



# CYPRESS

What about the kids?

When the Lord nudges us to go deeper with Him, it's one thing for adults to walk into the unknown, but what about children who would be affected by being uprooted from a home, school or a community of believers?

Houston's First members Brandon and Katy Burk felt God's familiar nudge, after attending The Loop Campus for 15 years, to become members of the Cypress Campus at its launch in 2013. They had been members at The Loop since their newlywed class, where Jason Swiggart had been one of their teachers. When he left to pastor the new campus, they felt drawn to join him there, but how would their daughters, nine-year old Lexie and six-year old Emily, take it?

"The Loop was the only church our girls had ever known," said Katy. "It was 'home' to them, and they had developed strong friendships. And we loved the children's programming, so the thought of leaving a place we loved so much and felt so comfortable was difficult."

Lexie, now 13, and Emily, 10, remembered a little of their apprehension, though it seems almost a lifetime ago. "At first, I didn't want to move and leave my friends," said Lexie. Emily agreed. "I didn't want to leave friends either, but I was like, Yes! Ms. Erin" and Mr. Patrick" are going to be there! That made it better," she said.

While at The Loop, Emily and Lexie were involved in Life Bible Study for children, Kids' Worship, MidLink on Wednesday nights, Camp Intersect (Lexie's age group), and Vacation Bible School every summer.

Lexie says she's met a lot of friends and likes the student activities in Cypress. "I like Cypress because I know more people, and I'm more involved," said Emily.

As the girls have grown, they are pitching in to help in all kinds of ways at the Cypress Campus. They attend Life Bible Study and MidLink, Camp Intersect and Rush Week just as they would have at The Loop. But they also are on the weekly teardown team



The Burks are reaching people for Christ in their community.

on Sundays after church, which is unique to the Cypress Campus, as it meets in a middle school until the new campus is completed early this summer. The girls are also greeters on Sunday mornings and help host Backyard Kids' Club at their home every summer, ministries they likely wouldn't have been involved in had they stayed at The Loop.

It was bittersweet for the family to leave The Loop, but they quickly found their place and a new rhythm at the Cypress Campus. "We are reaching out to people in our own community," said Katy. "The girls go to church now with the kids from their schools and we've developed sweet friendships across all age groups that come with being part of a smaller campus. An added bonus is that it only takes five minutes to get to church!"

*"Erin Ruddle is the Director of Preschool & Children's Ministry and Patrick Simpson is the Children's Ministry Associate at the Cypress Campus."*



# DOWNTOWN

Obeying God's call

Houston's First member Caron Blankenhorn joined the church at The Loop Campus because it was close to home. Friendships blossomed for four years in a young single adult Life Bible Study and spilled over into spending time together outside the church, giving her a deep sense of belonging. Then Pastor Gregg — and God — asked her to leave The Loop.

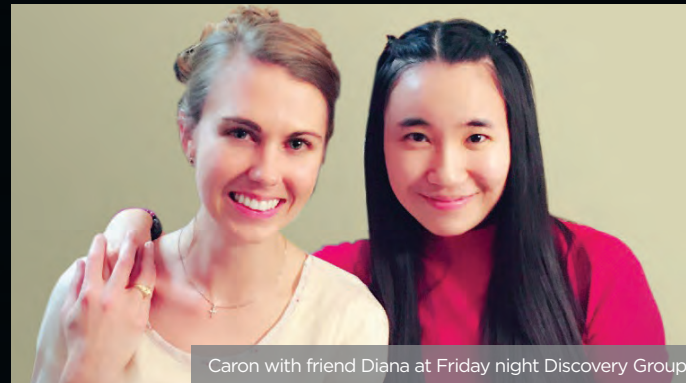
"I didn't want to leave," said Caron. "I was comfortable and loved my community. The Lord requires obedience, though, and I trusted He would be faithful. Still, obedience is not always easy."

Caron's sense that God was leading her to the Downtown Campus came after Pastor Gregg's churchwide call to go and get plugged in for a year at the newly-formed campus of Houston's First. Caron's Garden Oaks address made her a likely candidate for joining the small community of believers who would initially seed the campus.

As difficult as it was to leave, Caron felt a calling to reach international people. God had already begun the work in her heart several years earlier, and she began volunteering a few times each week at the Faith Center-Spring Branch in the Food Pantry & Clothes Closet. Later she began teaching ESL to adults from mainly Latin American countries living nearby. The Faith Center-Harwin opened in 2016, and she began loving refugees by volunteering there most every Saturday.

After more than five years at the Downtown Campus, Caron sees how beautifully God had already begun the work in her heart several years earlier, and she began volunteering a few times each week at the Faith Center-Spring Branch in the Food Pantry & Clothes Closet. Later she began teaching ESL to adults from mainly Latin American countries living nearby. The Faith Center-Harwin opened in 2016, and she began loving refugees by volunteering there most every Saturday.

