

Brookwood in Georgetown founder continues daughter's legacy

By CHARLOTTE KOVALCHUK

Erin Kiltz wouldn't have chosen the difficult life for her daughter Gracie that resulted from a childhood brain injury and Down syndrome.

But the tragedy birthed a goal to create a vocational community for her daughter and other adults with special needs.

Through Brookwood in Georgetown (BiG), Ms. Kiltz said she has seen God transform the monster of her daughter's struggles into something beautiful.

"All the things that happened in her life were painful and ugly, not something I would have chosen, but it's only through that, that BiG came about," she said.

Gracie's life might have been short — she died last September at 26 — but she left an enduring legacy, one her parents are determined to continue.

Before Ms. Kiltz helped change lives with BiG, she aided children through His Grace Foundation, a nonprofit organization she started after Gracie's injury that supports kids who receive bone marrow transplants at Texas Children's Hospital in Houston. Ms. Kiltz ran the organization for eight years before passing the torch to a friend.

Besides her nonprofit work, she worked as an interior designer in the Houston area. She and her husband John lived in Hockley, Texas before his job moved them to Austin, just south of the place they would ultimately call home. In 2004 they moved to a community that would greatly support BiG.

"I know us landing in Georgetown was just a God thing," she said. "I don't feel like (BiG) would have been successful if it started out in a different community."

Paradigm shift

Gracie's experience at Benold Middle School and Georgetown High School, Ms. Kiltz said, was wonderful, filled with "amazing teachers" and a homecoming crown win.

She credits BiG's beginning to the GHS student body, saying their votes for Gracie and Jared Friemel, who also had special needs, as homecoming king and queen in 2010 sparked a paradigm shift.

"They were given a place of honor that foreshadowed the dignity and respect that would come through BiG," she said.

Buoyed by Gracie's homecoming victory, Ms. Kiltz met with her teachers to applaud their commitment to her education and to ask what was next for her daughter, then a senior.

Their response, "nothing," launched her on a nationwide search for any post high school community for Gracie. She finally found The Brookwood Community, a vocational center for adults with special needs near Houston in Brookshire, Texas, that became a model for BiG.

Brookwood allowed her to use its name, something it hasn't done in more than 30 years. She believes they allowed her to steward the name because of her commitment to replicating it down to the detail where BiG would be an "educational greenhouse for all new programs." She began a small pilot program for students at GISD with special needs who were aging out of the school system. It then transitioned into her home and backyard for the summer.

Together, Ms. Kiltz and students planted 1,400 sunflowers in the backyards of anyone who would allow them, made pottery



Brookwood in Georgetown founder and executive director Erin Kiltz and a group of citizens are excited about the first two homes the vocational community is building for adults with special needs.



Gracie Kiltz inspired her mother, Erin Kiltz, to open Brookwood in Georgetown, a vocational community for adults with special needs.

and unknowingly bootlegged granola.

One student's mother, who worked for the Williamson County and Cities Health Department, asked where they were making the granola.

"My kitchen, of course," Ms. Kiltz said.

Well, that would be illegal, the mother said. Thanks to Galaxy Bakery, students were able to make granola, legally, in its kitchen on Sunday nights.

One day Mr. Kiltz came home to find clay from a pottery class all over their kitchen and living room.

"Do you think we can find some church that would allow us to have a room to continue this experiment?" he suggested.

Gaining momentum

Ms. Kiltz began loading up buses of community leaders, educators and pro-

spective families to tour The Brookwood Community in 2011. Since then, BiG has led more than 100 tours to the center.

One bus driver would be inspired to give BiG its first home and eventually join its staff as development director.

Georgetown Church of Christ Pastor Tim Curtis was so taken with the beauty of Brookwood, Ms. Kiltz said, that he told the church's board he wanted to see the church provide free space for BiG, which it did for four-and-a-half years until the organization moved to its current site at 905 North Church Street in 2016. Mr. Kiltz said it was the perfect place for BiG because the former mattress store was accessible and right in the heart of Georgetown.

But it could have been a different story.

When Ms. Kiltz put in a bid for the building five years ago, it was already in negotiations to become another mattress store. But when the buyer heard about Ms. Kiltz's goal, he backed out because he wanted to see BiG happen, she said.

And so BiG grew, from eight citizens in its first church home to today's 80 across three campuses: the main one on Church Street and two satellites at Georgetown Church of Christ and Austin Ridge Bible Church on Bee Cave Road.

Citizens make pottery, jewelry, soap and food to sell in the BiG shop. BiG raised \$2.6 million this year for operations, most of which came from revenue and tuition.

To meet the growing demand for services, Ms. Kiltz led a \$4 million capital campaign to expand citizen workspace by 7,500 square feet and build their first two residential homes for eight men and eight women with special needs. She hopes to open the homes in late 2020.

She also wants to add more satellites as churches come on board, as well as a "BiG in a box" franchise model. Another long-term goal is to create Grace Place, a 75-100 acre residential and vocational community within a 10-minute drive of BiG. Ms. Kiltz hopes for a land donation for the

project that will be designed to serve 150 citizens.

The driving force behind the growing organization is quick to shift praise to others who have helped along the way: her daughter, husband, citizens, staff, volunteers, God.

"There are 100 people behind me. God has so blessed our journey," Ms. Kiltz said.

She especially thanked her daughter and husband.

Mr. Kiltz, who works for a real estate firm in Austin and is BiG's board chairman, has given Ms. Kiltz the opportunity to be BiG's full-time founder, executive director and volunteer. Since Gracie's death, she said he has stepped in to help them organize and take BiG to a new level.

"Without Gracie, we would not exist. John and I desire to honor and truly fulfill her life legacy," she said.

'They carry us'

Fantastic, transformational, fulfilling — that's how parents, citizens, staff and volunteers describe BiG at focus group sessions.

The groups are designed to measure BiG's impact for potential donations.

They all see the power of BiG, Ms. Kiltz said. Adults with special needs who never spoke before, now speak confidently. People who were depressed, lead fulfilling lives.

"When you see that transformation happen it makes it all worth it," Ms. Kiltz said. "The citizens have carried us through this journey."

She pointed to the pride and confidence they gain from accomplishments at BiG that rub off on their families.

"I think for the first time ever, their families are able to celebrate who their son or daughter is because of BiG," she said. "Their child has a place where they are highly valued and when you're highly valued as a human being, the sky is the limit."

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