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Ranch Holidays bring Joy!

... and much Thankfulness ...

by Tony Gallucci, Publications

We are smack dab in the middle of the greatest season . . . from Thanksgiving to giving our children the Christmas they never had, we celebrate it all end to end.

We invite our friends out every year to partake in turkey and all the fixins' the week of Thanksgiving. Ranch children read expressions of thanks, we may put on a show with a little music and dance, we say a prayer, and we dig into the big bird, with dressing and cranberries, corn and green

bean casseroles, and top it all off with pumpkin, pecan, and apple pies with whipped cream.

Our faithful readers certainly understand the histories of our children, how they have come from such desititute and neglected situations that many of them never experienced such a big meal and family gathering for Thanksgiving. We strive to right that wrong by bringing them into our festive family traditions.

And so, likewise, is their experience with Christmas. Before they arrived here many of our kids never experienced

a tree in their home, wrapped presents under that tree, lights on the house, visits with Santa, early Christmas morning surprises. We spare nothing to make this the best Christmas they could ever have, thanks in large part to our wonderful donors and benefactors, volunteers and staff.

Our Christmas season starts with several holiday events including the Lighted Parade and Tree Lighting in Kerrville, and the Ingram Tree Lighting and Parade. Those make for nights warmed by hot chocolate and

family hugs, and put everyone in the mood for a wonderful few weeks of sated celebrating.

All the while our own coterie of magic elves are working away wrapping presents, baking cookies, and stuffing stockings. And then, right before Christmas, we gather once again as one huge family to celebrate the "Reason for the Season" with a wonderful tamale dinner, and a chance to whisper wishes in

Santa's ear. He gives each child a stocking made specially for them, and with a "Ho Ho Ho" is off to his next stop.

All year long we hope that this is our kids' 'Happy Place' but this is our happiest season. With all of our blessings we wish to share with you a message of peace for a Merry Christmas and a wonderful New Year. Thank you for helping us make this so for all our children.



Dance teacher Camille Priour's class performed several dances at this year's Thanksgiving feast, culminating in this finale (left) showing off the message of the season. Thanksgiving week is also the time for the Kerrville Lighted Christmas Parade and Tree Lighting. The Ranch built, decorated, and showed off this Narnia-themed float in this year's parade (above).

Season of giving completes circle of love

by Clint Rangel, BSRC Campus Director

I have known Sue Peterson since she began bringing Thanksgiving meals to feed our Big Springs Ranch family back in 2015. This year she shared more of the story of why this is a ‘circle of love’ dating back to 2007, when she brought her son Jonathan to meet a horse named Rhythm.

Jonathan was a boy of about 12 years. He and his mother and two older brothers, had moved back to their small family ranch in south Texas. He loved their country life home where he had been born.

To appease his longing to learn and become a part of the community, he joined the local 4-H Club. Having a love for horses, and hoping to have one of his own someday, he signed up for Horsemanship. He had a wonderful coach who offered him weekly riding opportunities at her ranch.

Jonathan started a rabbit business to raise money to buy a horse. His coach had told him he needed to purchase one in order to get a good one, so he was working hard to save up more money. The long wait was really difficult.

One day, his coach called after one of the riding visits and said she thought she had found a horse for Jonathan. They asked how much, to which she replied, “Free to the right person.” His coach made arrangements to take her truck and trailer to Big Springs Ranch for Children to meet the horse and Ranch Manager Michael Priour the next day. She was hopeful this would be a perfect match.

Upon arriving at the ranch, they made their way into the barn, where the horse named Rhythm was being groomed. She was a beautiful horse! It was love at first sight!

Michael led Rhythm to the arena for a trial ride. It was a thrilling experience and an exciting answer to prayer. Jonathan and Rhythm were off to a great start!

Michael was also pleased with the match, so Rhythm was loaded and off to her new home.

As years passed, Jonathan’s mom reflected on Rhythm’s former home and the children who lived there. Having compassion for them, she wanted to somehow help and give back for the great blessing Jonathan had received. Arrangements were made to revisit the Ranch to take some donations of clothing for the children. In that visit and tour that included learning the history of how the Ranch came to be, she was deeply moved to do more. She asked about how the children celebrated Thanksgiving. When she was told that only limited funds were available for a Thanksgiving meal, a dream was sparked in her heart and mind to make Thanksgiving a very special day for every child there. Soon the planning began to make that Thanksgiving in 2015 the best Thanksgiving ever!

Friends and family joined in, giving donations and making preparations to deliver meals to each of the homes at the Ranch. In 2016 the first annual Thanksgiving Feast was served at the Community Center. It was amazing how



Sue Peterson delivers 2023 Thanksgiving meals for Big Springs Ranch families, continuing a 9-year tradition.

everyone came together to create such a beautiful event, complete with colorful fall decorations and an amazing feast. The tradition was carried on until COVID began in 2020 and accommodations were made even then for dinners to be delivered to the individual homes for each family.

Everyone, young and old, who has participated in this annual event has been blessed and thankful for the opportunity to give and serve. And it is encouraging to reflect on how the gift to a young boy of a horse named Rhythm sowed seeds for ongoing blessings for the children.

