

Neighbors of CULPEPER

FEBRUARY 2024

An exclusive magazine serving the neighborhoods surrounding Culpeper



The DODSON FAMILY

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in mighty ways*

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COVER PHOTO BY SUSAN BITTNER, OUTGOING PORTRAITS

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Inside!

By Tom Fish

Photos By Susan Bittner, Outgoing Portraits

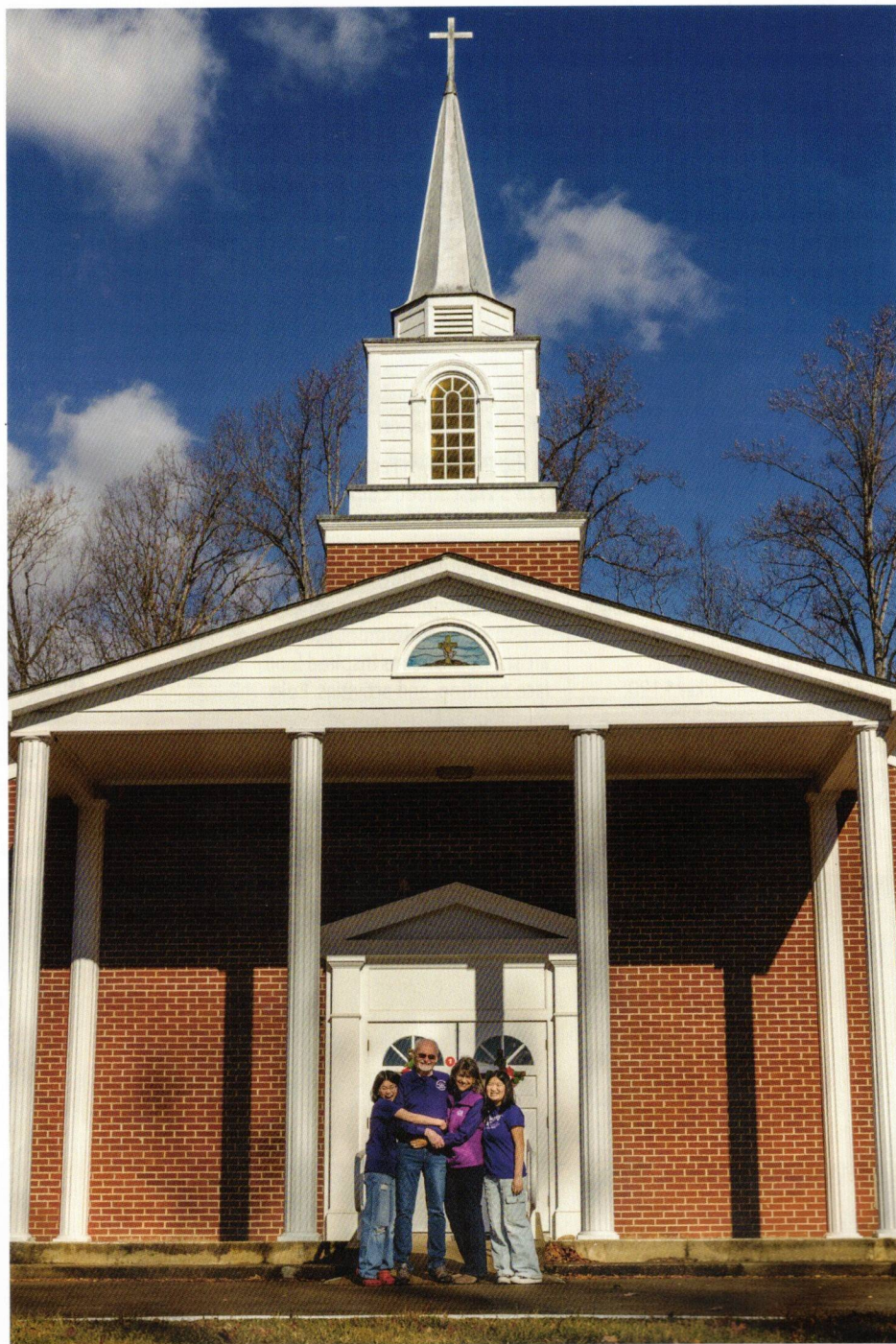
Travel 9.4 miles northwest up Sperryville Pike from the Town of Culpeper, and you will arrive at Boston, a small rural community straddling Culpeper and Rappahannock counties. Like many small towns in our area, folks coming through Boston are usually on their way to somewhere else. Boston has a population of about 1,600, among whom are the Dodson family: Mike, Liesa, Mikaela (23) and Ellie (15). Sons Timothy (36) and Greg (34) are married and live elsewhere. Mike and Liesa have one grandchild, Michael (3).

