

Hill Country Youth Ranch
P. O. Box 67
Ingram, TX 78025-0067

Address Service Requested

A child care facility family

PRSR STD
U.S. Postage
PAID
Kerrville, TX
HERRING
PRINTING

For more information:
Phone: 830-367-2131
Email: data@youth-ranch.org
Website: www.youth-ranch.org



The Corral has been
published bi-monthly
since 1977

Volume 47 Number 2

A publicly supported tax-exempt charitable and educational organization

April 2024

Stepping stones to the future are leading to our beginnings

by Gary Priour, Founder

After volunteers had built the first roads into our raw land in 1976, and we started constructing buildings and houses in 1977, the Youth Ranch started its journey of caring for children in 1978 by receiving applications from parents, grandparents, and relatives. This family-based placement system worked well, and the children could stay as long as it was good for them and their families, many for eight or ten years until they finished high school. Funding came from community supporters and friends.

In 1982 we made our first contract with the newly formed Child Protective Services and began to receive placements from counties across the state, in addition to families. Since then, it's been a roller coaster ride ranging from strong partnership with the state to frustration with their 'one size fits all' guidelines. When the counties went broke during the 1986 recession, we kept all the state kids, and the community funded all the beds. It was a huge risk, but it was also a very fulfilling time.

We renewed our state contracts in 1990, and that helped with finances, especially with high-needs kids. We appreciated that help. But as the kids stabilized, neither the Ranch nor the children were at the table when decisions were

made about moving a child or letting them stay with us as family.

We've known for a long time now that to fulfill our mission of being a long-term family to children who need us, we will have to wean from state contracts. This means replacing their funding, one bed at a time. Thanks to a friend who has followed our reporting on this challenge, and who has chosen to replace annual state funding through a program called "Adopt-a-Bed", starting with four beds at Big Springs Ranch, we are responding once again to applications from families, especially grandparents raising their grandchildren, who are without the means to pay for our services.

Our history is a story of taking chances that align with our core

mission, and God's calling, to serve children in a family setting, establishing relationships that can last a lifetime.

So here we go, returning to our beginnings and renewing our commitments. We need to build on this wonderful start and find a way to add more "Adopt-a-Beds" so that grandparents and other kin wanting to help their children can apply to us, and keep them out of the state system altogether.

It's a tall mountain, but a path has opened, and we've stepped onto it in faith, believing. If you would like to join in this journey, or if you have questions, please email me at gary@youth-ranch.org. And if you know a family who needs help, tell them to email admissions@youth-ranch.org.



Big Springs Ranch for Children is the new home of "Adopt-a-Bed".

The Youth Ranch in brief

- ◆ A childcare family established officially on March 21, 1977
- ◆ Mission: to provide a safe, loving, and life-enhancing Christian environment for children and youth with special emotional and developmental needs
- ◆ Three villages on three separate ranches with unique cultures to serve children and youth with varying needs
- ◆ Award-winning charter schools on all three campuses
- ◆ A complete array of programs for traumatized children from 5 to 18, in settings where healing and growth are individualized, plus transitional living for young adults, ages 18 - 24
- ◆ Unparalleled activity choices, including recreation, athletics, visual and performing arts, agriculture, horse and animal care, vocational education, outdoor adventure, and more
- ◆ Need-based, age-appropriate housing ranging from psychiatric assessment centers to family-style homes, to apartment-style housing for young adult graduates
- ◆ A community of veteran caregivers with deep resumes, experience, and proven success in the field
- ◆ Home and lifetime family to over 2200 children in 47 years
- ◆ Alumni Association with 750 members who maintain positive relationships with their HCYR family and one another
- ◆ Life-long support for alumni of all ages, including college, transitional living, career guidance, and help during crises

Javier: from child to man to husband and father

Editor's Note: Javier came to live at HCYR in 2008 at age 11, along with his four siblings. Over the next six years, he came to call the Ranch his home and family. Despite CPS moving him constantly to different placements, Javier had bonded here and always begged to come back. He was moved four times in six years, always returning. He graduated from high school in 2015. In 2017, he testified at the Texas State Senate about the malpractice of moving foster kids constantly, especially without consulting them. He talked about being moved 22 times, starting at age five. When he finished his testimony, you could hear a pin drop in that packed hearing room. Today, Javier is not only a survivor but a man with purpose. With the help of Ranch Scholarship grants, he is pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Research Biology. In March of 2023, he married Faith, the love of his life, at the Big Springs Ranch chapel, coming home for the ceremony, and returning often since then to bring his bride. In March, Faith gave birth to Eden Grace, a beautiful and healthy baby girl. In this story, he shares and celebrates his journey from brokenness to fulfillment.

by Javier Castillo '15

I came to the Youth Ranch back in 2008 at age 11 with my siblings. Through the love that was provided to us by the house parents and staff, we knew we had found a family, and a home.

We all felt safe, and wanted to stay. But the foster care system was set up to move children based on a 'one-size-fits-all' idea of getting all kids out of group care into foster homes or adoptive care, always moving them to 'least restrictive' settings. So as soon as we stabilized, they moved us.

When I was moved the first time after just ten months at the Ranch, I was heartbroken because I was being taken away from the family I had become rooted in. Many years later, when I was turning 18, the foster care system was done with me, and it was now my choice. I didn't have to think twice. The Youth Ranch had a campus where aged out foster youth could live while transitioning to adulthood.

