

A 501(c)3 Approved, But Real, Family

by Chelsea Wine

The dining room is bustling. Laughter. Conversations. An occasional shout. It's craziness as eight of the ten children, at the time, of Calvary Home for Children in Anderson, SC color at the two tables and share crayons with one another. They are coloring Christmas trees on large two-by-three foot pieces of paper for two of the bigger supporters of Calvary Home, one being Baker's Acres Ranch – a ranch in Anderson that invites the Calvary Home family over to play frequently. I am greeted with many hellos and childlike inquiries about my life: "What's that? What's your name? Are you gonna ask us questions again? Can you help me color? Yeah! Me, too!" If any person ever needs to feel special or loved, they only need to be a guest at Calvary Home. I am suddenly the center of attention in the room, and each of them calls me over to help them draw the tree outline or candy canes or angels or ornaments. As I move from child to child complimenting their artistry and assisting them all "fairly," I look into the kitchen and see Chris and Laurie Owens, the house parents, beginning to prepare dinner – together. The phone rings twice while I am coloring, and as they answer the phone and continue to cook, I admire their daily lives. I imagine the opportunity for both of them to prepare an entire meal together is rare because one of them would need to care for the now twelve children, ranging in age from three to thirteen. Parenting twelve children is no small task because even with my presence distracting most of them, Chris and Laurie still find themselves in want for answers to myriad questions that the children have, while cooking enough food for the whole troop.

The house parents, as they are known at Calvary Home, welcome each of these children into a family with Christian love and provide them with the family they had been left without. The house parents of the only cottage in operation, Chris and Laurie Owens, run the home with

gentle, loving spirits that emanate the love of Christ in their very actions, words and eyes. Chris, 36, looks like a man right out of rural Appalachia with a beautiful well-kept beard and an average but solid build. His wife, Laurie, is a petite woman with dark features. Choosing to parent twelve kids, four of whom are their own, Chris and Laurie thrive in an environment that few others ever will experience.

The family dynamic here according to Chris is not much different than a family with only three or four children; it's just more of everything – more mouths to feed, more homework to be done, more baths to be taken each night, and more children to give attention to. He and Laurie became the house parents at Calvary Home just over a year ago after the previous house parents moved on. Prior to becoming the full-time house parents at the time, they filled in as relief house parents while the house parents took some of their seven days off per month. Of the twelve kids the Owens care for now, four of them are their own children: Audrianna, 13, Andrea, 11, Emily, 9, and Isaiah, 7. Each child that comes to Calvary Home receives the same love and treatment from Chris and Laurie as their own. Chris notes despite the possibility for inequality among the children, “It's set up more like a home than it would be at a group home or something like that, and we do everything with these children that we do with our own.”

The children at Calvary Home were excited to learn that breakfast food was on the menu for dinner that night. Good old-fashioned “brinner.” It had always been a favorite of mine growing up, and my stomach growled in jealousy of their special treat knowing that I would be on my way for the day before the meal. When I visited around dinnertime in the early fall, Greg Skipper, the CEO and executive pastor of Calvary Home, gave me a tour and introduced me to the family. Upon inquiry about the meal for the night, Greg, obviously a “family friend,” joked about joining them for that meal: pork chops. Having seen their pantry that night as Greg and

Chris showed me around, it became clear that cooking for twelve growing children can literally be compared to “cooking for an army,” as my mom would say.

Although I envy the brinner the Calvary Home family would share, I do not envy the grocery trips that amount of food accounts for. Emily, the Owens’ daughter, compares the occasions of grocery shopping between just her family and when she goes with her parents to shop for the Calvary Home family: “When it’s just family, it isn’t that bad. Sometimes it’s only like five bags. But when it’s for everyone, it can be like two bin--fulls.” Based on the Summer 2010 newsletter, the estimated cost and budget for all of the meals and snacks in one cottage runs about \$12,000 annually, about 16% of the entire budget of the cottage.