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Caron with friend Diana at Friday night Discovery Group

Before Caron began attending downtown, she wasn't in the habit of bringing international friends to church. Many international students came to Houston to attend one of the universities and then go back to their own country. She started a "Discovery Group" on Friday nights at her house two years ago. Caron makes dinner each week for between six and 13 people. The topic of discussion each week is about truth, and they open the Scriptures, something internationals have rarely — or ever — done.

"We don't always see fruit, but we do a lot of sowing," said Caron. Recently a couple of young men who have been part of the group came to know the Lord and were baptized at the Downtown Campus.

"If you sense the Lord leading you to leave The Loop, do it," said Caron. "God is faithful and He'll provide a purpose."



Renderings of Downtown Campus' new home at 1730 Jefferson

# ESPAÑOL

Making a connection

Oscar and Eliana Dominguez were only five years old when their families made their way to the United States from Cuba. Oscar's family flew to Miami by plane in 1956, BC — Before Castro. Eliana and a majority of her family fled the city of Matanzas on Cuba's northern coast in 1963 after Castro's regime took power. They left behind farms, cattle, land and businesses for freedom. Her family began their 230-mile nautical journey to Miami at dawn, hidden in the bulrushes off Cuba's coast, laying low to avoid patrolling PT boats that would cut off their escape.

The couple met at a party in Florida in 1976. Oscar was vacationing there, but was living in Louisiana, where he attended a Spanish congregation. Eliana had grown up Catholic and accepted Christ just before the couple married in 1979. She decided to ditch the plan to wed in a Catholic church, and instead, they said their vows in a Spanish-speaking Baptist congregation in Hialeah, Florida.

Oscar and Eliana joined Houston's First in 1983 and here they raised their children, David and Christina, to love Jesus. Both children were on the nursery roll, professed faith in Christ, baptized and were married at Houston's First. Oscar is a deacon and the couple has been active in leadership throughout their 34 years at Houston's First.

When the vision for the Español Campus began taking shape, the Dominguezes were ecstatic. "When I met Pastor Juan Alaniz in 2014, I told him that after more than 32 years as members, we had finally met two people from Cuba at Houston's First, and they had been members here more than 20 years!" said Oscar. "Being part of a Spanish campus is like when you go to a foreign country and meet a fellow believer. Culturally, we feel that same way — there's a connection."

Making people feel welcome was the foundation for the Dominguezes' ministry as leaders of the Connection Team. Oscar and Eliana welcome visitors and information-



The Dominguezes prayed for a ministry to reach Spanish speakers for decades.

seekers at the Español Campus to get to know them and help them find what they are looking for.

"There are 17 different nations represented here," said Oscar. "We all speak Spanish, so there's an instant connection. God is so good, and we're thankful for Pastor Gregg's vision and Pastor Juan's leadership to start a Spanish campus at Houston's First. We wait expectantly to see what God has planned for Spanish speakers at the other campuses."



# SIENNA

New in town

In 2013, high school sweethearts James and Hannah Lucas relocated from Waynesboro, Virginia, population 21,000, to Houston, a city of more than four million. The Lucases were invited to The Loop Campus, where the membership rolls rival the number of residents in their hometown. As they navigated being new in town, they developed sensitivity to others in similar circumstances.

"We got involved in a Life Bible Study, and volunteered for special events and other ministries at The Loop," said James. "After James Jr was born, we both served in the Preschool ministry."

"We found community instantly and developed a core group who became like family to us," said Hannah. Within a year, the Lucases were Life Bible Study co-directors, and friendships they developed with other newly marrieds proved to be a blessing during Hannah's pregnancy. "They brought meals and made airport runs to pick up our family members," she said. "We want others to experience the same blessing and community."

James and Hannah purchased a home in Sienna Plantation in April 2016, and were determined to get involved in the neighborhood. They tried attending the Sienna Campus and liked it, but weren't yet ready to pull the trigger. As a compromise, they attended Milestones classes there during MidLink on Wednesday nights. They prayed for God to soften their hearts about leaving The Loop. "We asked God to help us get plugged in," said James. God was faithful to answer their prayers when a new campus pastor was called to the Sienna Campus that they had already grown to love while attending The Loop. "Malcolm Marshall bridged the gap for us," said Hannah. "He was the icing on the cake and the answer we needed to make the move."

Hannah and James are paying forward the love they received at The Loop when they moved far from family. They stay home for the holidays and invite people new to town for a meal at their home. "Our church is a small community," said Hannah. "It's easy to pick out the new people, and we want them to feel they have family around."



James & Hannah left their comfort zone for ministry.

About the same time, two other couples from the Lucases' Life Bible Study relocated to the Sienna Campus. "It helped having people we knew," said James. And God gave them a huge blessing on their street. "Five Sienna Campus families live on our street," he said. "The Five Oaks Clan has pool parties, events, does missions work together — and we're getting to know them all on a deeper level."

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