I knew I would find support there. I was provided with a job as a maintenance intern, and a place to lay my head. Many of the staff who took care of me when I was younger now looked out for me as a young adult and showed me important 'next steps' to success.

In 2017, I had an opportunity to help my home, and other kids in the system like me, by giving my testimony to the Texas Senate. I told them about the Ranch, and how it had remained my family despite being moved away against my will four times in six years. I knew the Ranch would always be my family. When I married, I would have my wedding at the Ranch chapel because the people at the Ranch had helped me to become a man worthy to marry. Another commitment was to have my kids see where I grew up! My Ranch family had walked beside me as I passed every huge milestone in my life.

Six years after that testimony, on March 11th, 2023, I got married in the chapel at Big Springs Ranch to my beautiful wife Faith. Approximately one year later, on March 6, 2024, my wife gave birth to our beautiful baby girl Eden Grace Castillo. Both my wife and our baby are doing well and are healthy. After my daughter was born, I had many messages and support from everyone in my Ranch family. I want to give special thanks to Krystle Ramsay, the Ranch's Executive Director, for visiting and encouraging us while we were at the hospital! Now, going into this new chapter of fatherhood, I am encouraged because I have such amazing people backing me and supporting my continuing walk in life. I am working and also a college student working on my Bachelor's degree in Research Biology. I plan to get a Master's degree also, and hope to work in the field of research.

I wish I could thank all of you personally right here and now. But there are too many people in our large Ranch family to name them all. Please know that I know you are there, and always will be, to welcome me home when I come.

Don't let anyone ever tell you that a group home can't be a forever family. It's just not true.



Javi, age 12 (above left), with his younger brother, fishing at Ranch pond in 2009. Above right, Javi is dressed for an interview at a local bank in 2016. Left, Javier and his beloved Faith tie the knot at the Chapel at Big Springs Ranch for Children on March 11, 2023. On March 6, 2024, Faith gives birth to their daughter Eden Grace.



*You are worthy, O Lord,
To receive glory and honor and power;
For You created all things,
And by Your will they exist
And were created.
Revelation 4:11 NKJV*

On right, new mom Faith is joined by HCYR Executive Director Krystle Ramsay and her son Uriah. Krystle, who came to the hospital the night before Eden arrived, provided support for Javier and Faith. Javier said Krystle's presence made him aware of the closeness of our Ranch family.



John David returns to pay it back – and forward

Editor's Note: John David Hopkins '87 was among the first group of five boys to arrive at Hill Country Youth Ranch in the summer of 1980. The Youth Ranch had opened in 1978 with a cabin of six girls, then built two more houses by 1980 and welcomed a new household of girls and one of boys. Almost all of those first kids were private placements, All of the boys were placed by grandparents and relatives who had taken responsibility for children when parents abandoned or abused them. Child Protective Services was new, and still figuring out a path to help keep children safe. In those early days, we saw that we were helping not only the children but families who needed help as well. In John David's case, it was his grandmother who stepped in, took charge, got legal standing, and brought him to the Ranch.

by John David Hopkins '87

My biological family was dysfunctional. My parents' constant battles left me feeling lost and confused. I was shuffled between relatives, none of whom kept me long. I was a victim of physical, mental, and sexual abuse, a taboo subject at the time (mid-1970s). I was dying inside but had nowhere to turn. I was broken, battered, bruised, and sometimes bloody. My school never questioned my bruises because of the taboo.

At age eleven, I ran away, spending a summer on the streets, fearing for my life. After a summer of hiding, I was discovered and returned to my abusive home. Nothing had changed. I made a call to a child abuse hotline, and that led to my rescue by my paternal grandmother. She became my savior and advocate and got legal standing to place me at Hill Country Youth Ranch, which opened a whole new life for me.

During my first days at HCYR, I was scared, and I responded to their attempts to care for me by being combative and disruptive. But something changed. As I realized they were not going to abuse me, I began to calm down, I would think before acting, and I stopped fighting. I started doing well in school and participating more.

I attribute this change to the unconditional love shown by the Ranch staff.

When I arrived, the Ranch village was still being built. Volunteers and contractors were often there, and the kids joined in the work. During my time at HCYR, we worked together – residents, staff and volunteers – on various structures. We built a barn, an outdoor chapel, and even manufactured adobe building blocks for Ranch buildings. I helped stack one of the log cabins for a new children's house, working with a church group, our staff and other kids to put it up.

We also had a chicken coop, a cow, a calf, and three pigs. I often had the task of collecting the eggs, or feeding the animals. I recall selling vegetables from our home-grown garden to raise funds for our group trips across the country.

I remember the weekly meetings where we discussed recent events, confessed our character defects in a supportive group meeting led by Papa Gary, and learned from our mistakes. I also found a stable father figure in one of the houseparents. He taught me life skills and lessons about nature and survival.

In school, I excelled when given the opportunity. I participated in sports, band, debate team, and student government. My grandmother encouraged me, along with caring staff, emphasizing the importance of education beyond high school. Because CPS was not involved, I was able to remain at the Ranch for seven uninterrupted years until I graduated from Tom Moore High in 1987.

After high school, I attended Schreiner College, where I was a Resident Assistant for Delaney Hall. I edited creative works for *The Muse* literary magazine at Schreiner. I faced numerous challenges, including the death of my grandmother. However, I persevered, and earned my Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology in 1997. The Ranch helped me with scholarship grants.

