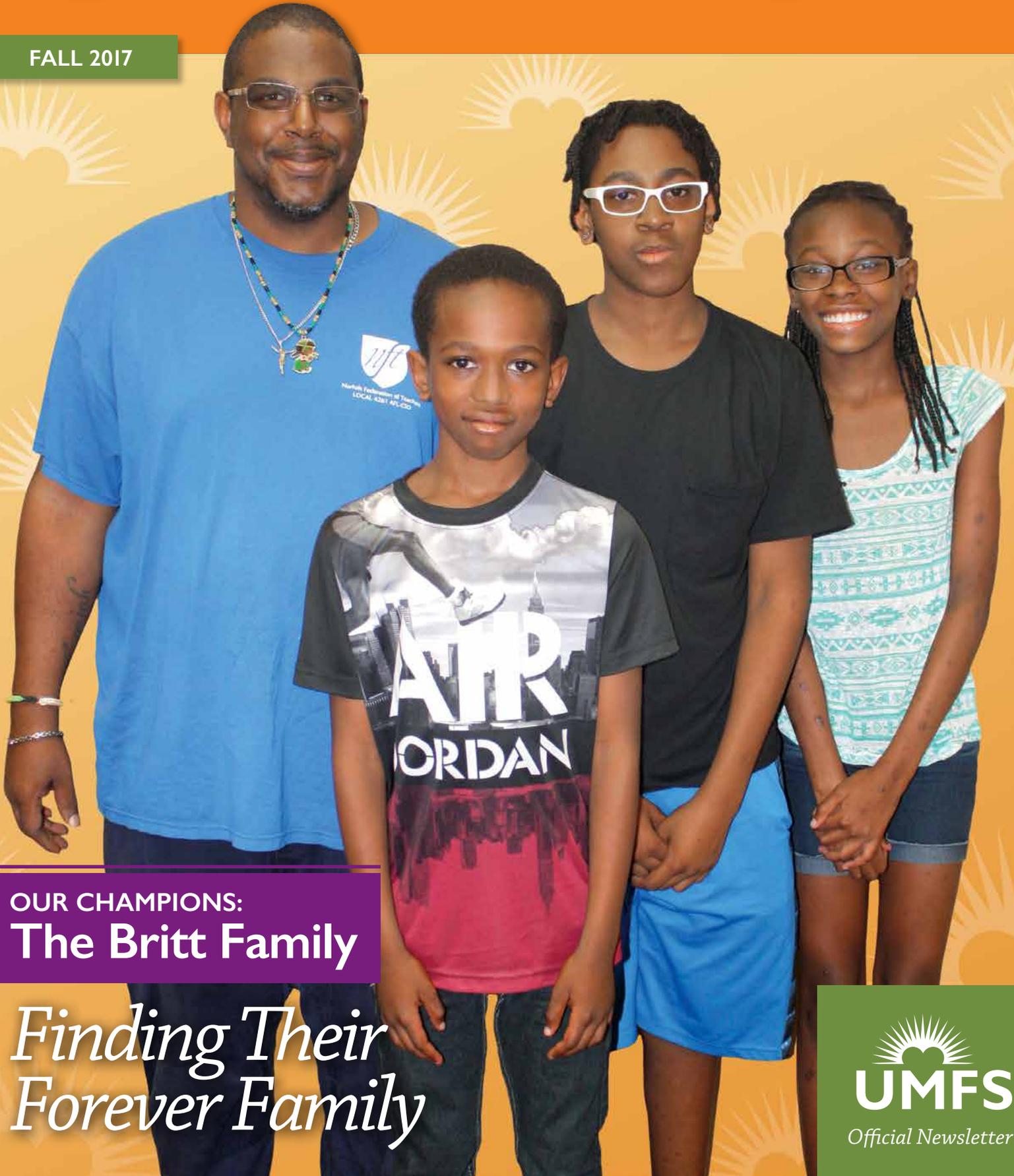


THE CHAMPION

FALL 2017



OUR CHAMPIONS:
The Britt Family

*Finding Their
Forever Family*


UMFS
Official Newsletter



Calling All Champions!

