

Generosity

AT HOUSTON'S FIRST

A NEW SEASON

Fifteen years of steady employment gave way to two rounds of layoffs in three years, and a Houston's First couple had a change of heart about where their hope is found.

Dean and Tracy Townsend grew up in Christian homes and were taught to give. But during much of their nearly 25-year marriage, they adopted a practical approach to giving.

"We were occasional givers — trying to keep up with bills and having a daughter in college," said Dean, "— there were seasons of life that we felt we didn't have it to give."

In 2013, the same year MISSION 1:8, the Houston's First two-year generosity initiative, was kicking off, Dean lost his job as a vice-president at Staples. His severance promised to last until 2014 when they decided to hire him back in another role, albeit at a lower salary.

Lessons on suffering and God's faithfulness were lessons Dean taught while he and Tracy were Life Bible Study leaders at The Loop Campus, and they continued their practice of occasional giving. "We knew we were supposed to give to God first," said Dean, "to set aside an amount to give each week, but we just didn't think it was possible."

The couple lives in Sienna Plantation, yet Dean and Tracy faithfully led their class at The Loop and saw it grow to 100 members. It split into two classes just about the time Houston's First opened its Sienna Campus. The Townsends began attending there in 2015 and lead the 40s-plus couples' class.

After Dean's second job loss in early 2016, Tracy reintroduced the idea of giving weekly to the church as they had been considering for years. They did, and a few weeks later Dean landed a sales job. His severance from Staples continued through mid-summer, meaning the family received double pay for four months.

"God's got this," said Dean. "As we obeyed by giving in faith, we became confident that He would take care of us."

As faith in God's provision grew, they felt led to begin giving at a higher level. The Townsends now find weekly giving a joy. "We like the act of physically writing the check and putting it in the offering plate," said Dean. "We actually fight over who gets to write the check."



Dean & Tracy Townsend with daughter Torrey (left)

The family sees God's financial provision and they feel connected to their neighbors and neighborhood unlike ever before. "We believe we've been given a new purpose — meeting our neighbors and inviting them to church," said Dean. "We've seen what happens when we obey, and it's becoming clear why we live here in Sienna. We're seeing the difference it makes in getting connected to our community campus."

GIVING AT HOUSTONSFIRST.ORG

Visit the Giving page at HoustonFirst.org to read more generosity stories, make one-time or recurring contributions, give to mission trips, and more.

MINISTRY IMPACT YEAR-TO-DATE TOTALS FROM JAN 1 TO DEC 31, 2016

DECISIONS

1,006 New Church Members
176 Joined By Baptism

17%

Of New Members
were Baptized

ATTENDANCE

245,625 in Life Bible Studies
(5,013 weekly average)

279,956 in Worship Services
(5,384 weekly average)

56,094 on Webcast
(1,100 weekly average)

MISSIONS

34 Mission Trips with
1,926 Team Members



NEWS + UPDATES

ALL CAMPUSES

HighPoint Bible Study
Wednesdays @ 11:30a — 1010 Lamar (Tunnel Level)

This weekly downtown Bible study is open to everyone! Dr. David Self is teaching this Wednesday at 12:10p. Bring your lunch or purchase one there for \$8. Visit HoustonFirst.org to learn more.
CONTACT Diane.Bagby@HoustonFirst.org

CanHope
Mon, Jan 9 @ 6:45 — The Loop (Reception Rm)

CanHope ministers to families touched by cancer and those who love and care about them. At this meeting you'll share a meal with special guest Chuck Caldwell, Jr., a cancer survivor. The entree is provided, so please bring a salad or vegetable. Come enjoy this time of testimony, prayer and fellowship! RSVP to 713.957.6764.
CONTACT Sherry.Oradat@HoustonFirst.org

First H.O.P.E.
Jan 26-27 @ 9a-4p — The Loop (Rm 602A)

Have you ever struggled to understand "who" God is calling you to be and "what" God is calling you to do? The First H.O.P.E. job ministry is having a special event — "The Only One Standing in Your Way is You" with special guest speaker, Fred Lowe. Register online for just \$30 at HoustonFirst.org.
CONTACT Bob.Stroud@HoustonFirst.org

