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## Pictures of Hope program dares homeless children to dream big

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By **Melissa Fletcher Stoeltje** - Express-News Staff [RSS](#) | [EMAIL](#) | [PRINT](#) | [SAVE Writer](#)

Ask most kids today what they want and the list probably sounds a lot like this: A Nintendo Wii. An iPod. The latest cell phone. Cool clothes or a crazy car.

But for the homeless children living at the SAMMinistries Transitional Living and Learning Center on Blanco Road, the requests are far simpler and more poignant.

Brian Toscano, 12, wants "my mom to get a house."

Lynnette Rodriguez, 9, wants "the world to be a better place."

Lydia Rodriguez, 13, hopes for a college degree and to "become something in life."

Alisa Rios-Carroll longs for "my mom to come home."

The children's written-down dreams were part of an innovative program recently brought to the shelter by award-winning photojournalist and author Linda Solomon, who asked the 15 kids assembled on a sunny July afternoon to plumb their hearts for their utmost desires. The next step: Take pictures of places and things that symbolized those desires.

Sponsored by the Saturn Division of General Motors, the Pictures of Hope program is in its third year. Last year, Solomon held shelter workshops in six cities across the nation. This year, the program will visit six cities again, with the one last month at SAMMinistries serving as the launching point. Shelters in Houston and Austin are also taking part.

But capturing wishes on film is only one element of Pictures of Hope. Solomon will select 15 images taken by the local children on disposable cameras and transform them into greeting cards, to be unveiled this fall at a local Saturn dealership. The images will be paired with text reflecting each child's hope. All proceeds from sale of the cards, geared to the holiday season, will benefit SAMMinistries. Last year, the cards earned an estimated \$50,000 for each participating shelter.

"Our goal is to show these children that their hopes and dreams matter," said Solomon during a telephone interview prior to the July workshop. "When you know someone cares about what you hope for in life, it gives you the confidence to pursue your goals. I'm really excited to give these children an opportunity to express their hearts."

Navarra R. Williams, president and CEO of SAMMinistries, which each day assists more than 200 homeless children and their families, welcomed Pictures of Hope with open arms.

"I knew right off the bat this would be a life-changing experience," he said.

### It's a snap

On the appointed day of the workshop, the children, ranging in age from 7 to 15, filed into a conference room where tables had been set up in rows before a large screen. A bank of television cameras captured their every move. Solomon, who wrote a New York Times best-seller about celebrities and their horses, stood before the group, smiling beatifically. Slender and chic in white jeans, a white shirt and turquoise belt buckle, with a mane of blond hair, she immediately established a rapport with the children, who listened raptly as she explained that they were going to become photojournalists for the day.

"Who wants to work with my camera?" she asked, and hands shot up around the room. Jasmine Dears, 10, walked to the front of the room, and Solomon asked her to pick a model. Lydia Rodriguez volunteered. Solomon coached Dears on how to frame the photo, how to aim, how to push the button.

"Anybody can take a picture," she told the children. "You can all be good at it."

She talked about when to hold the camera vertically or horizontally, how important it is to not be too close or too far away, when to use a flash. And then the lights went dim. Solomon, famous for her celebrity photographs, told the kids about taking



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SAMMinistries residents Anthony Garcia (from left), Brian Toscano and Brandon Garcia take photos at the University of Texas at San Antonio to complete their assignments for the Pictures of Hope program. The children were asked to photograph places and things that symbolize their desires.

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pictures at the Academy Awards. On the screen appeared mugs of Will Smith, Miley Cyrus ("Did you know she has her own security guards?" she asked the kids), Beyoncé, Usher, Jennifer Lopez. You could tell Solomon had solidly established her cred with this crowd.

Then images of photos gone wrong flashed on the screen. Each time, she asked the kids what the problem was. Hands shot up. Those who answered received photographs of Cyrus.

"OK, now you're all going to get an assignment today," she said after the screen segment was over. "Pictures describe what's in your heart. They help you tell a story."

Each child was handed a green sheet of paper where they could scribble down their hopes for the future. The room went quiet.

In the interview before the workshop, Solomon said she's been amazed by the heartbreaking requests she's read from homeless children across the nation, whom she describes as "innocent victims." One boy hoped to see his mother smile again. Another just wanted a bed of his own.

"These children are just so unselfish," she said. "Kids who have everything need to see this. My goal is that children who are so overindulged today with the latest and the greatest will maybe realize it's not so important. To be a good person, to worry about other people — that's what matters."

### Changing lives

Solomon also hopes her project will help dispel misconceptions about homeless people — especially the idea that they're satisfied with their lot in life. Almost all the children who take part in Pictures of Hope speak of their desire to go to college and get a good education, she said. In fact, the program actually has made that dream possible for two children, one in San Diego and one in Memphis, Tenn. They each took photos of the exterior of colleges and other school-related pictures. When the media printed their stories, local colleges in their respective cities granted each a scholarship.

"I know that one photo can change a life because I've seen it," Solomon said.

Dispelling stereotypes is crucial today, she says, when more than 750,000 families are homeless each year simply because they can't make ends meet in desperate economic times.

"Now more than ever, we need to be aware of these children who deserve a chance to dream and succeed in life," she said.

Her program may be having a positive impact: Suzi Lacey, director of communications at the Salvation Army Door of Hope Transitional Living Center in San Diego, said that while she only has anecdotal evidence, it would appear all of the families whose children have gone through the Pictures of Hope "do really well."

"This program is like dropping a pebble in a pond," said Lacey. "The ripples keep going and grow into a belief not only in yourself but in the future. That good things can happen to you. In a homeless situation, hope is the main thing that people have lost."

Back in the conference room, Lydia Rodriguez rises to read about how she wants to grow up to be a good, strong woman with a bright future. She wishes the same for her siblings.

"Just think," Solomon says. "The entire city of San Antonio will read what you hope for!"

### College trip

Two days after the workshop, a handful of SAMministries kids still haven't finished taking all their pictures, so they and a few adults pile into a white, 15-passenger van and head for the University of Texas at San Antonio.

For most of them, this will be the first time they've ever stepped foot on a college campus.

Brent Smith, 15, has marked on his hope list that he'd like to join the military, that there'd be "no more fighting, no more wars" and the future will bring "a better life for my family."

Alisa Rios-Carroll, who has a swath of dark hair hanging in front of her face and blue fingernails, took a picture of her shoes, because "I want more awesome shoes." And she took a picture of her sister, "Because I want to see my sister happy," she said. She wants to go to either Harvard, Duke or Princeton, she added. She took a picture of a computer to symbolize education.

In the UTSA parking garage, Brandon Garcia, 8, takes a picture of a red Mustang, because he wants the very same car. (OK, *sosome* of their desires are materialistic.)

The group then spends two hours meandering the broiling hot campus. Malik Moore, 12, takes a picture of the science building, because he wants to study biology. In the engineering building, a riveted Brian Toscano takes a picture of a brain in a jar in a display case, because he wants to be a doctor.

"Engineering is fun because you get to mess with stuff!" Brandon says.

The group peers into laboratories, into the printmaking studio, into a room where a group of artists sits in a circle and paint a still-life tableau of fruits. In one auditorium, a group of musicians play beautiful music.

"All I have to say is one word: Wow," Alisa says.

Exhausted, they pile back into the van and drive to a nearby upscale subdivision, where tidy brick homes are set on meticulously landscaped yards. One by one, the kids get out and photograph a home.

A hope for the future.

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