After graduating, I worked at the famous YO Ranch at the Outdoor Awareness Program and Camp. I overcame fears and



John David, age 11 (above left), taken after he arrived at the Ranch in the summer of 1980. Above right, John David (center of photo) helps HCYR Business Manager Bob Vaden (left) and Founder Gary Priour (right) stack logs for HCYR's fourth children's house, Sams Cabin, in 1981. At that time, the kids joined volunteers and staff to complete construction.

learned a lot about myself. I also met my wife there, a volunteer for a conservation group. We quickly connected, leading to marriage and the birth of our two beautiful children, Hunter and Abigail. A move to Pennsylvania brought a change of scenery, but also culture shock and the daunting responsibilities of parenthood.

I found work in the plastics industry in Scranton. I was a good employee. Yet, there was something missing. I neglected my family and myself. Alcohol became my escape. I started attending AA meetings. I'll be sober 12 years on May 3, 2024! Trust God. Clean House. Help Others. These are three things I strive to live by.

During this same time, my mother passed away from liver disease caused by alcoholism. I said goodbye over a cell phone. I rode a Greyhound bus to St. Louis where she was given a memorial. I met a family I hadn't really ever known. My sister and I reconnected. When my father lost his wife to dementia during the COVID lockdown, I wanted to be there for him. I took time off work and drove down from Pennsylvania. I attended the service and fellowship, meeting both of my stepfamilies.

During this time, I visited some old college friends and Mr. Priour in Ingram. He offered me a job opportunity that I couldn't refuse. I was unhappy in Pennsylvania, my health was deteriorating, and the cold weather was becoming unbearable. With my kids grown and no longer living with my wife in Scranton, I decided to make a change. I moved first to my father's

house in Houston, taking a job there.

I applied for a position at HCYR. Once approved, I gave my employer my two weeks' notice, a lesson in integrity I learned at a young age at the Ranch.

Upon returning to work in November of 2021, I filled in as a childcare worker at our two children's campuses. Now, I work at Enhanced Horizons as a program monitor and mentor to young adults who have aged out of the foster care system. I wish I had had such an opportunity when I graduated from high school, but EH didn't exist then. I could have learned about saving money, finances, relationships, life skills for success, all while attending college, and I would have had a place to stay.

Through my own life experiences, I can offer insights into real-life situations, helping others learn and grow from their successes and failures. I hope to teach them about self and community integrity.

If you are a former resident reading this, I urge you to reach out to someone you were close to when you lived here. Four years ago, I felt alone and lost in a dead-end job. Now, I am grateful to be here.

I feel blessed by my God to have been given the opportunity to pay-it-forward to at-risk youth who are aging out of the foster care system. I would like to believe that I can use my testimony to reach out and make them more aware of things you need to do to succeed in life. I failed at first when I was out on my own. Now, much older and wiser, I feel most helpful when I share my failures and what not to do, as well as my successes. I want my message to hit home and sink in. My hope is that one day, when a resident is out there living on their own, something I said connects with them and they travel down the right road doing the right thing.



Left, JD graduates from Schreiner University in 1997 with his B.A. in Psychology, joined by Papa Gary and Mama Carol. Above, JD returns for the 35-Year Alumni Reunion in June of 2011, shown here with Papa Gary.

HCYR Memorials & Honors

Each month HCYR receives memorial gifts honoring loved ones who have passed away and other gifts remembering special occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries, etc. Because they are so important to the daily operation of the Ranch, and in keeping with their two-fold purpose, we gratefully acknowledge all such gifts both in the newsletter and in cards sent to family members. The following list includes loved ones honored by gifts made from February 3, 2024, through April 3, 2024.

In Memory Of:

GERRY & JOAN ALLISON
John & Lars Allison
LISA AVERY
Delbert & June Oehler
MARION CARL BAETHGE
Winnie Crenwelge
Elton Faught
Royce & Karen Herbort
Margaret Priess
JOHN E. BAKKE III
Madge Reid
FRANCES BERTAGNOLLI
Joe Hipp
CREED BLEVINS
Harry Rittimann
CARL BORCHERS
Wayne & Norma Curtis
KENNETH BOYCE
Clarence & Elaine Jenke
BOBBY BURNHAM
Kay McCorquodale
PATSEY CHASE
John & Lars Allison
BETTY COLLINS
Evelyn Anderson
Marilyn Hankins
CALVIN CURRY
Margaret Priess
FELIX MATTHEW FISHER
Donna Hillin
Gary & Carol Priour
Michael Priour
Kathy Ragsdale
BARRY FLETCHER
Bill & Blythe Thomas
SHARON FORSTER
Ronnie & Rochelle Lumpkins
BILL FURBUSH
Bill & Blythe Thomas
SUE GALLAGHER
Bob & Donna Lace
MILTON GIBSON, JR.
Harry Rittimann
MARGARET GOODMAN
Jerry Goodman
VERAUNDA MAE GRAMLING
Jerry Cunningham
JOHN GUMERT
Dan & Karen Cutting
BETH GUNTER
Frank & Julia Dunlap
HCYR Auxiliary
Gary & Carol Priour
Gary & Jeanette Vaughan
PATSY HAHNE
Royce & Karen Herbort

