

The image features a central brick with the words "BREAK THRU" written in white, capital letters. The brick is surrounded by a network of dark, jagged lines representing shattered glass or a broken surface. In the background, a blurred green landscape is visible through the opening. The overall composition suggests a theme of breaking through barriers.

"BREAK
THRU"

FOCUS

Spring 2012

Editors' Note

Shattered glass.

Remember sending your new baseball through the front window for the first time? Or maybe it was the time you, out of exuberant love, swung your teddy bear around so quickly that it knocked your mom's favorite vase clean off the coffee table. As you heard the glass shatter and watched the shards glide across the wood floor of her living room, something gripped you from the pit of your stomach and held you motionless for just a second. One second ago what once seemed constant, unchanging, maybe even unbreakable now sits quite broken at your feet.

When something breaks before our eyes it grips us, even if just for an instant. It's that moment that we want to take you back to over and over again with this Spring 2012 issue of Focus.

Windows and vases break, but so do walls and norms and seemingly unconquerable mountains. Waco, like any city, is full of these walls, norms and mountains, these breakthroughs waiting to happen.

The most segregated hour in America? A downtown sitting in years of disrepair? A Waco teen who lost both parents? A family of drug addicts?

One second they're unbreakable, unconquerable scenarios, and the next the walls and mountains sit like piles of broken glass at your feet.

The walls come in all shapes and sizes, but they share one thing in common: they can break. It might take a more intentional effort than an errant baseball or a swinging stuffed bear, but Waco is watching its citizens shatter norms, stereotypes, odds, addictions, and expectations.

The glass shards are stacking up. Enjoy the breakthroughs.

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Defying the most segregated hour

Story by Abigail Risner | Photos by Matt Hellman

When Pastor David Booker and his wife, Kim, moved into the neighborhood of their newly located church at 13th and Mary street, they knew they didn't fit in. As a white, middle-class family living in a low-income neighborhood in downtown Waco, they weren't exactly typical neighbors.

"Our house was broken into three times in the first year we lived there," Booker said. As the racial minority, the Bookers knew they had to earn the trust and respect of their neighbors by building relationships with them. After several months of interacting with the community, the tides began to turn.

"The fourth time our house got broken into, our neighbor personally chased the guy down on foot. That's when we knew things were starting to change," he said.

In a country where Sunday morning is said to be the most segregated time of the week, Acts Christian Fellowship has made it its purpose to build a church that reflects heavenly worship, meaning every race, tribe,

social class and background is represented in the congregation. After starting the church in 2006 in China Spring, they felt they would have a greater impact in downtown Waco. They moved to their current location at 13th and Mary in 2007, and that's when their story really starts.

One of Booker's convictions was that he wanted to live within five minutes walking distance from the church. He wanted the church's leadership to live in the neighborhood to build relationships with the people, so that from this neighborhood their congregation would grow.

Melissa Sloan, Acts' children's pastor and wife of church elder Stephen Sloan, recalls her first experience at the church.

"After visiting lots of churches in Waco, the first thing we noticed at Acts was the racial diversity," Sloan said. "I told the pastor's wife, Kim Booker, 'I've never seen such a diverse church.'"

Kim explained to her that when the Lord called David [Booker] to plant this church,

He told him it would resemble heaven.

Revelation 7:9 records the people in heaven as "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language." In response to this word from the Lord, Acts has been intentional about reaching out to people of all races and socioeconomic classes.

"We knew that growing a diverse congregation would be hard for a group of white people to do," Booker said. "So we intentionally prayed for a minority to join our staff." The Lord answered their prayer with Omari Head, a black student at Truett Theological Seminary. Head had a heart for ministering to students, and Acts needed a college pastor. He shared Booker's conviction for serving the community around the church, and he soon moved into the neighborhood as well.

"By living near the church we were saying, 'We are here to stay, and we want to get to know you,'" Head said.



them with an after-school snack and offer a Bible lesson. They hoped that through this ministry, they would bless the children and be able to connect with their parents.

Even with their new location and growing staff, Acts knew people wouldn't just show up on Sunday mornings. Individuals first needed to be accepted and trusted within the community. To do this, they started with those least inhibited by racial barriers, children, and created a ministry called Kidz Jam. Twice a week, the church staff would go to Kate Ross Public Housing to play with the children, provide

Samantha Reyna, a 27-year old Hispanic single mom, was one of these parents.

"I first got connected to Acts through Kidz Jam, the after school program that goes to Kate Ross," Reyna said. "I wanted to make myself familiar with the people watching my kids, so I started talking with Kim [Booker] and the other women who came."

