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Michigan Humane's animal cards are about more than adoptions



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Keysan, a Detroit teenager, dreams of building his own shelter someday to help "all the homeless animals suffering in the world."

The 14-year-old has been homeless himself. For the past six months he and his mother have lived at Peterboro, a supportive housing facility run by the Coalition on Temporary Shelter, in Detroit.

"We had to move because I couldn't stand the roaches at the previous slum landlord place anymore," Keysan told the Free Press on Tuesday. "But I miss my cat. He's probably back in the wild. He was never domesticated."

Keysan crouches down, a new digital Kodak camera in hand, and snaps a photo of Bobbi, a 3-month-old kitten wrapped in a blanket in the arms of a Michigan Humane shelter volunteer.

Keysan is one of 15 kids staying at COTS facilities who, on Tuesday, were given digital cameras — which they get to keep — at Michigan Humane's Mackey Center for Animal Care in Detroit. Their assignment was to think about their hopes and dreams for all the homeless cats and dogs at Michigan Humane's shelter. In the process, the children also consider their own hopes and dreams. Take 9-year-old Sincere, who was assigned to photograph a cat named Opel.

"My dream for Opel is to have clothes and a bed to sleep in," Sincere said. "And some food."

What would he like for himself? "Some clothes, toys ... and toys for the cat too. A business for my mom. I want her to work in a grocery store," Sincere said.

COTS asked that we use only the children's first names because many face bullying at school for being homeless.

Teaching kids to make a difference

The event Tuesday was called Pictures of Hope. The photos the kids took of the various animals will be made into packets of 10 to 15 cards and sold through COTS' and Michigan Humane's websites starting Sept. 27, but can be ordered now. The price for the cards has not been set, but the proceeds will go to support COTS and Michigan Humane. Also, the public can view the photos on Sept. 27 at the Metropolitan Museum of Design Detroit during a reception from 4:00 to 5:30 p.m.

"People donate way more than the price of the set of cards," said Linda Solomon, founder of Pictures of Hope. "When people see these heartfelt photographs on the cards ... I had one woman call me and say, 'I just want one box of cards.' Then she sent \$10,000 to the shelter."

Beyond the financial help, Pictures of Hope also benefits the animals and the children. For the animals, having a couple of hours of the children's attention reduces their stress of staying at the shelter. For the kids, who are ages 7-14, getting a field trip to play with animals and learn photography is both fun and self-esteem building.

"It is giving these children the opportunity to know they can make a difference," Solomon said. "When you tell them, 'You're helping find a home for these pets,' imagine how it makes them feel. They feel important and they feel that they're respected. When you end up in a shelter, you don't think anybody cares. This shows that you're making a difference."

Assignment: Change a life

Each child gets an adult mentor for the day to coach them on articulating their hopes and dreams.

"I hope my cat is loved," said one of the little girls, when Solomon asked some of the children to share their hopes for the animals with the group.

Solomon founded Pictures of Hope in 2005. She has worked as a newspaper columnist, a photojournalist and author. She was inducted in the Michigan Journalism Hall of Fame in 2011. She's created educational programs that have donated more than 1 million cameras to elementary school kids across the nation, with an emphasis on teaching homeless kids to express themselves through photography.

So she starts the day by explaining to the children the job of a photojournalist and how to make photos that tell a story.

A pit bull mix puppy named Annie is brought into the room. Solomon asks for a volunteer to take Annie's photo. Sincere's hand shoots up. Solomon hands him her professional long-lens camera and says, "You're a journalist now. How would you like to photograph that pet? Get right down on the level of the pet."

Sincere is on the ground, pointing the camera at the puppy. The shutter whirs.

"Perfect!" exclaimed Solomon. "You're a great photojournalist."

Her encouragement was all that was needed for Sincere to keep taking photos throughout the rest of Solomon's presentation, showing his photos around the room.

"I treat them as journalists," Solomon said. "They're on an assignment, and the assignment is to change a life. It's about making it fun, but having them realize their dreams matter and now they're changing the dreams of a pet."

Keeping the family together including the pets

While the kids staying in the COTS system share the common experience of temporary homelessness with the animals at Michigan Humane's shelter, the trauma is more complicated.