JO ANN P. HALE
Carter & Susan Hale
JIMMY HATCHETT
Lynda & Bill Tolleson
KRISTIN HENKE
Connie & Kevin Braziel
Vickie Ahrens & Kenneth Lindig
RUSS HOLMER
Junell Holmer
DOUGLAS KENNY
Wayne & Norma Curtis
E. J. LANDRY
James & Sherri Burdell
MAXINE McCORMICK
Bill & Blythe Thomas
LILA NEWMAN
Neva Nicholson
MAXINE NIELSEN
Anne Marie Raftshol &
Michael Emery
Shirley Gumert
HCYR Auxiliary
Jay & Nancy Kelley
Rick Pfaff
RUDY OLFERS
Connie & Kevin Braziel
ELAINE OSBURN
Cathi Skinner, Samantha
Skinner & Richard Osburn
SHIRL PATTERSON
Marilyn Hankins
BILLY PEHL
Sherri & James Burdell
ANDREW PETERSON
Brian & Vicki Menefee
JENNIE LEE PFEIFFER
Mary Jane Morrison
Karen & Ronnie Schneider
HARRY PORTWOOD
Brenda Loudermilk
DAVID MATTHEW POWELL
Michael & Susan Marston Evans
BUDDY PREUSS
Kenny & Linda Harrell
IRENE PYKA
Royce & Karen Herbort
DOMINGA P. RAMIREZ
Suzel & Arnold Vela
JAVIER RANGEL
Ronnie & Rochelle Lumpkins
MARY JANE ROBERTS
Bill & Lynda Tolleson
DEE ROBINSON
Edward 'Rob' Robinson
TAMMY PRUNEDA
SLAUGHTER
Kathy Ragsdale

LENA MAE SMART
Mary Jane Morrison
JANICE SPAETH
Connie & Kevin Braziel
LEOMA DREYER STEFFEN
Armand & Karen Antony
REV. DAVID TRITENBACH
Stanley Brunsman
NELDA VOGT
Mary Jane Morrison
MARGARET WILKE
Bernice Klein
Carol Meyners & Family
AUDIE WOOD
Leslie Ozuna
NINA WRIGHT
Verna Benham
Nancy Brown
Suzanne Godfrey
HCYR Auxiliary
Mary Aiken Wright

In Honor Of:

MILDRED BARTELS
100th Birthday
Mary Jane Morrison
KAREN BRUNE
Paul & Susan Bazelides
George & Jan Pilko
JOE CRAFT
Harvey & Marilyn Vordenbaum
JIM FROEMKE
Harvey & Marilyn Vordenbaum
ZEBADIAH GARZA
Ashley Phillips
GENERATIONS SIGNS
COMPANY
Harvey & Marilyn Vordenbaum
BILLIE DEAN GULLEY
Claire Nelms
HCYR
Claire Nelms
HCYR HOUSTON DONOR
APPRECIATION EVENT
Wayne & Norma Curtis
KENNEDY JOHNSON WITH
FUSION DANCE
Natalie Yancy
TYE PHELPS
Jeremy Porter
GARY & CAROL PRIOUR
Catherine Carson
JANET ROBINSON
Happy Birthday
Donna Schloss
CHARLES SHAW, JR.
Claire Nelms

LOIS SHAW
Claire Nelms
KARI SHORT
Happy Birthday
Kirk & Kathryn Hachigian

BILLIE JOYCE TERRY
Claire Nelms
CALVIN WARNECKE
Harvey & Marilyn Vordenbaum

500 Club Grows

The **500 Club** is our way to honor donors who have given \$500 or more to HCYR. We are pleased to announce new members whose donations total over \$500 by virtue of gifts made from February 3, 2024, through April 3, 2024.

Generous cash donations came from **Jeff Barefoot, Scottsdale, AZ**; **Joe Foy & Brenda Loudermilk, Austin, TX**; **Giovanni Tapia, D'Hanis, TX**; **Kirk & Kathryn Hachigian, Houston, TX**; **George & Janet Pilko, Houston, TX**; **Robin Segesta, Houston, TX**; **Marilyn Hankins, Kerrville, TX**; **Donna Hillin, Kerrville,**

TX; **Donna Schloss, Kerrville, TX**; and **Louis & Lynda Dicke, Knippa, TX**.

We were also blessed with generous in-kind gifts: **Joe & Christy Barron, Ingram, TX**, gave furniture; **James & Marjorie Ellis, Kerrville, TX**, gave furniture; **Kerr County Produce, Kerrville, TX**, gave produce; **Harold Robinson, Kerrville, TX**, gave furniture; **Vesta Varner, Kerrville, TX**, gave furniture; and **Kelly Murphy, New Braunfels, TX**, gave clothing.

Thank you to these new members, and to all our **500 Club** members, for your generous support.

Gifts-in-kind provide quality environment

Remember us when getting rid of items that are still usable.

With a big family like ours, material goods are in constant demand. So when we receive such gifts, we first fill needs at our campuses. We then offer remaining items for sale at our Thrift Shop. Either way, our children reap the benefit.

We go out into the Kerr area each Thursday to pick up items from donors. Call us to schedule a pick-up at 367-2131.

Furniture – any quality items, including sofas, chairs, chests, dressers, tables, etc.

Housewares – glasses, dishes, pots, pans, silverware.

Linens – towels, sheets, pillows, blankets, quilts, etc.

Vehicles – minivan for transports & utility truck.

Recreation – fishing gear, sports balls, saddles & tack, bicycles, helmets, games.