Arriving at Calvary Home the first time, I drive down the asphalt lane through the main entrance: a cast iron gate resembling a pair of open arms. In search of a standard office building, I am confused to come to a dead end after only having passed three gigantic subdivision homes. I return to the entrance in search of guidance and find a small circular sign to the right of gate that leads me to a pale yellow duplex just to the right the lane. Uncertainly, I knock on the front door and wait for the sound of steps to draw nearer. The door opens to a man of fair complexion, medium height and a warm smile: Greg Skipper. Greg, 39, joined Calvary Home full time last August after years of support for the mission. He welcomes me into this unusual office building, and my journey with Calvary Home begins. During our visit, he opens up about the young, but evolving, history of Calvary Home, the original vision, and the changes in plans due to some financial hardship.

Calvary Home began in 1998 after numerous inspirational mission trips to Palmer Home for Children in Missouri. The Palmer Home was first opened in 1895 by the renowned Presbyterian pastor Dr. Benjamin Morgan Palmer. Over the orphanage’s 115-year history, it has

seen many leaders and much growth; it now maintains a residence for eighty children. Despite many changes over the years, the Palmer Home has kept the same heart: “The mission of Palmer Home for Children is to reflect the hope and love of Christ by providing a stable, long-term Christ-centered home for children who lack adequate family structure.” The original campus in Columbus, MO spans over 100-acres and includes “seven cottages, two administrative buildings, a gym, a swimming pool, twelve greenhouses and several other buildings.” Each of the cottages houses eight to ten children and are run by a married Christian couple whom serve as house parents to the children. With the help of grants and volunteer labor, the Palmer Home has been able to continue to grow and renovate its many buildings.

When volunteer groups from New Covenant Presbyterian Church in Anderson, SC returned to Palmer Home year after year, the adults on these trips began to feel a call to start a similar mission for the fatherless in Anderson out of a heart for the mission and scriptural conviction: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress [...]” (*NIV*, James 1:27). The Board of Calvary Home was established in 1998 and used the model of Palmer Home for Children to set up their mission and structure. The mission of Calvary Home very closely mirrors Palmer Home’s:

The mission of Calvary Home for Children is to present the hope of Christ to children who are without adequate family structure and in need of a long-term, Christ-centered home. We seek to keep siblings together, to teach reformed evangelical Christian values, to mend emotional scars, and to provide biblical counseling. Our desire is to give each child the full opportunity to reach his or her God-given potential.

They received the current property of Calvary Home from one patron as a donation in honor of his mother, a total of about twenty acres now. The original business plan of Calvary Home's Board of Directors took on a *Field of Dreams* ideology: "If you build it, they will come." The Board set to work to build up the campus, opening the Stephanie Carter Cottage, named for a four-year-old who had been abused and murdered by her father in 2000, in 2002, and the White Cottage in 2006, with two buildings still under-construction - the Leslie Mazzara Cottage and the new administration building. When economic tribulations grew too high to keep two cottages open, the Board decided to close the Carter Cottage and revamp its strategy.

Since Greg has taken over as CEO, he has worked hard to gain the trust of new investors as a reliable non-profit with a bright future. He has worked to cut costs wherever possible so that the money brought in can be put into its highest demand use, the children. These costs have come from many little things that make a difference in the long run, such as disconnecting four landlines and mainstreaming their uses into only cell phones and WiFi and locking two unused irrigation lines. Monthly reductions in cost, according to Greg, are what can make the difference in an investor choosing to invest in Calvary Home versus some other organization in times such as these.

According to Nonprofit Fund Finance (NFF), an organization that works to create a stronger non-profit sector through helping appropriate "money to missions effectively," the current economic climate for non-profits is grim, indeed. In the survey they sent out in 2009, 52% of the 986 non-profit organizations that participated said that they expected the recession to have a negative effect of at least two or more years on their organizations. When the survey was conducted by the NFF again in 2010, 88% of the 1,315 participants said that they expected the year to be as or more difficult than 2009, with only 18% expecting to break even at year's end.

The non-profit sector is suffering from the “first in, last out” epidemic in this economy. When the times first grew difficult nationwide, the non-profit sector was the first market to feel the decrease in spending by the American people; they will also, more than likely, be the last to climb out of this recession.

