



# School on Wheels News

July 2007

*Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves. Abraham Lincoln*

Dear Friends,

July is the month we spend time celebrating our independence as a country - a time to be proud of our journey together as a nation. Our measuring stick as a country is how we treat, respect and lift up the most forgotten in our society – homeless children from kindergarten through twelfth grade. There are over 200,000 homeless children in California, according to the California Department of Education. Our country is failing our homeless children, their numbers rising continuously.

But hope is strong because a growing number of people like you are leading the way to bring change through education. In a country so wealthy, in a country so distracted, you have not abandoned these children. In times when they are losing hope, you show your belief in them and in making this possible, you are making our nation stronger. Those of you who donate financially and those of you who donate your time, our volunteer tutors, you truly understand what makes a nation great.

July and August are a special time for our volunteer tutors as they use the summer sessions to emphasize Reading and Writing through fun, creativity and relaxing activities. It is a time to help a student catch up and expand their experiences through field trips, music and art experiences. We appreciate our volunteers continuing in the summer as our students otherwise would have nothing to look forward to and would have missed opportunities to continue to grow and learn.

On behalf of everyone at School on Wheels, including our children and teens, I want to express our deep gratitude to you for your generous response to our first appeals letter. You are an inspiration in your understanding and believing in these children. You know, as we do, their success will be a success for all of us, for our country and for the world.

Agnes Stevens

Founder and Executive Director

## Our Mission

The enhancement of educational opportunities for homeless children, from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. Our goal is to shrink the gaps in the education of these children and provide them with the highest education possible

## WE NEED YOU!

We have hundreds of homeless children in Southern California who need you to tutor them for just one hour a week.

You don't need any experience, just the desire to make a difference in a child's life. Please visit the Volunteer section at our website:

[www.schoolonwheels.org](http://www.schoolonwheels.org)

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# TUTOR TALES

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## Blue

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Blue McDonnell has been a tutor with us since 2003. Below is an essay she wrote for publication that sums up many of our tutors' feelings. We are very fortunate to have so many volunteers like Blue and so are our students.

Being dumped is something that I hate to admit to but it happened. I was dumped by the man that I had loved for three years. He bravely left me a message on my answering machine at 4 o'clock on a Tuesday morning. "Sorry" he said, "I just can't do it". The commitment, the promises, the love, the laughter, the life was all over, laid to rest in one lousy phone call. The future loomed bleakly. I loved him so much I couldn't even bring myself to hate him. Instead I lost myself in tears. For months on end I cried incessantly. I wallowed in my misery. It was something I learned that I was good at. Wallowing. It was all wonderfully sad and dramatic and I was blissfully unhappy. I couldn't go on like that. I needed help!

That phone that had crushed my heart was the same one that I used to call a friend. "I'm in the black hole of Calcutta" I said, "and I have to get out". His few simple words of advice changed my life in a way I could never have dreamed possible. "Help someone else" was what he told me and that was that.

School on Wheels was the non-profit organization that I choose to volunteer with. I became a tutor to homeless children. Every week I went to the homeless shelter and helped kids with their homework, listened to their stories, dried their tears and laughed with them. Academically I'm not sure how much difference I've made in these kids' lives, but I know that simply spending time with them was sometimes all they needed.

Recently, I gave a 15 year old boy that I've been tutoring for two years a project. I called it "The do a good deed for a week project". He was to do a good deed everyday for a week, write down what it was that he did and how the other person he had helped had reacted. In the next tutoring session we discussed all of the things that he had done and he said that he realized how much he liked to do things for others to cheer them up. The following week, he beamed a great big smile on his face when I came to tutor him. "I did it again" he said excitedly. "The good deed project, and I told my teacher and some of my friends and now they're doing it too!"

I was overwhelmed at this young man's generosity of heart and his willingness to learn. I am proud to be in the company of these children who give me purpose, love, friendship and gratitude. They have given me renewed energy and love of life and they have taught me patience and forgiveness. These are the children who come from so little and have so much to give us. In volunteering I have found the cure for a broken heart, for self pity and ungratefulness. In volunteering I have found purpose, strength and honor. I believe that doing something for someone else is the best thing that you can do for yourself.

## Elias, Jeff and Frank

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Elias has what one of his tutor's Jeff Clews, calls the X factor: when you meet him for the first time, you are immediately drawn to him. He is charismatic, has a great attitude and always wears a big smile ways on his face. He looks you in the eye when he speaks and as Jeff says, he has a continuous and genuine love of life. That's very unusual when you know his story.

Elias has been moved around a lot in his young life. Jeff first met him at an emergency shelter where he lived with his mom and younger brother. Soon after that Jeff was tutoring Elias at a Salvation Army Shelter in Ventura. And soon after that, Elias was moved to a foster home when it was discovered his younger brother was being abused. There were many stops in-between. There was one strange week when Elias enrolled in three different schools. It is always tough on a child to move from one school to another, no matter how good an attitude you have. There are the friends you leave behind and the new kids who don't quite know what to make of you, especially if you are a small scruffy boy in ill fitting clothes. Imagine doing it three times in a week and still being able to smile. Elias continues to smile which gives you an understanding of just how special he is. Jeff says that Elias is the smartest kid he has ever tutored and was impressed with the quality of his vocabulary and the many books he devoured while they were together.