A lasting tradition in the midst of change

Editor’s Note: Camille Priour was born into the Ranch family in 1993, and she has thus been present for 30 Thanksgiving banquets. She produced the program this year, and then wrote reflections.

by Camille Priour Green, HCYR Dance Teacher

Thanksgiving is a sentimental holiday to me, for three main reasons:

Gratitude. A human life has constant ups and downs, and the painful parts can burden our joy. The descent into winter holiday season can bring up trauma and grief. Thanksgiving is a day when we intentionally set aside those burdens and focus on what we do have . . . warm food, shelter, people who care for us. I know each member of our ranch family carries a story that could bring even the most stoic to tears, and I believe the depth of this is what makes offering thanks an especially magical moment to share within this particular community. To our houseparents who sacrifice day in and out to care for our children, we are so grateful . . . whether the children see it now or appreciate it later, your seemingly thankless work will not go unnoticed.

Togetherness. At age 30, this is my 30th year celebrating Thanksgiving with the Ranch. Truly, this banquet on Monday of Thanksgiving week has been the most consistent tradition since I was a baby. The residents I’ve broken bread with on this Monday in this Community Center are still important figures in my life. Things change within a biological family, and traditions shift as elders pass or the family tree continues to evolve . . . from my perspective, this Monday banquet IS my family Thanksgiving dinner. I know it will always be a warm gathering. That consistency is not only important to me, but I imagine to those who come here with very little consistency in their pasts.

The original Thanksgiving was shared by people who were not biologically related, and that spirit carries on with us on this night.

Time to reflect. Thanksgiving starts off a reflective time of the year, leading us to our eventual Christmas wishes and New Year’s

resolutions. We start with what we are thankful for and incubate our Christmas-spirited dreams in winter hibernation, leading us to plans for progress at the turn of a new year, a fresh start.

That reflection led me to the theme of this year’s program. Each year I like to build the message of our closing dance by reflecting on a theme that has been present in the community over the past year. Last year we focused on the symbol of the Phoenix taking flight, rising from the ashes.

Although change is constant, the word ‘change’ came to the surface a lot this year in our Ranch family.

So I began workshoping with the children to create a dance. We started with a song by Jose Gonzales with lyrics about change:

*Some things will change, some remain
Take your time, build a home
Build a place where we all can belong*

We then worked to come up with choreography with symbols and story lines to represent change – they embodied butterflies, fall leaves, even the rising and setting sun. They included a quick change to shift energy from serious and graceful to fun and silly. We discussed things that touched my soul. Our littlest girl, seven years old, said, “Change is really scary, but it can also be good, too! Like, if someone bullies you but they change their mind and they can just be thankful for you instead.”

Our children must sometimes deal with scary changes, like having to pack up and move to another placement. Some changes are more subtle or neutral – changes that happen within, like growing up, meeting a new friend, or watching a flower bloom.

What we can learn to be grateful for over time is the potential for beauty to sprout from change. Sometimes change doesn’t work out, but sometimes the results are greater than we could have imagined . . . and that’s what makes the risk worth it. Change and faith go hand in hand.

The girls even embodied this in their dance rehearsals. We

had a week and a half to prepare with a six-girl team. A few were new to performance. When some of them doubted that we could pull it off, I reminded them of our theme – it is normal to feel that before you create something beautiful.

When nerves were high just before going onstage, we joined hands as a family. Mama Carol said a prayer, and the girls continued on to perform beautifully. I could not have been more proud.

A Poem for Thanksgiving 2023

Today I was thinking about my past . . .
Thinking about how different today is.

Today I have people who care.
People who want me . . . for me.

Here I don’t have to worry about
what will happen when I go to sleep
Or if the food is poisoned or bad,
or if I will get to eat at all.

I don’t feel misplaced anymore.
I feel wanted AS A PERSON.

This Thanksgiving and Christmas
I’ll be with people who care about me.
I have something to look forward to.

So thank you,
HILL COUNTRY YOUTH RANCH,
I’m not afraid of the dark anymore.

From a 16-year-old Ranch girl

Letters Home – *following a life that has been a treasure to many*

by Carol Priour, Fine Arts Director

The sunlight coming in just beneath my office window shade provided a spotlight for the small wooden chest that sat in the corner, taking my thoughts to the treasures inside, including a very special gift from Steven Ayala, HCYR resident in the 1990s.

For years I kept special gifts from the children at the Ranch inside that little chest. Some of the most precious gifts I have ever received were tucked away there . . . hand-made gifts, dried flowers, special rocks, and notes or drawings for “Mama Carol”. The blue first place ribbon from Steven Ayala, who would later become Sergeant Steven Ayala in the U.S. Army, and now “Daddy” to his four beautiful and beloved children. Steven was still in high school when he gifted me the first-place ribbon he had won at a countywide art show. The day Steven gave me his blue ribbon, I had returned from the art show and told him how proud of him I was. He beamed.

In the abusive and neglectful family he came from, he wasn’t accustomed to praise. He was truly an exceptional artist, and if I didn’t select the right words then to tell him that, I know he saw it in my face. Like all good art, Steven’s drawing, with tears streaming down a man’s face, said a lot.