Midnight Madness
Fri, Jan 27 @ 5:30p-Midnight — The Loop

Current and prospective Life Bible Study leaders from each Houston's First campus will gather for this annual equipping event for great training, inspiring vision, fantastic giveaways, interactive fun — and food, of course! Learn how Life Bible Study is a critical part of the mission of Christ and come together as leaders from all age groups and leadership positions to focus on how each leader can serve with excellence. Register at HoustonFirst.org.
CONTACT Alisa.Williams@HoustonFirst.org

MEN

Warrior's Heart
Thursdays @ 6:30-7:30a — The Loop (Garden Rm)

Warrior's Heart is a weekly morning Bible study for men focusing on clear biblical teaching followed by real conversations. Our new series, "The Core Values of Manhood" will cover Brotherhood, Truth, Courage, Honor, and Mission. Steve Diserens will teach this week. Breakfast is available for purchase in the Cafe. Registration at HoustonFirst.org is encouraged, but not required.
CONTACT Emily.Brown@HoustonFirst.org

THE LOOP

MidLink Movie: "The Insanity of God"
Wed, Jan 18 @ 6:30p — The Loop (Worship Center)

After their son's death, Nik and Ruth Ripken journeyed into the depths of the persecuted church asking: IS JESUS WORTH IT? This movie tells their story of being taught by persecuted believers "how to follow Jesus, how to love Jesus, and how to walk with Him day by day even when it doesn't make sense." The movie is free to attend! Come early for dinner at MidLink Cafe (4:45-6:15p) and take your kids (Birth-5th grade) to NextGen programming while your 6th-12th graders come along with you to the movie.
CONTACT Courtney.Schisler@HoustonFirst.org

MidLink / Milestones Preview Night
Wed, Jan 25 @ 6:15p — The Loop

As a follow-up to "The Insanity of God" the week before, gather in the Chapel for an interview with Benjamin Lee, currently serving in China, about "ministry in dark places." But before that, the Milestones Open House in the Main Foyer will allow you to discover what Milestones classes are offered during the spring semester. NextGen programming for all ages (Birth-12th grade) will be available, along with MidLink Cafe from 4:45-6:15p.
CONTACT Courtney.Schisler@HoustonFirst.org

YOUNG SINGLE ADULTS

Summit Celebrates: Missions
Sat, Jan 14 @ 7-9p — The Loop (Oasis Room)

Young singles (20s-30s) are coming together for a night of worship through song, prayer and testimony about all that God has done and is doing locally and around the world. Why? Living a life for the Lord is living a life on mission. Learn how YOU can be a missionary in your city, nation and world! Plan to stick around afterwards for coffee, dessert and fellowship.
CONTACT Joshua.Bagby@HoustonFirst.org

WOMEN

Fighting for Your Family
Sat, Jan 14 @ 9a-12p — The Loop (Chapel)

Are you ready to fight for the ones you love the most? Join us for a workshop led by author, speaker, and Bible teacher, Debbie Stuart, director of Ministry Initiatives at Hope for the Heart. Debbie has experience with prodigals and has had to learn how to fight for her own family over the years. Childcare available for \$10 (\$5 each additional child) by registration at HoustonFirst.org by Fri, Jan 6.
CONTACT Meredith.Cann@HoustonFirst.org

CYPRESS

MARRIED YOUNG ADULTS

Newlywed or Close LBS
Sundays @ 11a — Smith Middle School

A new Newlywed or Close Life Bible Study begins today! This class addresses topics relevant for creating a balanced home life such as communication, finances, intimacy, roles in marriage and healthy family relationships. Directed by Colin and Katy Sproule, it is open to all couples engaged or married up to two years.
CONTACT Susan.Newman@HoustonFirst.org

DOWNTOWN

Marathon Sunday
Sun, Jan 15 — 1010 Lamar

The Downtown Campus will cheer for Houston Marathon runners at 8a as they pass by our front door at 1010 Lamar! We'll exercise our hospitality by engaging in conversation with fellow spectators, and offering hot cocoa and coffee, too. Come worship with us later that evening at 5p.
CONTACT Nikki.Moss@HoustonFirst.org

ESPAÑOL

Family Night
Wed, Jan 11 @ 6:30-8:30p — The Loop (Harbor Rm)

Kick off the new year with a night of food and fun with the Español Campus! Bring your family and invite your friends for a time of bowling, games and laughs. This is a great time to introduce others to your church family!
CONTACT Karina.Bazaldua@HoustonFirst.org

