

THE CHAMPION

SUMMER 2015

OUR CHAMPION:

SOPHIA
BOOKER

Becoming
a Champion
for LIFE

4 Where Are They
Now? Ashleigh

5 A Mom Breaks
Her Silence

6 Lynchburg Region Builds
Bridges out of Poverty

7 Gifts of Hope Catalog:
Your Chance to Give


UMFS
Official Newsletter

SOPHIA BOOKER

Becoming a Champion for LIFE



Sophia Booker, former Project LIFE participant, is now the program's youth network coordinator. She found her voice as an advocate for youth in foster care and is helping others do the same.

SOPHIA BOOKER HEARD

about Project LIFE for the first time in 2010 when a friend invited her to a youth advisory council meeting where teens in foster care discuss shared challenges and ways to improve the system. “I just wanted to hang out with one of my friends who had planned to attend—I had no idea that this would become a permanent connection in my life that I would cherish,” Sophia said.

Sophia and her twin sister, Bridgette, entered foster care at age seven. Like many children in the system, they moved around several times and were without a permanent connection. Their final placement was with Linda Booker, who adopted both Sophia and Bridgette after they lived in her home for five years.

“Mom was determined that we were going to stay engaged and connected beyond our new home,” Sophia explained. Linda’s determination, plus the nudge from a close friend, brought Sophia to Project LIFE for the first time.

“When I started as a participant, Project LIFE gave me the tools I needed to help me build my own support network,” she said. “It’s like the program helped me to create

my own little family of people who supported me and loved me unconditionally.”

Bolstered by her support network, Sophia flourished at Project LIFE. As a regular participant in the youth advisory council, Sophia learned to advocate for herself and others in the foster care system. “The program helped me learn how to problem solve effectively,” Sophia explained. Project LIFE staff quickly recognized Sophia’s skills and potential and asked her to serve as a volunteer for the program’s bi-annual youth conferences.

As her connections to Project LIFE continued to deepen, Sophia remembers asking herself, “Man, wouldn’t it be cool to get paid to work for Project LIFE?” That’s exactly what happened in 2012 when the program hired Sophia as a youth counselor to help coordinate the summer learning program. During the summers of 2012 and 2013, Sophia helped to coordinate service learning activities for program participants including a partnership with A Grace Place, an adult care center in Richmond.

On March 5, 2014, Project LIFE hired Sophia as its first youth network coordinator. “I made sure I’d remember that date,” Sophia says. “It was and will

always be a proud moment in Sophia history,” she added.

In her current role, Sophia works with foster youth from across the state to help them develop the same skills and connections that she gained as a participant in the program. “I educate the youth on how to effectively advocate for themselves and for others,” Sophia explains.

“I want them to understand that they are valuable and that what they say matters. So, along with discussing their concerns within the system, I teach them to brainstorm solutions. When they do this, they can say that they made a meaningful contribution for a greater cause,” she said.

“Sophia is a remarkable young woman whose passion, energy and life experiences are gifts that have made room for her at UMFS. She brings a personal perspective that allows her to connect and engage with youth.”

— Adalay Wilson, associate vice president of programs

Jill Gaynor is Sophia’s mentor and a member of her Project LIFE support team. “Sophia is truly an amazing young woman with so much talent,

potential and drive. All she needed was a little help and support with basic life skills, and a cheerleader to occasionally pick her up when she stumbled. I can't wait to see where God will lead her, and I am blessed to be in her life to walk alongside her in this journey."

Sophia will continue her journey this fall when she enrolls in the social work program at Virginia Commonwealth University. "It took me so much sweat, tears and hard work to get to that moment. Along with my success in supporting kids in the foster care system, being accepted at VCU was one of my proudest moments. I'm so excited."



A Life Worth Living

Someone asked me what is a life worth living?
I told them paving your own road, never accepting what's in front of you.
When darkness surrounds your life...create your own light.
Deep inside there is one, you just have to believe that it's there.
That's a life worth living.
Abuse and neglect is not the only thing life has to offer.
I believed there was something better.
Foster care and adoption gave me a life worth living.
It gave me new opportunities...like Project LIFE. A life worth living.
As a participant and now as an employee, I accept the blessing.
Determination and overcoming all challenges presented in front of us, it's a reflection of my life.
My passion shines through with the help of amazing people on our team. Talia, Angie, Willie, Adalay and former employees like Ms. Jackie Cowan and George Mack...
Shout out to you all for not only being my co workers, but permanent connections in my life! That's a life worth living.

