

Prologue To Greatness

GuidingStar:

Illuminating the Lives of Children and Families

Beneath a towering oak canopy in a quiet, enclosed acre of Mills Home farmland lie 88 stones, each marking the final resting place of a unique human being, created and loved by God.

So near to the Creator does one feel in that place, so high and lifted up, that those who set the spot aside called it God's Acre.

Each stone declares, "**I lived,**" for the one who lies beneath. For a moment, for a brief flash of time – be it a month or a century – each person breathed the sweet air; tasted fruits of the good earth and picked his or her way through a life littered with obstacles dropped there by others.

Beyond a common grave, each God's Acre resident shared a common life, even those long dead before the latest arrivals were born. Their common life issued from a certain trouble. It sprang from the BCH farm where they grew their food; was sustained by the sacrificial gifts of North Carolina Baptists; was nurtured by Christian workers who believed it their duty to care for "the least of these, my children;" and was blessed by a loving God whose very heart weeps to see them hungry, thirsty, naked, neglected or abused.

Each stone testifies to the past. Each declares faith in the future.

Baptist Children's Homes of North Carolina has served children in parts of three centuries. When the nation was devastated by war, racked by depression, and tossed by a vacuum of values, BCH served children and families. When there was only beans and 'taters for lunch and 'taters and beans for dinner – but always enough of each – BCH served.

But none who lies in God's Acre was impressed by the past. Their concern first, last and always was their future, and how they could make it through a troubled life into the future God intended and which they desperately hoped would be better than their present.

BCH is always about living into the future God ordained and carrying with it the fears and hopes, truths and dreams, realities and possibilities of children and families desperate for a guiding star.

For without a guiding star we are lost.

GuidingStar: Illuminating the Lives of Children and Families is a solemn pact with the future, a promise to plan intensely, work feverishly, pray fervently, sacrifice willingly and follow faithfully.

GuidingStar is both an acorn and an oak forest; the seed of a strong, intentional future and a century's fruit of committed experience. When implemented, GuidingStar will unfold a path of work for BCH staff and trustees that will be clear, flexible, responsive, pace setting and secure.

As importantly, implementing this plan recognizes – for perhaps the first time – Baptist Children's Homes' responsibility in the larger world of residential child care. To be a pace setter outside the narrow confines of its current communities, and to offer the real, nurturing help its century of experience affords, BCH must establish world class efforts in program, staff and financial matters.

If this document throbs in your hand, if it pulses with energy, do not be surprised. GuidingStar features five important thrusts. Individually each is a star. Together they fling a galaxy against the dark backdrop of heaven. Following are the main thrusts:

1. We must implement some immediate fixes.

Sometimes those who build cities neglect roads. We have some roads to repair and we can do it within current budgets. Our immediate fixes will focus on growth – professional, spiritual and personal. After the budget difficulties of 2003, we need to reaffirm to our staff their value.

We will implement specific communications to make sure all staff are heard, at all levels, for all concerns. It is no wonder that staff at 14 locations across the state can feel isolated from each other and from administration. Utilizing a personal touch, and our new intranet, web sites and email technology we will build roads that connect.

We will confirm to staff their value with a career ladder by which they can know that consistent performance, dedication to improvement and response above expectations will lead to concrete recognitions. We will make clear expectations from the moment we first talk to potential staff members to the day we host their retirement dinner.

2. We will expand external awareness.

It is **not** a blessing to be North Carolina's best kept secret. It is a curse, and GuidingStar is going to break that curse as we work hard to expand awareness of who we are and what we do in the wider world around us.

Our story literally is the most compelling story in history – changed lives.

We do not sit idly lamenting the collapse of Christian culture. Our hands are busy lifting hurting children from the gutters of despair and healing hurting families so they can live together again – changing lives.

It is important like never before that people know about this work. It is imperative that those who love children help us financially; that those whose

responsibility it is to protect children know and trust us as a front line resource; that those who are hurting know we can help.

We have a story to tell and GuidingStar commits us to yell it from the rooftops. In our visual culture, we will use more video, highlight our web sites more and commit to increased quality publications. At the same time our efforts will be high tech, we recognize only “high touch” will gain them an audience. We cannot “send” our story to outlets. We must “bring” it to as many as possible.