Steven, his mother, and five siblings came to the U.S. when he was nine. The children were verbally and physically abused by their alcoholic mother and stepfather, and never had enough food. He had been mocked by schoolmates because of his clothing, and sometimes slept in parks to escape the violence in his home. The younger children reported that Steven received the worst of the abuse for his efforts to protect them.

When his mother and stepfather kicked them all out of the house, Steven did his best to protect them and find them food, sometimes in dumpsters. A man in a military uniform, seeing the children walking in the rain with plastic bags of clothes, offered them a place to stay until he could find their mother. When he couldn’t, he called CPS,

and the children came to live at HCYR.

Steven came to live at the Ranch with three of his siblings in November of 1997, two days after his birthday. He was the oldest and obviously his siblings’ protector. He became a leader at the Ranch, always watching after the littler ones, and becoming a star in our fine arts program, learning to play drums, draw, and dance.

Steven remembered praying when living on the streets, “Lord if you love me and you have a purpose for me, you will change my life and you will help me. My body is worn out and my eyes cannot cry more tears.”

Steven graduated from the Ranch program in 2000 and settled into adult life. We received a letter from him in 2007, saying he felt called to serve in Iraq. Of course, we had concerns for him, but we knew his happiness would always lie in making the world a better place for others. When he left, our prayers went with him. Here is part of the first ‘letter home’ we received from Steven while he was in Iraq:

Dear Gary,

Well, here I am in Al Kisik, Iraq. Supplies are very limited. Anything we have, we use it wisely since we are located inside an Iraqi military base without a PX (store). Any care packages would be appreciated. I hope to make it back from my second tour so I can visit and chat with you and Carol. It has been quite an experience to be in the military and in a combat zone where mortar rounds and car bombs go off regularly. Being on convoys are the scariest rides of any soldier’s life, since at any given moment an IED might be detonated.

It has been such a long time since I have seen you guys and I want to show appreciation for all the hard work and effort you and your staff provide to make a difference in the lives of those who need you. I had the best time in my life at Hill Country Youth Ranch, no lie. I know there were many rules to abide by, but none of the rules bothered me because I knew within me that the rules were for my own safety. I hope

that you keep providing the same assistance to many others.

I have been in the military for almost five years now, and I don’t regret the time spent in my country’s service. It has made me mature. And it has made me see the qualities I have within me that I can share with others. If everything goes well,



Above, Steven (left) with his three younger siblings after arriving at HCYR in 1997. Top right, Steven (left) as Sergeant Ayala in Iraq. Steven did several tours in the Middle East.

I will visit when I return. I want to see you guys and visit my old home. God bless, and I will stay in touch – Sgt. Ayala

Our generous community responded to Steven’s request for care packages to share with his fellow soldiers as well as some of the poor locals in Iraq. Steven’s next letter so clearly illustrates the constant faith, care for others, and hope for a better world that our Steven still has, despite all the struggles he has navigated in life.

Hey Family,

All is well in my world this day before Thanksgiving. I have been very busy every single day. I will be here in Iraq until next summer, so anything you guys can send us will be great. Care packages are so appreciated, and I can share them with others who may not receive such items. Hygiene products, beef jerky, and other non-perishable supplies are well received out here in our spot, and the rat traps have done their job, thanks. Our area of the country is still not very safe for us or for the citizens of Iraq. Two days ago I was on a convoy with a group of guys. Well, on our way back, we could see from a distance three goats dead on the ground. To our dismay, they had tripped an IED. The animals stepped on the wires before we got there. Therefore, the IED went off and, in turn, that saved our lives. Now tell me, isn’t GOD merciful?! God will do anything to take care of His people. He did on that day and on many other occasions I have witnessed.

It was nice hearing from you and I will continue to send reports. Thank you so much for the encouragement and support, it really means so much to all of us out here. Thanks Guys – Sgt. Estevan Ayala

After 15 years in the Army, Steven returned to San Antonio in 2017 to be with his wife and children and opened a construction business, which is doing well. Since he had become an Army Chaplain while in the service, he visited several times and spoke to our Ranch children at Sunday chapel.

This past summer, Steven wrote us a note, in lieu of a visit, to tell us how busy his construction business had become, and, as always, talking about God’s hand in all of it.

Dear Ranch Family,

About five years ago, as you know, I ventured into the world of construction in the field of remodeling and repairs. It has not been an easy journey, but God has been good and given me favor along the way. I have to put God in everything for He is the vine indeed. Just as you taught us at the annual Good Friday garden planting, it takes time for the seedling to emerge from the ground and then slowly grow.

I am reminded of your work in my life when I came to the Ranch. I was not okay: I needed that extra help. I was in a messy spot, as I had been left stranded and alone. The right people came along and spoke life and envisioned me doing fine. Words are powerful, and I was careful to hear the words that were spoken in the Chapel by you and others on Sunday mornings. I would sometimes pretend that I was not listening. But I did listen, and I believed.

And I clung to the Word of God. I am a living testimony of how a messy life and broken heart can be restored. When the world saw a lost cause; God saw me with love, hope, and a life ahead. And God sent the right people, in His timing, to restore me.

