

I Dream of ... College, Safe Home and Hope

Photographer Brings Cameras to Homeless Shelters to Help Kids Find a Future

By BARBARA PINTO

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In a bleak corner of North Memphis, trash blows in the hot breeze. Beyond the abandoned buildings and rusted cars, one place stands out.

Inside a new brick building on a hill, the Salvation Army's shelter for homeless families, something amazing is developing. A group of children hover around a table as photojournalist Linda Solomon shows them how to compose a photograph.

"You hold the camera like this," she says as she moves 8-year-old Marteja's fingers away from the camera lens.

Solomon is an award-winning photographer and best-selling author. With a grant from General Motors Corp., she has traveled to homeless shelters in 10 U.S. cities to distribute disposable cameras and encourage children to dream beyond the shelter walls. Their work will provide images for Salvation Army holiday cards.

As she and the children began a daylong workshop, Solomon asked the youngest shelter residents to make a list of what they wished for in life and then capture those dreams on film for the project "Pictures of Hope."

"You see the most beautiful things," Solomon said. "These children aren't wishing for Nintendos or iPods, they're hoping for things that are truly important."

'No More Suffering'

In some case their hopes can be heartbreaking. In Raleigh, N.C., a teenage girl took a photograph of her empty closet to illustrate her wish for "new clothes for my whole family."

A 17-year-old submitted a self-portrait in which she held her infant child. Her dream: to give her own children a better life.

In Orlando, Fla., one child photographed homeless men sleeping outdoors to illustrate his wish for "no more suffering and no more pain."

An 11-year-old snapped a photo of Purdue University from a Web site because he desperately wants to study there.

Another child wished for his father to get out of jail.

At the Memphis shelter, 9-year-old David, a spunky blond boy, read his list.

"I want to be a doctor," he said. "I hope to get an education. I hope to see my Dad some day."

Nine-year-old Jasmine followed, and in a soft voice she said, "I hope for the world to be a better place to live."

Wishing for 'Good Dreams' to Replace 'Bad Dreams'

Jasmine and her 11-year-old sister, Jackqueline, bounced from foster home to foster home before arriving at the shelter. Now they share a small room with their grandmother.

Jasmine's time in foster care inspired a wish she worked hard to illustrate. She asked her sister and her neighbor David to hug teddy bears and pretend to be asleep. She framed her shot and clicked the camera's shutter.

"My wish is to have good dreams," Jasmine said, "so that I won't have any more bad dreams and to keep the devil away from me."

Justice and a New House

Cairo Tatum set out into the neighborhood to photograph his wish list. The first stop: a tidy brown-and-white home in a manicured neighborhood. From across the street, he framed the house in his viewfinder.

"Got it," he said clicking the shutter.

"I wish for a nice house," Cairo explained, meaning a home away from drugs and violence.

At age 11, Cairo also wishes for something else many adults might ignore. Snapping a photo of a statue outside the county courthouse, he explained, "I wished for justice."

Cairo's photo was just one of a dozen pictures that Solomon blew up to poster size and placed on exhibit at a city park in Memphis. On a steamy Saturday afternoon, she assembled the excited group of her "students" and unveiled the pictures one by one.

"Where's Jeremiah," Solomon asked. A nervous little boy in a white T-shirt came forward.

As Solomon showed his photograph, Jeremiah broke into a wide smile. Jeremiah's picture is the roof line of a building an inverted V set against blue sky. His wish: "to have a roof over my head."

Eleven-year-old Jonathan, who had snapped a picture of a "No smoking" sign, explained his wish: "So people don't have any cancer and live a healthy life."

Jackqueline was breathless and ecstatic as she showed her photograph a teddy bear resting on the branch of a tree. A little girl below is pointing at a toy.

"My hope is to own my own wildlife sanctuary so that animals don't go extinct," she said.

How does she feel about seeing her work on display? "I feel really high and mighty like a queen or something," she said beaming.

Cairo's wish for justice surprised his grandmother Akiba Shabazz.

"It gives him a voice that he didn't have," she said. "I think it has to be that magic, that dream that lifts you out of your circumstances & and shows you where you ought to be going. And I'm thinking that's what it will do for him."

One can only hope. The photos will eventually be made into holiday cards and sold by the Salvation Army. All of the proceeds go toward programs for the homeless.

"It's showing how much we believe in them and their dreams," Solomon said. "And knowing these cards can change their lives."

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