After an invitation from Kim and prompting by her daughters, Reyna

finally visited Acts' Sunday morning service.

"Back then, the majority of the congregation was white. Not many people from the neighborhood were coming," Reyna said. "I sat by myself in the back corner, but people would always come up to me, and I felt accepted there."

That was four years ago. Today, the congregation has grown from around 30 to almost 300, becoming more and more diverse as it grows. Samantha and her daughters have been attending ever since that first Sunday. She even serves in the children's ministry as a Sunday school teacher.



Members of Acts went into the community over spring break to work with children and families at the Kate Ross Public Housing, owned by the Waco Housing Authority. *Catalyst* focused on community service, working with children and building relationships with families. Children were taught music, theater, dance and more during afternoon sessions each day. The event concluded with a block party, pictured at left.



“*I know if I need something, I can depend on Acts more than my own family, because Acts is my family.*”

“I’ve talked to other people [from the neighborhood] that have visited, and they feel the same way. Acts doesn’t feel fake,” Reyna said. “It’s not like the people have pity on us. They just accept us and love us. Yes, it is a poor neighborhood and some of us aren’t educated, but they don’t judge us or look down on us.”

Diversity doesn’t end with race. The Acts community represents educated, uneducated, rich, poor, young and old.

“We are a church for the rejected, because that’s who Jesus spent his time with,” Melissa Sloan said. “He went to the people that didn’t fit in and weren’t received anywhere else. We want to be a home to those people.”

Acts desires to mimic the characteristics of the early church in the book of Acts. The disciple Luke writes, “they pooled their resources so that each person’s need was met.”

Church Elder Stephen Sloan, who also serves as the director of the Baylor Institute for Oral History, describes how these

characteristics look in the church today. “Some people think we pray so we don’t have to do anything else. We need to pray, but God has also given us the means to help people with real tangible needs.”

So they started a monthly special offering that goes entirely to a member of the congregation that’s in need.

“We’ve done it for two years now, and every week it’s different. Sometimes it’s a couple hundred dollars, sometimes it’s thousands,” Sloan said.

In September 2011, Samantha Reyna had a need, and Acts met it.

“I was taking the kids to San Antonio, and my car broke down in Austin,” Reyna recounts. “Melissa Sloan loaned me her car for the next couple of weeks, but I had just gotten a new job, so I would need a dependable car soon.”

Stephen Sloan decided this would be the perfect challenge for the monthly special offering. So the following Sunday morning, when Samantha would be serving in the children’s ministry, he announced to the

church, “Get your checkbooks out. We’re buying Samantha a car.”

Thanks to a few large gifts and generosity of members, Acts collected their largest monthly special offering to date: more than \$10,000. The very next week, Samantha and the Acts congregation were led outside during worship, and she was presented with a new car.


“I was so excited because I found an ‘I heart my church’ bumper sticker,” Stephen Sloan said. “It came in the mail just in time to get it on the back of the car.”

This is just one example of how the people of Acts Christian Fellowship have created a support system for Reyna and countless members of the neighborhood surrounding the church.

“I don’t have to worry about anything,” Samantha said. “I know if I need something, I can depend on Acts more than my own family, because Acts is my family.”

Acts hopes to bring more members of the community into its diverse family by encouraging students and families to spend time in the area surrounding the church. The college ministry usually goes on a mission trip for spring break, but this year they decided to stay and spend time getting to know the neighborhood and ministering to the Waco community.

The church is investing in this neighborhood, creating opportunities for deeper relationships and continued growth. The goal is to create a church that looks like heaven, joining people of all backgrounds to worship one God.

A person is silhouetted against a bright doorway, standing with their back to the camera and arms crossed. They are looking out at a wooden fence. The scene is dimly lit, with the light coming from the doorway. The person is wearing a dark t-shirt, shorts, and sneakers. The floor is dark and appears to be concrete or asphalt. There is some debris on the floor near the doorway.

His Dream

Story by Laurean Love | Photos by Matt Hellman

From living amid his mother's in-house prostitution ring to witnessing his father murdered in front of him, Jameson White has already encountered more in his young life than most people do in a lifetime.

With his past and Waco High School's low graduation rate, it is hard to believe that he is where he is today: at the top of his class, graduating in May and having earned acceptance to an acclaimed Texas university.

Jameson grew up in San Antonio with his mother and had been put in special needs classes. His mother had been self-employed at a massage salon, which he later found out was a cover for in-home prostitution. His mother would verbally abuse Jameson and his two brothers and sister.

"Whenever my mom was there, she would say I was worthless," said Jameson, "and that's why I could not do anything on my own because it was always, 'I can't do this, I don't know how'. I didn't have any motivation in me at all."