Tools – of all kinds.
Anything re-sellable

Thrift Shop needs volunteers

The Auxiliary Thrift Shop, located at 3171 Junction Hwy in Ingram, is run by 100% volunteer personnel. The Shop is looking for more volunteers to help with their growing business. Anyone willing to devote just a few hours a week is wanted!

Help is needed to sort donated items, stock shelves, greet customers, and perform tasks to make the store runs smoothly. It's a great way to serve and make friends, too! Come see us at the store!

Call 367-2131 to learn more.

Last of HCYRA Founders is Gone

by Gary Priour, HCYR Founder

I met Beth Gunter in June of 1977 in the River Hills Country Club foyer. I had been asked to come to a meeting of four ladies. One said, “You don’t know this yet, but you need us. We’re going to form an Auxiliary to help Hill Country Youth Ranch. We’re going to start by taking your vision to the community through growing a group of service-minded women and men. As you build the children’s homes, they will need furnishings and decorations. That will be our first project.”

Four founding women, then 19 Charter Members at the first official meeting September 30, 1977. Beth was in all those groups. Founder, Charter Member, Officer.

Beth helped organize the first event on the raw land of Hill Country Youth Ranch – an outdoor Thanksgiving picnic in 1977 at the site where the playground now stands, and the tradition was born for the family to gather for holiday meals.

To fulfill their desire to gather furnishings, the Auxiliary rented a storage room in 1978 at Lime Creek, collecting items for the first cabin to open that fall. They also began to sell items that would not be used, and another tradition was born. Beth was there.

Beth worked at the site of every Thrift Shop (four locations), and every Auxiliary event. Her dedication never wavered or waned. She was day manager at the various Shop locations over a period of 30 years. When the Auxiliary decided to host a Style Show to help raise funds, she modeled.

And she served with such a joyful spirit. When Beth could no longer walk the runway at the Style Shows, she was helping in the silent auctions. She greeted folks at the Thrift Shop, and always invited them back.

When all she could do was attend the gatherings, there she was. Up until 2022, she was at every annual Style Show. I looked for her every time because she was a



Beth Gunter at the first meeting of the HCYR Auxiliary in 1977.

signal of stability and continuity, and because she had the most affirming smile. If I was talking I would look for her loving eyes, and she was always encouraging.

What a light she was in the world of Hill Country Youth Ranch, always shining her light on others, and serving the children. Now I delight to imagine her with the best seat in the house, still beaming with joy and encouragement. Thank you, Beth.

Houston donors appreciated at March event

We are thrilled to share the exciting news from our recent Donor Appreciation event in Houston, Texas, which was an incredible success thanks to our team, generous contributions and overwhelming support. Held on March 19th at River Oaks High-rise, the event brought together our Houston community in a spirit of awareness, giving, and compassion, and we are grateful for the tremendous response.

The evening was filled with

celebration, joy, and heartfelt moments from our speakers: Karen Brune, event host & Foundation Trustee; Krystle Ramsay, Executive Director; and Catherine Carson ‘87, HCYR Alumna. Guests enjoyed delightful hors d’oeuvres, engaging presentations about Hill Country Youth Ranch, and conversations with fellow supporters.

One of the highlights was the inspiring story shared by Catherine Carson, whose life was

certainly impacted by her time at Hill Country Youth Ranch. Her testimonial served as a powerful reminder of the importance of our work, and the profound difference the Ranch makes for so many children and young adults.

Thanks to the generosity of event host Karen Brune and her incredible presentation covering the current state of the foster care system, along with Krystle Ramsay’s reflection of her 20 years with HCYR and her vision for the future of all three campuses and the charter school, the evening was beyond impactful and left the event attendees wanting to learn more and help to further the work of Hill Country Youth Ranch.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who contributed to the event’s success, which will serve as a wonderful benchmark for future events across the state to increase awareness of Hill Country Youth Ranch. Your support is truly appreciated, and we look forward to our journey together to create a brighter future for all.



We gauged our Houston donor event to be a huge success. Chief Development Officer Keith Hitt (left), greets attendees with help from fellow staff hosts Wynita Walther and Sara Skaines (right). It was an evening filled with friend-making and sharing about HCYR.

Auxiliary Twine

Dear Friends,

My last *Twine* article featured Bridget Dale, our present Thrift Shop Manager. This month’s *Twine* article is dedicated to Beth Gunter, a founding member of the Hill Country Youth Ranch Auxiliary.

On Thursday, March 28, at Beth’s *Celebration of Life* we heard stories of her spirit, spunk, and love for the children at the Hill Country Ranch. Her daughter Lynn Epperson is carrying on her legacy.

Beth not only was a vital part of the HCYRA but also a founding member of the Youth Ranch Thrift Shop. She served as a Day Manager for thirty years.

She met the customers with a twinkle in her eye, treated each and every one with kindness, and sent them out the door with “Ya’ll come back now, hear?”

We, as volunteers, salute Beth for a job well done. Beth, we’ll see you later, hear?

Grace and peace,

Cheryl Sieker, President
Hill Country Youth Ranch Auxiliary

Considering designees for your non-probate assets? Think of the Hill Country Youth Ranch!

Non-probate assets are assets that are passed on outside of your will. They most commonly include IRA’s, 401(k)s, pensions, life insurance policies, and certain bank and brokerage accounts. Non-probate assets can make up a significant portion of your total property.