The NFF offers some practical advise on their website to non-profits feeling the pressure of the recession, which Calvary Home has already instituted in their plans in recent years. In addition to the penny pinching cuts they have made with regards to WiFi and the irrigation lines, Calvary Home has followed another one of the suggestions of the NFF by cutting back on the programs costs by reducing the number of cottages they were running in 2008. They also seem to be following some of the other well researched tips and tricks from the NFF with their unfinished construction projects: “In this economy, you may be in a position to renegotiate material costs and professional services pricing.” Due to the insufficient funds to finish both the Leslie Mazzara Cottage and the administration building, Calvary Home is working to raise the \$10,000 needed for the completion of the Leslie Mazzara Cottage. Upon its completion, the Leslie Mazzara Cottage will become the new temporary administration building for Calvary Home rather than the duplex. The duplex, which Calvary Home for Children owns, will then be rented out to bring in more constant funds for the ministry.

After he finishes informing me of the background of Calvary home, Greg and I step outside the back door of the duplex to go on a tour of the campus. Immediately, the hot early-September South Carolina sun oppresses us, and Greg, offers to make the tour a driving tour, rather than walk in the heat. We climb into his old F-150 and set out. The rattle of the old engine reflects this young, uncertain non-profit organization: sturdy, steady but struggling and working hard to keep going. We drive across the yard in front of the red brick home I had seen upon my

arrival; Greg explains this home to be the future location of their main office building – once everything is finished inside. We drive along the same asphalt lane I had originally ventured down, passing one unused cottage and the only cottage in operation, and park in the driveway of the nearly complete third cottage. The cottage resembles the soon-to-be office building: huge, red brick and model home-esque. My expectation of an industrial multi-story grey CMU building shatters before me in the driveway of this cottage.

Having set-up my visit in the only available slot Greg had available in the short span of time I allotted him, there is a hollow echo as we move about the premises – no children are home at 10 am on a Wednesday. Walking through the front door of the third cottage, named after Leslie Mazzara, a beauty pageant participant and advocate for Calvary Home who was murdered in 2004, I am amazed by the eloquence of the foyer. Growing up in an upper middle class community, I saw my share of grandiose suburban homes, but I am still taken aback by the simple beauty of this entryway. The walls are a peachy yellow color; it's warm and welcoming but muted enough to not overwhelm a visitor. The cottage is clearly un-lived in – beds but no sheets, pantry but no food, library but no books. The only appearance of use is the scattered box of crayons on the dining room table. Greg explains this sign of life to be evidence of the Homework Help program they have here in the afternoon for children. Not only is it 10 am on a Wednesday, but, due to the current economic climate, these rooms constantly remain unfinished and without the joyful presence of children. The lack of people causes the cottage to feel more institutional than homey – a feeling Greg had said was a part of the purpose of having modern-looking homes versus the industrial 19th century image of an orphanage with one large room lined with beds for the children to sleep in. It's not that if lived in it would feel institutional, but that stark feeling of a place love should dwell in but something tragic happened permeates.

Of course, the eerie feeling leaves upon the presence of people and the sense of family. My expectation of more of an institution further breaks down when I meet this unique family. The children at Calvary Home find it just that, home. Although they generally do not view one another as brothers and sisters, they do find friends in each other. Kambria, 9, confides in me, as I spend some time with her and her twin brother Kameron, that her favorite part of Calvary Home is “Our parents. And friends. I like my house parents because they are very, very nice. And my friends are very, very nice at Calhoun and here.” Kambria and her brother came to Calvary Home in January 2010, where their brother and sister had already been placed some months and years before. This reunion of siblings is something Calvary Home celebrates. They attempt to keep and bring families together, so that the loss of parents does not need to result in the loss of all family. Earlier this fall, they were working to bring another family together – Ansley, 4, and her brother Seth, 3, have a younger brother who is not currently living at Calvary Home. Ansley and Seth came to Calvary Home over the summer and still have monthly-supervised visits with their parents. Despite the attachment she keeps to her home life and birth family, through giggles and fickle answers, Ansley states that she does like it at Calvary Home. Even though Calvary Home had been trying to work through the paperwork to bring this brother here to join Ansley and Seth, with two new boys brand new to the family, the White Cottage is full.

Although they have the capacity to house thirty-six children between their three cottages, the current state of the economy has arrested their ability to grow and even caused them to close one of the cottages back in 2008. Greg keeps his hopes high for growth in this organization, but with two unfinished buildings on the premises and the only cottage in operation within the last two weeks running at full capacity, it is going to take a lot to see the potential come to fruition.

