



School on Wheels News

January 2006

Dear Friends,

The year 2005 ended with much warmth and delight for many of our homeless children as they experienced the generous giving of countless people from all walks of life: individuals, families, businesses, foundations, public and private schools, synagogues and churches. These encounters were not just the material donations made to the children in the spirit of the holidays, but also the message behind their kindness: *we care; we know you exist; we want this time of year to be special and happy for you, too.*

That is a huge event in the life of a homeless child. For many of our children, it is an all year event if they have a volunteer tutor in their lives. And for our volunteers, it is experiencing the gift of giving all year long. Experiences like this last a life time in memories for a child who often feels alone, scared and sad.

I think of the mother with three children who had moved several times this year. This mother kept it together for her children, stressing the important things in life, especially education. The children's respect and love for their mother carries over to other people they meet. I think of another woman. A woman who wanted her grandchildren to know that not everyone had the wondrous life they did. So she gave them \$250.00 and said: "we are going shopping for children not as lucky as you." Just before Christmas, the children from both families met at our downtown learning center on skid row. A magical, joyful scene took place as the children delighted in seeing beautifully wrapped presents with their names on them. The children were so happy to receive basic clothes, like socks and tee-shirts. When they got to the toys, they could hardly believe their eyes! What happened was a deep connection. The more our homeless children make this connection with wonderful giving people and with dedicated volunteers all year long, the more confidence and belief they have in themselves.

Amidst so much observance of sadness all year long by our School on Wheels' team of staff and volunteers, we start 2006 with renewed energy, hope and excitement. More and more people are hearing our voices as we speak for the increasing number of homeless children in our cities and counties. We thank each of you for being there in 2005 and we have a request for 2006: be an advocate for these children; tell others what you know of their lives; tell others about School on Wheels and challenge them to pick up a phone and call us. Challenge them to help a homeless child in the best way they can.

It is true that it takes so little to help a child; but that little has to come from many people and often. With your help in being a voice for the homeless, 2006 will be "a fuller and deeper going on for all of us together".

I wish I could thank each of you personally and tell you what a huge difference you make. Until then, may you continue to have much peace and joy in the New Year!

With gratitude,

Agnes Stevens
Founder/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

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2005 ACHIEVEMENTS

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” Nelson Mandela

As we begin down the path of a new year, with all its potential and possibilities, we wanted to reflect on what we accomplished in 2005 at School on Wheels. Sometimes we feel overwhelmed as we look at the ever-increasing number of homeless families and children. Sometimes we get discouraged as we look at political priorities that don't include our children. Sometimes we are saddened by the lack of understanding about homelessness. (Lack of affordable housing; lack of good paying jobs; mental illness/substance abuse coupled with lack of services).

Sometimes, however, we are amazed at the generosity of spirit and love and giving we see every day. Sometimes we have to remind ourselves what we achieve day in and day out. When we look back at 2005, we accomplished much. We have far to go and so much to do, but let us take a moment to celebrate what we did achieve.

The heart of School on Wheels' programs are the hundreds of volunteer tutors who come from all backgrounds and professions with one agenda only: to reach out to a child, to teach, to mentor, and assist in their educational life. In 2005, 414 volunteers tutored approximately 1,350 children. We had other volunteers who fixed computers in the shelters, held art fairs for the children, threw parties for them – in total, we had the privilege of almost 50,000 volunteer hours last year.

We provided over 4,000 backpacks filled with school supplies to homeless children. Something tangible for them to hold onto. The potential of clean paper and colored pencils is a powerful talisman for a child with so little else in her life.

In 2005, we facilitated almost 300 enrollments into public schools. We assisted parents in filling out the necessary paperwork and in gathering records such as birth certificates, immunization records and transfer papers from previous schools, without which their children will be denied admission to school. We also helped get children properly placed into special classes or special schools, based on their needs, and arranged for special testing when necessary.

Many public schools in the Greater Los Angeles region require incoming students to wear uniforms; students not in uniform are refused entry or placed in detention. Last year we acquired or funded the clothing for 170 children.

