

Once-homeless teen who received car returns to San Diego for talk

By [Gary Warth \(/staff/gary-warth/\)](#) 6 a.m. April 11, 2014



In this photo from September 2013, Brittnie Pemberton is surrounded by photographers after she was surprised with a new 2014 Chevrolet Spark at Jimmie Johnson Chevrolet. — *Howard Lipin / UT San Diego*

Brittnie Pemberton is still working toward her first driver's license, and still getting used to the idea that she suddenly needs one.

"The car's awesome," the once-homeless 16-year-old said about the 2014 Chevy Spark she received as a surprise gift last September. "I drive it everywhere."

A new car once had been on Brittnie's wish list, but far below a wish for a reunited family, a scholarship, and even world peace. Since her ordeal as a homeless child was brought to light about six years ago through a project created by a Michigan photojournalist, the new car is just one of several of Brittnie's wishes that have come true, including a scholarship to San Diego State University and a reunited family.

She scratched the car off her list in September when Chevrolet [presented her with a new Spark](#) (<http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2013/Sep/17/pemberton-chevy-homeless-salvation-army/>) at Jimmie Johnson's dealership in Kearny Mesa.

Brittnie, who is living temporarily in Palos Verdes Peninsula, will return to San Diego this weekend to share her transformational story in a TEDx talk in La Jolla.

"I'm a little bit nervous about it," she said about her first public speaking experience.

Brittnie will be at the podium with Linda Solomon, the photojournalist who created the project "[Pictures of Hope](#)" (<http://www.lindasolomonphotography.com/PicturesOfHope/>) in 2006 to raise awareness of homeless youths. Children in the program receive disposable cameras to take pictures of their life's wishes, and the photos are used in greeting cards sold to raise money for charities helping homeless people.

Solomon met Brittnie in 2007 when the then-9-year-old was living with her brother and mother in the Salvation Army's Door of Hope, a transitional living center for homeless women and their children in San Diego. Her father was living in the Salvation Army's rehabilitation center.

Solomon was struck with Brittnie's selflessness.

"She didn't hope for personal things," she said about most of the items on Brittnie's wish list.

"She flew with her mother to Albuquerque (New Mexico) last year to mentor homeless children there," she said about Brittnie's efforts since her life has improved. "She's a mentor to children at the Door of Hope. This is a child who continues to help others."

Solomon said her talk Saturday will highlight Brittne and three other children who were helped by Pictures of Hope. She credits Brittne with helping create awareness of homeless children because of the media exposure she has received, which she said also led to the invitation to the TEDx talk.

Brittne said she plans to talk about how different her life might be if she had not benefited from Pictures of Hope.

Since getting her new car in September, Brittne said she has been focused at school and keeping her grades up, a requirement to keep the full scholarship at SDSU. She had planned to study psychology after high school, but now is thinking about becoming a photojournalist, like Solomon.

TEDx talks are independently organized talks in the spirit of TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) talks, which are worldwide conferences on “ideas worth spreading.”

The La Jolla TEDx talk will be at a private residence and is sold out, but the conference can be watched as it is streamed live at TedxLaJolla.weebly.com (<http://TedxLaJolla.weebly.com>).

Solomon and Brittne will speak in the first session, scheduled for 2 to 3:20 p.m. Talks usually are about 18 minutes or less, and they are the third speakers.

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