Always, Steven Ayala

And here’s what I wrote back to Steven:

Steven,

I pray you will know what a gift you have been to your families . . . to your children and beautiful wife, to your Youth Ranch family, and to your larger family of all the humans that live on this Earth.

We thank God for your life that has inspired and encouraged so many.

Thank you for keeping on when life got hard – a life that has encouraged countless others to keep on, too. You are a treasure, and we love you so much, Precious One.

Your family always. Mama Carol



Steven with wife and children on a recent vacation at the beach.

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 from October 6 through December 1, 2023.

In Memory Of:

PEGGY ADAMS
Billie Stoepler
JAISON BAULICK
JoAnn Hagel
WANDA BEAVER
Mary Sue Fontenot, Karen
and Family
ROSANNE TEAL BECKER
Dr. Laurence Becker
Tim Campbell
DEAN & MARION BOWEN
Ron & Cindy Kuhn
TRUDY BRUNE
Charlie Brazil
PRESTON CHAMBLISS
Mike & Betty Lou Schofield
HULDAH REAL CUNNINGHAM
Richard & Susan Crummel
SANDRA KAY DAVIS
Ronnie & Rochelle Lumpkins
TOM DEUPREE
Philip & Brandi Capps
GLORIA DOUGHERTY
Keith Hill
AUGUSTINE ESTRADA
Mary Estrada
ELLA REAL FISHER
Richard & Susan Crummel
ED FOREMAN
Barbara Foreman
ERICH FRANKE, JR.
HCYR Auxiliary
Bob and Cynthia Moran
ANTHONY HECTOR
“BUDDY” GARCIA
Karen Gibson
SHIRLEY GAUTIER
Tom Gautier
JACK GROFF
HCYR Auxiliary
ELLA HAMLYN
Kermit & Marian Strackbein
LLOYD HARPER
Kevin & Connie Braziel
Ronnie & Rochelle Lumpkins
EVELYN HENRY
Patrick Henry & Terry Graham
Mac & Lady Jane Percival
TOM HILLIN
HCYR Auxiliary
DAVID HOPF
Kevin & Connie Braziel
Ronnie & Rochelle Lumpkins
TED HUDSON
Doris Ivy & Family
DARRELL JONAS
Mary Jane Morrison

HUGH NED JONES
Kevin & Connie Braziel
GWEN GRONA KAISER
Ronnie & Rochelle Lumpkins
CAROLYN “DITTY”
KINDERVATER
Mary Jane Morrison
MYRTLE KIRCHHOFF
Sylvia & Edward Albrecht
RUBY SOLBRIG KLEIN
Betty Moellendorf
LOUELLA KOCH
James Avery Craftsman
Rob Kling
Peggy McCullough
FRANCES LAUTNER
Maxine Nielsen
JERRY & LOUISE LEINWEBER
Lester & Candice Stewart
PEGGY LOPRESTI
Amy Walsh
SUZANNE MOONEY
Nancy & Ed Wallace
JOE MORRISON
Mary Jane Morrison
BETTY MOSER
Lloyd & Rae Marquis
DODIE NAIL
Junell Holmer
LARRY NEVELS
Linda Nevels
ANDREW NIELSEN
Kevin & Connie Braziel
Vickie Ahrens & Kenneth
Lindig
EDWARD NOBLE
Ruth Hatch
RUDY OLFERS
Royce & Karen Herbort
MIKE PARKER
HCYR Auxiliary
Bob & Cynthia Moran
LORRAINE PRESSLER
Edward & Sylvia Albrecht
EDNA REAL PRIOUR
Richard & Susan Crummel
FELIX “SONNY” REAL, JR.
Richard & Susan Crummel
LARRY REED
Sylvia & Edward Albrecht
STEVEN REEH
Sylvia & Edward Albrecht
JOHN RILEY
William T. Cobb
ANDY RITCH
Ruth Hatch

DEE ROBINSON
Rob Robinson
ARLENE ROGERS
Mary Jane Morrison
PAUL ROSIPAL
Wade & Linda Hawkins
Kaase & Alford Family
MARY JANE RUHLAND
Clarence & Elaine Jenke
PAULETTE SAUNDERS
Ed & Mary Doyle
Ruth Hatch
DOLORES SCHAEFER
Doris Ernst
EVELYN SCHAEATTER
Jeanne Dietrich
Ikey Peter
Margaret Priess, Gwen &
Peter Arhelger, Jason &
Rebecca Priess
BETTY JO SCHLADOER
Sylvia & Edward Albrecht
ROSEMARY SHEIVES
Nanette Newbern
CAPT. CHARLES S. SMITH
Janet Smyers
DYRON SMITH
James & Sherri Burdell
SCOTT & JULIA STEHLING
Gary & Carol Priour
Lester & Candice Stewart
JACK STEVENS
Richard & Susan Crummel
Gary & Carol Priour
BILL STURROCK
Mike & Kay Barclay
META REAL SYFAN
Richard & Susan Crummel
SARA WALTERS
Evelyn Anderson
SETH WEATHERFORD
Bob & Cynthia Moran
JOHN PAUL WHITE
Ronnie & Rochelle Lumpkins
WRILEY WAYNE WHITE
Pam & Richard Puig
ROBERT WICKE, JR.
Claire Gilmore Nelms
BRAD WILLIS
Kenny & Rita Dexter

