



DOORWAYS TO CHRIST shares the experiences of organizations that are making God's love visible in the world with astonishing grace and clarity. We are privileged to partner with them.

Our most recent support for the Wilkinson Center was through a \$30,000 grant award to their CLIMB after-school program.

WILKINSON CENTER TAKES THE LONG VIEW IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD

While other nonprofit leaders agonize over the myriad tradeoffs facing leaders in a struggling sector, Brian Burton, executive director of the Wilkinson Center in Dallas, celebrates their newest partnership with Eastfield College's Pleasant Grove campus. In fall 2009 the Wilkinson Center began offering classes at the college to prepare under-resourced students for entry into Eastfield's core programs. An on-site case

manager helps them overcome barriers to fully accessing or engaging in a potentially transformative educational experience.

"This adds another dimension to our holistic approach to combating poverty," Burton said. While immediate family needs are addressed through emergency services and their Food Pantry, Wilkinson Center's second-tier programs empower family

members with the skills, relationships, and resiliency they need to move into economic independence. Adult education programs – GED, ESL, computer literacy, financial literacy, and career prep – and their free CLIMB after-school program work together to provide coordinated support services and resources for creating "pathways out of poverty" for the area's most vulnerable families.

Leading in the Best and Worst of Times

Though justifiably proud of this latest nationally recognized collaboration, Burton is the first to admit the difficulties of managing a nonprofit, especially in tough economic times. Like 93 percent of nonprofits surveyed by the Bridgespan Group in fall 2009, the Wilkinson Center has been dramatically affected by the downturn. In fact, the center has seen a 70 percent increase in demand while funding has diminished.

"In my 14-year tenure here, last year was the worst. Needs were up, money was down, and we had to make some really tough decisions –

but we wanted those decisions not only to allow us to survive the recession, but also position us to take advantage of new opportunities as the economy improves. We weren't interested in short-term survival – we wanted sustainability," Burton recalled.

Preserving the Core/Stimulating Progress

When faced with reductions in revenue, most organizations have no choice but to cut costs, and the Wilkinson Center was no exception. However, even when confronted with an immediate shortfall, they refused to rob the future to pay for today. Instead, they focused on their mission, on preserving a healthy core.

They accelerated by two years their plans to move programs at Munger Place United Methodist Church – where the Wilkinson Center originated in 1982 – to southeast Dallas. Though emotionally charged, the transition improved their financial picture while positioning them to serve the needs of even more struggling families located in an area with more affordable housing than the gentrifying East Dallas neighborhood around Munger Place.

"It was difficult to vacate our 27-year home at Munger Place. But we knew it was more important to remain true to the purpose and vision of our founders than to their location," Burton remarked.

When one of those founders, Rev. Clayton Lewis, then pastor at Munger Place, observed a child digging for food in a dumpster, he vowed to spare other children that indignity and suffering. He helped form the East Dallas Cooperative Parish to minister to a growing impoverished population in East Dallas in the early 1980s. "That need has moved to the Pleasant Grove area in southeast Dallas, so that's where we needed to put more resources," Burton explained. "I think Rev. Lewis and Ruby Wilkinson (the Munger Place member for whom the Wilkinson Center is named) would support that decision wholeheartedly."

Unfortunately, like many nonprofits across the country, the Wilkinson Center was also forced to reduce staff – from 26 to 19. "That was the hardest decision. These were good people," Burton lamented. "We just tried to make decisions with a concern for the common good, with transparency, and with a sensitivity and compassion for all affected, both those who were laid off and those who remained."

Missional Management

That concern for the common good has defined Mr. Burton, an amiable, remarkably youthful-looking Southern Baptist from Arkansas who moved to Dallas in 1991 to be minister of adults at Wilshire Baptist Church. There he began his career in community-based education, starting innovative programs such as a vital job leads network, a spirituality of nursing continuing education course, and a survival course for beginning public school teachers. "Thousands of non-members were shown a faith meant to help, a faith that projects outward," Burton said.

"Growing up Southern Baptist in Little Rock, we were at church four times a week – I guess it "took" with me. When I became re-involved with my home church in my mid-twenties, I began to understand the purpose of the Church as touching those on the ragged rim, taking Christ's message of hope outside the walls of the Church," he continued.

Burton, however, had a crucial component to add to his calling to serve: management acumen. In addition to his Masters of Divinity, he earned an MBA and an undergraduate degree in accounting and held cost accountant and comptroller positions in the real estate industry.

"No doubt about it, passion about your cause is essential, but it's not enough. You have to be able to implement sound management principles for stability and long-term viability. And you have to tailor those business practices to the changing needs of your organization."

Burton began building that foundation at the Wilkinson Center 14 years ago. "A year after I started, we became a 501(c)(3). I added greater intentionality to board recruitment, identifying prospects whose skills and knowledge matched the requirements for

continued on page 7



"The message we want to convey to our kids is to take responsibility for their own learning," said CLIMB Director Marguerite Holmes. The CLIMB (Changing Lives, Improving Minds and Bodies) after-school program offers tutoring, physical fitness, nutritional education and fine arts opportunities to low income children ages 5 to 14.

Top: Brian Burton, Executive Director of the Wilkinson Center
Below: Marguerite Holmes, Director of CLIMB, Wilkinson's after-school program