Mike shared, "We have lived in Boston for 12 years. After living in the city for about 28 years, we were so anxious to get away back to the country. God provided the perfect place. Our driveway is a half mile long. It is very quiet and peaceful with only deer, bear, turkey, and squirrels around." Besides all the wildlife that frequents the Dodson property in Boston. Mike reports, "It seems like we have a cat farm. We have seven right now: Timothy, Greg, Peter, Sniffles, Snuggles, Naomi and Ruth." They also have chickens.

Mike, a Culpeper-area native, graduated from Culpeper County High School in 1976. He had enlisted in the U.S. Air Force during his senior year and left for Basic Training at Lackland AFB in San Antonio, Texas about a week after graduation. Why the Air Force? "My dream growing up was to become a police officer. The Air Force was the only branch that would guarantee me a position in Law Enforcement at 17 years of age," explained Mike. What was it like in San Antonio? "Basic training in southern Texas in July and August was really fun, especially those days where it was about a hundred degrees before 10am," Mike quipped, giving me a taste of his famous sense of humor. He served four years in the Air Force, and he was discharged honorably with the rank of sergeant.

After leaving the Air Force, Mike served briefly as a police officer for the City of North Charleston, South Carolina. "My mom was diagnosed with cancer, so I moved back to help," said Mike, explaining why he was in South Carolina for less than a year. He worked in Culpeper as a police officer for about four years, then in November 1984 he was hired by the Virginia Beach to be a police officer down there.

Liesa (which is pronounced just like Lisa – but her parents inserted the "e" so her name would stand out) graduated from Fairfax County High School. She moved to Culpeper to attend Germanna Community College. She and Mike met through mutual friends, and they got to know each other doing things as part of the same group. According to Liesa, "Mike's daddy was a really





special, kind, and sweet man. His mom too, from the stories I heard. Mike loved them deeply and took care of them. That was very different from my life up to that point. I was kind of blown away by it. His daddy was so nice to me." That solid family life rubbed off on the kind of person Mike had grown into. Liesa recalled, "Those were traits that I cherished about my friend Mike."

For his part, Mike's first impression of Liesa was, "She was absolutely gorgeous, outgoing, upbeat, and always smiling." They did crossword puzzles from the Sunday newspaper together. "She was fun to be around and easy to be friends with," Mike shared.

At one point, they were in the same class at Germanna. Whether it was English or History neither quite recalls now, but it was a turning point in their relationship. To save money they decided to ride together on those 45-minute drives. Their first real date was to Pizza Hut in Front Royal. Then, one day on Route 3 driving back together from Germanna, Mike worked up the courage to say, "I love you." Sometime later he cooked dinner for Liesa on Valentine's Day. "It was steak and potatoes, with strawberries for dessert," Mike recalled. "It was before dessert; I got down on one knee and proposed." They were married on August 4, 1985 at Amissville United

Methodist Church. Over 38 years later, Liesa still teases Mike that she married him because of his daddy.

Normally, at this point, we would jump right into careers and family life. But Mike's change of vocations from police officer to ordained minister and pastor warranted a conversation about their faith journeys. Mike grew up in northern Madison County, and his family attended the Lighthouse Tabernacle Pentecostal Church, where he attended Sunday school regularly. At the age of 12, Mike attended Bible camp at Sunnybrook Chapel near Syria, VA. His Sunday teacher was his camp counselor. It was at this camp that Mike accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. However, as happens with many young people, after Mike joined the military, he drifted away from his relationship with Christ.

Liesa also grew up attending church. But she experienced a different approach to Christianity. Studying the Bible on one's own wasn't emphasized, though passages were read during Sunday services. Developing a personal relationship with Jesus was not something that was talked about. Liesa explained, "There really didn't seem much there for me, so as I got older, I got away from going." That was their spiritual situation when Mike and Liesa met.

