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Homeless youth realize their dreams through photography

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In an age where every dinner plate, sunset and palm tree has an equal chance of being photographed by a smartphone and shared on Instagram, it's hard to fathom how a single picture of a building can change a life.

But that's exactly what it did for Brittnie Pemberton.

She snapped the photo on the San Diego State University campus ten years ago she was just ten-years-old and homeless. Her parents had never been to college and the family was living in a shelter in San Diego. At the time, Brittnie's mom thought the family's future looked pretty bleak.

"If Pictures of Hope had never been to the shelter where we were staying she never would have gone to college," Pemberton's mother, Tanya said in an interview with the Daily Press.

The click of the shutter on a new digital camera provided by the organization cemented young Brittnie's dream as she roamed the campus with a photography mentor. The digital image is testament to the power of visualization. The elementary school student's goal to earn a scholarship and get to college became more real.

The picture proved prescient. Brittnie is now a junior at SDSU studying psychology. She earned that scholarship after all. Her parents went to college too. Tanya now helps run the Salvation Army on 11th Street in Santa Monica.

Last weekend, eleven local homeless children were given the same opportunity as Brittnie at the Upward Bound House. Pictures of Hope provided them with cameras (they get to keep) and sent them out with photography mentors all over the city to photograph their dreams.

They returned with pictures that symbolized their goals in life – pictures of UCLA and SMC, snapshots of the beach and images of homes with green lawns under sunny skies where they hoped to live.

“When you ask the children to share their hopes and dreams, the moms often say this is the first time the kids have even talked about them,” founder Linda Solomon said. “They’re so busy making ends meet they don’t discuss their hopes and dreams.”

Solomon says with the help of a mentor, the children suddenly feel like their dreams matter. Once they matter they become attainable. Pictures of Hope has helped children in 50 cities with the highest population of homeless children.

Skinnytees sponsored the event in Santa Monica and Walgreens donated the cameras.

SDSU is not the only college to offer a picture of hope child a full ride after seeing their photograph. The president of Blackburn College reached out to Solomon a few years ago and also offered to help her young photographers get through school. So far, Blackburn has granted four full rides to Pictures of Hope alumni.

The Santa Monica children's heartfelt photographs will be printed on holiday notecards that will be sold with 100 percent of the proceeds benefitting Upward Bound House on 12th Street. The children will see their photographs in print for the first time when they go on display Nov. 11 at the shelter.

The Upward Bound House is a non-profit organization that provides housing, supportive services and advocacy for the homeless. The House works to reduce the number of children living on the streets by helping their families access basic resources and transition into their own homes.

"When you're going through homelessness, the kids and their mothers often feel that no one even knows they are out there," Solomon said. Once the photos go up for sale, the dreams can no longer be ignored.

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