There were constantly guests living with Jameson at his mother's house, anywhere from four to six people a room.

When Jameson was just 12 years old, his mother abandoned him. She had been gone two weeks before he called his grandmother. When his grandmother came for him, Jameson found out that his father had been released from prison several months ago, but his mother had forbidden him from seeing Jameson. His father had been incarcerated for drug-related charges.

Jameson's father, Charles White, withdrew him from school in San Antonio and brought him to Waco, putting him in regular and advanced classes. Jameson said his father believed in him and wanted to teach him right from wrong. Although his dad was still involved in some illegal activity, he always made

sure that Jameson kept up in school and remained involved in extracurricular activities, including band, football and any advanced classes that were available.

"I was completely reliant and dependent on people before I got to my dad," Jameson said. "When I got to my dad, he straightened everything out for me to be self-reliant, but I never got completely off of that because of him. But when he died that forced me to become self-reliant and forced me to utilize the tools that he gave me."

Jameson's father would go and talk to his teachers to make sure he was not falling behind. His father even taught him how to play guitar. Jameson still uses this gift as the bass guitarist in a local band, War Within.

On June 2, 2008, Jameson's father was murdered. Two men came to his home, cut the power switch to draw him out and unloaded an entire AR-15 magazine on his father. Everything Jameson knew was stripped from him in one instant. He remembers the gunshots, all the blood and his father's last breath.

According to Jameson, his father sent him inside to get a flashlight, even though they knew exactly where the breaker box was. Jameson said his dad must have known someone had tricked them to come outside and was going to try to hurt them.

Jameson said he thinks his father, who was a former Marine, must have fought the guy for a while because his father shot the man he struggled with in the foot. It was another man from several yards away that shot and killed his father.

"It's more of an honor story. That's why I have more pride in it because he defended us, and I had someone die for me so I can go to college," Jameson said. "He gave me the tools I needed to go, but it wasn't until he died that I had the inner will to be able to do it on my own."

Jameson was a witness at his father's murder trial. He had to sit while the medical examiners told the jury exactly how it must have happened. Even though a full magazine had been emptied, his father had only been shot twice — once in his leg and once in his heart.

"When you get hit in the face with the truth, you have to deal with it. You can't put it to the side," he said. "My dad was gone. No one else is going to be there."

Even as a sophomore in high school, Jameson knew then that he would have to cope with the fact that both of his parents were gone, and they were not coming back.

The hardships in Jameson's life did not end with his father's death.

Since his mother was not in his life any longer, his stepmother, Lupe, took custody of Jameson. Jameson collected Social Security checks and his stepmother set up an account for the money to be placed in.

The account was supposed to start his college fund. However, Jameson soon learned that his stepmother had been stealing his money and had only been putting a small part in the account. When Jameson confronted her about this, she withdrew the rest of the money from his account and left.

At this point, Jameson had no one else to turn to but himself.

"I have no emotional bonds with anybody," said Jameson. "I could care less. I was forced to let go of the one person I ever loved. Forced, as in ripped from my arms kind of thing. Ever since then I worry more about myself than anybody else in this world."

He is living with a friend now, but he pays his own rent, utilities, groceries and all the other essential items.

Jameson does not have a car, so he must walk everywhere or rely on someone else to give him a ride.

After his father's death and his stepmother's disappearance, a teacher whom he been close with and whom his father spoke with on several occasions became an advocate for Jameson. Denise Bell stepped in as a sort of mother figure. Bell even offered to adopt him after his father was murdered.

"I just have been there to clear the path," Bell said, "the way a parent would within the school system when he is coming up against a barrier, to just be that sounding board, but also be that advocate for him."

Jameson was recently accepted to Texas A&M University. Excited about his acceptance, he began to tell everyone he knew, only

“When you get hit in the face with the truth, you have to deal with it.”

to realize that he could not share the moment with his father.

Billy Tate is one of Jameson's longtime friends, as well as a member of the same

band, War Within, and Jameson's employer at Texas Chain saw Nightmare Haunted House.

"Jameson has worked for me for several years, so I have heard his story before, and to see him fight as hard as he has and end up where he is still strikes a chord," Tate said.

Meeting Jameson, few people would guess his past hardships. He comes across as a happy, normal and well-educated young man. Jameson does not like to share his past with others in fear that they would pity him.

Even though Jameson's father is not around today, Jameson said he is inspired by his father's goals and pursues his dreams in dedication to his father's life.



Jameson White strums his Dean Electric guitar. The Waco High School senior, who has been accepted to Texas A&M University, plays bass for the local band, War Within.