Media representatives are not faceless. When we meet them on their turf, they become fellow players in our great drama. We will train our staff to be communications experts for us, telling our story – their story – in every barber shop, grocery store, church and neighborhood encounter of their daily lives.

We will create community partners through which we can tell our story in personal ways, such as festivals and community day celebrations. Our service areas will have communications plans and, assisted by our communications department, will focus on their area’s leaders, media and events.

North Carolina Baptists gave us birth and nurtured us before we could walk. We will renew our relationships with the churches and leadership of this great network of Believers.

Our mandate is biblical. Our model is Jesus. Our motive is pure. Our midwives need to know we have stayed by the stuff. We have kept the faith.

Just as a child matures and becomes a man to his father, Baptist Children’s Homes will find ways to directly impact the lives of North Carolina Baptists. We have expertise to help hurting Baptist families. We want to train the trainers and disseminate the knowledge we’ve accrued.

3. We will develop a world class program.

In a private pool, a proud daddy considers his daughter a world class swimmer. That theory may be disproved when she swims with others.

We believe our services to children and families are unexcelled – but we want to know for sure. GuidingStar is a commitment to our clients that if we are found wanting, we will not rest until we become the model others emulate.

GuidingStar mandates us to evaluate our programs both against the unbiased standards of other programs and against current needs. Every program in the BCH quiver was created and honed to meet a specific need. But if needs have changed; if community profiles are different; if other needs arise that more dearly require the resources, GuidingStar empowers us to cut one in favor of the other.

In the searing movie *Sophie’s Choice*, actress Meryl Streep’s character – a Jewish mother – was forced to choose which of her two children to give up to the concentration camp furnace to save the other. We will make those tough decisions to respond quickly to changes in the field of child care.

Child welfare policy in North Carolina no longer favors initial placement in residential settings. That is not going to change. Policy now favors mental health diagnosis and treatment as opposed to more traditional services. GuidingStar will enable BCH to deal with those realities and become the provider of choice in a culture of excellence.

4. We will build world class staff and leadership.

A world class staff is committed to personal, educational, emotional, professional and spiritual growth, is eager for new experiences and embraces change like a rich uncle. Our staff is our strength but to be world class, we need to improve every “good” area to “great.”

We may be the largest organization in North Carolina to be without a human resources department. Our business office has handled most of those duties, but we’re going to implement the kinds of changes that will require the expertise of those trained in human resources. We’re going to add that capacity.

We’re going to build a leadership development program; maintain a staff profile of education, experience and personality characteristics, develop a written training plan for staff, be more intentional with new employee orientation and develop a career ladder that draws staff constantly to higher levels of performance.

And, we’re not going to be selfish with what we know and are learning. We will intentionally disseminate information to other child care agencies and helping professionals to benefit the child care profession.

5. We will develop world class fund raising and financial management.

BCH has a reputation for its ability to attract financial support and to squeeze a mile of pennies out of every dollar. Because GuidingStar requires world class fund raising and financial management, we will evaluate the present and plan for the future.

We will study the cost effectiveness of every program. Can we do the same for less? Is each dollar spent wisely? Are we developing the relationships necessary to present the needs of children and families to a receptive audience?

Perhaps we’ll find that some agencies are willing to pay for the services we can provide. Maybe a community will want our experts to create a program of service and even manage it.

We’ll study online giving, and find more effective methods in direct mail. We will carefully and within the guidelines of agreements with other Baptist entities, identify North Carolina Baptists who can help in significant ways. And, we will find ways to involve post-modern Christians who like “hands on” missions opportunities.

In everything we do financially, accountability will be our watchword.

Observing an unproven pitching prospect, baseball's wise observer Yogi Berra declared, "That boy's future is all ahead him."

Baptist Children's Homes, with experience dating to 1885, is marching toward its future guided by all the elements that went into making this document our own GuidingStar. As the wise men traveled afar to find immeasurable treasure beneath the star of old, travel with us in the light of our GuidingStar, illuminating the lives of children and families.

Michael C. Blackwell
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Baptist Children's Homes of N. C.
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