

CHAMPION



OUR CHAMPION
MELVIN

*From Foster Care
to College Campus*



CALLING ALL CHAMPIONS!

I'M EXCITED TO SHARE some of the far-reaching effects that you, our donors, volunteers, and community partners are having on the young people we serve.

In our main story, we caught up with Melvin on the Old Dominion University campus in Norfolk, where he's wrapping up his freshman year. Melvin's story as an older teen in the foster care system is truly inspiring.

Our donor champion is the Leedom Family. We sat down with Bill and Barb Leedom to learn more about their generous support of the UMFS Scholarship Fund, which helps young people like Melvin achieve their dreams of going to college.

Our last story is pretty special. I'm always so impressed with the unique ways in which volunteers connect with young people. At UMFS Leland House in Fairfax, volunteer Melissa Mackey turned a moment of grieving into an opportunity to make residents there feel at home.

It's a pleasure for us to share these stories with you, but it's also a privilege to celebrate the work you all are doing for high-risk children and teens. Thank you all for being unwavering champions!

Greg Peters

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SPRING 2019 CHAMPION MELVIN

From Foster Care to College Campus

MELVIN WAS WALKING briskly along one of the many shaded and brick-lined paths on Old Dominion University's campus in downtown Norfolk when it dawned on him. "Wait, what's today's date," he asked as he came to an abrupt halt in his linen-white sneakers. "It's March 27? Well, then yesterday marked four years since I came into care. It was March 26, 2015."

Shortly after entering the foster care system at age 15, Melvin was referred to the UMFS Treatment Foster Care program, which specializes in helping older foster children find placements. Melvin said for all of the uncertainties associated with being an older kid in care, there's one thing he's always been sure of. "I knew I wanted to be here one day," Melvin stated confidently with the ODU Monarchs' iconic Lion Fountain at his back.

Melvin was understandably overjoyed when he learned he'd been accepted to ODU. To be crowned a Monarch was indeed a well-deserved reward for this well-dressed and well-mannered young man from Richmond. "We've always known Melvin wanted to go to college," said Talia Brown, Project Manager for Project LIFE, a foster care support program for teens. "I've known him since he became involved

with Project LIFE, which wasn't long after he came into care. He's said all along he wanted the experience of a four-year university."

Project LIFE (Living Independently, Focusing on Empowerment) is a partnership between UMFS and the Virginia Department of Social Services. The program helps equip youth with critical life skills so they can be successful when they age out of foster care. At first, Melvin was skeptical of Project LIFE. "I just thought it was something being pushed on me because I was new to the system," he said. "But as time went on, through the support groups and speaking opportunities, I learned that I have a voice."

Melvin's attitude continued to improve, and Talia said he became one of the program's most active

members. In fact, Melvin says had it not been for UMFS and Project LIFE, he may not have been prepared to attend a four-year university directly after high school. "Maybe I would have gotten here another way," he said. "But I don't know. I've grown a lot. I've developed communication skills and leadership skills, and definitely people skills."

Melvin said Project LIFE staff always offered encouragement as he worked to establish a network of like-minded people. "That's one of our main goals," Talia said. "It's to help youth build permanent connections." One of Melvin's connections, in particular, is Keara Chambers, a former Project LIFE employee. "She's not only become a mentor, she's a friend," Melvin said. "Keara's been there through the low moments and the high moments."

And as of late, Melvin's highs absolutely are outweighing his lows. He's slowly trying to re-establish a relationship with his family, freshman year of college is winding down, and momentum behind his newest endeavor is picking up. "It's called Foster-U," Melvin said with his signature soft-spoken confidence. "The 'U' stands for University."

Melvin's been working tirelessly and with great patience to get Foster-U up and running on the ODU campus. The concept is to connect college-aged students who have experience in the foster care system with supportive peers who have similar experiences and are of a comparable age. He was inspired, in part, by Project LIFE. "I feel like it's so important to have that type of program on the university level," he said.

Talia said she was floored when Melvin reached out with his ideas for Foster-U. "I've been very impressed," she said, citing Melvin's ambition and resolve. "It takes a lot of work to get something like that going. What can I say? Melvin's just awesome."

While Melvin is excited and passionate about Foster-U, the pursuit isn't about earning accolades as much as it's about extending advocacy. "When people doubt you, it's real," Melvin said. "And I've seen it so many times where foster youth are told that they can't do this, this, or this because of their situation."

Melvin's been in that situation before, and it's a situation he wants to help others avoid. "When people don't take the time to see the good in you, then they're only going to see the bad." ✨



Melvin plans to major in Criminal Justice. He and eight other students are continuing their education with generous support from the UMFS Scholarship Fund.

Visit [UMFS.org/donate](https://umfs.org/donate) and help students like Melvin achieve their educational goals.

VOLUNTEER CHAMPION

Meet Ms. Melissa

Helping Make a House a Home



Ms. Melissa (right) shares a smile with UMFS' Marie Thomas on the patio at Leland House.

AUTHENTICITY and contagious enthusiasm are just two of the many reasons it's an absolute pleasure to be in the company of Melissa Mackey. Pay her a compliment, and she'll reciprocate tenfold. Invite her out for coffee, and she'll try to pick up the tab. Simply put: To meet Melissa is to find good fortune.