When Mike received the invitation to join the police department in Virginia Beach, where he and Liesa would live for almost 30 years, they started attending the United Methodist Church. A while later, they learned about Atlantic Shores Baptist Church. They decided to visit there, and in their own words they were "blown away." One day, they saw a very large man in a classroom, and he called to them, "You two are supposed to be in here." The man was Outreach Pastor Paul Hardy, and "in here" meant in his Bible study class. They loved the class, and Paul said to Mike, "In just a short time, you're gonna start teaching this class." Mike wasn't too sure about that, but it came true. A different time, Pastor Paul asked Liesa when she had accepted Christ, but she couldn't say when or if that had happened. "I was deeply seeking," Liesa confided, "but I wasn't there yet." Paul said, "Well, let's talk about that." And then he led her through the Faith Outline. Liesa shared, "He led me to the Lord right there in his office." Mike and Lisa recommitted, and they were baptized with their two sons on Easter morning. Soon they were both lay leaders in that church.

Mike's long term career goal was to become a police chief. With that in mind, he continued



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educating himself. He had earned an Associate's degree in Criminal Justice from Germanna and a Bachelor's degree from St Leo University. Mike started attending Old Dominion University in the Master of Public Administration program when God called me into the ministry. "My plan had been to receive an MPA degree, get another promotion or two, and then become a police chief somewhere. However, I was miserable attending ODU. Which was very unusual for me. I had always loved taking classes." Liesa had an inkling that God had another plan for her husband. She explained, "He was already being a teacher at the police department. He had been a lieutenant for a long time. He was the guy people came to. They saw him as a godly man." She even suggested to Mike that God might have something else in mind for him. But then God called to his heart. "That Sunday at church, Pastor Jim Wolfcale preached about praying big. I don't remember exactly what he said, but it was during the sermon that I knew God was calling me into the ministry. I dropped from ODU on Monday and registered for the Master program in Religion/Pastoral Counseling at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary the next day."

Mike was ordained at First Baptist Norfolk in 2008 and started preaching at New Salem Baptist in 2009. "Liesa and I, and ultimately Ellie, all traveled from Virginia Beach to Culpeper every weekend until I retired from VBPD on January 1, 2011." They would drive up on Saturday and then drive back Sunday evening. "Many miles! We got to know 64 and 95 very well." Mike was called as the full-time pastor at New Salem in November 2010."

"I have been at New Salem for over 14 years now," Mike continued, "God continues to bless us, and we are always seeking ways to bless others." A wonderful American Heritage Girl troop (VA 0412) meets at New Salem. They are constantly serving the community and have a special heart for serving veterans. The church also has a large home school co-op that meets on Tuesdays. New Salem also hosts King's Light Christian Academy, which is a Christian high school with grades 9 -12. Mike reported, "We are in our 3rd



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year and God has brought together an amazing group of teachers and staff. I am excited because KLCA provides parents an option other than public school." Mike and Liesa are both on the Board of Director for KLCA.

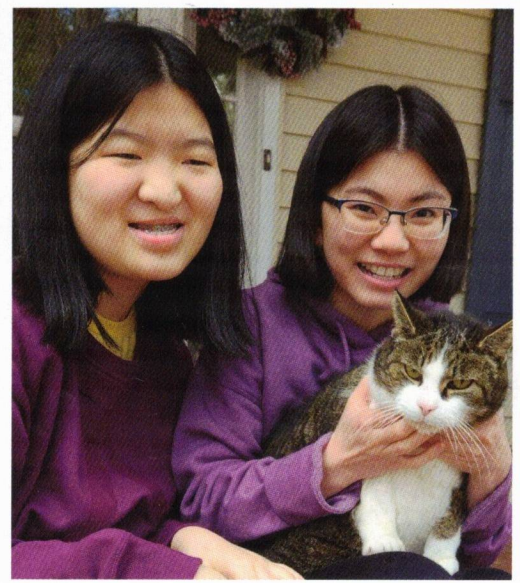
The Dodson children are at a variety of different stages in their lives. Timothy works in the Henrico County District Court Clerk's Office. He is also the primary caregiver for his wife. Gregory, father of grandson Michael, is a computer programmer in Virginia Beach. Like their dad, both men do not seem to let life's ups and downs dampen their sense of humor. Mikaela attends Germanna and works at TJ Maxx in Culpeper. Ellie is in the 9th grade at King's Light Christian Academy.