Risking it all for the ARTS

Story by Whitney Van Laningham | Photos by Debra Gonzalez

Amanda Hixson isn't interested in "normal." She zigzagged between various careers before finally deciding to become a true "bohemian:" one who practices an unconventional lifestyle in the company of like-minded people, involving musical, artistic or literary pursuits."

In the past 12 months, she has gone from schoolteacher to editor-in-chief of her own magazine. Her goal is nothing less than to unite Waco artists and raise awareness for the local arts community. But despite personal success, Hixson faces daily financial struggles that threaten to sink the *Bohemia Literary Arts Journal* and everything else that she has worked so hard for. In short, Hixson is risking it all to showcase Waco as a hub for art and culture.

Waco is the perfect city for Hixson's artistic revolution. Where most people see a city dominated by parking garages and chain restaurants, Hixson sees a Mecca for neophyte artists to begin their careers and a haven for professionals to showcase their craft. She has dedicated the past year to this project, and for someone who can truly be classified as a

starving artist, has already made quite a bit of progress.

"We couldn't have started this in another city," Eric Doyle, managing editor at *Bohemia*, said. "Because there's such a need for what we're trying to do in Waco, there was just a groundswell of support. It was very humbling."

Hixson moved to Waco in 1998 at the age of 22. She chose to major in journalism because of her childhood dream to someday publish her own magazine.

"I used to make 'magazines' for my mother growing up," she said. "I would also make 'newspapers' by stapling together old bits of newspaper and folding them up."

Her passions for writing led her to work for the *Baylor Lariat*, Baylor's student newspaper, as a staff writer.

"Interviewing was my strength," Hixson said.

In her last year of college, Hixson's life took an unexpected turn.

"I left Baylor due to extensive health and poverty problems," she said.

An invasive surgery left her too emotionally and physically unable to return to school.

The realization that she could have lost her life made Hixson re-evaluate her decision to be a journalist.

"Around the time I decided to leave Baylor, September 11th was being heavily covered in the media. At this point, I was just so happy to be alive [after the surgery]. I didn't want to be a journalist anymore if I had to cover stories that were just making me sad," Hixson said.

Without a college degree, Hixson found herself working at Wal-Mart and living paycheck to paycheck. She used food stamps to pay for her groceries and struggled to make ends meet.

"I'm an independent spirit," she said. "I left my parents' house when I was 17, and I haven't taken any money from them. Sometimes it's really hard."

Still, Hixson began volunteering on the side with a local Girl Scout troop to branch out from her job at Wal-Mart. It was then she discovered her passion for teaching, and enrolled in McLennan County Community College's four-year teaching program.

In 2003, Hixson started professor Jim McKeown's creative writing class at MCC.

McKeown took an interest in Hixson because of the obvious dedication and focus involved in her writing.

"She would have a vision for a project, and when she has a vision, she always follows through with it," McKeown said.

The two of them teamed up after McKeown published several of Hixson's poems in MCC's literary journal, *The Stone Circle*.

Despite the fact that Hixson was making a steady living as a teacher, having been hired at JH Hines Elementary, she felt that there was something greater that she could be doing for the community. She quit her teaching job in early 2011 to start working on the magazine.

"I couldn't say no to her," McKeown said. "She was one of the best students I ever had. At first I thought she was just going to ask me about printers and other advice kind of things. [After meeting with her] I realized that this was going to be so much bigger than the neighborhood rag."

Hixson arranged a meeting at On the Border to pitch her idea about starting *Bohemia*. In attendance were Doyle, McKeown and a handful of other writers and poets.

"There was salsa on everything," Doyle said. "We had no artists. When we first showed up for that meeting, we were all writers. That's how we decided to be a literary journal, because we had all that writing."

But when different personalities started showing interest in Hixson's project, things really started happening. Artists, journalists, photographers and musicians started showing their support for *Bohemia*.

"Journalism is great," Hixson said. "But I wanted to showcase actual art. I wanted to feature emerging artists and regional artists who are at the peak of their field." Through *Bohemia* she provides a unique networking

system that allows artists, writers, musicians and photographers to connect, as well as providing the support and encouragement that they need to continue creating. Hixson operates under the theory that if you give artists an opportunity, they will embrace the inspiration and be able to accomplish their goals.

Most artists in the Waco community can empathize with Hixson's financial situation. Her creativity costs more than her bank account actually holds, and she is constantly treading water to keep the *Bohemia* project afloat. In the process, producing creative material for free has consumed Hixson's life. All revenue garnered by advertising sales and donations is immediately devoted to the cost of printing and distributing the magazine. None of the money goes to the artists, let alone to the visionary bringing them all together. Hixson's only source of income is through her husband, Donnie, who is the manager of Domino's Pizza. Even the \$100 a month rent at the Croft Gallery was unaffordable, and she recently had to relocate across the street. She relies completely on community support and her own creativity for success.