Beneficiaries – In the estate planning context, beneficiaries are the people and organizations that receive property when its owner passes away. For non-probate assets, beneficiaries generally must be named using a particular form that is specific to each asset.

Why set beneficiaries? The distribution of your non-probate assets is not controlled by your will. To ensure that those assets go to the people and organizations you love, you must be sure to properly name your beneficiaries and update them over time.

*If you would like to name Hill Country Youth Ranch as a beneficiary of a non-probate asset IRA, 401(k), insurance, or pension plan or have questions, please let us know. Contact Chief Development Officer Keith Hitt, 830-367-6161, for more information or to get the process started.

Love survives . . .

by Carol Priour, Fine Arts Director

In 2014, after showcasing 20 years of amazing art, dance, theater, and music, our first Fine Arts Center burned. To the ground. An electrical fire. This building had been more than just a building. It had been an island of mercy.

In my very first teaching position as an elementary art teacher in Burkburnett, Texas, I hadn't even had a classroom. I kept my very limited supplies in a closet and went from classroom to classroom with the tools and supplies for each class stacked on a rolling cart. This now phantom building had been beyond a palace for this art teacher. It had been a space way beyond my most ambitious dreams where children danced out their trauma onstage . . . where they could take their broken hearts and turn them into healing art.

The night of the fire, overtaken by the emotion of this great loss, I literally laid on the ground across from the inferno, sobbing uncontrollably from a place deep in a temporarily shattered heart. The children were losing what they had been calling their "Happy Place".

The following morning, still in a state of shock and devastation I woke with a command in my heart . . . God said to me, "Surrender to the healing. I will give it to you. Get up and paint it." My still broken spirit picked up a paintbrush and opened the first tube of paint. No preliminary sketch. Just follow the instructions from The Master. And, in the early morning light, I painted "The Arts Will Rise Again" in acrylic, on canvas, and with a new listening that often comes from brokenness. That painting now hangs in the gallery in our new art building, alongside the work of young artists through the years who have lived at the Ranch and began their healing process through art.

After a few days of intense grief and shock, I forced myself to put on my most rugged boots and make my way through the rooms of ashes and melted metal of the demolished building.

First I entered the theater space where

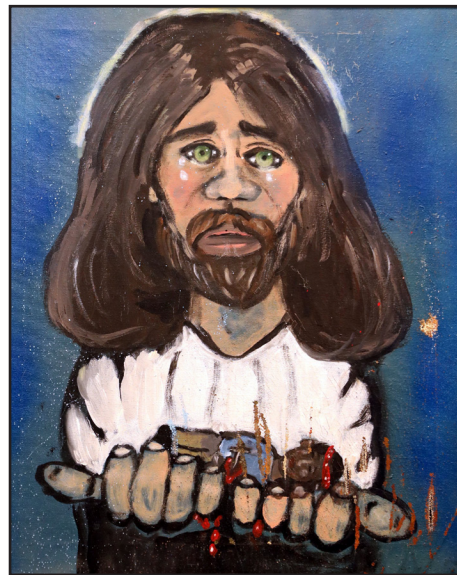
the children had beautifully and bravely performed "Broken Wings Can Fly", four years in a row. I remembered the joy on the faces of the cast when they experienced their first standing ovation that, for some, had erased years of not feeling "good enough". Hundreds of their costumes had burned, many handmade. I remembered lovingly sewing each piece to fit the child who had worn it . . . and the children who came after them who gave each costume new life by wearing it again. One by one, I said good bye to the rooms where God had spoken to us through the sacred avenue of creativity. . . my office where I wrote the first musical theater script for the kids to perform . . . the training room where the new employees each had taken up their crosses of learning and teaching, and sacrifice and growth beyond what they had ever imagined. The little dance room that had doubled as a dressing room during performances . . . with its now shattered mirrors and once magical lighting possibilities.

I saved the terrifying moment of opening the door to the gutted art gallery for last. From the condition of the other spaces, I just knew it would be a total loss. I prayed and gathered my courage before I entered. Opening that door was so hard.

The paintings and drawings that had once lined the walls, each depicting the trials and triumphs of a very brave child had, in fact, been reduced to ashes lying on the once carpeted concrete floor. A bronze sculpture donated by a well-known sculptor, had melted into a heap of metal.

Then I saw it! One painting lay atop the pile of ashes and debris. Just one painting had survived. Miraculously. It was a painting by a 14-year-old boy named Joseph. A clear message that the arts program must arise and continue. A seed.

When he first came to the Ranch, Joseph was so broken and confused. He had been rescued from a vicious and violent gang on the streets of San Antonio. His arms were covered in scars and he had one rather large scar on his face. But, in time he had made new friends, and warmed to the unfamiliar



Above left, Joseph's painting "It Hurts His Heart" survived the 2014 fire that burned the original Fine Arts Center to the ground. Right, Carol painted "The Arts Will Rise Again" the morning after the fire. Below, the final scene from HCYR's originally scripted and choreographed play "Broken Wings Can Fly", performed five years in a row during the heyday of the arts in the original blackbox.



love he was receiving. And one day in art class he painted "It Hurts His Heart", a painting of Jesus with a boy in his hands, and tears in His eyes. There was so much love in that face that Joseph had painted. And you could see a plea, too. "This thing you are going through may be hard, but please don't ever give up. I never have."