SIENNA

NEXTGEN MINISTRIES

Popcorn & PJs Movie Night

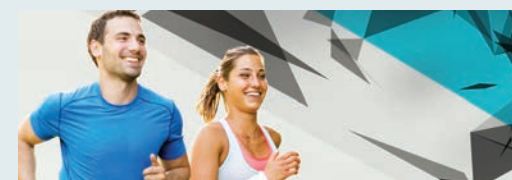
Fri, Jan 13 @ 6-8:30p — Sienna Worship Center

Wear your favorite pajamas and invite a friend for a special family movie night that includes popcorn and candy! Families with kids of all ages are welcome to come and watch *Finding Dory*.
CONTACT Cara.Buis@HoustonFirst.org



Jan 9-13

As the new year gets underway, Pastor Gregg invites the Houston's First family to join with him, the church staff and deacons in a time of fasting and prayer for our church. The "Daniel Fast" is a partial fast, allowing you to eat foods based on Daniel's fast found in Daniel 10:2-3. Visit HoustonFirst.org for a list of foods, recipes and other resources — as well as a prayer guide to follow during the five days.



LET THE FITNESS & RECREATION CENTER HELP YOU!

The Fitness & Recreation Center (FRC) at The Loop Campus celebrates its 33rd anniversary in 2017, and offers a variety of classes, programs, and opportunities to get fit!

January Promotion

Join the FRC in January and pay no enrollment fee — a savings of \$50. Membership is \$25 per month with no contract.

First Place 4 Health Orientation

Sun, Jan 15 @ 4-5p and Sun, Jan 29 @ 2-3p
The Loop (Rm 258)

Learn about this Christ-centered weight-loss program focusing on emotional, mental, physical and spiritual wellness.

Fitness Expo

Sun, Jan 29 @ 12:15-2p

The Loop (Fitness & Rec Ctr)

Discover all that the FRC has to offer at Expo 2017 with class demonstrations, health screenings, kids' programs and much more! In the health industry? Consider being a vendor at Expo!

Learn more about all the FRC has to offer at HoustonFirst.org.
CONTACT Becca.Wooldridge@HoustonFirst.org

LIFE BIBLE STUDIES

Life Bible Studies are the primary method for connecting with others and growing together at Houston's First. Visit HoustonFirst.org to find one that's right for you, or ask the Guest Experience (GX) team at your campus for assistance.

Houston's First Baptist Church is a relevant biblical community where we gather our hearts, grow our souls and give our lives as we seek to fulfill the Great Commission. For information, call 713.681.8000, or visit HoustonFirst.org.

SUNDAYS AT HOUSTON'S FIRST

The Loop Campus

7401 Katy Fwy • Houston, TX 77024

Worship 9:15a • 11a • 5p

Life Bible Studies 8a • 9:15a • 10:45a • 6:30p

Cypress Campus

10300 Warner Smith Blvd • Cypress, TX 77433

Worship 9:30a • 11a

Life Bible Studies 9:30a • 11a

Downtown Campus

1010 Lamar • Houston, TX 77002

Worship 5p

Life Bible Studies 9:30a

Español Campus

7401 Katy Fwy • Houston, TX 77024

Worship 9:30a • 11a

Life Bible Studies 6:30p

Sienna Campus

4309 Sienna Pkwy • Missouri City, TX 77459

Worship 9:30a • 11a

Life Bible Studies 9:30a • 11a



HOUSTON'S FIRST
BAPTIST CHURCH
PASTOR GREGG MATTE

ALL THINGS New



SECOND CHANCE • HEALED FOR LIFE • A NEW SEASON • JAN 8, 2017

ALL THINGS NEW

He met few requirements on her "ideal man" checklist, yet God intervened and composed an unexpected and powerful love story of redemption, renewal and hope for the future of a Houston's First couple.



Several years ago, Torrance and Alisa Wilson's lifestyles would have been an interesting case study in contrasts: she, a Jesus-seeking, prayer-and-fasting kind of woman with a ministry résumé that includes teaching etiquette to apartment-dwelling girls, and he, a drug dealer who was in prison — three times. The relationship is a real head scratcher for most people who don't understand God's ability to transform lives. But with God, all things are possible.