In Honor Of:

REX BRAND
Birthday
Sheila Brand
CATHERINE CARSON
Nikolas Morgan
Gary & Carol Priour

AVERY & ALLIE ESSER
Merry Christmas
Mary Jane Morrison
JACOB FAVELA
Video “Forgiven”
Luis & Juliana Perez
ZEBADIAH GARZA
Ashley Phillips
JUDY JONES
Birthday
Frances Andrews

MAYSEN, JAMES & RYAN
LESTER
Merry Christmas
Mary Jane Morrison
ANN PRICE
Kathleen Brinkman
TYREE THOMPSON
Birthday
Sharon Joseph
NORMA WILTON
Birthday
Frances Loving

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 August 5 through December 1, 2023. Generous cash donations came from **Brock and Samantha Carroll, Steamboat Springs CO**; **Amy Walsh, Vero Beach, FL**; **Robert and Brenda Peterson, Driftwood,**

TX; **Allen Keller Company, Fredericksburg, TX**; **Nikolas Morgan, Houston, TX**; **John Hopkins, Ingram, TX**; **Jeffrey and Kathy Baker, Kerrville, TX**; **Henry and Karen Wulff, Kerrville, TX**; **Merrie Cavanaugh, San Antonio, TX**; and **Richard and Debora Huckins, San Antonio, TX**. Thank you to these new members, and to all our **500 Club** members, for your generous support.

The Youth Ranch in brief

- A childcare family established officially on March 21, 1977
- Our mission is to provide a safe, loving, and life-enhancing Christian environment for children and young adults
- 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
- Adoption services including training and support of families
- Home and lifetime family to over 2150 children in 46 years
- Alumni Association with 750 members who maintain positive relationships with their HCYR family and one another

Eclipse brings NASA to HCYR

On the first of two monumental celestial events to center on the Ranch, we were graced with the presence of a professional scientist from NASA who taught our kids all about the eclipse.

Grace Beaudoin showed them how the moon passes between the earth and the sun, leaving us in the shadow. She brought moon maps and, as a special treat, she had several rocks recovered by missions to the moon's surface. Finally, as the hour approached she set up a special projector that displayed the progress of the



NASA Scientist Grace Beaudoin eclipse on a screen.

And of course everyone got to view the eclipse through special safety-certified glasses, a gracious donation of the Hill Country Astronomers.



NASA Scientist Grace Beaudoin (above) projects the eclipse for our kids to enjoy. Grace is a 2011 Ingram Tom Moore grad who went on to get a B.A. in Geology from Berkeley and a Ph.D. in Geoscience from UT Austin. At the invitation of her ITM classmate and HCYR Dance Teacher Camille Priour, Grace came home to volunteer her time to help our students understand this celestial event. She brought along some moon rocks and moon maps. At right, Bruce Barton of Hill Country Astronomers presents HCYR with a donation of 500 safety glasses for viewing the eclipse.



Connections take time to grow

by Gary Priour, HCYR Founder

From the first meetings with the first children who arrived at Hill Country Youth Ranch in 1978, I knew that we had our work cut out for us. They had come from chaos, both at their family homes before removal, and in the system that was removing them. I could see the distrust in their eyes, expressions, and behaviors.

They came to beautifully furnished houses, and each received a loving welcome. Years later as HCYR Alumni, they would recall feeling the love and acceptance on Day 1 at the Ranch. But it was years before they could accept the caring, much less communicate about it.

So our job was to keep each child, and everyone around them, safe in the short term. I also knew there would be more to healing, and that it would take time.

In my life, I had learned to cope with childhood trauma, but hadn't looked past it until a special men-

tor took a moment when I was a senior in high school to say something to me one day after class. Kathleen Akin, my high school English teacher, had known me since I was on the 8th grade debate team. She had observed me for five years, and knew about my troubled teenage life. What she said that day entered my heart and soul and stayed forever.

"Beyond this temporary foolishness," she said, "I see purpose in your life."

I suspect it had taken her years to choose just that moment, a moment when everything in my future was at risk. And boom. I was on a different path. And ready to hear what she had said.

There are windows that open, sometimes just briefly, when the child walled off by pain can listen, if only for a moment, and see beyond the wall. Those win-

dows are created by caring, but do not usually open right away when trauma is deep. It is an art to notice when the window does open. The rest of the time we keep planting seeds and watching.

Our welcoming activities are not usually specific to the individual child. But building trust is. We start looking for clues like gifts, motivations, and responses on that first day. What works matters, and it takes time to learn.

We thus point to the need for 'deferred gratification' in introducing staff to this calling. We train them to not take the rejection of early caring personally, but to stay the course, caring as if it were making all the difference, because it is. I have had alumni tell me that something I said 20 years ago changed their lives, though I may not recall that moment until they share it.

Auxiliary Twine

Dear Friends,

Happy Holidays! I am so grateful for the Hill Country Youth Ranch. It gives me purpose and a passion for my life. The HCYR and Auxiliary are truly a family. I am honored to be a part of such a committed community of servants.

