

A photograph of two young children jumping on a trampoline. The child in the foreground is a Black boy wearing a grey hoodie and blue jeans, with his arms raised and a wide smile. The child in the background is a girl with dark hair wearing a red shirt and blue jeans, also with her arms raised and a joyful expression. The trampoline has a colorful pattern of blue, yellow, and purple sections. The background shows a carpeted floor.

Evan Flowers and  
Joshukica Ellisor-Butler  
are students at Thompson  
Child & Family Focus.

**THOMPSON CHILD & FAMILY FOCUS  
WORKS TO HELP ALL TYPES OF KIDS**



# Making children whole

BY **JEN ARONOFF** | PHOTOS BY **JOHN D. SIMMONS**

Children come to Thompson Child & Family Focus in all states of repair: Young and optimistic, but perhaps at risk. On the brink of trouble. Or broken, having endured unimaginable trauma. From there, thousands of small steps add up to a big story of redemption, help and hope.

The local nonprofit provides therapy, foster care services, early childhood education, parenting classes and a range of other services to aid kids that have already fallen through the cracks elsewhere – and keep others from tumbling. If that sounds like a broad mission, well, that’s because it is, as the group’s president, Ginny Amendum, readily notes. But at heart, she says, Thompson is about making children whole and giving them tools to succeed.

The group’s roots stretch back about 125 years, to when it began as an Episcopal church orphanage in then-rural Matthews. Though children no longer stay for years, Thompson continues to maintain a residential campus there, to treat emotionally and mentally disturbed children. After reexamining its mission in the early 1990s, the organization recognized it could do more to help the many children it saw that had been “completely destroyed by family issues,” Amendum says. That’s when she came on board, to start an early childhood education program designed to reach at-risk children.

Now, Thompson focuses on prevention, intervention and support, with three centers around the area serving ages birth to 18. The group works widely with other social service agencies. The Episcopal church is no longer a significant funding source, and Thompson now operates on a combination of grant money, public dollars for some of its programs, an endowment and, most crucially, donations – about \$2 million a year. Thompson has not cut

its fundraising goals in the recession, but needs are rising and money is harder to find than it was a few years ago.

In the 2008-09 fiscal year, Thompson served 10,144 people, 137 percent more than in 2006-07, spokeswoman Kathy Rowan says, due to rising needs and new programs offered. Though many families struggle even in better times, Amendum notes, economic stress and increased unemployment can exacerbate already-fragile situations.

A year ago, Thompson completed a \$10 million capital campaign. The result was a new, \$6.6 million early childhood center on Clanton Road in west Charlotte, with 50 percent more space than the previous building in NoDa. New cottages will double the number of troubled kids the Matthews campus can house, to 48 from 24.

That’s important, because the campus is in many ways a last resort for children who don’t fit elsewhere, or who have blown other placements. They arrive with no sense of stability and security. For about six to nine months, they work to recover from issues that probably took a decade to develop. These are generally attachment disorders stemming from deep, early trauma such as sexual abuse, witnessing the murder of a parent or infancy spent in a foreign orphanage, where no one touched them.

If left untreated, the children could grow up to seriously hurt themselves and others. When they arrive in Matthews, many are already aggressive, destructive, angry and withdrawn. Some will jerk away when staffers try to pat their shoulder, or are immediately confrontational and poised to fight. Others are so withdrawn they simply won’t respond at all, even to simple questions such as “Do you know how to ride a bike?”



Though often far behind in school, Amendum says, they have incredible potential, having developed creativity and intelligence to cope with difficult situations.

Thompson staff works to make them feel safe, giving them their own personal space, with individualized attention and mentors who tuck each child into bed at night. The children attend school and chapel and get three meals a day, in a natural environment, and work to confront the trauma, seek closure and learn forgiveness. They learn to interact with other people in appropriate ways and stop harming themselves, and many begin to do well in school. As they laugh, play and accept chores at their cottages, signs of normal, typical children and healing emerge. Even what they write on their prayer slips at chapel changes, becoming more selfless and generous – from inward-focused responses like “I’m mad, I want to get out of here” to “Please help my friend do a good job singing in chapel today, I know she’s nervous.” From there, they return to biological, adoptive or foster families, with hope for permanence and stability.

#### EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER

The early childhood center, meanwhile, works to prevent other kids’ lives from reaching that point. Inside the cheerily decorated building are programs meant to combat the corrosive effects of poverty, substance and spousal abuse, teen parents and neglect, including a five-star rated preschool that serves children from a mix of socioeconomic backgrounds. The goal of the center, which is on Clanton Road, near West Boulevard, is to draw from

the surrounding community, prepare children and their families for elementary school and serve as an example for others.

“My kids are so eager to learn,” says Marlena Butler, 28, a mother of four whose two youngest children, daughter Joshukica, 3, and son Ja’Amechii, 1, attend the center. On a recent morning, Ja’Amechii relaxed in a teacher’s lap, sucking on a bottle, while Joshukica frolicked around a playroom, tossing bean bags with a teacher and fellow students.

“Every time they see a book, they pick it up,” Butler says. “Just to have that rush, that curiosity, I find that very cool.”

Butler, who lives in the Charlotte Housing Authority’s Boulevard Homes on nearby West Boulevard, landed a spot at the center after being picked from a lottery. Otherwise, she would have had to seek other day care, as she had for her older children.

She appreciates the integration of the arts and music into the curriculum, even for infants. She was shocked, she said, when her 8-month-old son came home with fingerpainting – something her older children hadn’t done until they were about 2. “My kids look forward to coming,” she says. Though her infant can’t talk yet, he makes happy noises when he enters the classroom. Her daughter comes home and talks about class, her classmates and her teachers.

The Thompson center, Butler says, makes an effort to involve the entire family. For instance, she also attends a parenting class there, and she says she loves the chance to discuss issues with other parents and teachers and receive feedback.



1. Thompson Child & Family Focus provides therapy, foster care services, early childhood education, parenting classes and a range of other services.  
 2. Teachers Kia Foster, center, and Galina Moraru work with their 2- and 3-year-old class.  
 3. Kia Foster shows Jackson Brailsford, 3, how to pour seeds into a bottle.

**'NOTHING SHORT OF MIRACULOUS'**

It's stories like that, Amendum says, that move her – and the nearly 700 volunteers Thompson welcomed last year.

She thinks of the young boy who struggled with behavioral issues who is now in high school, an artist, with solid grades and a creative outlet, on the path to becoming a happy adult. And the girl who endured repeated sexual abuse.

When she arrived at the Matthews campus, the girl had self-destructive tendencies. But after months of intensive therapy, she got up and danced at a volunteer appreciation luncheon, twirling ribbons with other children, accompanied by drummers. Putting herself out there like that was “nothing short of miraculous,” Amendum says. “Those seem like little things, but it's the indication that they're stepping forward.”

During the performance, the girl almost tripped on her ribbon. But she recovered. And with support and encouragement, she recovered and kept going – and in doing so continued picking up her life, moving on and, step by step, leaving the trauma behind. **SP**

► Portraits of Courage

Thompson Child & Family Focus' eighth annual Portraits of Courage luncheon - the group's main fundraising event - will be at the Westin Hotel, 601 S. College St., Charlotte, on May 11 from noon to 1 p.m. To attend or for more information, contact Toinette Wilkinson at 704-644-4371 or [twilkinson@thompsoncff.org](mailto:twilkinson@thompsoncff.org).



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