Despite this, Hixson and the other "Bohemians" have managed to produce. "We always get the money," Doyle said. "Sometimes we have to be creative about finding revenue sources, but I know that someday we are going to be successful, and that makes it worth it."

When James Lafayette, owner of Legacy Art Café, heard that Hixson was losing the Croft office, he offered her a rent-free space above his gallery and coffee shop. Artists and writers have accepted bylines instead of cash payment for their work, and poets are able to perform their work in front of a crowd almost every weekend at the open-mic nights that Hixson helps sponsor. Countless volunteers donate food, useful products, time and energy to the project.

The community's support has kept the magazine alive, but only as a result of Hixson's vision and motivation. "In a year filled with ups and downs, the growing pains of any startup endeavor, none of us has seen a dime. Somehow, Amanda has convinced a team of Waco's most talented artists to work a highly stressful, full-time job for free," Doyle said.

Publishing the work of talented, unknown artists helps them get their foot in the door of the elusive world of art and entertainment. "There is really nothing for young artists in the communities between Austin

and Dallas," Hixson said. "We provide an outlet for any kind of art."

Hixson meets with every kind of artist imaginable, from conventional painters, sculptors, and photographers to edgy tattoo artists, glass blowers, fashionistas. Hixson is so dedicated to her job because she truly believes in the artists that she fosters. She strives to give a voice to the individuals struggling to have their art form as their primary source of income.

"A lot of people here are hungry for others to see their work," she said. "They want an audience. That's what every artist or writer wants; for people to hear what they have to say."

Artist Spotlight

Con-cept-ion-al

"Con-cept-ion-al" is the term used by breakthrough artist Jeremy Newton to describe his latest gallery exhibit, currently featured at the Art Center Waco. Newton, 28, has re-defined the boundaries of material objects in his artwork. He uses everyday objects—toothbrushes, erasers, staples, and matchsticks—to display extraordinary works of art.

First, Newton selects his material—for example, a piece of college-ruled notebook paper. Then, he breaks down the material into something unrecognizable. He slices the thin, red and blue lines from the paper, shreds them into tiny pieces, and arranges them into piles. When he is finished, it looks like two mounds of pink and blue ash.

"How often do we pay attention to the little blue lines on a sheet of notebook paper?" Newton said. "By cutting them out and rearranging them to be perpendicular instead of parallel, it helps bring more thought to the material."

When Newton breaks down his materials, he gets to know them better. For his installation made of eraser shavings, Newton purchased 400 Pink Pearl erasers from Office Depot and spent three months rubbing them into tiny, curled shavings to place in a 4'7" x 6'8" pile.

"The breakdown of the materials is spiritual," Newton said. "When you create art, they are resurrected into their new form."


Newton's exhibit, *Con-cept-ion-al*, will feature pieces such as *Staple Stalactite*, *Boiled Matchstick Cubes*, and other installations at Art Center Waco through April 28, 2012.



Avery Jackson reads an original piece at one of the local open mic nights.



Setting a Farm



“Whap!” A gun smashes into the back of his head.

He crumples to the ground.

Two men take off with his coat and money. He stands back up, head pounding. He tries to run. He gets hit. He tries to run again. He gets hit again. After the seventh time, there is no getting back to his feet.

“My whole body was just blood,” he said.

“Pow! Pow! Pow!” One bullet found flesh.

“All of a sudden I’m sitting at the top of this tree way up in the sky, like I’m sitting on the Alico,” he remembers. “I look down, and it’s me and these circle of clouds. They are going counterclockwise. They are going around me and these guys are jumping me.”

An ambulance ride, a hospital visit and a reconstructive facial surgery later, Jason Ramos had more than 70 stitches in his head, face and mouth. A scar in his foot still marks the bullet wound.

But he’s alive.

Losing Innocence Early

That was not Ramos’ first run-in with a gun. At age 6, Ramos, his twin brother Jon and their sister watched his mom slip out the door as his drunken father threatened her with a shotgun.

After he was locked up, it was Roy.

Every time they went to the room, Jason and Jon knew exactly what they were going to do.

“Don’t do it, please don’t do it!” Jon remembers screaming through the crack at the bottom of the door to his mom as she stuck a syringe filled with methamphetamine into her arm.

Then came the beatings.

“We’d hide in the closet and watch for hours while he beat her up,” Jason said.