Affectionately known as Ms. Melissa to staff and residents at UMFS Leland House in Centreville — a short-term crisis intervention and stabilization facility in partnership with Fairfax County — this kind-hearted Northern Virginia volunteer is a ray of light to young people enduring cloudy days. Everything Ms. Melissa does, she does with a smile, whether it's bringing her certified therapy dog, Lieuy, by for a visit with the residents (whose ages range from 12-17) or cooking one of her signature dishes.

"Oh, the mac and cheese!" a Leland House resident exclaimed when asked about the once-monthly home-cooked Sunday dinners that Ms. Melissa helps prepare. The resident then incited hunger pangs from everyone within earshot by illustrating in dreamy detail Ms. Melissa's legendary mac and cheese.

It's not just Ms. Melissa's culinary skills that resonate, said Leland

House Program Director Marie Thomas, it's also her generosity. "She is genuinely supportive and caring," Marie said. "The kids just love her. They always ask, 'Ms. Melissa, why don't you come work here? You're so great!'" A sentiment to which Ms. Melissa responded with a smile: "Are you kidding me? I feel like I should be paying them just to volunteer!"

And if Ms. Melissa's selflessness isn't already abundantly evident, consider this: When approached to be featured in this story, she quickly turned the spotlight to Brian Woodworth, a young and well-liked Leland House Youth Counselor who passed away in 2013. "We had so much grief when Brian passed," Ms. Melissa said. "We wanted to do something. We asked Leland House if we could bring dinner. That's how I got started."

"Brian's Brigade, that's who we are," Melissa continued as she gleefully listed the names of fellow volunteers Elaine Tomaseski, Jill Lee, and Patty DelRiego, all of whom have contributed to the success of Sunday dinners at Leland House.

"Melissa has a heart of gold," said Jean Marshall, Brian's mother. Jean, her husband Mike Woodworth, and Brian's brother, Matthew Woodworth, say it means the world to know that

Brian inspired someone to help others. "She's my family's angel in that she celebrates Brian's spirit of giving and caring for others." And it's exactly that spirit that Ms. Melissa said she wants to keep illuminated. "Brian just had such a light about him," Ms. Melissa said.

But it's certainly not just Brian's spirit that Ms. Melissa is lifting up. Her relationship with Leland House staff and its eight residents is dynamic, and she has an instinctive way about her that makes it hard to believe she doesn't have children of her own. "Ms. Melissa is ensuring youth and staff have a home atmosphere," Marie said. "That sort of normalcy is crucial and can save the healing process."

For more information on how you can make a difference, please visit [UMFS.org/volunteer](https://umfs.org/volunteer).

Fighting back tears of joy, Ms. Melissa said if she can make a difference in just one child's life, then she's done her job. Rest easy, Ms. Melissa. You've achieved your goal at least 100 times over and have helped make a house a home. ✨

DONOR CHAMPION

THE LEEDOM FAMILY

Encouraging Others Through Education



HELEN'S HUSBAND LEFT, and suddenly she found herself alone raising four young boys in a rough neighborhood in pre-depression era South Philadelphia. "Can you imagine," Bill Leedom said of his late grandmother's resiliency, "raising four boys by yourself in the 1920s?" Yes, it was a tough situation, but Helen was decidedly tougher.

Rather than buckle under the pressure, Bill said his grandmother adopted a pick-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps mentality and emphasized to her four boys that education would help them endure. Strong work ethic has been a hallmark of the Leedom family ever since.

Three of Helen's four sons went on to earn college scholarships to attend the University of Pennsylvania, and the other was called to serve in the U.S. Navy. Among those who enrolled was Bill's father, Richard, who later enjoyed a successful career in engineering. "Dad always reminded us how important education had been to his brothers and our grandmother," Bill said. The importance most certainly wasn't lost on Bill or his two brothers, all three of whom graduated from the University of Delaware. Bill and his brother George would go on to earn additional post-graduate degrees.

And when Richard passed away in 2016 at the age of 100, Bill, George, and other family members chose to honor the legacy of their father through education. Establishing the Richard P. Leedom Memorial Scholarship at UMFS was a good fit, Bill said, because "UMFS is giving a lot of kids a chance who maybe wouldn't have had a chance otherwise, and they're doing so with compassion."

Young adults receiving services from UMFS who wish to pursue college or vocational training are eligible for the UMFS Scholarship Fund, as are those who would like to participate in the UMFS Courage to Succeed program.

UMFS Chief Development Officer Gary Duncan has known the Leedoms for years and lauded their ongoing philanthropy for being "as thoughtful as it is generous."

"Inspired by their own experiences, they've chosen to invest in the lives of young people," Gary added. "In doing so, they are helping others write success stories of their own. They've made a significant impact." Bill also makes an impact as a member of the UMFS Resource Development Committee, and he praised UMFS for preparing

children and teens to enter the workforce through endeavors like Charterhouse School's Career and Technical Education program.

Bill then smiled and looked toward his wife, Barb, whom he met nearly 50 years ago while both were students at the University of Delaware. The college sweethearts noted their own children's academic achievements. Daughter, Kimberly, has two master's degrees. Their son, Michael, has his Juris Doctorate. "I felt really guilty because I was the only one in the family without an advanced degree," Barb said with a chuckle. "So when I was about 55, I went back to grad school and earned my master's degree."

If you'd like to join the Leedoms in helping young people achieve their educational goals, please visit [UMFS.org/donate](https://umfs.org/donate).

And just as the Leedom family continues to lead by example, so too does UMFS, Bill said. "What Charterhouse School is doing," he said, "is getting students through to the next step instead of sending them to the back of the room." ✨