

LIFE

Kids' pictures show images of hope

Children at Posada Esperanza, a shelter for immigrant mothers and their kids, use cameras to express their hopes for the future.

By [Ricardo Gándara](#)

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Maricela Becerra, 13, photographed flip-flops at a store, ones with yellowish jewels on the straps. Perfect for a teen. When she snapped the picture, however, she was thinking about a homeless, barefoot woman she saw begging for money on a street corner. The girl can't forget her.

"She could have used the flip-flops," says Maricela.

The girl and four other children at Posada Esperanza, an Austin shelter for single immigrant mothers and their children, spent a day this summer shooting pictures with disposable cameras with the intent of capturing their hopes and dreams on film. Maricela's photo not only linked shoes with someone who needed them, it said something about the girl. "I like to help people," she says.

"Children capture the essentials of life," says Linda Solomon, photojournalist and author. "The kids hope to go to heaven, for their mother to come home, to help others, to get a good education. The kids are so unselfish. The photos they take aren't about over-indulgence like iPods."

Solomon's "Pictures of Hope" project is sponsored by the Saturn division of General Motors Corp. She visits children in homeless and transitional shelters and shows them the simplest of techniques to shoot photos and tell a story. Their photos are reproduced as greeting cards that the shelters sell to raise money.

Solomon isn't surprised anymore by the universal theme of the photos — children in need wanting to help others — but their impact has gone beyond her expectations. Last year, a 9-year-old girl took a picture of a building at San Diego State University, and the school granted her a scholarship. Likewise in Memphis. A 12-year-old boy living at the Salvation Army was offered a scholarship to Rhodes College after his photo appeared in the newspaper.

"This project gives children a voice," says Solomon, who spent a day in Austin working with the five children at Posada Esperanza. "This shows them how important they are and that their hopes and dreams matter." To trigger their interest, Solomon handed out pictures she took of Miley Cyrus at the Academy Awards.

As part of the exercise, the children wrote down their hopes before heading out with cameras in hand. Maricela's list included several items that involved photography. "Take pictures of people who sing. Take a picture of fresh fruit," she wrote.

Referring to the television cameras that recorded Solomon's workshop at the shelter, Maricela liked the attention of a camera. "I was nervous at first, but I felt new, like I was just born. I'd like to shoot pictures of people, too, like Hannah Montana."

Her housemates at the shelter also enjoyed taking photos. Safia Essien, 13, turned in a photo of a bookshelf at a local library. "It symbolizes learning. Reading will lead to me getting a college scholarship. I know to be successful I need a good education. That's why I love the library. I can also get on the computer and read the latest news of my home country, South Africa. I'd like to return there someday as a heart surgeon," she says.

Aron Gonzalez, 12, took a photo of his apartment complex. "The world is a better place and it starts at home. Me and my brothers and sister feel safe there," he says.

The simplicity of Mireya Bonilla-Reveles' picture was perfect for a 5-year-old. "I hope to eat cookies all my life," she says of her photo of a cookie shelf at the grocery store.

Monica Ortiz, 10, went to a church and took a picture of a religious statue.

"I like to pray. I feel protected," she says. She prays for a good education because someday she hopes to own and operate a big hotel.

Often, says Solomon, the photos that the children bring back depict simple necessities. A boy in Detroit photographed a lamp.

"He wanted a lamp for Christmas so he wouldn't have to do his homework by flashlight," she says.

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Greeting cards
In late October, greeting cards (\$20 for a 12-card box) with the photographs taken by the children of Posada Esperanza will be available by calling the shelter at 928-8862. Posada Esperanza, operated by Casa Marianella, is a transitional shelter for homeless, single immigrant mothers and their children.

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