— Sophia Booker



Project LIFE serves Virginia foster youth ages 14-21 as they transition out of the foster care system into adulthood. Since its inception in 2009, Project LIFE has made an impact on more than 1700 foster youth.



Mission

UMFS is an unwavering champion for high-risk children and families, collaborating with communities to help them reach their full potential.

Vision

Creating a world where caring, opportunity and generosity are passed on from generation to generation — empowering all children to contribute to society as engaged citizens.

www.umfs.org

RICHMOND CAMPUS CHILD & FAMILY HEALING CENTER

3900 West Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23230
804.353.4461 • richmond@umfs.org

FREDERICKSBURG REGIONAL CENTER

1320 Central Park Boulevard, Suite 310
Fredericksburg, VA 22401
540.898.1773 • fredericksburg@umfs.org

NORTHERN VIRGINIA REGIONAL CENTER

5400 Shawnee Road, Suite 101, Alexandria, VA 22312
703.941.9008 • nova@umfs.org

TIDEWATER REGIONAL CENTER

5301 Robin Hood Road, Suite 122, Norfolk, VA 23513
757.490.9791 • tidewater@umfs.org

SOUTH CENTRAL REGIONAL CENTER

828 North Mecklenburg Avenue, Suite B
South Hill, VA 23970
434.447.8630 • southhill@umfs.org

LYNCHBURG REGIONAL CENTER

2420 Memorial Avenue, Lynchburg, VA 24501
434.846.2002 • lynchburg@umfs.org

FARMVILLE OFFICE

306 East Third Street, Suite B, Farmville, VA 23901
434.391.9076 • farmville@umfs.org

CHARLOTTESVILLE OFFICE

806 East High Street, Charlottesville, VA 22902
434.972.1718 • charlottesville@umfs.org

LELAND HOUSE

13525 Leland Road, Centreville, VA 20120
703.222.3558 • leland@umfs.org

CHARTERHOUSE SCHOOL

3900 West Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23230
804.239.1080 • info@chs4u.org

CHARTERHOUSE SCHOOL, EDINBURG

508 Picadilly Street, Edinburg, VA 22824
540.984.6266 • info-edinburg@chs4u.org

Ashleigh Finds a Family



Ashleigh and her boyfriend, Brandon

EVERY YEAR, ABOUT 18,000 YOUTH will emancipate — or “age-out” — from the foster care system when they reach age 18 or finish high school. Studies of youth who have left foster care show they are more likely than those in the general population to not finish high school, be unemployed and be dependent on public assistance. Many find themselves in prison, homeless or parents at an early age.

Thankfully, Ashleigh isn’t one of those statistics.

While processing paperwork for a fleet vehicle purchase at her job at CarMax, Ashleigh saw the name UMFS. Ashleigh told Jay Ziehl, UMFS chief operating officer, that she had been in foster care with UMFS when she was a teenager.

Ashleigh was living in Northern Virginia with her grandmother. When her grandmother died, an aunt and uncle tried not only to adopt Ashleigh, but also to “inherit” money from the grandmother’s estate. Social services got involved and put

Ashleigh in foster care. After two unsuccessful placements in Northern Virginia, UMFS placed Ashleigh with a family in King William County.

“The first six months were really hard,” Ashleigh explains. “I was adjusting to a new school, making new friends, and learning to put down my walls and adapt to the change that was happening around me,” she said. The support of her UMFS case worker, JoEllen Miller, got Ashleigh through the transition. “There was something about JoEllen that I could relate to immediately. Her support meant a lot to me.”

After 11 years in the foster care system, Ashleigh found her forever family through her friend and King William High School classmate, Nikki. Nikki’s parents took full custody of Ashleigh the summer before her senior year. “I call them mom and dad,” she explained, “and Nikki is my sister.”