With a few projects to complete, many beds unfilled, and a hope for growth in the future, there is always a need at this organization and fundraising to be done. Greg further explains that the only measure preventing the reopening of the Carter Cottage is the funds, \$75,000. There are more than enough couples willing and waiting to be house parents for Calvary Home, eight in fact, Greg specifies, nearly three times the number of cottages on the campus.

In wake of the economic climate, Calvary Home has needed to find other sources of income outside of individual large donors and grants. In order to make up for the remaining 55% of their budget, Calvary Home fundraises through special events to make up another 21%. For the holiday season, Calvary Home sells “Calvary Trees” to be displayed in store fronts, which encourages onlookers of the trees to take some of the provided special ornaments and purchase a local gift card to donate to Calvary Home. In 2009, the event raised of \$7,500 with hopes to “double [this] year’s participation.” This year, they have already received 1,200 responses. Greg writes me about the fundraiser’s progress: “We’ve only had them out for a few days now so I’m excited!!” The biggest fundraiser Calvary Home for Children holds is a golf event in the late summer each year. In 2009, the event raised over \$24,000 for the children of Calvary Home. This fall, they held the second annual Bluegrass & BBQ Benefit, which takes place right on the Calvary Home campus. Last year at the first annual Bluegrass& BBQ event, the event drew about 500 people and raised nearly \$5,000. This fall, the event was a little smaller as people continue to survive in the supposedly over recession drawing 370 people this year and raising around \$4,000. People from around the Anderson area come with their families to celebrate in this event. The children at Calvary Home also get to take part in this fundraiser as well. On my visit following the benefit, Chris said that the kids had a lot of fun getting to play with a whole bunch of other kids in the area.

Calvary Home for Children's budget that creates the basis for the fundraisers operates based on set amounts of money rather than percentiles. This system allows for the organization to set more precise and accurate goals when speaking with potential donors or writing for grants. The organization only has three full-time employees – Greg, Chris, and Laurie – as well as two part-time employees – Katherine, their finance department, and the young man in charge of lawn care. Their combined salaries total about \$100,000 per year. The segmented breakdown of the \$75,000 budget per cottage includes: \$12,000 for food, \$6,300 for heating and cooling, \$6,000 for education and school costs, \$3,700 for transportation costs, \$1,500 annually for water (drinking, washing and bathing), and about \$5,350 per month to provide quality, 24-hour parental care. Many of the day-to-day costs such as groceries, gasoline and random goods for the family are purchased using credit cards in the organizations name, and the receipts are kept and recorded in order to track each dollar spent. The detail to managing receipts throughout the year is further required, beyond the organization's personal use, for their annual audit by the IRS, which maintains the 501(c)3 status as a tax exempt non-profit organization.

Within the budget, all of the children are treated equally financially, just as they are personally. As the holiday season approaches, Calvary Home partners with a church in Anderson that sponsors the children and "puts on a great Christmas for them." The spending limit for each child is set to just \$75 because they "don't know what Christmas will look like for kids when they leave [Calvary Home.]" Birthdays are also all celebrated on their budget with a party and gifts. The Owens children are included within this budget for all times that they are on the campus, which is about three out of every four weeks of the month. When the Owens' take their vacation days, the children are their own expense to cover. The problem in recent years has been

coming up with the funds that go beyond the bare minimum for this cottage in order to expand Calvary Home.

According to a study conducted by the USDA in June, 2010, the average cost of raising a child from birth to seventeen years old in a middle class home is \$222,360. As the rest of the country struggles to stay afloat, the competition for investors continues to skyrocket for non-profits, be they individuals, businesses, or government grants. Greg understands this dilemma, and as we sit down for our first meeting in the entry room of the administration building, he takes the time to explain how Calvary Home is fighting to stand out from the pack.

With twelve kids currently living in the house, the children also find a pack-mentality at hand. It is no surprise that everyone has a lot of fun regardless of this mentality and whether there are an additional few hundred people around for a fundraiser or not. Right now, the White Cottage is at capacity for girls and just reached capacity for boys, so each of the children share a bedroom. The specific roommate interactions of all of the children shine through as I have the opportunity to observe them over the course of my time with the family.

