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## United We Run... Walk... and Sleep

Many of the children and youth served by UMCH have been running all their lives. They've fled abusive homes, heartbreaking pasts, and parents who left them to fend for themselves. They've run from heartache and fear, pain and loneliness, anger and disappointment.

"That's why UMCH is proud to host our Fifth Annual Steeple 2 Steeple Run," said Rebecca Morris, vice president of external affairs. "It gives us the opportunity to run on their behalf. There are thousands of kids who can't live with their biological families through no fault of their own. They deserve every opportunity other kids have, and that starts with a place to call home."

Scheduled for February 23 in West Homewood, a suburb of Birmingham, the 2019 event will offer a variety of options. There's a 5K and 10K, which are chip-timed, as well as a Fun Run/Walk. Those who can't make the event can choose the Sleep-In option or run a Virtual 5K anywhere they want.

Last year's race drew 534 participants and raised more than \$40,000 to support UMCH and its programs. "Steeple 2 Steeple has also been a wonderful way to promote awareness of our ministry and share stories of the children we serve," Morris said. "We forget sometimes that there are kids out there who don't have the basic



ABOVE: Two group home boys finishing S2S 2018.

necessities. Public support is crucial because it allows us to give them hope, stability, love, and the chance to just be kids."

Registration fees range from \$20 to \$50, depending on the event, and

*continued on page 2*

# The Heart of the Matter

Two stories have been on my mind a great deal lately. The first is found in the Gospel of John chapter 6. Jesus is followed up to a mountain-side by 5,000 tired, anxious, and hungry followers. To the disciples' surprise, Jesus feels the responsibility - and has the intent - to feed them. Philip responds, "Eight months wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"

In the crowd there is a young boy who has come to the far-away gathering prepared. The boy gives all that he has to Jesus, all the while not knowing what - if anything - he will get in return. Jesus takes the boy's gift, gives thanks for it, and all who were present were fed as much as they wanted. Twelve baskets were filled from all that was left over. The young boy most likely went home with much more food than he had when he left.

The other story literally hit much closer to home. On October 10, 2018 Hurricane Michael made landfall on the southeastern portions of the Alabama/West Florida Conference. Many homes and businesses of our Methodist supporters in the area were destroyed. Lives were forever changed. Many places of worship suffered significant damage, if not total loss.

And yet we at UMCH witnessed a miracle this December and January as White Christmas offerings began to flow in to us from our supporting churches. To our astonishment, several churches in Hurricane Michael stricken areas of Northwest Florida and Southeast Alabama - churches who faced tremendous losses from

the storm - surpassed their previous annual record for giving to the White Christmas offering. Almost all - even the most devastated of the devastated - insisted on offering something to God's children through the offering. You will read about some of these churches within this edition of Embrace.

How does one make sense of such extravagant generosity? And why, exactly, are these two stories tied together in my mind? I wish I knew the answers to these questions. But I believe there is something in Eugene Peterson's idiomatic translation of the Sermon on the Mount found in *The Message* (Matthew 5:3-9) that brings the two stories together:

*You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.*

*You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.*

*You're blessed when you're content with just who you are - no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.*

*You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.*

*You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves being cared for.*

*You're blessed when you get your inside world - your mind and your*



Blake, Tracy, Brooke, and Arden Horne

*heart - put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.*

*You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.*

There's an old saying that's often cited in times of loss and crisis - "You find out who your friends are." Such is the wisdom of the world. But the wisdom of Christ is different, and I suspect both the young boy in John and the devastated churches of the Alabama/West Florida conference have known something of it. The wisdom of Christ says "You're blessed when you choose - amidst your own loss - to be a blessing to others."

Indeed, you are a blessing - our donors and churches - to the vulnerable and orphaned children of Alabama and Northwest Florida.

For Christ and His Children,

**Dr. K. Blake Horne**  
President & CEO,  
United Methodist Children's Home

## Steeple 2 Steeple (continued from page 1)

there will be overall male and female winners, as well as age group winners. In addition, team awards will be offered in three categories: largest team fundraiser, largest overall church team, and largest church youth group.



For more information about Steeple 2 Steeple or to register for the event, visit [steeple2steeple.com](http://steeple2steeple.com) or contact Rebecca Morris at [rebecca.morris@umch.net](mailto:rebecca.morris@umch.net) or **205.837.0141**.

## Blondine Burke's Impact on Young Mothers is Far-Reaching

In the 15 years she's worked with the United Methodist Children's Home, Blondine Burke has mentored nearly 80 teen mothers, helped care for 37 children, and welcomed 26 babies into the world. She's taught the girls to change diapers, offered a shoulder to cry on, and clapped louder than anyone when they finally graduated from high school.