There are 5,330 children in foster care in Virginia. At UMFS, we are unwavering champions for these high-risk children and their families, supporting them in regional centers across the state. In this edition of THE CHAMPION, we celebrate foster children Zeniya and Daijean and their journey to find their forever family.

We are excited to launch Open Table at UMFS this year. Open Table helps youth who have aged out of the foster care system, and other high-risk individuals and families. Community volunteers partner with us to provide valuable mentoring as they walk alongside these individuals and families to help them achieve their goals.

As we enter the holiday season, we continue to give thanks for our donors, who help make all of our programs possible. Monthly donors like the Lintons provide an important financial foundation for UMFS.

We are grateful for the partnership of our staff, volunteers and donors who make an incredible difference in the lives of high-risk children and families in Virginia.

Thank you,
Greg Peters, LCSW
President and CEO

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FALL 2017
CHAMPIONS

The Britt Family



Finding Their Forever Family

"MR. BRITT IS UNIQUE," reflected UMFS Family Support Specialist Melissa Lee. Michael Britt is a single father who created a loving home for his son Corjah, 14. In 2014, he got a call that would change his life, and dramatically expand his family. Corjah's mother had two younger children with another man, daughter Zeniya, 12, and son Daijean, 10. They were placed into foster care when Daijean was a baby, and they moved between several homes before they entered the UMFS Treatment Foster Care program in 2013. Shortly after that, UMFS Adoption Specialist Nikissia Craig

began working to find the siblings an adoptive home.

Nikissia used a technique called extreme recruitment. She worked with a private investigator to locate as many potential connections as possible in the hope of finding strong candidates to adopt Zeniya and Daijean. The search uncovered over 80 connections including extended family members, teachers, coaches, and past foster parents. Ten of those connections were interested in exploring adoption, but many of them were not able to qualify.

During this process, Michael heard that Zeniya and Daijean were available for adoption. Corjah was in fourth grade at the time. Corjah had met his half-siblings briefly when he was younger, but he never had the opportunity to get to know them. Michael remembers the moment that Corjah learned that they were available for adoption. "I saw the big smile on my son's face," said Michael, "and I said yes without hesitation."

Saying yes to adoption was easy for Michael, but there were big hurdles ahead. Michael is a school custodian

UMFS has offices across Virginia supporting youth in foster care, like the Norfolk office that works with the Britt family. We have an urgent need for foster parents, particularly for teenagers. To learn how you can become a foster parent, visit UMFS.org/foster.



Corjah (left), Daijean (center) and Zeniya were all smiles when they reconnected in 2014.

in Norfolk. At the time he was a supervisor on the night shift, but to be considered for adoption, he had to change to the day shift. No supervisor roles were available on the day shift, so Michael had to take a pay cut. The adoption also required him to move to a more expensive three-bedroom apartment to fit his expanded family. As Melissa reflected, "He sacrificed a lot to make this work, and he never complained."

In December 2014, Michael, Corjah, Zeniya, and Daijean got to meet together as a potential new family for the first time. Nikissia remembers the meeting well. "To see people connect is so amazing. It was a moment of joy for me." They all cried when it was time to go.

The adoption process takes time, but Michael never wavered in his commitment. On May 4, 2017, he officially became the father of three beautiful children. They are a loving family. They eat dinner together every night, and enjoy watching movies

and taking weekend trips along the east coast. Corjah is a protective older brother. "I have to remind him that he's the older brother, not the father," chuckled Michael. "We enjoy being around each other," Corjah reflected when asked what it's like being part of this expanded family. "Nothing blocks the path of love."

Finding their forever family was transformative for Zeniya and Daijean. UMFS social workers Melissa and Nikissia have really enjoyed watching the children blossom. The love and stability of their new family has helped Zeniya and Daijean settle down, and many of the issues they struggled with are minimal now by comparison.

When asked what it's like to be part of this new family, Daijean immediately smiled and said, "I have a dad and a sister and a brother that care about me." Zeniya agreed. She loves having a big brother and she knows "I'll have my dad to support me no matter what." ✨

Open Table

Connecting Those in Need with Faith-Based Communities



Volunteers from River Road UMC's Open Table (from left to right): Keith Buchholz, Kim Denmark, Kate Meilink, Rachelle Butler, Amy King, Angie Williams, Beth Downs.