Mikaela and Ellie are both adopted from China. Ellie was their first. They waited five and half years to be offered a child to adopt. She was 17 months when they picked her up. Several months later, their social worker, who was doing a home visit (required by China), told them there was another little girl that needed a home. "We hesitated momentarily because she was 10 years old," admitted Liesa, "but once we saw her picture, we put in our paperwork and were back on the plane headed to China."

Both Mike and Liesa are heavily involved with Hope for Appalachia, for which this month's charity spotlight will provide an update to our article in the August 2022 issue. Liesa is very active with Aging Together in Culpeper. She teaches Dementia Friends, leads several Caregiver Support Groups and teaches several Caregiver classes in the community.

There is so much more to share about this amazing family, their faithful walk together, and their positive impact on our community. Unfortunately, we only have so much room in this issue.

Asked what message they would like to share with fellow Culpeper area residents, they offered these words from Jesus: "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." Matthew 6:33



Life on a Cat Farm

By Tom Fish

Photo courtesy of the Dodson Family

The Dodson family seems to be a cat farm. They have Timothy, Greg, Peter, Sniffles, Snuggles, Naomi and Ruth. Shown here with Ellie and Mikaela is Peter.






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HOPE FOR APPALACHIA UPDATE – MORE HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS

By Tom Fish | Photo By Susan Bittner, Outgoing Portraits

Hope for Appalachia was founded in 2011 to provide basic necessities and the hope of Jesus Christ to school students and families in the Appalachian Mountain Region of our nation. Neighbors of Culpeper did a spotlight article on them in August of 2022. In that article, we shared how God opened the door for them to go to three public schools in 2012. Pastor Mike Dodson and some of folks at New Salem traveled to Harlan County, Kentucky. They delivered each child a hope box and shared the Easter story and the hope of the empty tomb with each child and teacher.

“God has blessed us in a huge way,” exclaimed Pastor Mike, “We also travel at Christmas now, and on our recent trip God provided thousands of hats and gloves, coats, blankets, etc. so that we could deliver them to 26 schools. We were also able to bless many kids with Christmas presents that otherwise would not have received anything.”

Mike's wife, Liesa, shared the funny story about how the Christmas trip came about. One day she was in a store and noticed that all the hats and gloves were 25 cents. Liesa said, “Suddenly, I felt the Lord telling me to buy the hats and gloves.” “Lord, what will I do with them?” “Take them to Kentucky,” came the reply. She told the salesperson that she was going to buy the hats and gloves – all of them. “Well, alright then. We'll get some more carts.” A manager came by to inquire what was going on. When he heard the story he said, “We have some more in the



back.” Before she wrote the check, Liesa called Pastor Mike, who asked, “What will we do with all that?” Liesa responded, “We'll go at Christmas. We'll take them to all the schools we normally go to at Easter.” And so, Hope for Appalachia Christmas trips were born.

Pastor Mike, Liesa, and crew are preparing for their upcoming Easter trip which will be their 13th spring trip. “We will take a hope box to each student and share the Easter story. We anticipate visiting at least 34 schools for a total of almost 13,000 students,” explained Pastor Mike. They will also deliver prom dresses, little dresses of hope for the little girls, bibles, comfort blankets, etc.

God continues to open doors for new opportunities for hope. Mike and Liesa were giving a presentation at a church in southern Virginia about HFA. Following the presentation, one of the folks in the group approached and asked if their hope program would transfer to a jail setting. The program in the schools hasn't changed much over the years. Kids come into the gym one grade at a time. The team has fun with them for a while, then lets them know that they are loved, special, and treasured by the team members, but more importantly by God. Then they break into small groups and share the Easter story. Lastly, each child receives a hope box.

So when asked if this would translate to a jail setting, Pastor Mike answered, “Absolutely.” Mike and Liesa took a small team to a large regional jail in southern Virginia last month. “It was absolutely amazing!” declared Pastor Mike. “The hope that is needed in eastern Kentucky is the same hope that is needed in a jail in Southern Virginia,” he continued. Leisa told me how she walked a room filled with a large group of inmates, some 40 of them, unsure of what exactly she was going to say. The Lord had put on her heart that the topic should be the parable of The Prodigal Son. “We are here because God sent us,” she began. She opened her Bible and announced that they were going to talk about The Prodigal Son. Several inmates left the group and went into their cells, but they return moments later holding their own Bibles. Suddenly they were in a Bible study, something that Liesa was well acquainted with leading. Although out of their comfort zones, they described an amazing day of ministry.

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