Christmas is always such an exciting time of the year, for many reasons! The auxiliary members gather in the basement of the Ranch's General Store to wrap hundreds of presents for the boys and girls! As we wrap, we are in awe of the newest and latest games and toys and have not a clue what they are or their purpose! We may say, "Wow, my grandchildren don't get this much."

That may be true, but my grandchildren weren't raped by their dad or uncle, my grandchildren were never 'pimped' by a parent for drug money. My grandchildren were never beaten, starved or locked in a closet. My grandchildren don't have to ever see one of their parents shot in front of their very own eyes. My grandchildren don't have to worry about being abandoned.

Why does Krystle Ramsay, Executive Director, and staff want to make Christmas magical for each child? Because of the all the things that my grandchildren will never have to experience. 'Things' don't erase the memory or erase the scars, but for a little while each child can feel the magic of Christmas.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. I pray God's blessings on you this holiday season.

Grace and peace,

*Cheryl Sieker, President
Hill Country Youth Ranch Auxiliary*

Big events on the horizon for our kids!

Art Show opens at HCAF in January

HCYR's advanced art students are preparing for an art show at the Hill Country Arts Foundation that runs from January 19 to February 23, 2024. Advanced Art, with high school credit, is a program for gifted artists – for those who have special gifts in one or more of the visual arts, with our job being, as with all our Enrichment Programs, to help

them develop these gifts. The program is both therapeutic and gift-enhancing. The art work of traumatized children is often stunningly beautiful, and full of transformational insight.

Livestock Shows also begin in the new year

Our championship-winning 4-H team, led by Brune School Science teacher Tripp Davenport, is fully engaged in preparing animals for the 2024 Livestock Show season.

Competition begins on January 11 at the Real County Show in Leakey. Five of our kids will be showing pigs, three will show rabbits, and four will compete in the horse show. Several will move on to the big livestock show in San Angelo. Horsemanship and animal care are, like the arts, proven mainstays among our programs that promote healing and gift-building, leading to trust-based relationships with people as well as animals.

Foundations provide fuel for year-end giving

Children's Fund – Taking Care of the Basics

The end of the year is the greatest season for charitable giving and it's no different here at Hill Country Youth Ranch. As we look to wrap up 2023 on solid financial footing and start the new year strong, your contributions make all the difference!

We're excited to report that two of our Foundation partners have encouraged us to use their gifts as matching funds to stimulate more giving by midnight on December 31st. These foundations will match every dollar given, one-for-one, up to a specified amount for two key areas of funding.

The Children's Fund is our all-purpose source of unrestricted gifts to fill in all the gaps for the basic needs of the children in our childcare programs. State funding covers the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and direct care for the children, but not completely. For 46 years we have raised additional funds through faithful donors for our Children's Fund, which fills in the gaps to ensure that the basic needs of the children are fully met and that we can fund the administrative

and maintenance needs of our Ranch campuses. This year we set a goal to raise \$1 million of our \$7.8 million annual budget for this purpose. This year's goal is \$200,000 greater than last year's. To help us get there, a faithful foundation partner, who wishes to remain anonymous, has pledged \$125,000 in matching funds to stimulate another \$125,000+ in giving. If you choose to give to this campaign, just designate your check or online donation to the Children's Fund.

Enrichment Programming – Core Programs for Healing and Growth

During 46 years of providing an educational and life-enhancing environment for traumatized children and youth, seven core programs have proven their worth in lifting children and youth to see more in themselves than brokenness, allowing them to discover gifts, take new adventures in learning, develop

strengths, and find motivation as they continue to heal and prepare for adult life. These Enrichment Programs include Chapel and Christian Education, Horsemanship and Animal Care, Visual and Performing Arts, Recreation, Family Life Activities, Summer Programs, and Transitional Living for young adults

at our third campus, Enhanced Horizons. Our budget for these programs for 2024 is \$1,230,000. These vital programs are funded completely from private donations. We have met our goal for 2023 and now at the end of the year seek to start 2024 strong. To help us accomplish this the Hal and Charlie

Peterson Foundation has generously provided a \$100,000 matching grant to stimulate another \$100,000+ in year-end giving for our Enrichment Programs. When making your gift by check or online you can give to all the programs collectively, or designate a specific program for your support.

Transform your giving: Be strategic, give smart

Discover the power of Smart Giving to Hill Country Youth Ranch

Smart Giving represents a new generation of charitable contributions. It's an innovative set of donation methods, including Donor-Advised Funds (DAFs), Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCDs), stock gifts, and cryptocurrencies. Each offering brings unique tax benefits, allowing you to support our mission in a way that also maximizes your financial strategy.

Donor-Advised Funds

A Donor-Advised Fund (DAF) is like your own charitable savings account. You

contribute to the fund as frequently as you like and then recommend grants to nonprofits like ours, all while potentially earning immediate tax benefits. Our tool integrates with most major donor-advised fund sponsors, saving you time while streamlining the grant request process.