Emily Owens and Ansley sit on the couch right next to each other and tell stories over one another. These two young girls share a room in the girls' hall. They have the exciting luxury for children of bunk beds and clearly have the inside jokes that all good siblings, especially those that share a room, have. Both shine in the attention of a visitor. The laughter, jokes and stories grow progressively louder as we chat. Ansley sings a nonsensical song that sends the girls into fits of laughter for minutes on end. The fun continues when Chris enters the room questioning me with a grin, "What are you teaching them?"

Chris sits in the chair opposite me to discuss his life and his experience at Calvary Home. He uses few words and keeps to his quiet nature. His presence at Calvary Home by his own

admission would probably surprise people who knew him only in high school. He did not grow up in a Christian household; it was not until he met his wife when they were eighteen that he was introduced to Christ and what a family centered around Christ could look like. When I asked what finally changed that brought him into his faith, he credits it to Laurie and her family in this time: “God was calling the whole time, actually. I just had to see how they lived in a Christian faith. How they interacted with one another. How devoted they are to the study to Christ, to learn more of Him, which is when I realized I lacked every bit of that.” Chris now takes joy in heading up a household devoted to Christ and the opportunity it gives to share the Gospel with all ten of his children. Chris explains that their current devotions with the children are reading the Bible cover-to-cover in, hopefully, a year. Back in late September, they had reached the book of Micah, and they have continued to read a few chapters each night and each morning.

Sitting at one of the dining room tables while the children work on their Christmas trees, India, 10, is adding a Bible passage to her tree, Psalm 23. I notice as she writes that she does not have a Bible in front of her; she is doing this from memory. She and her brother Kameron, 9, soon recite aloud the whole Psalm for me. It is evident that the children who are placed in Calvary Home openly appreciate and participate in cultivating, or continuing to cultivate in the case of India and her siblings, a Christian lifestyle. They experience the Gospel daily in the free love they are showed, regardless of their pasts or transgressions. They also have their nightly and morning devotions to deepen their knowledge. On a separate visit when I hung out in the living room with Kambria and her twin brother Kameron, they each displayed a clear understanding of their faith and the simple message of the Gospels. In near unison, they proclaimed that they know who Jesus is and that “He died on the cross and saved [them].” Although they knew Jesus before coming to Calvary Home, many children do not, as I found in the siblings and youngest

children at Calvary Home, Ansley and Seth. They are quite young and new to Calvary Home since August and have not yet taken an interest or understanding in just what Jesus means to them or the family;

Calvary Home's approach to raising children in a Christian environment has its beautiful successes and examples, though. In their Summer 2009 newsletter, the front cover story included one of these sorts of profiles of children who had been positively affected by the Christian family at Calvary Home. DJ and Theresa Rigdon's story that lead them to Calvary Home was like many other children's: their parents did not take on the responsibility of parenthood gracefully and neglected their children through drug use. When they came to Calvary Home in August 2005, the brother and sister experienced loving parents and acceptance for the first time: "Calvary Home made us feel like we were something. Other places made us feel like we were being punished because of what our parents did." In 2008, Theresa and DJ's aunt and uncle in Greenville adopted them. During her time at Calvary Home, Theresa got saved and changed her life forever, all of which she specifically attributes to her time at Calvary Home in the article saying, "If I hadn't been at Calvary Home, I wouldn't have gotten saved or gotten in church." The children of Calvary Home attend New Covenant Presbyterian Church just down the road from the Calvary Home campus, the church from which Calvary Home originated. The Owens' do not attend New Covenant very often and continue to attend Christ of Four Church as their home church. Each week, they drop the Calvary Home children off at their Sunday school classes and then continue to their home church.

Shortly after the children impressed me with their memorization of the Psalm 23, the Owens' daughter Emily asks if I would like to see her room. From the first time I met her, Emily carried herself with far more presence than most nine-year-olds I have met. She is a pretty girl

with brown hair and a medium complexion like her mom's, a kind smile like both her parents and a twinkle in her eyes that transitions between an innocent trick in her eye and love. She loves to tell stories and grab the attention that she can from a guest, and she clearly loves Jesus a lot, too. At just nine-years-old, she has a better conception of the Gospels and more knowledge of the Bible than many adult "Christians," and she catches my attention with her excited spirit. Emily illustrates the "long-term" effects of a sound Christian upbringing. When I ask her what her favorite Bible verse is, she responds, "I don't know. I just love all of it." After which, she proceeds to name not some of her favorite verses but *books* of the Bible – Matthew, Psalms, Genesis, Mark, Luke, John, Esther, Acts and a few others. Now for a nine-year-old to be able to rattle off the names and famous verses of the Canonical Gospels and Genesis is not all too shocking to me; it was her inclusion of Psalms, Esther and Acts that threw me for a loop. Certainly as a young girl, I did not know books of the Bible. Zealous evangelist, yes; biblically knowledgeable, not so much. I heard stories and had my own Bible but could not have told you where exactly to find most of the Sunday school teachings in it. This background in myself left me stunned in the presence of Emily.