"I've been able to see these young girls, whose lives have been traumatic, be changed and go on to be successful," said Burke, who recently retired from the Babies First group home in Mobile. "The Lord sent me there, and it has been a blessing."

The group home serves girls ages 14-20 who are pregnant or have a young child and helps them reach their full potential. Most are in foster care because of abuse and neglect, some live at the home for

years, and others come and go before their babies are born. No matter how long they stay, Burke has always tried to be a positive influence in their lives. "They need love, guidance, structure and someone to show them that there is a different way," she said.

Burke, who served as a youth care worker and staff assistant, has always been a calming presence in the house and has coached the girls through their frustrations and fears, said Kristin Webb Alberda, vice president of programs for UMCH. When the young moms participate in UMCH trips or the annual Awards Weekend, Burke has always volunteered to keep the babies so that the moms have time to enjoy themselves.

"She is that sweet, sweet spirit we all need in our lives," Alberda said. "The girls know she is an advocate for them and that she loves their babies as much as they do."

*"She is that sweet, sweet spirit we all need in our lives,"*

— Kristin Webb Alberda, vice president of programs for UMCH



**ABOVE:** UMCH Director of HR, Joanie Busbin enjoying visiting Babies 1st.

**BELOW:** Staff, teens, and kids celebrating Ms. Blondine over a delicious lunch.

Burke said she's always tried to encourage the young mothers to graduate or get a GED so they could make a better life for themselves and their children. "That was one of the joys - to see them walk across the stage with a diploma," she said. "I always told them not to let their past define where they're going."

Burke made an impact in many different ways. Janet Rawls, a regional director for UMCH, remembers one young mother who decided to put her baby up for adoption. His new parents were planning the child's second birthday party and were distraught when they realized they didn't have any baby pictures of their son. "Blondine had all kinds of pictures she had taken to send them, and she was so excited to help," Rawls said. "They were able to put together a baby book."

Burke said that all of the mothers and children she's had the opportunity to serve will always remain in her heart. "Sometimes they felt all alone, but I told them, 'You've got us,'" she said of the Babies First staff. "It doesn't matter that we're not your family. Just know that God has placed us in your path."

# In the Face of Tragedy, Florida Churches Continue Support of UMCH Kids

Just months after Hurricane Michael ravaged the Florida Panhandle in October, killing more than 40 people and causing billions of dollars in devastation, United Methodist churches in the affected areas were focused on the needs of others.

In the midst of their own storm – some of the churches were destroyed or badly damaged, and many of their members lost everything they owned – the congregations still gave generously to UMCH’s White Christmas Offering, which benefits the abused and neglected children and youth in the ministry’s care.

“These are some of the most meaningful donations we have ever received from our United Methodist churches,” said Blake Horne, president and CEO of UMCH “We are incredibly humbled by the generosity these congregations have shown vulnerable and orphaned children, even while in the midst of their own devastation.”

Despite the fact that most of its members had extensive damage to their homes, Marianna First United Methodist Church made its largest gift ever to the ministry following the

hurricane. “When I announced the total, our congregation erupted in applause,” Pastor Nathan Attwood said. “It gives us great joy to continue to help others while we are both helping our community and receiving help from around the country.”

Ironically, Tracey Williams, executive director of UMCH’s Northwest Florida Ministries, was already scheduled to visit Marianna FUMC the Sunday after the storm to present the church with an award for its 2017 support. “We are a fairly small congregation, usually with around 150 in worship on Sunday morning, but we are very generous to UMCH,” Attwood said.

About 50 members were in worship that day, some covered in sawdust after operating chain saws all morning. “We were all pretty traumatized but we determined that morning that we would not take a step back in our



White Christmas gift,” Attwood said. “It was a great blessing on that difficult day to be reminded that we are a strong, generous, giving people who always help others in need.”

That’s the spirit that so many churches have shown in the aftermath of the storm. A week after the storm virtually destroyed both campuses of Lynn Haven United Methodist Church in Panama City, the church posted a message on Facebook. “We know it has been a challenging week but we hope that you have seen God’s provision, hope, and love in the midst of the hard,” it read. “We are a church on mission, and our mission to love and care for our neighbors has never been so important.”

Despite their losses, the Lynn Haven church family has been humbled by the outpouring of support from churches and individuals all over the country, according to Terry Tatum, executive pastor. That’s one reason the congregation was determined to continue to support UMCH.

“I can’t even begin to tell you how blessed we have been,” he said. “We felt like we needed to return that. The



least and the lost is what scripture tells us to be concerned with. The United Methodist Children's Home has been very special to our congregation for a long time and the mission is important. That is what Jesus wants us to be doing."