We counseled hundreds of parents and gave them guidance and advice on the educational opportunities that are open to their children, made them aware of special requirements they may need to fulfill and special programs they should investigate. A Parent Handbook, available in English and in Spanish, answered the easy questions; our staff tackled the hard ones.

We provided more than 500 bus tokens in 2005 to children who would not otherwise get to school and provided special transportation assistance during last year's bus strike.

These statistics are important ways of measuring our achievements. School on Wheels helps break down the barriers that prevent homeless children from getting the education that each child needs and deserves. Just as important is the message we bring to homeless children: they are cared about and important. We are a consistent support system for them at a time of great stress and fear.

ACTS OF KINDNESS AND BEAUTY

Once again, **Bob Morris**, his many friends and the residents of Paradise Cove, brought joy to about 200 homeless kids. They do this every year around Christmas. And every year it gets better. We can not thank them enough for the wonderful party they throw and the graceful way they do it.

Bob is the owner of Paradise Cove Beach Café. Each year he opens up the Café for our big party. And while he provides more than enough good food for everyone, there is never anything left. The people who work at the Café donate their time and create a wonderful holiday mood as they serve the kids with such kindness. Bob also rents the buses that bring the kids from Long Beach, Venice, LA's skid row, Ventura, South L.A., Hollywood and many other cities. He enlists community helpers and organizations who volunteer their time and, as he does every year, he buys each child a gift. This year he bought a Zizzle toy that makes music come to life for every child. I wish you could have seen their faces.

Steve Dahlberg, the owner of Paradise Cove and one of our Board members, organizes and makes all the set-up at the Cove work. He has a party for the residents and raises funds for School on Wheels. It is a hard and time-consuming activity. Steve pulls it off with ease.

Greg Gerson, owner of the Calamigos Ranch in Malibu, fills the Cove parking lot with great rides for the kids. His staff transports the equipment, sets it all up and watches over the kids like angels so that no one gets hurt.

Garner Gerson, Manager of Paradise Cove Beach Café, makes sure that all the effort put into creating such a wonderful event actually happens. He is the one who sets up the Cove for the party and supervises various people and activities. If you have ever attempted to pull off something like that, then you know what effort it takes.

Can you imagine wrapping 200 presents? **Barbara Rude** and **Audrey Phelan** can. They are long time School on Wheels' volunteers who, for the last four years, have wrapped the presents and written each child's name on the gifts. Barbara and Audrey set a festive tone as they warmly greeted each bus and gave each child their own personalized name tag. As if that weren't enough, they also helped Santa pass out the gifts.

Irene Atencio and all the other School on Wheels staff worked with the shelters to keep track of the ever changing list of children's names. It was one of those thankless but very important jobs. Thanks Irene.

With their sirens going, the Malibu Fire Department - Station 71 - delivered Santa to the party. Not only did they talk with the kids and show them how a real fire truck works, but they gave out bags of gifts to each child.

The Malibu Sheriff Department attended the party again this year. The kids had all day to talk to the officers and to sit in the patrol cars. The good ones even got handcuffed!

At the end of the day, 200 tired kids got back on their buses and drove away from the best Christmas party many of them had ever had. Thank you to everyone who made it possible.





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HOMELESS IN AMERICA

LA's skid row is a tough place to live. All the recent media attention has been on the mentally ill and substance abusers. However, hundreds of children live in this "toxic environment" and are routinely ignored by the media, harassed at school, and intimidated by public officials.

Here are some highlights from a

2005 survey: "Toxic Playground: Growing up in Skid Row."

- *The percentage of the skid row population that are children increased from 1% in 1990 to 15% in 2000.*
- *Half of children surveyed witnessed a death while living on skid row.*
- *1 in 5 children living on skid row are not enrolled in school.*
- *71% of children*

have lived on skid row for one year or more.

- *71% of children surveyed have never tried drugs.*
- *76% live with at least one parent; these are not run-aways.*
- *43% have been cited for such minor offenses as jay walking.*
- *50% of children have been punished at school for not having a proper uniform.*

Wish List

- *Educational software (all grades)*
- *Laptop or desktop computers*
- *Laser printers*
- *School uniforms*
- *School supplies*
- *Educational workbooks*