

CHAMPION

OUR CHAMPION

LUAN

Laying the
Groundwork
for His Future



Laying the Groundwork for His Future



UMFS Charterhouse School provides specialized education for students ages 6–22 who are struggling with emotional, behavioral, or developmental challenges, autism or other neurological differences. With locations in Richmond and Edinburg, Charterhouse School provides high-quality, individual care so that young people like Luan can achieve their goals. Learn more at charterhouseschool.org.

ASK LUAN about landscaping, and he'll tell you he digs it.

It hasn't always been that way, though. "I didn't think it was any fun," Luan said of his first few days as an apprentice. But after cleaning out and replanting his first flower bed, the UMFS Charterhouse School graduate took a step back and admired the fruits of his labor. "There's more to it than just planting," he said. "After you're done working, everything looks really beautiful."

Luan's epiphany warmed the heart of Ms. LinLee, a horticulture contractor who's been keeping the flowerbeds on the UMFS Richmond campus in tip-top shape for nearly nine years. "When you come out here in nature, you're supposed to be spreading joy and love in what you do," she said. "Luan gets that connection."

Ms. LinLee's lighthearted approach to what can sometimes be a heavy workload certainly had a positive effect on Luan, who spent his junior year apprenticing with her as part of his Individualized Education Plan (IEP). "Ms. LinLee taught me in a way

that I can understand," Luan said. "She definitely knows how to have fun while she works."

Ms. LinLee responded with a shrug of the shoulders and a friendly smile: "There's no such thing as a grumpy gardener," she said.



Luan and his older brother, Lucas (pictured top right), were born in Brazil. They experienced neglect and ultimately were placed in an adoption center, where they then suffered abuse. Luan was born with the effects of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. He has

ADHD and a diagnosed Intellectual Disability, which causes problems with learning and memory.

Luan was 4 and Lucas was 6 when adoptive parents David and Christine gained guardianship. They finally were able to bring the boys home to Virginia after another 17 months in the legal adoption process. "Things have been great since they took us into their lives," said Luan, who turns 20 in October. "They've shown us so much love and so much compassion." Luan and Lucas now reciprocate those feelings toward their little brothers — David and Christine had twin boys nine years ago.

For 16 years, David and Christine have provided Lucas and Luan with safety, stability, and above all, love. They've guided the brothers down a path of resiliency and helped them connect with resources to overcome the challenges associated with their difficult past. Lucas found success as a welder and lives independently. Luan is working toward independence, too, and took a huge step in June when he graduated from UMFS Charterhouse School. "Living on my own, that's the ultimate goal," he said. "It's good to know that one day I won't need Mom and Dad but that they'll be there if I do."

Luan spent two years in the Charterhouse School Applied Curriculum Program (ACP) and had the option to continue until he turns 21. But as UMFS Charterhouse School's Career & Technical Education Coordinator Ms. McCaig put it: "Luan doesn't need us anymore. He's ready to go in the field and practice his skills."

"ACP focuses on employment skills," she continued. "Luan's IEP focused specifically on finding a steady landscaping job after graduation." And thanks to UMFS' recent partnership with SOAR365 and the skills Luan learned from Ms. LinLee, a steady

full-time landscaping job with benefits is exactly what he found.

SOAR365 (formerly Greater Richmond ARC) is a nonprofit serving individuals and families who are coping with the challenges of living with a disability. "SOAR365 is invested in Luan," Ms. McCaig said. "I can trust that he has a place that's going to take care of him when he needs it, while also allowing him to gain independence and grow in his profession."

"The great thing about SOAR365 is they don't see a kid with a disability; they see me as a good worker," Luan said.

Luan is part of the SOAR365 team that provides grounds maintenance for UMFS' 33-acre Richmond campus. He said he's excited to be working on campus because he had such a positive experience as a student, citing support from mentors like Ms. LinLee (center photo, on right), and teachers like Mrs. Westfall (center photo, on left), Mr. Whitbeck, and Ms. McCaig.

"I couldn't have done any of this without them having my back," Luan said. "They worked with me, and they actually understood my problems and didn't pity me. If I did something wrong, they didn't ignore it, they helped me." 🌟



UMFS Auxiliary

90 YEARS of SERVICE

HELEN WOOD has fond memories of United Methodist Family Services. When she was 4 years old, her mother was a member of the UMFS Women's Auxiliary. While her mother volunteered, Helen kept busy with a coloring book and an eight-pack of crayons. Today, she's a member of Chamberlayne Heights United Methodist Church and keeps busy leading the Auxiliary as its President. "To be involved is a passion for me," said Helen (pictured fourth from left). "And the people have been so welcoming."

Dot Gay (pictured middle in yellow) attends Laurel Hill United Methodist Church and has been a member of the Auxiliary since the 1990s. Some of the most impactful moments she's experienced during her time as a UMFS volunteer have been at Commencement ceremonies, in which youth at UMFS celebrate the completion of their residential treatment. Dot recalled one Commencement in particular and the profound words a father said to UMFS staff and leadership: "Thank you for giving my son back to me." It's a moment Dot said she'll never forget.