One day they finally ran down the street to get their grandpa. Putting on his deer uniform, their grandpa grabbed his gun out of the gun case and said, ‘C’mon, boys.’ Minutes later he kicked down the door and watched Roy scurry out the window.

“That was the end of Roy,” Jason said.

Despite the coming and going of two abusive father figures, the twins still held onto their childhood for a couple more years.

“We were kids all the way to seventh grade,”

Family Free

Story by Matt Larsen
Photos by Matt Hellman

Jon said. "And then our lives changed."

With few family memories that didn't involve drugs or violence, Jason and Jon were simply looking for somewhere to belong. That somewhere ended up being anywhere their respective gangs went.

"I would go to school Friday morning in seventh grade and not come home until Sunday night," Jon said.

By the age of 12 Jason found himself stealing cars, smoking weed, and getting drunk. He remembers the first time he was arrested for unlawfully carrying a weapon at 13. At 16, he overdosed on cocaine.

Lying in a hospital bed after the overdose with his grandma crying by his side, Jason vowed to give up the drugs for a while. That lasted about a year.

After that year, Jason quickly fell back into a habit of using and selling everyday.

"That was just the lifestyle we lived," he said. "It was normal."

Normal was also in and out of a relationship with Monica, the woman who would be his future wife. The two met in their early teenage years but finally started a relationship, built around drugs, in their early 20s. For much of the on-and-off relationship, the two used drugs together on a daily basis. In October 2001 Monica became pregnant with their first son, Austin.

Ten years later, Austin sparked a change.

A Pair of Breakthroughs

For his 10th birthday, Austin had one wish: to go to church for the first time.

So they went.

"It was so uncomfortable for me," Monica remembers, smiling. "I felt like the whole message was for me."

The following week a couple girls approached Monica at the supermarket and asked if they could pray for her. Though she didn't fully open up to the two strangers, she shared that her family was in a tight spot financially because she needed a job. Having just prayed for God to show up before she en-

tered the supermarket, she thought these girls might be her answer.

After they prayed for her, she walked out the door of the supermarket and ran right into her old boss who asked her to come back to work for him.

But the drugs continued.

Three more weeks of simply adding church and Bible-reading to her drug-dependent lifestyle found her still depressed and disappointed in her shortcomings as a mom. Then all of sudden something broke, and she lost the desire for drugs.

A week later she gave her life to Jesus.

"Even though we were in this depression stuff, it was the first time I had experienced this joy and peace," she said. "I never knew I could experience that no matter what was going on."

Knowing she wanted him to change too, Jason tried to hide by smoking just \$20 or \$30 worth of dope a day rather than \$100.

But she could tell. One day he came back to their apartment after hitting the streets and she was gone. She wanted a real father for her children and started praying for one.

This separation launched Jason into the loneliest season of his life.

While watching his reflection smoke a glass pipe in the bathroom mirror of his apartment, guilt and despair finally gripped his insides. He flushed what he had and went to his mom's house. Flopping down on the bed in what used to be his room, he grabbed a pen and paper and began scribbling:

"God I need your help. I don't want to live

“

I would go to school Friday
not come home un

like this no more. I can't live like this no more. Come take me by the hand and pull me out of this."

"I was praying to God," he said. "And He heard me."

His answer came the following day at work in the form of a phone call from his probation officer. Jason had not told him about the job.

"How did you find me?" Jason remembers asking.

But the call had a purpose. Jason had tested positive for drug use at the probation office earlier in the week.

But he had no intention of coming quietly.

"I've been ducking and dodging and ripping and running my whole life. I ain't fixing to go do no time," Jason told the officer.

"Hey, you prayed about this two days ago," a voice from inside him interrupted.

So he went.

"I walked out of there that day, and I felt this lift off of me like I had never felt before. I went home and told my mom, and she was crying. I was like, 'No, I think this is God. I think God is doing something.'"

On Wednesday, Nov. 14, 2007, Jason Ramos entered Lubbock County Correctional Facility and found his freedom.

"He started a Bible study and it got to the point that it was bigger than mine," Benny Lopez, Jason's friend and Pastor of Prison Ministry at New Life Ministries, said. "So from that moment I could see that God had something special for Jason. He was a leader..."

MERCY

ay morning in 7th grade and until Sunday night.

”

A bunch of guys started to call him the pope.”

The two developed a deep bond during Jason's time in Lubbock. Lopez's strongest memories were Sunday night dinners with Jason and a handful of other inmates. Spaghetti, garlic bread and one movie: “Nacho Libre.”

“We watched it so many times, to the point that we all knew the lines,” Lopez said. “So every Tuesday I would go over there and be like, ‘Nacho!’”

