

Not your average childhood wishes

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The little girl sits looking at the blank piece of paper, her pen poised in the air.

It's not every day, after all, that a kid like Jesika is asked what she most wants in life. After a few minutes, the 8-year-old bends over the paper and starts making a list.

Jesika is one of a dozen homeless kids in Phoenix who were recently asked to dream a little for a project called Pictures of Hope. So what do 8- and 10- and 11-year-olds most want?

Their answers might surprise you.

For several years now, Linda Solomon has been working with children who are one step from the streets. She's a Tucson photographer on an elegantly simple mission: "To show them that their hopes and dreams matter."

To do that, Solomon is fanning out to six cities this year, meeting children who live in homeless and transitional shelters. Teaching them how to take photographs, talking to them about how to dream and giving them each a disposable camera and an assignment: Show us.

The kids take pictures of things that symbolize what they want, and the pictures are then turned into Christmas cards and sold. Thanks to financial support from General Motors, 100 percent of the proceeds from the Phoenix project will go to Homeward Bound, where these children live.

And sometimes, the proceeds far exceed mere money. Sometimes, one photo changes a life.

Last year, a 9-year-old San Diego girl who lived in a Salvation Army shelter took a picture of the sign at the entrance to San Diego State University. "I hope," she wrote, "to get a scholarship." The president of the alumni association saw the card and the girl was given a full ride.

Can you imagine being 9 with nothing much to hold onto and then everything?

"These kids don't have fun lives," Solomon said. "I mean, when you look at their lists and you see a 7-year-old whose only hope in life is to see his mother smile again. They reveal so much, I can't even tell you."

Homeward Bound is a transitional shelter in northwest Phoenix, a place where families can get back on their feet.

Most who live here are the children of single mothers who became homeless in one of

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usual ways: fleeing abuse, using drugs, making bad choices or all three.

"They come from a background that to dream or to hope or to imagine for the future is just so far reaching to them," said Dana Bailey, a spokeswoman for the shelter. "But for them to be successful, they have to be able to have these hopes and dreams."

Jasmine, 13, wishes for a good education and "for my mom to get better." She'd like to go to Northern Arizona University and become a veterinarian.

Eleven-year-old Vincent, too, hopes for a scholarship and like any red-blooded American boy, to someday play Major League Baseball. As we talk, he mentions that he's never actually gotten to play on a real team.

"Many times, we turn away," Solomon said. "We don't want to look. We don't want to recognize someone who's homeless. With these children, I think they're expressing values and lessons that anyone can learn from."

Mercedes certainly is. The 7-year-old's No. 1 wish is to help people.

Then there is Jesika, who lives at the shelter with her mother and her 9-year-old sister. They bounced around from place to place until finally there was no place left to land

other than the street.

They've been at Homeward Bound 18 months now, and in that time, they've begun to heal and to begin again. But some things, it seems, are not so easily forgotten.

Jesika's No. 1 wish is for food.

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