Stock Gifts

Donating appreciated stocks can provide substantial support to our cause and potentially help you avoid capital gains taxes and claim a tax deduction based on the full market value of your stocks.

When you donate securities, you make an outsized impact without taking money directly out of your bank account. Plus, neither you nor HCYR will be taxed on the gains for appreciated assets you donate.

Qualified Charitable Distributions

A Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD) is a direct transfer of funds from your IRA to a nonprofit, counted towards your required minimum distributions for the year, without treating the distribution as taxable income. A Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD) is a tax-efficient way for those 70 ½ or older to donate from their IRA, while also counting towards your annual Required Minimum Distribution.

Cryptocurrency Gifts

Cryptocurrency donations are a new, tax-efficient way to give. By donating cryptocurrency, you potentially avoid capital gains tax on the appreciation and can deduct the fair market value of the asset on your tax return. When you donate cryptocurrency, you make an outsized impact without ever selling the crypto yourself. That means neither you nor HCYR will be taxed on the gains for appreciated assets you donate.

To donate via any of these asset types

Go to <https://frwill.link/hcyr4> and select the appropriate tab.

Or use the QR Code below:



bittly

Note: Please consult with your tax advisor or financial professional before making a decision about Smart Giving. Your philanthropy is deeply personal and unique, and we want to ensure you are fully informed about your giving options.



Volunteers are how special events happen

by Gary Priour, Ranch Founder

The story of Hill Country Youth Ranch is, in large part, the story of volunteers coming to meet needs and fill gaps when there was not funding to accomplish what we had envisioned as a next step.

In 1976, what we were calling Hill Country Youth Ranch was just 107 acres of raw land outside of Ingram, and a new 501(c)(3) non-profit charter. The land was one big cedar brake.

I knew that God had planted the calling deep in my heart to build a village for abused and neglected children, but I had no money. I knew I needed to share the dream with others, so I sought opportunities to speak at civic clubs in the area. The response was wonderful. The Rotary Club donated a sign, the Optimist Club started a monthly fundraiser, and the Kiwanis Club decided to sponsor a rodeo at Crider's Rodeo and Dancehall. One of the ladies at the Lions Club volunteered to contact a friend, a road builder named Walter Masters (there wasn't even a road through the property).

On a cold day in December of 1976, Walter showed up with his road grader, Dr. Theron Hawkins brought his bulldozer and, with the help of a team of volunteers, Main Street was created from one end of the property to the other, allowing the first access for development.

A film crew from the local cable television station, Channel 10, came out to report on the volunteer day, and the reporter suggested I contact the station manager Bill Stacy about promoting the new adventure. That led to a 24-hour telethon in January of 1978, and the rest is history. The Homebuilders Association sent rotating crews to put up the first three buildings, all with donated materials and labor.

An Auxiliary was formed by local community leaders in the fall of 1977, and that created a pool of volunteers that decorated and furnished the first children's houses, hosted dedications, developed our incredible Thrift Shop, and still provides an extended family for the children and a connection for the Ranch to the community.

We opened in 1978 with donated office space in Ingram, volunteer houseparents and volunteer maintenance men. There were no paid salaries until 1980.

Volunteers have always been at the core of our ability to care for children, and make progress in

building and maintaining a quality environment. There are stories like the ones I've recited about the Ingram campus at both the other campuses, at Big Springs Ranch for Children and at Enhanced Horizons. I look forward to sharing more stories in future newsletters about the volunteer organizations that have served in the same way at these other locations.

Volunteers also host all our special events, like the 47-year-old Healing Hearts Style Show that has run continuously since 1977, and many other fund-raising events like auctions and banquets. The Thrift Shop is operated with an all-volunteer staff and is open year-round. None of our special events occur without the help of volunteers. In addition, our children are blessed by mentors, guest teachers, holiday banquets, and Christmas gifts because of them.

COVID put a pause to many of these events during 2020 and 2021, though the Thrift Shop stayed open, and the Style Show went on virtually! Chicktime of Uvalde continued to provide activities at Big Springs Ranch, but the Ingram volunteer program stalled, and re-organizing it became difficult, even with all restrictions lifted in 2022.

One of the things I've learned over these past 46 years is that, when we stay at work following God's calling, He will put angels in the path to help. Our job is to stay alert while we work, and be open in sharing our needs. We may not always see the angels coming, but they will come. The mission of caring for outcast and troubled children is planted in many hearts, and a ministry like the Youth Ranch provides opportunity for the dreams of others to be fulfilled, including those with different careers and life histories. That was the community love story told in our beginning years, and it is once again the story of people coming to help us meet the need.

Some wonderful folks have come forward just this year to join us and help us continue to make progress in fulfilling our vision and in meeting the needs of our children. In fact, a whole new contingent of volunteers has joined our army. It feels like the beginning all over again. Renewal.



Thanksgiving Banquet - New HCYR volunteers



Thanksgiving Banquet - Presbyterian Church



Christmas gift wrapping in Santa's workshop



Chicktime teaches art at Big Springs Ranch



Serving Thanksgiving Turkey



At HCYR Thrift Shop: Auxiliary President Cheryl Sieker (right center) and Thrift Shop Manager Bridget Dale (left front) and volunteers present a scholarship to HCYR grad Christina (left center).