Last month Elias won the school spelling bee at his school. He went to the regional's where he placed very well. His current tutor, Frank Ward, helped prepare him for the contests. He says Elias carries a dictionary around with him and just loves to study words, their definitions and their history. We are proud of the contributions Jeff and Frank have made to Elias' success. And we are proud of Elias for the display of character he has shown in conditions where many kids would have just given up. But we worry about Elias too. What is to become of him? We don't know, but we will do all we can to make sure he gets the chances he so richly deserves.

# ACTS OF KINDNESS AND BEAUTY

## Ryan's Wings

Eric Krause was listening to an interview conducted on National Public Radio while he drove home from a hard day at the office. It was obvious to Eric that the young man being interviewed was an old soul in a 13 year old body. He kept wondering where the understanding and insights came from. It was obvious that Ryan was an amazing kid.

Like so many of our students, Ryan has moved around frequently in his young life. He and his family evacuated from Louisiana just before hurricane Katrina made landfall in 2005. But while this movement leaves a lot of the children hesitant and unsure of themselves and their future, it's brought clarity to Ryan. As he does with anything he tackles, he has done his research. After reviewing various professions, Ryan has decided he's going to be a fighter pilot. He knows the difference between a Eurofighter Typhoon, a F-14 Tomcat and a F-15 Eagle. He can compare the F-22 Raptor with a MiG-29 or even the Mirage 2000. Ryan's enthusiasm and passion about flying was something Eric could readily appreciate because his office happens to be the cockpit of a fighter aircraft.

Eric called us and asked how he could meet Ryan and help support his dream. We thought it was a wonderful idea. So just before last Christmas, Eric walked into our Downtown Center on Skid Row in full uniform and sat down to have a talk with Ryan. They talked about various planes and the thrill of flying. As he left, Eric pinned a pair of wings onto Ryan's shirt.

Shortly after that Eric was deployed to the Far East where he has been for several months. He sends e-mails to Ryan keeping him up-to-date on what he's doing and sends pictures of planes as they take off and land on the aircraft carrier where he has been stationed for the last couple of months. In a recent e-mail, he told Ryan he'll be returning soon and that he wants Ryan to join him for a day on the base where Ryan will ride in a flight simulator and sit in the cockpit of the plane Eric flies.

Thank you Eric for helping Ryan to dream and for showing him that dreams can come true.

## July 4th Fun at Big Rock Ranch

On July 4th, 35 children from the LA Family Housing shelter in North Hollywood jumped on a bus supplied by Laidlaw and Safety Harbor Kids ([www.safetyharborkids.org](http://www.safetyharborkids.org)) and spent the day at Cali Camp, Big Rock Ranch, Topanga. This special day was the brain child of John Williams (Founder) and Petrie Alexandra Williams (President) of Safety Harbor Kids, a non profit organization founded to build homes for parentless children and to create local community events and activities for children to learn, grow and be mentored by philanthropic minded community members. Essentially, they have built a support system for children in need through philanthropy, community spirit, education and family values.

When the children arrived at the camp they were asked what they wanted to do; some wanted to eat, so they ate; some wanted to paint, so they went to the art table; some wanted to play musical instruments, so they did (many had never picked up an instrument before). One brave boy wanted to learn to swim, and so he did and some even caught fish! The rope challenge course instilled confidence and trust in the children as they scaled the ropes and obstacles securely in their safety harnesses under the scrutiny of the volunteer instructor from Rockreation in West LA. Many community members and local businesses demonstrated an overwhelming outpouring of support including Laidlaw, Whole Foods, Home Depot, The Rib Ranch, Inn of the Seventh Ray and Topanga General Store. There were many volunteers there to help the day go smoothly including a group of community minded teens from ECHO, a recovery program in Malibu.



The children, including a group of youngsters from Hathaway-Sycamore, a foster home in North Hollywood, were treated to a special performance by Disney's T Squad with "BooBoo" and "Kid Karizz". The group were so moved by our children that they have offered them free tickets and back stage passes to their concert in Valencia on July 24<sup>th</sup>.

Overall John and Petrie said their first event went smoothly and they only wished that all our School on Wheels' students could have been there to enjoy the fun. Safety Harbor Kids is planning more special days for School on Wheels' students and children in need.



## School on Wheels

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## IN THE NEWS

News of what we do and how we help the homeless children in our community is being talked about — on television, radio, the internet and in newspapers and magazines.

Since our last newsletter our students have been interviewed by Meredith Viera, Sam Slovik, National Public Radio and The New York Times. We have been mentioned on The Today Show, KCAL 9 and Telemundo. Our fearless leader, Agnes Stevens and other staff members have been interviewed by radio stations, including KPFK 90.7, KIIS FM, HOT 92 Jamz and NPR. We have been featured in articles in the Malibu Times, Whole Life Times, and online magazine Gimundo.

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors presented a scroll to School on Wheels “in recognition of its commitment to providing educational needs to the community’s homeless children from kindergarten to 12th grade.”

To read or listen to any of the above, please check out our website page In the News, which we update regularly with our most recent articles.

### Wish List

- *School uniforms*
- *School supplies*
- *Backpacks*
- *Educational software*
- *Educational workbooks*
- *Laptop or desktop computers*
- *Educational board games*
- *Office supplies*