



# School on Wheels News

December 2007

In a high cost area like Los Angeles County, economic challenges are especially tied to homelessness. Simply put, millions of households do not have sufficient income to cover the rising cost of housing, putting them at risk of homelessness. *United Way of Greater Los Angeles*

Dear Friends,

There are 200,000 homeless children in California over the course of the year. How can this be, you ask? According to the recent LA Homeless Services Authority count, the most cited reason for becoming homeless was the loss of a job. The lack of affordable housing in California is close behind. No matter the reasons, 200,000 children are homeless in our state. For many of these kids, that means they will move from school to school, drop behind in their studies, lose friends, maybe even lose themselves.

And yet, I am continually astounded by the strength and courage of these children. We meet thousands of students who find the power within themselves to continue each day, to study and learn and keep focused. I think about Mary, age 15, who sets her alarm for 4:55 a.m. each morning so she can prepare for school and catch the bus to go to high school miles away. I think of Keisha and our volunteer tutors who are helping her study for college entrance exams. Throughout all her turmoil, she has never lost sight of her educational goals. This summer she took college courses to give herself that extra advantage. She is the first at our skid row Learning Center these days with the genuine hope and belief in her possibilities. It is this courage that gives hope to all of us that we are better off as a country to have such strong young women and men who do not quit easily, who challenge themselves and with help from our volunteers succeed in their number one job of going to school and learning.

In this newsletter, you will read about Elias, who continues to study and smile; you will worry about Emily; you will learn about Carmen and her family who persevered through all the tough times. You will also find some startling statistics about homeless children.

Please do not forget the most forgotten and vulnerable of our population.

In friendship,

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

## Holiday Cheers!

Bob Morris and the residents of Paradise Cove are doing it again. They are treating 200 of our homeless kids to the best party in town at Paradise Cove Beach Café. Thanks Bob, you are the best!

Invite your friends to visit [www.decorateourtrees.com](http://www.decorateourtrees.com) starting December 15., where they can create their own virtual ornaments, share their message with the world, and best of all, pledge their support for School on Wheels.

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# TUTOR TALES

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## Elias and Frank

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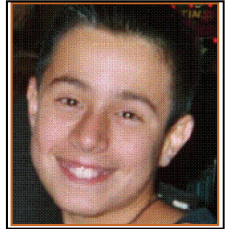
We lost Elias. One day he was here and the next day he was gone. This happens on a regular basis and we never get used to it. But losing Elias really hurt. Elias is a special kid. We told you about him in our last newsletter. He is one of those rare individuals you are immediately drawn to. He's charming. He bubbles with a spirited joy of life. He smiles and you can't help but smile back. He looks you right in the eye when you talk to him and in just a few minutes you sense this earnest 13 year-old has a lot of good things to give.

Why he smiles, we don't know. In the last year, he has been in seven schools and eight home situations, from emergency shelters to transition shelters, to living with relatives, to foster homes. Elias is too valuable to lose. So after days spent frantically searching for him in the foster care system, an easy place to get lost, we found him. And no one is happier than his tutor Frank.

We asked Frank how he thought Elias was doing...not just academically, but socially and emotionally too. "Elias is an amazing kid. I am so impressed by his ability to dig in and get on with his life." says Frank. "He has a voracious appetite for books. In fact, he is currently reading about the Middle East. He's fascinated by history and takes armloads of books from the library when we meet each week. I've always been impressed with his love of learning." That may be, but Frank also sees Elias losing interest in school, not surprising considering the uneven and sometimes repetitive education he's received moving from school to school. And we can only imagine how hard it must be for Elias to try to fit in to so many different schools.

Frank is determined to make sure Elias never gets lost again. So their sessions are not just about math, they are about balancing a checkbook and the magic of compounded interest and the ins and outs of mortgages (an area where Elias shows great promise). They talk about current events and about why people do the things they do in this crazy world. Elias absorbs it all like a sponge. Frank has wanted to relocate to Florida for some time and has put off the move because he is reluctant to leave Elias. That may sound extreme to you, but many of our tutors understand his choice. However, with Elias's recent move into a good foster home, Frank feels Elias has the stability he requires and has decided to go ahead with the move.

Frank is hoping School on Wheels will give Elias a computer so they can stay in touch via e-mail and continue their sessions online. He also sees a computer opening a door to the world for someone he knows will make a fine contribution to it when he figures out just what that contribution will be. Elias is too valuable to lose.



## Emily

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I liked the mom immediately - she had silver jewelry and happy eyes. Emily was four and cute as a button. Her older brother, Jon, really needed our help and I knew just the right School on Wheels' tutor for him. His name was Max. I knew instantly that the two of them would hit it off. Max became his friend. He met with Jon's mom, he met with his teacher, he even sat in one of his classes to observe him at school. They met every week and their sessions got better and better. Then mom fell out of recovery and the family had to leave the shelter and move into a motel. Max kept in touch with them through this transition and continued tutoring at a nearby library. One day they just stopped showing up. Max eventually moved to Seattle. He lost his young buddy and I lost a great tutor.

Three years later at another shelter, I noticed a young girl reading by herself. She looked familiar but I couldn't think why. As I left the shelter that evening, I wondered why the little girl kept looking at me with those piercing green eyes. A week later I was driving back to the shelter when it hit me. Emily! How could I have forgotten! Max had been her brother's tutor! I was excited to see Emily and find out all the things she had been doing, but I was hesitant to ask about her brother for fear of what she might say. Every week, at the back of my mind, I wondered if today was the day she was going to tell me where her brother was.

