place to live, but a nurturing environment where students can grow academically, spiritually and socially. With the guidance and resources offered at the Higher Ed Home, these young men are thriving.

Both Elliot and Caleb have remarkable musical talent. They each play multiple instruments and, after auditioning for The University of Alabama's Million Dollar Band, were accepted as members. Elliot is pursuing a degree in music, has composed several pieces for his high school band, and is now assisting The University's theater department with musical composition. He also enjoys participating in intramural football at UA.

Caleb is majoring in computer science engineering. In addition to his demanding schedule as a band member, he plays in the orchestra at a church in Tuscaloosa, serves on the worship team at another church and works part time at a restaurant.

Through the care and support provided by Embrace's Higher Ed Home, Elliot and Caleb have found not only a home full of support but a future filled with hope and opportunity.



THE TURNER'S STORY

FAMILY PRESERVATION

When David and Janelle Turner went to court in hopes of getting custody of their grandchildren who had been placed in foster care, the judge asked one important question: "Exactly how large is your heart?" Mrs. Turner thought a moment before answering.

"It's big enough for these two," she said. "I realized you don't actually have to birth a child to love them. I'm a very tenderhearted, loving person, and I have a lot to offer."

The children, ages 4 and 2, will need plenty of love and stability going forward. Their parents lost custody due to excessive drug use, neglect and family conflict. The children were in foster care for eight weeks, but the Embrace staff helped the Turners with the reunification process and have provided a variety of supportive services.

Family Preservation is an intensive in-home intervention program. For a period of up to nine months, Embrace's skilled and highly qualified staff works to alleviate conditions within homes at risk of having children removed. The program also supports children who have been removed from their homes. The goal is to preserve and reunify families while ensuring the safety of children. Embrace helps families learn new skills that bring about restoration and prevent the need for a child's re-entry into foster care.

"I feel like right now we are in a much better place because of Embrace," Mrs. Turner said. "I'm taking everything they offer to help our family." The children's parents have left the home, and Embrace helped the Turners with parenting and discipline techniques. They've established a reward system for the children to encourage good behavior and have worked together to ensure that the home is safe and in good repair. The staff helped arrange for day care and speech therapy for the children, as well as weekly counseling for the family.

"The things that were causing us heartache are no longer here," Mrs. Turner said. "It's no longer about us; it's about the children."

The Turners have met each requirement and are helping the children learn life skills, such as dressing themselves. They have also been diligent in ensuring that the oldest child, who has some health issues, gets the medical care he needs. "To me, a family is a whole unit working together to overcome anything that is thrown at them," Mrs. Turner said. "We're working together as a family. A lot of things are changing, but they're changing in a positive way."