As we walk back to her room, she remarks, "You're lucky we're in the girls' hall and not the boys' hall because our hall smells good." Ansley follows us to their room as well. It becomes another battle in the never ceasing chase for attention in a house of so many children. Ansley wants to be picked up and held, while Emily wants to tell me about her life and show me different climbing skills she has and some collections she has, too. I work hard to balance the two, not wishing to neglect either, and I see a small glimpse of what Chris and Laurie must endure daily. With each knick-knack Emily shows me, Ansley tries to touch and hold and accidentally bring damage upon it. Emily is used to Ansley's klutzy touch and skillfully, yet,

narrowly eschews all of her attempts. Ansley is soon called away by Chris, and Emily finally takes the spotlight she has been working for.

Emily instantly begins to disclose information and stories of all kinds about all of her family, her climbing adventures, fears and favorites. She begins by playing with her three small lizards, first taking out “Big Daddy” from the wood and screen cage that makes their home. Once she has depleted that resource of entertainment in her mind, she shows off her “secret way to climb into her [bunk] bed” of clambering up a shelf on the side and then using the slots in the wooden frame of the bed as hand- and footholds. Later, to reveal another one of her favorite climbs in her room, she pulls herself onto the covered bins that provide the surface of her lizards’ cage and begins to climb the built-in bookshelves on the wall of the nook. Once at the top, she finds what she has been searching for: glow sticks. She confesses that she used to have more but has misplaced them. As she continues to talk, she recalls where the rest of them are and pulls out a box with about forty more no-longer-glowing glow sticks from the bins she had climbed on only minutes before and is now poised atop. Immediately, Emily constructs a necklace of two glow sticks and gives it to me. Grateful for my attention, she offers to give me all of her collection, if I would like; I kindly decline, but she proceeds to give me a larger necklace of about six more glow sticks to “give to my friends.”

Between her climbing and generosity, she tells brief anecdotes about her family at Calvary Home. When I ask her if she likes having such a big family, she says, “Yes. My daddy says that if people come into here and are nice and respectful that they are just like his children and our brothers and sisters... But he was kidding. [Briefly pauses] Well, actually, I mean, they are our brothers and sisters in Christ.” In that moment, I realize just how truly precious Emily Owens is. Again, her spiritual maturity catches me off-guard; they are not her brothers and

sisters “in Jesus,” as I might have expected, but “in Christ.” She explains how Ansley views her as a real big sister because Ansley is scared of monsters and feels more secure when Emily has “slumber parties” with her to protect her, which is ridiculous to the nine-year-old. Who believes in *monsters*? I stand up a little bit for the four-year-old, offering her age as an excuse. Emily initially refutes this defense because Ansley’s younger brother Seth is only three and does not believe in monsters. After a moment, however, Emily confesses to a fear of the dark when she is home on relief days, due to the woods and dogs and howling she hears outside of her house.

The house families at Calvary Home for Children have seven relief days each month to do as they wish. The Owens family still owns their home in another area of Anderson, so on their relief days, they often return home. Emily divulges these visits as a lot of fun and spoiling, which is understandable when the parent to kid ratio drops from 1:5 to 1:2 at home. Emily recounts all that relief weekends include: “Go home. Go to Grandma’s. Eat *lots* of sugar. Sleep. Actually! We never sleep.” She also explains that they always have good breakfast food at Grandma’s the next morning. It’s a home-cooked meal of pancakes, bacon, and grits, everything delicious for a delicious Southern breakfast. Emily also puts her climbing skills to good use in the trees by her house. She brags that one tree is particularly good for climbing, and she is the best at climbing it. She out climbs all of her siblings and finds new ways to go about it each time that get her higher and higher. Her older sister Audrianna, 13, is not nearly as good as Emily, according to Emily, that is. Emily clarifies that Audrianna is a lot bigger than she and cannot stand on the two-inch diameter branches that Emily finds herself on during the climb.