RELATIONSHIPS AND RESOURCES are sometimes all it takes to keep a person from stumbling across the razor-thin line that separates stability from crisis.

That concept is central to Open Table, a movement that connects individuals or families in need — Brothers and Sisters — with faith-based communities. These Brothers and Sisters typically are facing extraordinary circumstances, from aging out of foster care to working toward family reunification.

UMFS brought Open Table to Virginia, one of 28 states in which the rapidly expanding movement operates. The commonwealth's first Tables were up and running earlier this year after volunteers completed the required training and Brothers and Sisters had been placed.

Reville United Methodist Church, River Road UMC, Chester UMC, New Life UMC and Second Presbyterian Church of Richmond all have Tables. Tables at First Unitarian Universalist and Gum Spring UMC will soon be operational.

As many as a dozen volunteers may sit on a Table. The commitment is substantial and requires a minimum of one weekly meeting with a Brother or Sister for a one-year period. "By that time, bonds have formed, table members have become family, and lives have been transformed," said Ellie Speer, an Open Table volunteer at Reville UMC.

Indeed, the goal is to provide a wholly transformative experience. It's been that way since Open Table's inception some 12 years ago. But how exactly does a Table facilitate transformation?

"God calls us to care for one another and has given each of us gifts that must be shared," Ellie said. "Open Table gives us the opportunity to adhere to the call and share our gifts and the knowledge gleaned from simply living."

Yes, it's imperative that Tables provide Brothers and Sisters with a variety of support — from driving lessons to assistance finding housing. But also important is fostering a sense of community.

"Bottom line is it's about relationships," said Rev. Dr. Jim Davis of Chester UMC. "And building relationships to help them through issues they're facing and that are holding them back."

River Road UMC's Amy King has volunteered for a number of missions over the years and saw something special in Open Table. Her other mission work is fulfilling, she said, but sometimes difficult because "we don't really get to know the individual and we don't really get to experience change."

But Shante, River Road UMC's Open Table Sister, will happily tell you that's not the case with this endeavor.

"Open table has changed my life," Shante said. "It's important to me because I know that I am not alone no matter what life throws at me; that I can overcome any obstacle and I also have a great support group by my side. Open table is not just my support, but they are my family." ✨

To learn more about Open Table and other volunteer opportunities, visit UMFS.org/volunteer.

FALL 2017 DONOR CHAMPIONS



Monthly donors like Jane and Brandon Linton make a critical impact in the lives of high-risk children and families. Join them and sign up for monthly giving on the enclosed envelope, or visit UMFS.org/donate.



Jane & Brandon Linton

“Giving is a Statement of Our Theology”

JANE AND BRANDON LINTON are wise beyond their years.

The Virginia Tech graduates still possess a youthfulness that would make them right at home on campus, but their faithful financial commitment to UMFS demonstrates just how much they’ve grown since their days in Blacksburg.

For seven of the nearly 10 years they’ve been married, Jane, 30, and Brandon, 33, have been monthly donors.

“We look at our giving and our budgeting as a statement of our theology,” said Brandon, whose employer, CarMax, also is an

unwavering supporter of UMFS. “What do we care to invest in? What do we think is important to God? What is important to us?”

As parents of three children, ages 2, 5 and 8, it’s clear that family is atop the Lintons’ priority list. Therefore, supporting UMFS and its vision of empowering children is an obvious choice, Brandon said.

“It’s exciting to say that we can commit money to something we feel strongly about.”

The Lintons first came to know UMFS in 2008 through volunteer opportunities with their church. Brandon would spend time shooting

hoops with the boys at the UMFS cottages. Jane would bring baked goods to the girls.

“They didn’t care what I brought them, they cared that I came,” Jane said. “To me, that was the best thing; that the girls knew I cared enough to stop by.”

And caring is something Jane and her husband both learned the importance of at a young age. Her parents divorced when she was three, and Brandon never knew his father at all.

“But we still had other people that filled in those gaps for us,” Jane said. “And that’s why we’d like to be gap fillers for others.” ✨