"Torrance was a hot mess," said Alisha, "When I met him he had gold teeth, tattoos and was dealing drugs." The two met in 2008 at Dave & Buster's while Alisha was celebrating her daughter Dominique's eighteenth birthday. They all hit it off and spent the evening playing arcade games.

"He was a nice person — a genuinely nice person," said Alisha. "We went on one date, but I didn't like him romantically. He was a single dad and needed guidance to get his daughter on the right road."

Torrance called Alisha to ask for prayer and a friendship began developing. Alisha gave Torrance his first-ever gospel CD and he began calling her "Queen," in response, he says, to the way she expected to be treated. Being friends with Alisha not only taught Torrance how to be a gentleman, but also opened his heart to receive truth from the Lord. "She never judged me," he said, "instead, she spoke blessings over my life. She told me, 'The best is yet to come.'"

The two lost touch for a time over the past eight years. Torrance went back to prison for three years for carrying a weapon, a felony for someone who had been incarcerated for drug dealing. What Torrance thought was the worst thing that could happen ultimately turned out for his good.

During the year in the Harris County jail before his transfer to prison, Torrance's godly grandmother died. "I had never lost a family member, and my grandmother and I were close," he said. "But the judge denied my request to go to her funeral. I decided then and there, I'm either gonna believe God, or I'm not. I surrendered my life to Him."

Torrance saw God move — even in prison. "I believe God hand-selected the prison I went to," he said. Carol Vance, the 300-man unit in Fort Bend County, offered evening classes on a variety of topics including leadership, parenting and the Bible. "It was like I was in a 24-month discipleship program," said Torrance. "I began thinking, why was I living that lifestyle when God has so much for me? God's love got to me."

During his incarceration, Torrance met Dave Trickett, a Houston's First member and founder of C.H.A.R.M. Prison Ministry. "I felt God telling me to change my parole plan to go to C.H.A.R.M. (transitional housing) after I got out," he said. "I wrote Dave three letters, but he didn't answer. It was a gamble to change my parole plan — I ran the risk of having to stay longer — but I put it in God's hands."

In the meantime, Alisha ran across activity on Torrance's Facebook page. "I saw that he was writing about Jesus," she said, "and I saw photos of him engaging as a father with his children and posting Scripture. His life had changed." She began fasting and praying, and eventually reconnected with him online.

Torrance would not only give a speech at the Vance Unit commencement ceremony, but he learned that he had been accepted into a C.H.A.R.M. transitional home. That meant a continuation of discipleship after leaving the Unit. He invited Alisha to the commencement. "He brought roses, a card, and he opened the door for me at the ceremony," said Alisha. "The gold teeth were gone, and I could see the glory of God all over him."

Torrance hoped to reconnect with Alisha, but when she resisted dating him, he decided to give her space and let God handle the situation. "He went away — didn't call me," she said. "I didn't want to date him; I had my list! But as I prayed, God showed me that I had been praying for him and had spoken greatness over him, but I wasn't seeing it."

Alisha asked God for a fleece (a reference to Gideon in Judges 6:36-40). "If he tells me that he's going to love me as Christ loves the church, I'll agree to date him." And the next time they prayed together, that's the first thing he said.

The two married on Thanksgiving Day 2015 in a ceremony that included a foot washing. "In a way, it symbolized washing away his past, his hurts and insecurity," said Alisha. "It showed our willingness to serve and love each other in humility."

The transformation has given birth to ministry, and it began at home. Though newlyweds, they invited Torrance's mother, Joy, a drug addict, out of the old neighborhood to live with them. Alisha began mentoring her and took her to an out-of-town Bible conference, where she accepted Christ as her Savior. "She is like a sponge for the things of God and has a heart to serve," said Alisha. "God gave Torrance new life, and now together we have the mission of loving others back to life. We've seen Him do the impossible."

Lance Parra, a musician on the Cypress Campus worship team, was born in Hollywood, bought his first guitar at age 10, and ran in circles with Motown stars during his formative years. As a teen, hard living and a car accident threatened to kill his music career — but God had other plans.

"Alcohol, coke, speed, 'ludes — there were times I didn't know how I got home," said Lance. "They were big influences in rock 'n roll." During high school, as lead guitarist in a rock band, Lance and his buddies booked appearances in Palm Springs nightclubs where drugs and alcohol flowed freely. The life, while appearing hip and glamorous, took a physical and emotional toll on the young musicians.