It was clear to me that what had survived the fire was not something that could be bought from the local lumber store, or sewed with fabric and thread like a costume. What had survived was Love. A love strong enough to rebuild.

A resurrection was coming.

It came to me that the building that had been a sacred creative space for 20 years had not actually burned all the way to the ground. The foundation was still there.

And the new building would eventually grow from that launch pad.

And grow it did! Folks from all over showed up with equipment, tools and ready hands to clean up the debris from the foundation where the Perry and Ruby Stevens Fine Arts Building now stands. One by one, cherished friends came forward to help us rebuild.

Now, our beautiful new building stands tall at the entrance to our campus and scores of children have been through our arts program and found long-needed avenues of expression.

Joseph's painting, now hanging in our beautiful new gallery, still delivers the message that Hill Country Youth Ranch is truly built on an indestructible foundation of Love.

*When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned,
Nor shall the flame scorch you.*

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you.*

Isaiah 43:2-3

Dance Program – a four-part journey to healing

Editor's Note: Camille Priour-Green, HCYR's Dance Instructor, was born into the Ranch family in 1993, and grew up with hundreds of brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles all around her. Daughter of the Ranch's founders, she felt safe but not just with them. She felt befriended by the Ranch's children and staff, and a part of life on campus, independent of her parents. As a little girl, she performed in the annual play, Broken Wings Can Fly, a musical drama comprised of songs based on the poetry and stories of Ranch children, and she danced and acted her parts with obvious talent. Camille graduated high school in 2011 and went off to college on the West Coast, eventually enrolling in professional dance schools in Los Angeles, performing with an Austin-based dance company, pursuing professional development in New York City, and gaining certifications in yoga and dance education. She had a deep inner knowing that the road of her training would lead back to the children at Hill Country Youth Ranch.

By Camille Priour-Green, Dance Instructor

The dance program at HCYR is carefully cultivated yet dynamically adaptive. When I originally began designing it in 2019, my dream was to see therapeutic dance culture ingrained into our community, but the program has blossomed into a living and breathing ecosystem of its own.

As it evolves each season with the spirits of those who engage in it, it also draws from a wellspring of history that predates the current program by almost three decades. During the first run of *Broken Wings Can Fly* (BWCF) in 1998, I witnessed a moment that awakened my five-year-old mind to the profound power of storytelling through dance, setting the course for my life's work. BWCF was a show comprised of original poetry, music, and dance performed by Youth Ranch residents, community youth, and myself up until 2003. Working through the script and choreography deepened empathy as we portrayed the Ranch residents' journeys from trauma to healing, a path on which to find common ground. Not only was it bonding and cathartic for the cast, but it also deeply impacted the audiences.

Later, I aspired to carve a space in the world that echoed BWCF and my 'aha' moment at five, providing a platform for the next generation to share their hearts and stories through empowering enactments of their own creation.

That piece of history laid the groundwork for my professional pursuits as an adult, which informed what takes place in our dance studio today. Combining knowledge, experience, passion, and alignment with the Ranch's vision, along with the crucial

element of reception in the hearts of the children, a four-phase program has emerged. Each stage serves a specific purpose in a child's road to healing, either as a progressive stepping stone, or as an entry point.

The first stage is therapeutic skill building, in which children are introduced to structured dance classes or one-on-one coaching sessions. Lesson-planning centers around a normalizing, confidence-building experience, and looks like a typical dance class in ballet, lyrical, hip-hop, etc. This stage lays a foundation for other components of the program, expanding body language vocabulary for soul communication, and allowing the children to feel comfortable and safe in their bodies and in the studio environment.

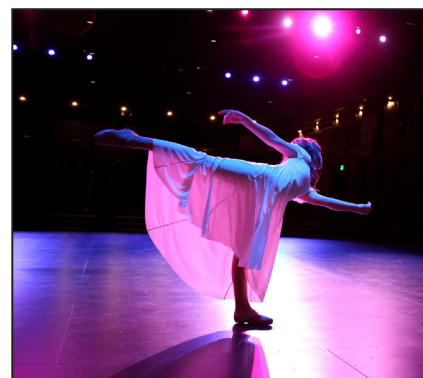
The second stage emphasizes authentic expression. Children are encouraged to dance from the heart, releasing feelings, thoughts, and stories fluidly through movement. They can let their internal world pour out and 'paint' the external world around them. As sessions progress, a child might connect movement with meaning in lyrics, or synchronize breathing with a soothing rhythm, or discover kinesthetic empathy through mirroring exercises. The process is more varied and abstract than in the first stage. Utilizing dance/movement therapy techniques, imaginative play, storytelling, physical activity, and self-expression, children are given opportunity to build connection, trust, self-regulation, and feel safe exploring and sharing their inner world. We shift our focus away from perfecting stylistic choreography or technique, to finding and amplifying a child's unique voice, encouraging them to take up space in this world fully and authentically.

This stage makes evident how dance can assist children in accessing and expressing concepts that they cannot reach or convey with words alone. Our children see their therapists regularly, and it is my intention to build synergy between what happens in the dance studio and the therapy room. Children can use dance to release pain and tension from trauma that can get stored in the body for years, while therapy helps them process on a cognitive level. Together, we can construct a holistic approach that leads to profound breakthroughs and lasting change.