A Family Affair

In September 2008 Jason Ramos came back to Waco free from prison, free from his drug addictions and free to pursue a new dream: the transformation of his family. He went into prison weighing 135 pounds and came out at a rock-like 185. But his smile is what really grew.

“I didn't even recognize him when I saw him,” Jon said.

Though Jon was released from prison shortly after Jason, he had no interest in a new lifestyle just yet. Jason spent two and half years praying and waiting patiently for his brother to want to change.

“But every time I would see him, I would see him as this man of God,” Jason said, recalling the visions he had of his brother following Jesus and walking in the same freedom he was experiencing. He remembers passing him on Waco Drive one time and whipping back around for a second look.

Out of faith that God would transform his

brother into the man of God he kept seeing, Jason kept extending invitations for Jon to meet Jesus and find freedom.

“He continued to invest in me,” Jon remembers. “I was living my life, selling drugs and gambling. ‘Jon, you want to come with me to lifegroup? Jon, you want to come with me to the feast? Jon, you want to...?’”

“One day he came at the right time.”

As Jason walked into his mother's house one afternoon, his brother was lying on the couch looking exhausted.

“I know you're tired,” he said.

Jon knew he wasn't talking about physically.

“You ready?” Jason asked.

“He has asked me that many times before,” Jon said. “That day when he asked me, I was like ‘Yeah, man. I'm ready.’”

After praying with Jason, Jon told his family his plans and moved in at the Mercy House within the week. Run by Antioch Community Church volunteers and staff, the Mercy House functions as a home where addicts can seek freedom alongside others with similar pasts.

Jon remembers mowing the church lawn early during his stay and thinking about how much money he needed to store up before he could get right back out on the streets selling drugs. God had a different plan though.

Jon's 3-month stint at the Mercy House ended in October 2011, but he stayed a month longer and now spends every other weekend there helping other men walk into freedom.

“It's my home,” he said.

While Jon calls the Mercy House home, he has done anything but forsake the family in which he has also found a renewed sense of belonging. The night he prayed with Jason to seek freedom from his addictions, Jason made sure Jon knew how excited he was to have his brother back.

“We're twins again,” he remembers Jason telling him with a smile that could have been mistaken for a child's toothy grin on Christmas morning.

Walking in close relationship with friends at Antioch, Jason and Monica started their relationship back up and eventually got married, this time centered not on their addictions but around the one who set them both free. Jason would become the answer to Monica's prayer for a real father for her children.

Not only has Jason become a real father, but restoration in the Ramos family is reaching back a generation to see Jason and his real father rebuild their relationship. While reaching back, the brothers have committed along with their cousin Frederick to leading their families forward to create a new norm for their children to grow up in.

“I used to go buy them an Xbox to keep them in a room. That was parenting for me,” Jason said. “Now I want to train them up to be men of honor. I want to train them up to be somebody's husband someday. I want to not just give them, give them, give them. Now I want to be a father. I want to be a dad.”

Knowing their history, the brothers are building a new heritage for the Ramos family, establishing a new namesake.

“There is not a day that goes by that I don't remember my life before, and I am so thankful that God pulled me out of it,” Jason said. “But the reality is that you can be a part of something greater than yourself by giving your life away.”

Though their sons come first, both brothers know the freedom and life they stepped into was not meant for just the Ramos family. They will give their lives away to see it spread. Their freedom compels them.

“It's just the beginning,” Jon said with a grin.



Fresh from the farm

Waco sees the fruits of local farmers' labor at downtown market

Story by Caitlin Giddens | Photos by Alison Higgins

Less than three miles from Interstate 35, local farmer Carl Spain feels connected to the land. He finds company not in the hustle and bustle of city life, but with the free-range goats and chickens he's grown to love. Spain's farm mirrors the garden he's studied in seminary, a union of man and animal. The goats and chickens do not solely exist to produce milk and eggs. They live in peace and freedom, harmonizing with nature by roaming Spain's fields and relishing God's creation.

Spain lives in West, a small community near Waco, working as what he calls a hybrid between a hobby farmer and a "grown up" farmer. He contributes crops to the weekly Waco Downtown Farmers Market, a new initiative in town. But more than his tangible contribution each Saturday, Spain plays a role in the return of trusting the local farmer, and in honoring animals.

"I don't want to live on the land like it's a blight, squeezing money out of it just to make a living," Spain said. "It's a pleasure doing what I know I am called to do, and

knowing what I do matters, at least with these 17 acres."

More than 30 vendors meet each Saturday morning at the Waco Downtown Farmers Market to offer visitors the best organic produce, meat and cheese. The market was in the budding stages for years, until it became a reality in November of 2011. This realization resulted from the efforts of local farmer Terry Vanderpool, Bethel Erickson-Bruce, director of the Heart of Texas Urban Gardening Coalition and the Waco Downtown Farmers Market Board.