Stacy still remembers the day she arrived

Note from Gary Priour, HCYR Founder

Stacy Walters Garcia '97 still calls me to wish me a Happy Birthday or Father's Day, and posts regularly on our HCYR Alumni Page to encourage all her "brothers and sisters." Whenever she calls me, she always asks, "How are my little brothers and sisters doing?" In the most thorough ways possible the Ranch is Stacy's family. And she spreads the word every chance she gets, sharing about the Ranch with others.

As a twin born with complications, Stacy considers herself fortunate to be alive. She has cerebral palsy, and has faced the challenges that go with that, but she has never let it stand in her way of living a full life and expressing her love for God and family, or helping others. Stacy has served in the Salvation Army for 20 years and was named Volunteer of the year in 2016.

On October 23, Stacy called me and said, "Dad do you know what tomorrow is? It's the anniversary of my coming to live at the Ranch on October 24, 1993. It's been 30 years! Can I come out tomorrow and just walk around my home?"

So I picked Stacy up at 9:30 the next morning, and the Ranch staff prepared a surprise celebration. Stacy expressed genuine joy and thankfulness for the reception and filled our day with blessings.

by Tony Gallucci, Publications

On October 24th we had the honor of celebrating Stacy Walters Garcia on the 30th anniversary of her joining our Ranch family. We surprised her with a cake and party prepared by our staff.

Stacy arrived here on October 24th of 1993. After graduating from the Ranch in 1997, she went on to have a successful career at McDonald's, got married, and has found her life's mission in ministry for the Salvation Army.

She has never left the Ranch behind. She got married by Ranch Founder Gary Priour in the Meadows Chapel here on campus, has been to every Ranch reunion, has been featured speaker at Auxiliary luncheons, and loves to attend dedications of new Ranch facilities. She reminded us she added her voice to the choir in the recording of our anthem *Common Ground*. She often visits us to reconnect.

Stacy was visibly moved by the surprise party, thinking she was just coming to visit her home. "These are tears of joy," she began. "Y'all are doing wonderful work here. I don't even have to be here to know that. Y'all are what makes it happen. You make the impact."

We asked about the sequence of events that have led her to where she is today. "I have worked at McDonald's since 1998, and have also been volunteering at the Kroc. I married my husband Daniel in 2003, so we have just had our anniversary too," she said.

"There were eight girls in my house when I arrived, and I was so happy. Over time, I became close friends with my housemates. We had lots of fun. To this day, several of us are still really good friends.

"One of my most special memories was I remember Daddy Gary had to have surgery the year after I came here. One day we were at summer work crew, and Gary was doing morning rounds. We saw him walking our way, and I ran up to him to say, 'Gary, Gary, I am so happy to see you back!'"

Her happiness at having been part of the Ranch family is palpable. "I've learned that God has a reason for everything. He has a plan. I didn't want to come here to the Ranch, but it became my family," she said. "Even mom was for it. God put it in my path to show me the way to know Him – to use it for His Glory. He used it to show me what was going on. I serve God to serve God, but I had two great teachers to show me how to do that – Gary and Carol."

Her life is now filled with community at two places special to her. We asked about her work life. "I started at McDonald's as soon as I left the Ranch, and I have been there ever since – 25 years. That's another anniversary! I have so many relationships at McDonald's – I met my husband at McDonald's – it's a core part of my life. We met in 2000, got married in 2003. I had my 20 year



Stacy Walters Garcia is visibly moved by a surprise Ranch celebration of the 30th anniversary of her coming to the Ranch in 1993. Gary Priour brings her in to applause from Ranch staff.

wedding anniversary last month."

The other community revolves around her spiritual life. "I was going to church, doing Thursday night Bible Study at the Salvation Army, and I was doing a lot of praying about where I should be," she recalls. "God told me, 'I want you in the Salvation Army, that is where I will use you.' I became a Salvation Army Soldier in 2010, and I am part of the Women's Ministry. Right now I am helping out with Angel Tree Christmas lists.

"I teach the preschoolers at Sunday School. I kind of guide the young ones. I call them the 'fun' ones. It's so wonderful watching them learn and 'get it'.

"I also run the Prayer Table in the Kroc Center Lobby. I pray with, and for, many people. I say, "Do you want to pray? Do you have time to pray?" Also, anyone can leave a written request, and I pray for them at home when I'm reading my Bible.

Finally, Stacy wanted to get this message across. "Prayer is a powerful thing. That's not me – that's God talking through me. I'm not taking the glory. The Glory is His."



Stacy married her husband Daniel in 2003 at the Meadows Chapel on the Ranch (above). Ranch Founder Gary Priour performed the ceremony. Her marriage is one of several big anniversaries she celebrated in the past few months. Stacy gives God the credit for the blessings in her life, and she shares her testimony openly.



Stacy (at left, second from left) with her Stevens Lodge housemates getting ready for Prom in 1995. At the 1997 20-Year Ranch Reunion, she poses (second from right, at lower left) with other alumni and Mama Carol. Below, Stacy is being honored in 2016 as Kerrville Volunteer of the Year for her service to the Salvation Army.