The Auxiliary has been providing moral and spiritual support to the children and teens at UMFS since the days it was an orphanage. The

Auxiliary formed in 1929, and its earliest efforts included furnishing the orphanage with fireplace sets, pianos, and washing machines. The generosity and monetary support continues to this day, and just as UMFS has evolved, so too has the Auxiliary. Composed of volunteers from local churches, the Auxiliary had been an all-women organization until recently. The bylaws changed to allow men to become members, and Helen's husband, Phin, is one of three men who currently serve.

"The Auxiliary is an extension of our agency," said Greg Peters, UMFS President and CEO. "They are a compassionate group of unwavering champions for young people. Every member provides a level of care and attention to detail that brings joy to children and teens who are facing challenging circumstances."

That attention to detail is evidenced in the quarterly birthday lunches the Auxiliary hosts for young people at UMFS. The group makes a point to recognize each and every child's birthday with a celebration of lunch, cake, games, and presents, of course. It remains one of the Auxiliary's most popular activities, perhaps because — as many students have noted through the years — it's the only birthday party they've ever had.

Also popular are the Auxiliary's annual square dance and high tea, during which young people at UMFS get to don elaborate hats and formal neckties as they are treated to a traditional lunch experience. "The students are always appreciative and respectful," Helen said.

The Auxiliary has built trust with the children and teens at UMFS by maintaining a consistent presence and connecting with them on a personal level. Dot noted that sometimes students don't want to talk, so to break the ice she'll turn to sports as a conversation starter. And if that doesn't work? "I'll try to guess their age," she said smiling. "You know, just try to find some common ground." And the ability to find common ground is just one of the many reasons the Auxiliary is vital to UMFS. "The work they do for our agency, and especially for our young people, is just remarkable," Greg said.

Said Dot: "It's one of the greatest things our church does." ✨

Contact Volunteer Manager
Lisa Nicoll (804.239.1038 or
lnicoll@umfs.org) to learn how
you can make a difference as a
member of the UMFS Auxiliary.



Kind Soles

Kindergartners Sponsor Shoe Drive

IT'S 8:30 ON A SUNNY Wednesday morning in late May, and 40 Collegiate School kindergartners are buzzing about their classroom ahead of an end-of-year field trip to Maymont. But before heading off to explore the historic 100-acre Richmond estate, students get a visit from a familiar and friendly face.

"Hello!" exclaims UMFS Volunteer Coordinator Kate Ockerman as she enters the room. "I'm so glad to see you all again." Kate smiles wide as excited boys and girls rush to hug her before they plop down cross-legged on the carpet.

It's the third time Kate has had the pleasure of meeting these philanthropic 5 and 6-year-olds, who have twice supported UMFS through fundraising projects. "It's been amazing to see," Kate said. "They've donated over \$1,000 this school year for children and teens in foster care across Virginia to buy new shoes."

What began as a service project has blossomed into an ongoing partnership. Earlier in the school year, Collegiate School teachers Beth Anne Shelly and Elizabeth Andrews tasked their kindergartners with organizing a

student-run shoe store. Mrs. Shelly enlisted Saxon Shoes in Short Pump to coach students on how to run a business. "The students then began collecting gently used shoes from the community," Mrs. Shelly said. "They saw the shoes coming in and they counted, sorted, and kept a graph out in the hallway."

In February, the students opened their store and raised nearly \$500 for children in foster care to purchase shoes. It was the second consecutive year Collegiate School kindergartners chose UMFS as the beneficiary of their service project. "We've been blown away by their generosity," Kate said.

But this year's generosity extended well beyond the shoe store. Mrs. Shelly applauded Saxon Shoes for inviting the kindergartners to work as salespeople during a fundraising event at the store. "They generously offered to donate \$5 to UMFS for every pair of shoes the students sold," Mrs. Shelly said. The kindergartners logged over 100 sales.

Saxon Shoes President and CEO Gary Weiner said collaborating with Collegiate School to support UMFS was a joy. "What a great example of

young people doing good things," he said. Gary also commended the leadership of Mrs. Shelly, who coincidentally had taught Gary's now-adult children prior to becoming a teacher at Collegiate School some 22 years ago. "Beth Anne is teaching those students about business and life, and more importantly they're supporting a good cause."

Mrs. Shelly said of all the service projects she's been a part of, students have been most engaged with this one. "They've been totally connected. We're always looking for a way to help the 5 and 6-year-old brain understand about giving to someone else."

And these students most certainly understand, as one soft-spoken kindergartner so eloquently summarized. "It's like the Golden Rule," she said, prompting her classmates to respond in unison song.

*Do unto to others, Sisters and Brothers,
As you would have them do unto you.
And if you know it, then you can show it.
This is the Golden Rule.*

Visit [UMFS.org/donate](https://umfs.org/donate) if you'd like to follow in the footsteps of these Collegiate School kindergartners.