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Program gives Valley at-risk kids cameras to take 'pictures of hope'



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By Dustin Gardiner
The Republic | azcentral.com
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Two simple images — a child's bare feet and the holy cross — tell the story of tragedy and resiliency in the lives of a pair of young, shy sisters who photographed them.

For the girls, ages 12 and 13, the picture of feet reflects their wish to have a car, so they don't have to walk so many miles in the heat to get around each week.

Their mother said they live on roughly \$175 a month and cannot afford transportation.

Fighting back tears, the mother said the cross symbolizes the sense of hope her daughters have found at a new church congregation after they were sexually molested by a relative.

The church has helped the family get back on their feet after they spent more than a year in a homeless shelter.

"It's a place where they can go, where they feel safe," said their mother, who is single and a recovering alcoholic and drug user.

"It means everything to them."

The girls, whom *The Arizona Republic* is not identifying because they are victims of a sex crime, were among a group of at-risk Phoenix youths who were given digital cameras last week and instructed to take "pictures of hope."

Tucson photojournalist Linda Solomon visited Homeward Bound, a transitional housing complex for families who have experienced homelessness and domestic violence, as part of a 12-city national program to highlight the dreams of disadvantaged kids. Chevrolet is funding the project.

Solomon will use the photos to make holiday cards, which will be sold by Homeward Bound with all of the proceeds going back to the non-profit.

"I think if you realize that someone cares about what you're dreaming for in life, it puts you on the path to achieving those dreams," Solomon said.

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"We are showing these children their dreams are respected."

Before the kids were sent out to take pictures, Solomon gave them a lesson on how to be a photographer. As the youths, ages 6 to 13, munched on after-school snacks, she explained how to use their camera's flash button and properly frame a picture.

Each child was instructed to write down a list of hopes, dreams and ambitions.

Some of their wishes were typical of school-age children, who dream of becoming professional athletes, singers or models.

But many of their hopes told a more painful story: They wished to no longer be homeless, to have a car, to reunite torn families and to go to college.

"My hope is to be able to tell the people that kept my mom sober and kept us safe that we are grateful for everything," wrote the 12-year-old sister who photographed the cross.

A tall 11-year-old boy who is an aspiring basketball player said he hopes to "not go homeless and live in my house," "go to college" and "never get held back."

What children hope for

Children taking part in the "Pictures of Hope" project were asked to list the hopes and dreams they want to photograph. Below are some of the wishes of Phoenix kids.

"My hope is to have a house of our own to become a new family."

"My hope is to have transportation to do more things."

"My hope is to be a teacher."

"My dream is to have family time instead of being apart."

"My hope is to know everything's okay."

"My hope is to make it to the NBA."

"My hope is to have a good life."

"My hope is to have a loving family."

"My hope is to go to college."

"My hope is to see my real father in California."

"My hope is to not go homeless and live in my house."

"My dream is to be an artist."

"My hope is to never get held back."

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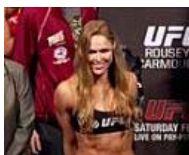
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