With the support of her adoptive parents, Ashleigh has also reconnected with her birth mother. “When we reconnected, I spent a week with her

“My favorite thing about you becoming part of the family is that I get to see you a lot more often than I did when you were just a friend. Now are obligated to come to all of the functions we have and now you are a permanent, built-in best friend!”

— Nikki, Ashleigh’s sister

in Northern Virginia—now we talk every day.”

After high school, Ashleigh attended Syracuse University, earning a degree in hospitality and tourism management.

Ashleigh currently works at CarMax as a business office associate and plans to one day be an event planner for a large company. She lives in the Richmond area and enjoys the support of her boyfriend, Brandon.

Grads Go Forth at Charterhouse School Commencement

Imagine the stress of having to take a standardized test to graduate—not once, not twice, but four times. That was the reality for one Charterhouse School student who, with the help of his dedicated tutor, teachers and school staff, was one of 12 students to receive a diploma at Charterhouse School’s graduation June 19.

He and his fellow classmates will pursue various post high school opportunities. A few plan to attend community college. One will attend Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center’s Life Skills Transition Program, while another will pursue a vocational education at Gladys H. Oberle School. Good luck, Mustangs!



A Mom Breaks Her Silence to Give Others a Voice

— By ReNe'e Teague



MY DAUGHTER, SALLY, IS MY THIRD OF FOUR DAUGHTERS.

Sally always preferred me. She objected loudly when anyone else held her. When Sally and I were at home, just the two of us, everything was good.

When Sally was in fifth grade, our nation endured the September 11 attacks, followed by anthrax and snipers. Sally became fixated on the fear. She ducked when planes flew over. She began to threaten suicide.

In high school, she was artistic, quirky, sensitive.... She had friends and marched in the band. She went out. She had a boyfriend. I thought she'd find her way—that her strong will would get her through. I was wrong. Sally began pulling her hair out.

At 18, Sally started taking her first anti-anxiety, anti-depressant medications. She graduated high school, went to VCU and became a nationally licensed pharmacy tech. Then she was assaulted at a party. She began cutting. Her boyfriend broke up with her.

She sank deeper into depression and I began the arduous task of accessing mental health care for my young adult child.

I called around and was told there weren't enough providers. The good ones weren't taking new patients. A psychiatric nurse practitioner and a therapist prescribed so many meds, I could barely keep up with what she was supposed to take and when. Her poor body just couldn't keep up with it all and after four months, she attempted suicide.

I walked in the bathroom to find my daughter...I scooped her up and took her to the hospital. Sally went into the psych ward voluntarily. We got her out 48 hours later. I vowed she'd never go back.

At a volunteer engagement meeting at UMFS I told Angie Williams my story. Angie talked to Greg Peters. They helped me find a psychiatrist. Meds started to make sense. I listened to other stories of young adults like my daughter. I wasn't alone.

Sally's mental illness continues to wreak havoc. On good days, she gets up, bathes, takes her meds. On bad days she never leaves her bed. On good days, I celebrate. I enjoy them to the max! On bad days I worry, I cry, I live in sadness and fear. The good days seem to be coming more often, but I'm so optimistic it's hard to say for sure.

My journey has taught me a lot, but the most important lesson is that it is all better with support. I want to end the stigma and break the silence surrounding mental illness. I want to be there for others so their stories aren't so unbearably difficult. I speak openly to anyone and everyone about living with mental illness, about my daughter and our story.

In my role as parent support partner for UMFS I share my story with families whose children are living with mental and behavioral health issues. I listen and help them navigate the system. I'm the parent's voice when their voice is breaking. And I make absolutely certain these families aren't alone on the journey.

ReNe'e Teague is a Methodist minister and a parent support partner with UMFS.

Parent support partners use their own experience to support and help families navigate the mental health system and connect with formal and informal family supports.

If you are interested in knowing more about the program, please contact Rachelle Butler, PSP program manager, 804.353.4461 x1404.

Lynchburg Region Builds Bridges Out of Poverty

POVERTY AFFECTS US ALL. Yet those living in poverty have a difficult time breaking the cycle. UMFS' new Getting Ahead™ program in Lynchburg hopes to change that. Through the lens of economic class, *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World* is a book and a 45-hour workshop that helps individuals in poverty build their resources for a more prosperous life for themselves, their families and their communities.

