

Gwinnett Braves announcement

[http://www.milb.com/documents/2011/12/02/26081382/1/Gwinnett Braves](http://www.milb.com/documents/2011/12/02/26081382/1/Gwinnett_Braves)

Wednesday's Woman: Nichole Richardson

<http://snellville.patch.com/articles/wednesday-s-woman-nichole-richardson>

It's nearly 7 p.m., and Nichole Richardson's day has yet to slow down. Just in from work, she's talking to a friend on the phone, frying fish for the family, and tending to her children.

Before the night is over, she'll be back to helping other families make life work, as well. Then she'll wake up, begin her day, and start the whole exhausting process over again.

During the day she works in medical office doing pre-authorizations, but if she has to be honest, that's not where her heart lies. It's with Mother's Choice, a nonprofit she began about 2004.

"I wanted Mother's Choice to be the choice -- a home away from home," she says now.

It started off with her doing something that her husband would rather she not do -- picking up random people off the street.

To her, they were not chance meetings. They were intentional. There was a reason beyond her own understanding that put each of the people she met in her path.

Strangers Helping Strangers

In 2003, there was a woman she saw walking down Indian Trail Road with her child. Already late for work, Richardson decided to pull over and offer the woman a ride.

In the drive, the woman told her they were living with a girlfriend and her boyfriend, and that her child was possibly being sexually abused. She also said that she had to walk to work at Burger King everyday, leaving her child behind.

Right then and there, Richardson told the stranger that she would keep her child while she went to work. Because the family also didn't have much food at home, Richardson fed the child, as well.

After about a week, the woman said she didn't need Richardson's help anymore. (Richardson thinks she was asking too many questions.) The woman went on to tell her that her manager at Burger King said he loved kids and would take them in. One bad situation to another one, Richardson thought.

"I felt like I didn't do enough, I felt I could have reported it, I felt like there was more I could have done to protect this little girl," she said. "And, after that I said, 'God, because I didn't do what I should've done...' I wanted to do something different, but I didn't know how."

She met other people -- including a child who was gang raped and another with cervical cancer -- with challenging family lives who she wanted to help. But, she had her own children (now three) and a husband, who wasn't too keen on her helping so many strange people.

But, there had to be a reason to it all.

Over and over, she was "hit with this decision on how I'm going to help."

No formal education in helping others or running an organization that assists families and no immense funds to draw from to make things happen, Richardson said all she had was "a will and a love for people."

Will to Live

While Richardson, who is now 32, was trying to figure out what exactly God had planned for her vision of helping others, she began fighting for her life.

In 2003, that same time she picked the woman up off the street, Richardson started having unexplained migraines. The worst one sent her to the hospital, and she was there for a month.

"I had finished, like, a whole bottle of Excedrin and a whole bottle of Tylenol within that day, and the headache went nowhere," she said. "When I finally went to the emergency room, I was diagnosed at first with meningitis, and then they said, 'You have a tumor on your brain.'"

She was getting lumbar punctures and spinal taps daily, it seemed. Doctors would come into her room, look at her chart, and leave out without clear answers.

"When you looked at me, you would have sworn Nichole was not going to make it," she said.

At some point, in the middle of the night, Richardson got up looking for answers. She prayed. She told God if he helped her make it through this tumultuous time, that she would do his will.

She was diagnosed with having a false brain tumor, pseudotumor cerebri. Nothing that could really be explained. Now, liquid continues to accumulate in her spine, so doctors have put her on diuretics for the remainder of her life.

It took her a year to get well after that 2003 hospitalization, but she still has complications. Over

the Christmas holiday, she was sick again, but still collected toys to give away.

Realizing a Dream

It took a while, but eventually Richardson was able to organize her growing idea into a nonprofit child care and learning center -- Mother's Choice.

She had worked for a short stint at YMCA because she thought she could soak up some nonprofit know-how there. She was still picking up strangers and helping families seek assistance, and she wanted to do more for children.

And, in the early stages, Richardson admits she didn't know what she didn't know. Trial and error is how she got through it. More and more families sought her out.

Every time her phone rang, "it was a family in need of something else: in need of clothing, of food, of assistance with food stamps, so what I started doing, instead of saying I couldn't do it, I would help them."

At first she rented a space in Lilburn, but that didn't last long. She was trying to work full-time, and go to the center on her lunch hour, and then back again. It was a lot.

She stopped that and began a partnership at the Centerville Community Center, helping at-risk youth -- some who were gang bangers. "Yes, they have gangs in Snellville, yes they do," she said.

She looked to churches, "but nobody would take me."

Richardson continued bringing her program to different centers around South Gwinnett. Late in the evening, she would do work on behalf of the families she helped. Some were referrals from the American Cancer Society. People she never met.

Still, she didn't feel like she was getting the break she needed. She thought God had given her a vision -- to open an after-school program, a summer camp, a shelter, her own referral center, maybe.

With no space, she surmised, "God you lied."

Finally in 2010, after asking for several years in a row, Snellville Christian Church said OK. She would open a summer program in 2011.

Moving Forward

What she really needs now is a van. What she hopes is to one day stop working full-time in a medical office doing billing, and be able to serve God and her community on a full-time basis.

She wants her summer program to teach children life skills -- an all-round camp, Richardson

says. She wants to reach more children.

Way out there, in the far reaches of her mind, she also thinks about finishing her nursing degree.

"I don't want to let anybody down, and I'm pushing myself to the limit," she said. "I'm doing, and I'm trying -- what am I not doing?"

Although she's frustrated lately with needing more resources to grow her nonprofit -- more money, more volunteers, more time, Richardson finally knows that she is doing what she should be doing.

"God orders my steps," she said. "I'm walking in my purpose."

She thanks her husband of nine years, the pastor at Snellville Christian Church, and her close friends for being with her on this journey. The families and children she serves continue to be her inspiration.

"When I hear that somebody isn't struggling anymore, not stressed about this and that anymore, I'm pleased," she said. "This is how I feel I did more than just existed."

To learn more about Mother's Choice or to contact Nichole Richardson, log on to her organization's website.

About this column: A look at interesting and inspirational women in Snellville.