As I sat in the living room with Chris weeks earlier, he described his down time in these days off, as well, with his favorite pastime: hunting. He, upon some prompting, opens up about a couple of amusing hunting stories he has experience over the years. His stories include no great

chase or mishap – he’s a patient man and waits for the shot. He retells one time when his cat followed him out to his stand in the land behind his house. He remembers,

The cat just laid down on the ground by my stand. Didn’t move. Just sat there. And I kept wishing the cat would just go away. Turned light. Not like thirty minutes after light, and there’s a deer that walked right up, right up in front of the stand there, and it saw the cat. And I couldn’t get a good shot ‘cause it was facing me, so it walked closer trying to figure out what it was laying right there, and as he was walking, he was turning a little bit so he could see the cat better. That was pretty good. The cat turned the deer around, so I could get a shot.

His eyes dance as he spins his tale. It’s his element, his niche. The time he gets to spend in the woods on these weekend off are a special and quiet time for this fairly reserved man, who happens to care for twelve children three-fourths of his time.

As she colors her tree and I draw candy canes for her, India tells me about what they do on the weekends. She explains that while the Owens’ are off-campus the remaining six children are given over to the temporary care of “relief house parents.” During one of the most recent relief weekends, the weekend of November 5th-7th, India, D’ante, 11, Kambria, Kameron, Ansley, and Seth went with the relief parents to Station Oconee Falls to hike during the day. Hiking is a common weekend adventure for the kids, she says. Then, with a reminiscent smile on her face, India adds that she and her siblings also got to go by their old home while they were out and about.

The children all continue to work on their various shaped, colored and decorated Christmas trees and share other things they like; many of which are favorites of all young children. Remembering again back to her weekend, India tells Isaiah that they got to go to a store

that had some *Star Wars* paraphernalia I haven't heard of. Isaiah writhes with jealousy because he loves *Star Wars*, as do some of the other children, and the conversation takes a turn in that direction for a time. Many of the children brag about having seen all of the movies, which Isaiah explains is because his dad owns *all of them*. India and D'ante, two of the older children, are not as loudly outspoken as some of the younger children in this room, but they manage to get in their opinions with voices of seniority. India tells me proudly that her favorite things to do include playing basketball and football. D'ante pauses over the question and, in a brief lull of conversation, states that his favorite things to do are build and camp. Immediately after D'ante speaks, his younger brother Kameron runs up and announces loudly that his favorite things are maps. They also have the opportunity to go play at Baker's Acres Ranch whenever they have an invitation, sometimes on the weekend, other times during the week. The energy continues to resound in the room as all of the children interject a comment here and there for a moment's attention.

On another Wednesday, when I enter the Leslie Mazzara Cottage around 4 pm, I see two children at the table doing homework, while a third, Kameron, scoots out the door free at last from the tortures of homework. This is Homework Help. Research over the years has shown that children from children's homes tend to have lower IQ's than those who are brought up in the "typical family unit." In a meta-analysis of seventy-five studies, researchers from Leiden University found this difference in IQ to be about twenty points. In the meta-analysis, gender did not seem to play a significant role; although, the age of the children in the studies did affect the results. It found that those under two were more negatively affected than those tested over the age of two. The type of children's homes and duration did not appear to play a major role; although, the socioeconomic status of the countries of origin and children did. In South Carolina,

a state already notorious for its poor public primary education systems, and in Anderson, one of the most poverty stricken urban areas of the state, Calvary Home has taken a strong stance to break the mold that the past of the child should affect their future academic success. By implementing Homework Help, the children at Calvary Home receive help with their assignments each day and keep on top of their schooling.

In the dining room of the Leslie Mazzara Cottage, Chris Andreasen, a Caucasian woman probably in about her early- to mid-forties sits at the table with India working on spelling. Across the table Chris' son Ben, 16, is working with D'ante on his math homework. D'ante is in 6th grade, and the math homework is becoming progressively more difficult to help with, as algebra begins to enter the equation. Ben comes with his mom on Wednesdays to help with things like math and other subjects that quickly escape parents' memories after high school and college. The children have been sitting here working since arriving home from school around 3:30 after looking up their homework assignments on the internet. With the exception of school projects, the daily schedule of an hour or two of homework fits seamlessly in the evening schedule at Calvary Home.