Farming is not an easy life, Vanderpool insists. But Waco sees the fruits of farmers' labor each Saturday at the market. And they want more.

"Being a local, small scale farmer is a lot different than any other thing today," Vanderpool said. "It's taking us back to our roots and taking us to a small-scale society, when people knew their farmer and the land they grow on. We're providing vegetables that are improving people's lives with more nutrients."

With the market taking root in Waco, the community can find organic foods with-

out a pilgrimage to Austin or Dallas. This marks the beginning of a greener Waco.

"This is one of the first pushes, so it's a start," Vanderpool said. "The parking lot at the market is not as full as those at the grocery store. There's only a small percent of people who are interested in this now, but we're doing our part. The Chamber is working, but there needs to be more done to promote local farmers."

The market filled a need that Wacoans did not realize they had. Vanderpool explained that once people see the difference in fresh fruits and vegetables, they understand the organic movement.

"These vegetables are more attractive, which makes people excited about eating fresh vegetables from a local garden," Vanderpool said. "There are more varieties and color varieties than what you can find in a grocery store."

Variety is just one difference between industrial and local farming. Take one walk around Carl Spain's ranch, and you will find chickens and goats living together. He describes his farming process as natural, and

the way God intended.

"You can't go to a confined animal feeding operation and see the livestock," Spain said. "You can't go look at the chickens in cages. But I welcome anyone to come and see the farm. I know my animals are happy because I interact with them on a daily basis."

Spain's roots in organic farming began when he saw the reality of large-scale agriculture.

"All you have to do is raise the issues, and people know it is wrong," he said. "There is a considerable theological element to this. The theology of creation sees humans as responsible for taking care of the land God gave us."

Brandon Tull, another regular farmer at the market, points to Christian faith as a reason for changing his lifestyle. A 2001 Baylor graduate, Tull worked with software programs in Dallas before returning to Waco.

"I get more satisfaction providing healthier food to CSA [Community Supported Agriculture] than providing software systems to a company," Tull said. "There's something inherently wrong with treating your animals as units of production, pumping them full of chemicals and steroids, then keep them moving as little as possible to get top dollar out of them. That lines up with my faith, and our calling to be good stewards."

Tull spent a few years at a feed yard, witnessing the hushed secrets of industrial agriculture. This fostered a passion for respecting God's creation through his career.

"When dollar rules, the quality of livestock goes down," Tull said. "When you're looking at meat in dollar signs, that's a problem. A cow is meant to walk and graze. We're not supposed to poison the animals."

Tull sees himself as part of the young movement to a simpler, sustainable lifestyle. He finds inspiration in campaigns against mass industrialization, such as "The Greenhorns," a film and blog focused on farmers.

"Their podcasts are pretty entertaining," Tull said.

"But they show that this life is a commitment."

Although Tull does

the majority of the labor work for his business, The Home Grown Farm, his family works together to provide all natural food at an affordable price. Tull's brother helped with the branding and logo design, and his sister and grandparents lend their hands to the farm.

"We are a family operation, so if you look at what we've done for the spring, three generations have touched our work," Tull said. "Everybody has a hand in it."

Spain explained that farming began as a community project, each person playing a small role in a self-sufficient lifestyle.

“It’s a pleasure doing what I know I am called to do, and knowing what I do matters, at least with these 17 acres.”

"It makes for a long day when you do the work yourself," Spain said. "My wife does her part because her being a doctor supports this type of life. What I sell at the Waco Downtown Farmers Market covers my cost to go there. It's more about meeting with other vendors and making relationships."

Before moving to West nearly three years ago, Spain admits he lived the sedentary lifestyle of most Americans. He did not transform into a healthier person overnight.

Similar to the crops he plants, Spain's new lifestyle required time to grow. He began by cutting soda from his diet.

"Now I hate the taste of it because it's so overly sweet," Spain said. "My wife and I eat less meat now, and most of the meat we eat is from the farm. You just have to change the way you think about things, like we have with seasonal eating. It just seems right to eat asparagus when it is in season now."

Spain said becoming a full-time farmer was a breakthrough in the way he thought about life, and in his overall health. He has lost weight and gained more energy as a farmer. But he admits to occasional indulgences in American habits.

"We still go to the grocery store now and then and eat frozen pizza about once a week," Spain said. "But since making the change, I feel more active. I feel more alive."



Carl Spain feeds his free-range goats on his farm in West, located 19 miles north of Waco. Spain believes free-range farming is a more humane way to treat animals.