

One Woman Is Helping Children in Shelters Realize Their Dreams with a Camera Lens

Linda Solomon travels across the country to provide cameras to children in shelters

By [Alexandra Zaslow](#)

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CREDIT: COURTESY LINDA SOLOMON

Linda Solomon knows the power of a camera. Ever since her dad bought her one when she was 5 years old, it hasn't left her side.

“It became a friend,” Solomon tells PEOPLE. “With the camera, I always felt like I could see life in a different way.”

The photojournalist is now sharing that perspective with 1,400 homeless children, aged 6 to 13, across the country through [Pictures of Hope](#), a program that Solomon started in 2005 to help children in shelters realize their dreams.

Solomon visits major cities with the highest percentage of homeless youth. So far, she’s traveled from her hometown of Detroit to other 14 cities.

Once she arrives at a shelter, she starts with a tutorial that teaches the kids to operate a camera and then shows them pictures of celebrities she’s photographed. At the end of the workshop, she surprises each child with a camera of his or her own and tells them to capture their hopes and dreams on film, guided by a personal mentor.

They start off by writing a list, which frequently doesn’t mention material things, but items like “a friend” or “a home.” One girl just wrote that she hoped to live. The lists are then made into greeting cards, which are sold on each shelter’s website for \$25, with all of the proceeds benefiting the shelters.

Solomon also organizes a Meet the Young Artist reception, during which the children’s mentors come back to help celebrate the exhibition of the greeting cards during the holiday season.

Brittnie Pemberton’s life changed the minute Solomon entered the Door of Hope, a homeless shelter in San Diego, in 2007.

Pemberton, then 9, was feeling depressed and scared until Solomon placed a camera in her hands and asked her to photograph her hopes and dreams. Pemberton took a picture of San Diego State University.

“No one in my family has gone to college and I wanted to be the one to change that,” Pemberton tells PEOPLE. “I wanted to pioneer a new way from previous generations so that my kids can go to college.”

Pemberton says she always drove past SDSU and admired the students who attended the school. Solomon arranged for her to tour the campus and promote the

greeting cards – or so Pemberton thought. The two of them ended up meeting with the university’s president, who presented Pemberton with a folder containing a four-year scholarship to the university.

“I was crying, my mom was crying. Nothing in my life has compared to that moment. It’s truly a blessing,” Pemberton says.

During the years that followed, Pemberton and Solomon kept in touch, and Pemberton has frequently acted as a mentor to other kids involved with Pictures of Hope.

“These kids feel pretty hopeless. And I’ve been there, so I give them hope by telling them my story and promising that things will get better if they just look up,” Pemberton says.

Marvella Johnson met Solomon when her son, Antonio Billington, now 8, took part in Pictures of Hope during the summer of 2014 through the Shelter of Flint in Michigan. Johnson had no idea college was even on her son’s mind, but now she’s determined to help him pursue that dream. After a former coworker from Landaal Packaging – where Johnson had worked until moving away – saw her being interviewed on a local news station about her son’s involvement in Pictures of Hope, she called Johnson and asked if she was interested in coming back. Johnson said yes, and Landaal created a job for her that she’s set to begin this month.

“Pictures of Hope opened up a door I wasn’t expecting and a dream for my son that might not have come true without their help,” Johnson tells PEOPLE.

Solomon’s hope for this program is to help the children realize their dreams and know that they are respected.

One child in Memphis, Tennessee, hoped to show people he wasn’t “a nobody.” Another in San Jose, California, hoped to be nicer than the people who look down upon him. A girl in Flint, Michigan, said that her dream is to own a shelter: She photographed an abandoned building.

“That’s the power of a child’s dream,” Solomon says. “A child who has nothing, but who dreams of what truly matters.”

Not only has this program helped children express themselves, but many now want to become professional photographers or photojournalists. Solomon keeps in touch with the children and their parents, and gives out her phone number so that they can reach her if they need help. She's hoping to expand the program to more cities in the years to come.

Although these children believe Solomon changed their lives, they don't realize how much they've changed hers.

"This program has led me to a wonderful network of people who believe in the power of hope, and it's powerful, it truly is," Solomon says. "I'm now totally devoted to sharing what I know with children who have nothing, but realize they have hope. If you can show them hope, that's all they need."