When I walk into the White Cottage, the scene is similar, as Laurie works with some of the younger children in the children's study area. A 4.x8 sheet of marlite adorns the wall above a short bookshelf in here. The daily schedule with initials checking off completion of tasks for each of the children runs along the right side of the board. At the top of the board is a memory verse for the children: "But my eyes are fixed on you, O Sovereign LORD; in you I take refuge – do not give me over to death" (*NIV*, Psalm 141:8). The attention span of the youngsters in the study room is clearly waning.

As each child returns from Homework Help in the other cottage, the atmosphere progressively shifts from study to play. Many children run up to Laurie or Chris and request to go outside and play – bike riding, scootering, jumping on a trampoline out back. I watch Isaiah run up to Chris and request to do just that. Just like with every other child, Chris makes sure that his room has been tidied up before consenting to it. Isaiah comes back out of his room ready to play with an air soft gun in hand. The sight of an air soft gun in the hands of this seven-year-old does not seem to surprise any one else in the room except me, as I come to learn that Chris is an avid hunter moments later. After Isaiah toys around with the gun for a few moments, Chris takes the gun from him to ensure that it won't shoot off inside and then tinkers with it himself. A few minutes later, Kambria runs into the family room ready to play. Chris picks her up in one swift motion over his shoulder and squeals of laughter ring in the house. The fatherly affection he shares with all of these children, regardless of birth, is beautiful and fun to watch. He has noticeably adopted each of them as his own in his heart, just as Emily had said.

The family that lives at Calvary Home is strongly rooted and growing in love and spirit. The children have their eyes fixed to the coming month filled with food, love, family and, of course, presents. Each child has a couple of big ticket items on their Christmas list for Santa to bring this year: iPads, iPod Touches, hamsters, movies, etc... Due to churches in the surrounding area that sponsor the children with the \$75 limit, the big ticket items will probably not be seen under the tree; however, when I asked about the way Christmas is celebrated here at Calvary Home, I was no longer surprised to learn that they celebrate it like all other families with “joy, food, reading of the Christmas story, [and] gifts.” The Calvary Home family also usually grows on the holidays when the house family's family comes to celebrate on the Calvary Home for Children campus.

Although, the Christmas story is especially told in the home at this time, it is lived out among this family throughout the year. A child is born who saves humanity in time through God's greatest sacrifice and keeping of His original covenant with Abraham: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (NASB, John 3:16). It's a story of grace, of second chances, of loving others simply because they are your neighbor, and of family coming together to support one another in all they do. The family at Calvary Home operates in this way daily, loving each child that comes to them because they are children of God and have the same promise of life and love and grace as the next person. The children act as true brothers and sisters in their joy and laughter, love for one another, and, as all good siblings do, their small teasings and battles.

Just as with the rest of the economy, this unique family can see the golden light at the end of the recession tunnel; the organization, however, will still have a long road ahead of them as they look to grow. Beyond just in this recession, this old F150 of an organization will have progressive changes to make to adjust to our ever-changing world. Each facet will need to evolve in the years to come: marketing, fundraising, volunteer services, introduction of new programs that could possibly be a source of revenue to balance out the programs that are costly and only mission strong, as well as how and when to build from here. The eerie feeling of Calvary Home at 10 am on an average autumn Wednesday sticks with me still. The love of a family has infiltrated my heart, and so the fear of an organization so rich in love not flourishing strikes me hard. The unknown road that Calvary Home has before it is similar to many others, but its heart is unique to itself in Anderson, SC to father the fatherless, to care for the orphaned. Chris describes his favorite part of this opportunity to serve this cause simply, "I don't really know the

specific thing. I like being a part of their lives. I like seeing the difference this has in their lives. That's it I guess."

The difference this organization has on these children is seen in the smiles on their faces as they sit down to their brinner that November evening. As I head for the door on my final visit to Calvary Home, I feel the familial love the children experience everyday. I say goodbye, and they each jump out of their seats to hug me goodbye. Then, they each hug me, again. Finally, Kambria and Emily hug me tightly and say that "[they] will not let go of me so that [I] can't leave." It's a real love. It's a *real* family.

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