Williams said she was amazed but not surprised by the generosity of the churches. "They all have a long history of supporting the girls in our Gulf Coast Group Home in Milton, as well as the nearly 100 foster families in our area," she said. "We made a conscious effort not to request the churches to participate in White Christmas because we knew their own needs were so great. So many of them called us, though, looking for their White Christmas materials. That's a testament to their priorities and their hearts."

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Many congregations come together to worship after Hurricane Michael. **RIGHT:** Even through destruction churches come together to make sure our kids had a great Christmas.



## Beau Interiors Owners Open Hearts to UMCH Children

In addition to finding great deals on beautiful home furnishings and gifts, holiday shoppers at Beau Interiors in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida had the opportunity to help the children and youth of UMCH.

For the second year, owner Margie Perry donated a portion of the proceeds from the store's Christmas Open House to the ministry. She and her daughter Kristen Foley, vice president of sales and marketing, are longtime supporters of UMCH and members of Good News United Methodist Church.

"They have a huge heart for our ministry," said Tracey Williams, executive director of UMCH's Northwest Florida Ministries. "We have a lot of church donors but it's so nice to have businesses that support our important work as well. We are so grateful to them."

**RIGHT:** Margie Perry and daughter Kristin Foley are gifted in creating beautiful interior spaces and we're thankful for their generosity at their Christmas Open House.



## UMCH reunites teen mother with family

The whole time that 16-year-old Celeste lived at UMCH's Babies First group home, she never unpacked her suitcase. The young mother and her 2-year-old son had been virtually homeless for a year, living in cars, crashing on floors, and bouncing around from foster home to foster home.

When she finally arrived at UMCH, the staff first thought she kept her belongings packed since she was always on the move. Soon, however, they realized the real reason. "She was determined she was going home," said Janet Rawls, a regional director for the ministry.

Returning home is a dream for many of the children and youth in UMCH's care, but Celeste's story was different. Her home was more than 1,200 miles away, and the teenage mother was pregnant again, scared, and very hesitant to trust. "I have to commend our staff," Rawls said. "They had to think outside the box, but they jumped right in to help her."

Although she has a grandmother across the country who loves her, Celeste left home a few years ago to stay with her troubled mother, who lived in another state and likely lured her with false pretenses and plans to traffic her. A mom at 14, Celeste was left with her mom's abusive boyfriend after her mother was arrested on other charges.

Celeste ran away with her son, developing a pattern that would last for months. They'd move to one state, meet some friends and follow them to another, eventually landing in Alabama. A family member of one of Celeste's new friends tried to get them help, and the young mother and her child entered the Department of Human Resources' care. Celeste was appointed a guardian ad litem, an attorney who represented her and focused on her best interests, and she formed a bond with him and his staff. After several unsuccessful foster placements, DHR eventually placed them in UMCH's care.

"I am amazed at her survival skills," Rawls said. "She was living in horrible conditions for a long time, but through it all, she kept her baby safe, fed and healthy."

It took a while for Celeste to settle in at the Babies First home in Mobile, which provides residential group care for young mothers and their children. There they finally found stability and received medical care, nurturing, and regular meals.

"She was very agitated when she first arrived," Rawls said. "She wasn't sure who to trust, and she wanted to get back

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Saying goodbye is never easy for UMCH Staff but thankfully Celeste was returning to a loving home.



to her grandmother. UMCH staff, Celeste's guardian ad litem and the judge assigned to her case worked together to determine that her grandmother's home was safe and that her family desperately wanted her.

Because the process was a long one, the staff got Celeste a prepaid phone so that she could talk with her family whenever she wanted. "We knew that letting her stay in touch with her grandmother was going to be key to gaining her trust," Rawls said. For the first time in more than a year, Celeste had regular contact with those who loved her. She finally began to feel safe.

Rawls said she is grateful that the Babies First staff was able to provide love and normalcy for Celeste before she returned home. "It had been a long time since she'd had anyone trying to help her," she said. "It was a team effort, but we all had her best interest at heart. Celeste was thrilled to go home, but she was weepy when she left because she had formed a bond with our staff and loved them. I hope that love is something she can carry with her the rest of her life."

## 1890 Society

Consider including  
UMCH in your will.

If UMCH is already in your estate  
plans please let us know so that  
we can update our records.

### CONTACT:

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blake.horne@umch.net, or  
Rebecca Morris at 205-837-0141,  
rebecca.morris@umch.net

# Honorariums and Memorials

We are thankful for all gifts given in memory or honor of loved ones and friends. Honorariums for birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, and other special days are acknowledged to the honoree. Memorials are acknowledged to the bereaved family. No mention of the amount is made.

The following gifts were received between September 1, 2018 and January 13, 2019. UMCH makes every effort to accurately reflect these gifts in this publication. Should you see an error, please contact us at [info@umch.net](mailto:info@umch.net). Thank you for your continued support.

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