"Our lead singer planned a surprise birthday party for his mom, and then he didn't show up," said Lance. "They went to his apartment and found he had shot himself in the head. He was a songwriter-poet, barely 20 years old. They read his suicide note at the funeral."

Within six months of the suicide, Lance went to a keg party where the band's bass player shot himself while playing Russian roulette. The deaths of the two band members and then the heart attack of their lead guitarist from a cocaine overdose sent Lance reeling.

"The deaths so close together scared me," said Lance. "I knew this kind of life wasn't where I needed to be, so I quit taking drugs — cold turkey." With a clearer head, he began thinking back to years earlier when he went to live with his dad in Oregon. He had taken Lance to a Christian youth rally, not because his dad was a believer, but it just seemed the right thing to do for his son. "I got saved there, but didn't know that God had a plan for my life," said Lance.



He and a friend ditched school, and against his better judgment Lance allowed the friend to take the driver's seat in his SUV. He lost control, fishtailed and rolled the truck several times. With each rotation, the vehicle landed on Lance's arm, crushing it. "I couldn't stand up at first," said Lance. "There was a hissing noise in my head. Blood was everywhere. I finally got up and noticed my arm was bent all the way back at the elbow."

With Lance being only 16, doctors issued papers for his mother to sign giving them permission to amputate. "They said my arm was damaged beyond repair, but I begged my mother not to sign," he said. "They replaced the elbow with plastic parts, but expected I'd have little use of it. I wondered if I would ever play guitar again. The doctors were amazed when I regained nearly full use — and was able to play guitar."

Lance met Julie, who became his high school sweetheart. She attended Palm Springs Community Church, and he began hanging out there to be near her. The Word became truth for Lance when he heard the pastor say that God has a plan for believers' lives.

The couple married after high school, and Julie's cousin told Lance about Christian rock, and about an opening he had heard of in another church's band. Lance joined the band and rededicated his life to Christ, but after just a year, they wanted to move on to a different guitarist.

"I was so disappointed," said Lance. "They couldn't even give me a straight answer as to why they were letting me go."

The drummer quit the band and began ministering to and mentoring Lance. Eventually the pair started a new band, Strength, and recorded an album. "Break the Chains" was their first hit, and it received nationwide radio airtime. The two began pre-recording instrument tracks, which allowed them to play live shows with a full sound. Lance plays lead, rhythm and bass guitar as well as drums and keyboards. Their music found its place in Christian stores, on a syndicated radio show, and at outreach concerts they performed for kids.

Times were good until a misunderstanding unraveled the band. Royalty agreements caused Lance to pull all master recordings from radio stations and cassettes out of every store. "Everything came crashing down," he said. "I still wanted to do music full-time, so I became a studio musician."

Lance did a solo project in Nashville and eventually he and Julie and two of their three girls moved to Cypress in 2011. So deep was his desire to play music that he briefly joined a classic country band, but "it didn't feel right to play anything other than Christian music," said Lance. With a family to support, he began working in another field altogether.

Cypress Campus Worship Leader Michael Brady encouraged Lance to become part of the band playing rhythm and lead guitar. Lance has no doubt that God saved his life, and his arm, for His kingdom. These days, Lance is reaching a new generation of musicians as he oversees the Student Worship Ministry in Cypress.

"My heart is all about saving lives through music," said Lance. "God made it clear to me many years ago that the reason He saved me — and my arm — is for ministry. The doctors said my arm had been damaged beyond repair, but I'm using it. God did it, and once I began playing Christian music, it all made sense."

SECOND CHANCE

Does God really have a plan for the lives of His children? One Houston's First member found that yes, He does, and got a second chance to become all God intended him to be.

HEALED FOR LIFE

The Sexual Revolution's "free love" narrative has created bondage rather than freedom for those who bought the lie that casual sex empowers and bears no consequences to body or soul. Most awakened a decade or two down the road feeling duped, guilt-ridden or experiencing a variety of physical, emotional or relational complaints. A Houston's First member shares her story of buying the notion of "my body, my choice," and experiencing a life of pain and turmoil — until God brought healing and purpose.

"I was young and looking for love in all the wrong places," said Cynthia Wenz, who had her first abortion at 15, a second at 19 and a third at 29. "I gave my parents a run for their money. I was almost in high school when they divorced, and as a result, was largely unguided."