"You've got these kids who right now should be out and enjoying summer and fun, but they are experiencing something traumatic, losing their home," said Matt Pepper, CEO of Michigan Humane, adding that often includes losing their pet too.

"This program brings to light our Safety Net Foster program, which is designed for a family who is experiencing homelessness," Pepper said. "We find someone who can temporarily foster their pet for them until they find a home again. Families should not have to give up their pet when they are temporarily homeless."

Michigan Humane launched its Safety Net Foster program in 2021, Pepper said, to support families experiencing housing crises, medical procedures requiring being away from home or other situations that temporarily prevent people from caring for their pet. The Safety Net Program operates similarly to a regular foster program, except the Safety Net Program requires longer fostering, sometimes 60 to 90 days. Also, there's no chance that the foster person could adopt the animal. It must go back to the family, Pepper said.

“We just want to make sure no one should forego their health and safety for their pet or have to lose their pet for something that is avoidable, that we can help address,” Pepper said.

Choosing between cats or COTS

Aisha Morrell-Ferguson, chief development officer of COTS, knows firsthand the importance of pets to the families who arrive at COTS Peggy's Place shelter on Wyoming Avenue south of West McNichols near the campus of Marygrove Conservancy.

COTS, which has 140 beds at the shelter, helped 1,100 families last year by providing temporary shelter, finding them affordable ways to have homes and providing other services such as education, job training, money management and wellness programs, Morrell-Ferguson said. Besides its shelter, COTS offers two apartment buildings in Detroit with affordable housing for families with limited means. COTS currently leases nearly 200 additional supported housing properties throughout the city, she said.

But the facility cannot take in animals. In 2021, a family of four had lost their home, Morrell-Ferguson said. They had been living in their car before arriving at COTS for help. But they had two cats that they loved and did not want to give up.

“You’re already going through the trauma of losing your home. Now you have to be separated from your pets, which give you comfort to the trauma you experience,” Morrell-Ferguson said. “They were going to choose to not come to shelter because they didn’t want to lose their pets.”

So Morrell-Ferguson agreed to foster both cats, Zeus and Fern, despite her allergy to cats. The family stayed at COTS just under a year before COTS found them affordable housing. Zeus had been adopted to a new person, with the family's blessing, but Morrell-Ferguson was able to keep Fern and reunite the cat with the family in their new home.

A 'groundbreaking' partnership that's changing two lives

Pets are part of a family, even when that family experiences homelessness, which makes the partnership between COTS and Michigan Humane groundbreaking, said Solomon.

“The camera becomes a way for them to share feelings,” Solomon said. “It’s not easy to share your dreams verbally, but through photography, these kids are sharing their dreams.”

Solomon said she's brought Pictures of Hope to 58 cities, and whenever she asks children to express their dreams they say, " 'My dream is to have my dog back,' or 'My dream is to see my cat.' Or, 'My dream is to help animals,' " Solomon said. "It's heartbreaking because, first of all having to move to a shelter is so sad, then having to give up their pets."

Solomon said recently she saw a woman standing with a sign that read: "I'm just poor." Solomon stopped and asked the woman what happened and the woman told her she was sick, lost her job and her home. The woman was living in her car rather than a shelter, she told Solomon because, "I don't want to give up my bird."

A chance to forget homelessness

Keysan goes outside the shelter Tuesday where an 8-year-old small female terrier named Fifi waits in a fenced-in area. Fifi arrived at the shelter two weeks ago as a stray and infested with fleas. Keysan erects a red banner with the word "Love" on it as a backdrop behind Fifi. He positions her in front of it, kneels down, raises his camera, waves at her and takes Fifi's photo. "Got it," Keysan exclaimed.

Nearby, Sincere is crouched down near the ground as a year-old pit bull mix named Banzai walks right up to the camera lens. Sincere snaps a close-up photo of Banzai's face with the dog's tongue hanging out sideways. "Look!" Sincere holds the camera's digital screen to a Free Press reporter standing nearby. "I wanna keep him," Sincere said.

Michigan Humane's Pepper said they might use some of the children's photos on social media as well as on the cards to create additional awareness and spur adoption, after all, they have about 350 animals that need homes.

Michigan Humane will track adoption rates to see if the cards do boost animal adoption, but Pepper said, "The reality is, if the only thing we do is allow for three hours when the kids don't have to worry about not having a home, that's worth it."

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