The third stage is performance. This ties together stages one and two, although dancers are not required to perform. Initially, I was hesitant to include performances in the program, fearing they could take away from the therapeutic focus. However, I soon realized the children were eager to share their newfound skills and expression, and a familiar bell rang from my own childhood. I ended up using BWCF as a template for



Four stages of dance program: 1) Top left: technique class. 2) Right: mirroring, storytelling, and expression. Young Camille in BWCF composited next to adult Camille with current student. 3) Below left: performance. 4) Right: familial bond & sense of belonging. BWCF cast composited under current team circle, showing continuity of HCYR values through dance.



our first recitals, showcasing individual dance expressions and ending with a choreographed group finale that celebrates a mosaic of different backgrounds coming together as a family of our own making.

Opportunities open to teach transferable life skills, such as collaboration and commitment, during rehearsals and performances. I now observe that performance is a key to connecting knowledge to experience. Crossing the finish line is powerful.

Moments leading to the finish line can be equally touching. Before a recent Good Friday performance during our annual garden planting, a nervous teen shared with her team, "Even if this doesn't go well, maybe what's in our hearts will rub off on someone out there who needs it." Despite anxiety, she found purpose in shining her light to illuminate the hearts of others.

That period right before emergence of dreams into reality is like a chrysalis, a precious pocket of rapid realization. Then, the applause and acceptance received after hard-earned spotlight can lift away shame and anxiety. It is heartwarming to watch a child shift in an instant from self-consciousness to a glow of accomplishment.

Finally, team culture, belonging, and family make up the fourth stage. Stage three usually triggers this connection, but it can happen in other stages. Here at the Ranch, we're creating our own dance culture. While we learn from dance languages with their

own rich histories, how they blend together within our community creates a dialect specific to us. What happens in this fourth stage connects us to the bigger picture and gives us the sense of contributing to something beyond ourselves . . . it makes all the effort feel worth it, no matter the outcome.

Dancers find home in the hearts of each other, in our team circles, and in the greater network of those in the world with a shared passion. The hope is to open doors to find dance families wherever they go, which can provide support systems and a sense of belonging. They can relate to groups outside of their foster care situation, broadening their horizons in art and culture. They learn another way a family can grow from nonbiological roots through the creation of a unique shared experience, bringing to life something that wouldn't have existed without all individuals involved, walking through vulnerability and praise as a unit.

Each day of work, I get to witness the incredible resilience and strength of young souls as they navigate through the 'dirt' of hard beginnings, watching seeds of learning and transformation take root in unique and indescribable ways. Dance truly has tremendous power to change lives. My mission each day is to share an art form I love, but also to go beyond the surface of steps or routines. The four stepping stones provide the structure, but they are also an avenue to dip into deeper waters.

47th Annual Good Friday garden planting

Connecting the story of spring renewal with the miracle of Easter

This year marked the 47th consecutive year that a vegetable garden was planted on Good Friday at HCYR. The same one-acre plot was once again sowed with tomatoes, peppers, squash and cantaloupe by the Ranch family.

In 1978, we gathered at this same hillside terraced garden and planted our first family vegetable garden. Ever since, the children have learned about sowing seeds in Spring and harvesting in Summer, tending and weeding while God does his work of transformation. The kids learn the rewards of work ethic, as well as the tasty value of home-grown vegetables.

Not only is this annual gathering among our oldest traditions, it's important because it involves children and adults coming together to share community life as one big family. It is also a time of renewal, a coming to life again as green returns to the trees and the earth all around us.

Spring also parallels the Easter story. Each year Founder Gary Priour tells the story of Easter weekend 2000 years ago when the darkest of days led to the most wonderful event in history.



HCYR dance instructor Camille Priour Green portrays the Holy Spirit in a performance with her dance team at the Garden Planting. The eight-member team danced to "Beautiful Things", and each dancer was choreographed coming to life to celebrate renewal and resurrection.

"Jesus was welcomed by crowds at the beginning of the week, but was rejected and crucified by Friday," he recounts. Priour then takes the Ranch family through that fateful Friday, from Pilate's steps in the morning to the lashing, judgment and crucifixion, to Jesus' last words and final breath at 3:00 p.m..

He describes the nine hours from dawn to 3:00 on that fateful Friday, recounting the events hour by hour as told in the Bible.

Gary then asks, "So why would anyone call this 'Good' Friday?" Hands shoot up: "Because He died for our sins, and rose again."

The Easter story, ending with the Resurrection, is reminiscent of the rebirth of earth after the long winter. John 12:24: "Unless a seed falls into the ground and dies, it will only be a seed; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." Gary suggests that they remember that scripture as they put seeds into the earth and cover them.



The soil is tilled and ready for the 47th annual garden planting on Good Friday, March 29. Each year since the first group of kids planted tomatoes and green vegetables in 1978, the Ranch family has gathered on this day, and after hearing the story of the first Good Friday 2000 years ago, they have planted seeds toward a new harvest for the family tables around the Ranch.



Easter festivities follow garden planting



Each year, after the traditional Good Friday garden planting, it's time for the annual Easter Egg Hunt (left), a visit from the Easter Bunny (right), plus a family meal at the Community Center. The meal is followed by indoor and outdoor games, including swimming, skating, hiking, and other recreational activities. It's a fun and uplifting opportunity for the whole family to share traditions, eat a meal, and play together on a warm spring day! The weekend ends with chapel, reminding all of us of the greatest of all our reasons to smile and be grateful. He is Risen!