Cynthia told her mother she was pregnant at 15, and her next stop was a southwest Houston abortion clinic. "I found my old diary three years ago and looked at the entry I had made," said Cynthia. "Well, I killed my kid today," it said. I didn't realize that I understood a life had ended." Her Catholic upbringing no doubt provided some understanding, but a lack of coping skills over the loss sent her spiraling out of control as she became involved with much older, and sometimes married, men.

During college, partying and drugs led to Cynthia's second abortion. "I was a kid crying out for help," she said. "Because of the drug use, I can't recall much about my reasoning. I went through the rest of college feeling pretty numb."

On her twentieth birthday Cynthia went to church. "I asked God, 'Are you real? Are you there?'" she said. "I remember God showing up in my life, but my lifestyle had not changed. It takes a lot of work to get out of the lifestyle I was living."

Cynthia spent her twenty-second birthday having emergency surgery. Two friends took her to the hospital after she experienced vision loss and was barely able to walk. "I had contracted STDs [sexually transmitted diseases]," she said. "And I got a diagnosis of pre-cervical cancer."

Experiencing major depression after graduating college served as Cynthia's wake-up call. She rededicated her life to God and settled down to dating just one man, but their breakup led to a rebound sexual relationship. Unexplained bleeding sent her to the obstetrician. "The doctor said it was probably a miscarriage, anyway, and performed a DNC. I couldn't relax, breathe or stop crying," said Cynthia. "I knew what I was doing was dead wrong."

At her two-week post-abortion check up, she knew something wasn't right with her body. She asked the doctor if she could see what was inside her, and an ultrasound revealed a living baby.

"We discovered the aborted baby had a twin," she said. "It was a Holy Spirit moment. God had sustained life after abortion." The shock was great. Cynthia knew she had to get out of the way and make the right decision about the life of this baby. She named him Roman after Romans 8:28, "We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God: those who are called according to His purpose."

The experience was "God's two-by-four right between the eyes," she says. Cynthia accepted Christ soon after, began working three jobs and moved in with her father in

an effort to support Roman. She met and married Chris Wenz in 2001, and had much coping to do in living as a wife. Chris helped her heal, but true healing came when she fell in love with Jesus. "Go, give away joy and serve others to reap the fullness of healing" was God's message to me," said Cynthia. "I began teaching a biblical post-abortion healing class to tackle a lack of self-worth and dignity — and teaching others to do the same."

What was evil, God has redeemed for good. Working with The Source for Women, first as a volunteer, and then becoming CEO in 2009, Cynthia found her place revitalizing the 30-plus year-old organization, creating alternatives for women and teens who, like herself, were bent on seeking sexual freedom, only to find themselves caught up in a web of heartache.

"The organization changed my life," said Cynthia. The viability of The Source for Women came to a critical point, and the question was asked, do we close the doors or give it another shot? Cynthia joined the staff, unpaid, as CEO, and as the organization began to turn around, she began drawing a salary. Under Cynthia's leadership, two additional centers opened and more than 22,000 visits have been made by women and teens during some of the most harrowing times of their lives.

"Knowing that the largest Planned Parenthood center was opening just 10 miles away, during my prayer time the Lord spoke to my heart," said Cynthia. "His message was, 'Do what they do, but do it better and with the focus of life and Christ.'"

The Source for Women positions itself as a "first responder for life," and a holistic reproductive health center that allows teens and women to make healthy choices for reproductive health. They provide services for women such as well woman exams, disease and pregnancy tests, ultrasound exams, counseling and education services at their three centers in the Houston area.

"I am a poster child for redemption," said Cynthia. "I believed the lies of the Enemy — that there are no consequences for our choices; that our own individual beliefs are the standard for truth; and that offering abortion for convenience sake is good healthcare."

God is expanding the reach of Cynthia's personal testimony of God's redemption in a book, *Healed for Life*, set to be released in early 2017. Her story provides God's truth for women who have believed the lie of "My body, my choice."

"How we love ourselves matters," said Cynthia. "I am not a broken woman stuck in my sin. I live a fully scripted life by God and live in the fullness of His redemption. He is allowing me to pour into young women the truths that lead to complete healing. It is a miracle of God that we can choose not to linger in the past, but to move forward with a renewed mind, cleansed thoughts and a pure life."



Cynthia & Chris Wenz with (l to r) Caleb, Justice and Roman