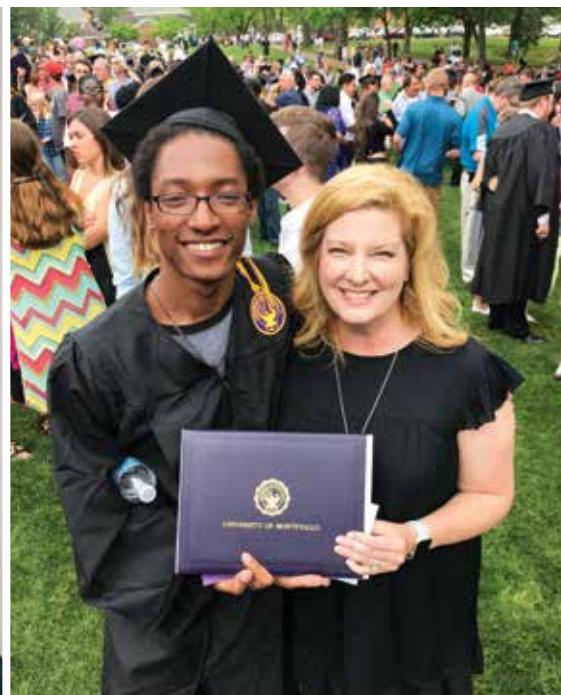


FOSTERING HOPE

A three-time Emmy-winning newscaster in northern Alabama gracefully balances motherhood, musical talents, and a full-time philanthropic endeavor dedicated to supporting children in need.



After a 20-year career as a broadcast journalist, Lee Marshall walked away from the news desk and embarked on a journey to enhance the lives of underprivileged children. “I was always an advocate and a voice for foster children, and I was looking for what that meant on a bigger scale,” says Lee, who was born into foster care in Tennessee and was adopted at age two. Drawing on her media experience and connections, Lee spearheaded a weekly television segment that spotlights Tennessee Valley children longing for a forever family—the catalyst for her successful and ever-growing charity, Kids to Love.

Since the early 2000s, Kids to Love has directly benefited more than 225,000 foster children living in Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Georgia. Volunteers are the lifeblood of this privately funded nonprofit, and it has also awarded hundreds of scholarships. Educational and outreach programs are available to children of all ages, including a weekend camp for siblings who have been placed in separate foster homes to reunite and bond in a fun atmosphere. In addition, Kids to Love dedicates special attention to older teens who will soon age out of the state’s care, ensuring they have the tools to succeed on

their own. “It’s hard to maneuver a successful life when you’ve got so much against you at the beginning of it,” says Lee.

The Kids to Love Center in Madison, Alabama, serves as the nonprofit’s home base. Classes and hands-on projects teach important skills such as budgeting, cooking, and professional etiquette, while a state-of-the-art training curriculum called KTECH prepares students for a wide range of technical careers. Not only do people from the community sustain these programs, but college and KTECH graduates return to share their experiences and lead workshops as a means of giving back to the charity.

“It’s amazing when we have people from the community in here volunteering alongside one of our kids, then our kids get the chance to tell their story. It’s just beautiful,” says Lee.

Kids to Love officially launched in January 2004, and that December, Lee and her husband, Jeff, celebrated the birth of their first daughter. “It truly is a family affair for us,” says Lee. The Marshall girls, now 13 and 10, have grown up witnessing firsthand the power of giving and look forward to sorting Christmas gifts in the donations warehouse year after year. “As a mother, what I hope my children take away the most is that we are so blessed. What we are able to show [our girls] is that if we work hard, we can provide these underserved and under-resourced children the same blessings that we have,” Lee says.

Lee admits she’s humbled and overwhelmed by the influence Kids to Love has had on countless lives over the past 14 years, but she’s equally eager to see what the future has in store. “My oldest has actually said that one day she wants to take the foundation over,” she says. “Knowing that, I think about what I can do now to set it up for success for the next generation. We are here for the legacy of serving the children we are called to serve.”

Last year, the foundation celebrated a grand addition to their robust network of

resources: Davidson Farms, a sprawling 10,000-square-foot home set on 20 countryside acres. Named in honor of its benefactor, Dr. Dorothy Davidson, the farm is now a comfortable safe haven for girls ages 10 to 19 who are in the state’s custody. Dorothy and other generous donors spent two and a half years transforming the facility into a beautiful 10-bedroom house complete with stylish common areas and a robin’s-egg blue dining table surrounded by plenty of chairs. “We’re creating a family,” Lee says. “I tell social workers that we’re not providing beds, we’re providing a home, and there’s a difference.”

Lee’s family and Kids to Love are her top priorities, but she also strives to make time for her favorite creative outlets. She’s recorded two Christian music albums—including an apropos song called “Supermom”—and hopes to work on a third album soon. Meanwhile, she’s also writing a book. Lee says when she’s stressed or troubled she turns to writing and music to “sort my thoughts and get clarity on where we’re supposed to go next and how we’re supposed to get there.”

Reflecting on the organization’s early days, Lee fondly recalls tucking markers and notebooks into backpacks in her garage alongside her adoptive father. Now, a selfless army of volunteers helps Kids to Love

distribute more than 5,000 backpacks per year, just one of the numerous services making a positive impact on foster children in the South. “My ultimate goal is to be able to go out of business because we are no longer needed,” she says. “If we’re lucky enough that our paths intersect with these kids, we know that we can change their lives. That’s what fills my cup.”

For information, visit kidstolove.org.

