

coverstory

A black and white profile photograph of a man with short, dark hair, looking out a window. He is wearing a dark sweater over a plaid collared shirt. The background shows a window with a grid pattern, looking out onto a bright, possibly outdoor scene.

Columbia's own *Blind Side*

by Deena C. Bouknight
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www.reachoutcolumbia.com

(Editor's note: This is a follow-up to the first article we ran on Sandee Hensley's Heartworks Ministry and Jubilee Academy in our December 2006 issue.)

When the movie *The Blind Side* opened in theaters nationwide last fall, Sandee Hensley's phone rang off the hook. Emerging from the theaters, friends and family members hastily called to say they had seen her in the real-life character of feisty Leigh Anne Tuohy, played by Sandra Bullock. The actress recently won a Golden Globe award for her portrayal of a white woman who nurtures a troubled black youth, Michael Oher. Callers also noted that Oher reminded them of the gentle giant Todd McClinton, whose young life Hensley had impacted just as dramatically. And vice versa.

You could say that Hensley was blindsided when she began teaching at a Columbia inner-city middle school in 1995. She describes the experience as "hell on earth." She adds, "These children were violent, spit on me, had sex in the bathroom, cursed ... and they weren't even old enough to know anything."

The bright light, however, was Todd McClinton. On her first day of teaching eighth grade at the school, Hensley noticed a massive student, head hung low, and commented to him, "You look like a ball player." A rapport between them ensued.

Soon, McClinton started showing up after class to help Hensley with chores. He also would sit with her at lunch. She gradually learned about his life and his family. He was exposed to the same horrors as many children in a life cycle Hensley calls generational poverty: shootings, theft, drug use, sex, poor nutrition, and little or no family structure.

"Todd is the way God got my heart into this community," Hensley says.

She began visiting McClinton's family and establishing ties in the black community. Because she tutored the Gamecock football team, she could take McClinton and his friends to USC sporting events.

When his home life became tumultuous, McClinton often



Opposite: Todd McClinton is Jubilee Academy's new assistant head master. Above: Heartworks/Jubilee Academy founder Sandee Hensley uses wooden cut-outs to familiarize young Questin with barnyard animals and farm chores such as gathering eggs.

would stay with Hensley, further strengthening their bond. "My house became his safe haven," she says. She also purchased necessities for him and his family. At the same time, she began to reach out to others in his community. Ten years ago, she started Heartworks Ministry, an after-school program with summer camps for inner-city children. The ministry's mission statement is: "Working to turn the hearts and lives of inner-city children, youth, and families towards Christ and academic excellence." McClinton

became a key player in the ministry and the lives of his peers.

In *The Blind Side*, as in real life, the Tuohy family so nurtured Michael Oher, hiring tutors to help bring up his grades, he was recruited to play for the University of Mississippi. Currently, he is an NFL offensive tackle with the Baltimore Ravens.

Likewise, in Columbia, Sandee Hensley so believed in and nurtured Todd McClinton, he was recruited to play football for Clemson University in 2000. He played tight end and then defensive

tackle. He eventually helped coach the team during his senior year at Clemson. Hensley drove the 6-foot-7-inch, 330-pound McClinton back and forth to Clemson, often assisting him with papers and assignments. Hensley had an ongoing dialogue with his coaches,

Clockwise from top left: Devin and other Jubilee kids enjoy the playground. Student handprints decorate a group art project focused on trusting God's promises. Jubilee student Jessica, 17, helps young Nevaeh with the alphabet. Todd McClinton tutors Aaron and Isaiah.



including Tommy Bowden. She also attended numerous games to cheer him on and occasionally took other Heartworks children to watch him play.

“Going away to college became locked into the imaginations of our Heartworks children and has forever since been a topic of conversation, inspiration, and expectation for them,” says Hensley.

She adds, “When Todd went to Clemson, the coaches commented on how differently he acted in their homes than other players. People who meet Todd have no idea where or how he grew up, unless he shares it with them. He is accepted and well-liked in different social circles without anyone even knowing how much he has endured.”

A favorite photograph of the two was taken at McClinton’s graduation in 2005. Hensley is hugging him and proudly holding up his diploma. She never married and has endured her own hardships but believes in the first few verses of James, which begin: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.”

Hensley says of that passage, “That’s how I have had to live and that’s what I teach these children. We all have to go through hard things to fulfill what God has for us. I tell them, ‘Don’t let your past determine your future.’”

“Todd is the fulfillment of our vision statement, which is ‘We envision educated, productive citizens who have exchanged the bondage of welfare and poverty for freedom in Christ and who will be the firm foundation for the next generation, according to God’s Word.’ Todd has had lots of trauma, but he’s also been very blessed.”

With a bachelor’s degree in sports management, McClinton has spent the last four years coaching, teaching, and training in facilities management and recreation-program development in Greenville. He was also employed with a tree-service company, learning about landscaping, plants, trees, and using heavy equipment. But his heart was in Columbia, where he never missed an opportunity to assist Hensley with the Heartworks children. He’s also been an asset to the Jubilee Academy, which Hensley founded in 2006. Accredited last year with the S.C. Independent School Association, the school provides the Heartworks children with an academically enriched, safe, Christian education. McClinton attended the graduation of Jubilee’s first graduate, Brandon Lowman, in May 2009. He has also participated in open houses, Halloween parties, day camps, and field trips.

When Greenville became too far away from Hensley and “my kids,” says McClinton, he came home to Columbia. “God began really leading me to come back here.”

In January, life came full circle for McClinton as he joined Jubilee Academy as assistant head master. He will wear many hats. “I will be the new face of fundraising for Heartworks and Jubilee, the school’s PE coach, and I’m starting a track team from scratch that will be competitive against other private schools by this time next year.”

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Hensley says, “Todd has always been the one our children listen to more than any other. He is the one they want to follow after. He is the only one they know who has successfully exchanged the bondage of generational poverty for a middle-class, Christian lifestyle. He’s very parental and protective with them.”

McClinton, with the hands-on experience he gained working with the tree service, will also assist Hensley in reaching a new goal, Jubilee Farm. The school is currently on the lookout for property where its children can learn gardening and farming.

“Farming, gardening, and caring for animals fosters independence, self-confidence, and understanding of life cycles,” says Hensley. “It teaches healthy ways to interact with nature by God’s design and inspires caring for the environment and for those who will come after us.”



Eric is one of six Jubilee students who have earned a spot that day at the special lunch table with real china, cloth napkins, and other finery. Later, he and others will clean all the tables and wash dishes.

The goal is for the farm to become a summer refuge for Heartworks and Jubilee Academy children. “I’m just so glad to be back here with these kids, most of whom I know and others I’m getting to know,” says McClinton. “These kids are learning Spanish ... even the little ones. Now that’s really amazing ... and they’re having fun learning too.”

Hensley reflects on the path McClinton’s life has taken. “Obviously, God protected Todd through many hardships during childhood so that he could lead others at such a time as this. It’s wonderful to have him here and to have his help. It’s also wonderful to see him blossom.”

Todd says he is proof of the verse he carries with him at all times, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). **ROC**



Needs of Heartworks Ministry and Jubilee Academy:

- Vacuum cleaners
 - MAC laptop or desktop
 - New tires for three vehicles
 - Chairs for classrooms
 - Lunches, including fruit, daily
 - A mini bus
 - Woodworking materials and tools
 - Gift cards for purchasing snacks, paper products, toiletries, cleaning supplies, and curriculum materials
 - Financial donations
 - And much more.
- For a complete list and instructions for donating, visit www.heartworksministry.org



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