One night about six months after we had started our sessions, Emily was working on a story for homework about an incident that had left a deep impact on her. She wrote about the time she was running across the road with her brother and she got run over and broke her arm. She had hurt herself, but the real pain she felt was that as a result of the accident, her brother moved away to live with their Grandma and she hadn't seen him since! She told me she thought it was her fault that her brother was taken away and that her Grandma didn't like her because she had taken her brother but not her too! From then on, I always included a time to talk about her brother in our tutoring sessions and made sure she knew that it was not her fault. Months later, we bumped into each other. She was waiting with her mom for a bus. She ran up to me and excitedly told me she was going to visit her brother and Grandma.

I watched Emily grow. She started to wear her mom's key ring holder (120 days sober and counting) on her wrist and she started to enjoy coloring and drawing. Indeed, she seemed to enjoy everything. And then one day, just like that, she moved out of state with her mom and brother and I don't know if I will ever see her again.

# HOMELESS IN AMERICA

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## A Letter from Carmen

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*We first met Carmen in 2004 and have kept in touch since then. We received this letter just as we were preparing this newsletter and asked her permission to publish parts of it. Her words speak for themselves.*

The company I worked for as a Call Center Manager filed for bankruptcy and I lost my job. My husband's income was not enough to sustain our family of six. We didn't have enough money to keep paying rent and our worst fears came true: we became one of the many homeless families in Los Angeles.

We lived in two vans and hotels for seven months. I had travel agent credentials and platinum status in a frequent stay program. We stayed in hotels where we could get free breakfasts, and all of us had at least one meal a day. We did not go to shelters because we didn't want to split up as a family. We had a baby in diapers and a child with Down syndrome. We had to stay together – there is safety in numbers and we had no other family in the area.

It was a very arduous and stressful time. But it taught us many things, including resilience and determination. I started a management company, using a cell phone and computers at the local library. My husband never missed a day of work. His prior military experience served us well and he was our pillar of strength the whole time. With the help and support of School on Wheels, our kids were enrolled in school, got tutors and worked hard to learn.

Our faith sustained us and provided for us through it all and I truly feel that we could not have made it through this ordeal without our faith. We had much to be thankful for, even in adversity. We knew from first hand experience that there are many people who had it far worse than we did. We had vans that provided us with a roof over our heads. Many people we met didn't. We were able to find places where it was safe for a family trying to survive on the streets. Many families have not. Our children were in school; many are not.

It was a steep uphill battle for us to get out of homelessness. We moved to Ohio and lived with various family members who were kind, but it's very challenging for everyone with four children. My husband and I were both working but the jobs didn't pay well. When my mother-in-law had to have surgery, we moved to Washington D.C to be with her and we were fortunate to get good jobs there. Things were getting better for us; we rented a townhouse that we all loved; the kids were thriving. And then I lost my job again.

We needed to find a more affordable city to live in. We moved to Florida. Things got a lot better after that. So, as I write this letter to you, I am happy to tell you that I am blessed with a well-paying job, Bill works for the airlines again, the children are thriving and we just bought a house.

My family has learned many lessons over the past three years. We all make assumptions and judgments, especially about homelessness. Take it from me - no one is EVER homeless by choice. Regardless of their state of mind, they are never there by choice. For some, it is their inability to reason and get things together to get back on their feet. Some people are homeless for so long that they resign themselves to their situation. For others, all it takes is the loss of a job or a medical emergency. Granted, sometimes bad choices are made that create personal hells. But some situations are created by circumstances beyond our control. All the things that happened to us resulted from a company filing for bankruptcy.

As my husband so eloquently puts it: "There is a difference between homelessness and displacement." Homelessness is a state of mind. Displacement is a temporary situation. No matter how you get there, it's how you look at it, how you feel about it that determines how you will live. Granted, there has to be some intervention along the way. For us, it was School on Wheels and an organization in Little Tokyo that helped us see that there are people who really cared about us and helped us, and we received strength from that.

My family was tested. Yes. But we are strong and we have lived in hard times and we know what that means. My hope is that my children will learn from our experience and will grow up to be sensitive to others. I hope they will have compassion for others and never judge why someone is in the situation they are in.

I want you to know that what School on Wheels did for us is an ongoing inspiration. My life goal is to find a way to help homeless children and homeless working families.

*Carmen and her family are typical of what can happen when you lose a job, fall behind on rent, and can't find any financial help. Family homelessness persists and, in fact, it is worse today than at any time before. We thank Carmen for allowing us to print her letter. Please read some of the alarming statistics about homelessness on page 4.*



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## HOMELESS IN AMERICA

When most people think of homelessness, they think of drugs and alcohol or mentally ill individuals in skid row. Homelessness, however, touches more people than you can imagine. There are over one million homeless children in America. Here are some other startling statistics:

- 200,000 of the 3.2 million school age children in California experience homelessness over the course of a year.
- One in four people who are homeless every night in Los Angeles County are in families.
- 1 in 9 homeless persons in the nation is in Los Angeles County.
- Almost 14,000 homeless children are enrolled in Los Angeles Unified School District, one of over 80 different school districts, a 35% increase in the last year.
- The average age of a homeless student is 9 years young.
- There are about 17,000 emergency beds in LA County for a homeless population that is almost 80,000 every night.
- The waiting list for Section 8 subsidized housing in Los Angeles is 10 years.
- Each night in L.A., an estimated 7,998 children sleep in locations not suitable for human habitation.

There are many complex reasons why people are homeless, but in high-cost areas, economic challenges are especially tied to homelessness. Losing a job, unanticipated medical expenses, the lack of affordable housing all contribute to homelessness. Housing costs have increased much more than wages in recent years and Los Angeles was recently ranked as the most unaffordable housing market – in both homeownership and rental – in the country. It takes a wage of over \$21 an hour to afford the average two bedroom apartment in L.A. County.