Brenda Moss recently completed the course. Following the death of her son, Moss decided it was time to make some life-changing decisions and saw Getting Ahead as a path forward. Before taking the course, she worked a dead-end job she described as disappointing and frustrating. The 15-week course helped Brenda start up as an entrepreneur with a T-shirt business and a lunch and dinner service. Brenda said that through the program she learned, "That I can, and that failure is not an option."

Small groups of 10-12 participants investigate the impact poverty has had on them and their community. Jamesia Harrison, UMFS community liaison and Getting Ahead



Watch a video about our Getting Ahead program at www.umfs.org/gettingahead

facilitator said individuals have to be committed to change and ready to work. "It's not just come in, sit down and have someone teach you," she said. "They do the work, they investigate options. The program provides the support and tools for success."

A second class started in June. Getting Ahead is part of Bridges Out of Poverty, a partnership in Lynchburg between UMFS and Parkview Mission.



Keller Williams Red Day Volunteers

Keller Williams Red Day

A BIG SHOUT OUT to our friends at the Richmond office of Keller Williams Realty for their hard work spring cleaning the Richmond campus. Volunteers gardened, painted, built picnic tables and mulched as part of Keller Williams RED Day—Renew, Energize, Donate. Their generous staff baked hundreds of cookies and made handmade appreciation cards for UMFS staff and teachers.

Drama Camp Helps Students Express Emotions

THE SCHOOL OF PERFORMING ARTS in the Richmond Community and UMFS have similar visions—to help kids develop skills to prepare them for productive lives and leadership. For the second year in a row, Child & Family Healing Center residents from UMFS will get to participate in a summer drama therapy camp.

Drama provides a way to confront difficult emotional issues through an alternative form of expression. Through active movement, role playing and play, students can express themselves without inhibition. A participant from last year's camp said "I was able to be goofy and funny without being judged."



SPARC Young Performers

SPARC's drama therapy camp allows students of all abilities to have performance training designed to build performing arts skills, deepen the ability to connect with peers and strengthen the personal foundation of each individual. Students will show off their talents in August with a performance at the end of the four week camp.

Creative, innovative, funny, and wildly expressive would be a few terms that could be applied to this group. The pride and satisfaction shown by our residents was heartwarming.

– Gary Duncan,
vice president of marketing and
development for UMFS

Programs like the SPARC camp would not be possible without the generosity of our donors. Your individual gift to our annual fund allows UMFS to provide exceptional programs to the children and families we serve in communities across Virginia. Visit www.umfs.org/donate



Visit www.umfs.org/donate to give online or call us toll-free at **866.252.7772**, from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Your gift of hope will provide:

| | |
|---------------|---|
| \$ 50 | A birthday gift for one child. |
| \$ 100 | Nonperishable, healthy food for two children. |
| \$ 780 | School supplies for an entire class. |

Or, see the full catalog for more opportunities.

Your Chance to Give Kids Hope

We rely on your generosity to help us empower the more than 3,200 children and families we serve each year. You can donate with confidence because UMFS is dedicated to having 86 percent or more of its revenue used for programs that benefit the children and families we serve.

UMFS staff identified several much-needed items for this catalog—items that we cannot provide without your help.

Become a champion for a child in need by donating towards one or more of the gifts in the catalog. Your donations become real gifts delivered into the hands of the children we serve.



#BackInTheDay

Here's a photo from the late 1930s or early 1940s when UMFS operated as an orphanage in Richmond and ran a camp in New Kent County. These happy campers are sunning themselves at Lake Matoaka, the camp's swimming hole.

HAPPENINGS AT UMFS



FORE THE KIDS GOLF TOURNAMENT

If you're looking to spend some time outdoors and partner with UMFS while you're at it, the Fore The Kids golf tournament is your chance. Whether you choose to play, sponsor or donate to the tournament, you'll be a champion for kids and families in Virginia.

WHEN: Friday, October 26
WHERE: Stonehenge Country Club
Richmond, VA

MORE INFO: Email Joe Torrence, jtorrence@umfs.org
REGISTER: www.umfs.org/golf



VISIT UMFS.ORG

for up-to-date information on events or to give online.

Find other updates about upcoming events and other news on social media:

