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Homeless children's views of the world

By Jenna Colley
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SAN DIEGO – Ratonda Tyler wasn't sure her 7-year old daughter would understand the assignment. So before agreeing to let her participate in a workshop that encourages homeless children to express themselves through photography, Tyler explained the situation.

A professional photojournalist was coming to the Salvation Army center where they lived. Tyler's daughter, Savannah, would get a disposable camera and three days to photograph something that she really wanted. One of the photos would be chosen to go on a holiday greeting card. The cards would then be sold to make money for the San Diego center.

Savannah listened. And then shocked her mother with her response.

The girl wanted to take a photo of herself sitting in a swing after spinning around in circles to the point where she was wrapped in its chains. Then she would let go, the chains loosening their grip. She wanted to photograph that feeling of calmness after chaos and the excitement that comes with spinning in the first place.

Savannah was one of eight children who live at the Salvation Army's Door of Hope Transitional Living Center who participated in the nationwide effort that stopped here yesterday.

“It will be interesting to see what she does,” Tyler said. “I'm going to just set the stage and see what happens.”

Situated on 6 acres near Children's Hospital, the Door of Hope includes 14 apartments where homeless women can live with their children rent-free for up to two years while they try to find work. Residents are required to save 80 percent of their income.

Sponsored by General Motors, the photography program was founded last year by Linda Solomon, a former newspaper columnist and author of a *New York Times* best-selling book of celebrities and their horses. This year, Solomon will conduct workshops in nine cities, including San Diego. All proceeds from the sale of the greeting cards benefit the individual Salvation Army centers. Last year, the cards raised an estimated \$50,000 for each site.

Solomon starts each workshop by showing the children basic photography tips and encouraging them to read a list of their hopes aloud.

“It's really a way to tell your story,” Solomon told the children yesterday.

The children's wishes range from a dog or cat to a college education. Most wish for a home. Often their answers reveal the harsh realities of what it's like to be a homeless child in America. One 12-year old girl hoped to witness a miracle.

In October, Solomon will return to San Diego and host an exhibition of the children's work, She also will present them with an enlarged version of their photograph and a box of greeting cards.



LAURA EMBRY / Union-Tribune
Photojournalist Linda Solomon gave some photography pointers to Devon Thompson, 3, during a workshop she held yesterday at the Salvation Army's Door of Hope.



LAURA EMBRY / Union-Tribune
Makayla Chapman, 8, (center) laughed with her mother, Jamie (left), as Makayla made a list of what she hopes for - including a cat - during the photography workshop.

She is always overwhelmed by the amazing images the children produce.


“These are not photos of Nintendos or iPods,” Solomon said. “They are photos that share their life lessons.”

■ Jenna Colley is a Union-Tribune intern.

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