

Pictures of Hope puts students' dreams in focus

By Rick Nathanson / Journal Staff Writer

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Words sometimes fail kids.

Particularly so when attempting to give voice to their aspirations and ambitions for their futures, while being preoccupied with present-day mass shootings and a desire to simply feel safe in a classroom.

Linda Solomon's Pictures of Hope project offers them another avenue of expression.





Gerrado Guerrero, 19, a student at Health Leadership High School, experiments with the camera presented to him as part of the Pictures of Hope program. (Rick Nathanson/Albuquerque Journal)

A native of Michigan, Solomon is a renowned photographer, author and member of the Michigan Journalism Hall of Fame. She began the project in 2005 as a way to not only validate the personal dreams of young people, but also to introduce them to photography as a way to say in pictures what they sometimes can't vocalize in words.

Solomon has brought her program to 52 cities, often multiple times, and frequently works with homeless children and teens. She was in Albuquerque recently working with a group of students at the Health Leadership High School, a state charter school with a curriculum that prepares students for careers in the health industry.

The Pictures of Hope program matches students with mentors from the community, who talk to the students and help them assemble a list of their hopes and dreams for their futures.

The diverse group of mentors for this session included a physician, lawyer, judge, social worker, artist, banker, investor – even this reporter from the Albuquerque Journal.

Solomon provided the group with a crash course on how to take a good photograph. She talked about color, contrast, framing and other elements, using examples from her own photographs of celebrities – boxer Muhammad Ali, performer Beyoncé, actor Morgan Freeman, artist N.C. Wyeth, and cartoonist Al Hirschfeld.

The students were presented with the unexpected gift of a Kodak PixPro AZ252 digital camera, a very respectable starter camera donated by Walgreens, one of the project sponsors.

Based on the list created, mentors drove the students to sites around Albuquerque, where the youths took photographs that in their mind represented two of the items on their list – perhaps a desire to attend college, feed the hungry, end social injustice or help the destitute.

I was matched with 19-year-old senior Gerrado Guerrero. He grew up in Albuquerque's Westgate area, which has seen its fair share of crime and violence. Guerrero confessed to having run with a rough crowd, being involved in his own fair share of mischief – and seeing friends pay a steep price for their actions.

But he also saw a future for himself working in public health and social work.

We set out to represent two items on his list: to put a human face to the homeless and to find a little piece of beauty in the world.

At Coronado Park, where many homeless people spend their days and nights, Guerrero focused his camera on a lone man's shoe lying on its side on the barren ground. A metaphor, he suggested, for someone who is looking for his soul, if not his actual sole.

He captured a small group of people living beneath a rain tarp draped like a tent over a chain link fence, all their earthly belongings stuffed into a shopping cart.

Another group huddled at a picnic table became irritated, even hostile, when he asked if he could take their picture. They became more agreeable when he explained he is a student and was taking photos for a class project.

At St. Martin's HopeWorks, which offers meals and social services to homeless people, Guerrero photographed people sharing food with a dog.

"I want to humanize the homeless," Guerrero said. "They are stigmatized. People think they're in the position that they're in because they put themselves there, that they choose to live that way. That's not always the case. A lot of times, it's about mental illness and addictions and a lack of resources and poverty."

His search for a little piece of beauty took us to Civic Plaza, where Guerrero enveloped himself in the drooping branches of a tree in full bloom with pinkish flowers.

"We live in a desert so there's not that much color, but when it does appear, it's really beautiful to see. It sticks out, and it's hard to miss," he observed.

The student photographs will be shown in a May 4 public exhibit at the school, 1900 Randolph SE, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. At that time, one of the 15 students who participated in the Pictures of Hope project will be awarded a full-ride, four-year scholarship to Blackburn College, a private liberal arts school in Illinois.

Naturally, producing an outstanding photo is not the only measure determining the scholarship winner. The students must also meet Blackburn's admission requirements, including its standards for high school grade-point average and ACT score.

Ultimately, the scholarship winner will be determined by Health Leadership High School principal Blanca López, in consultation with Solomon.

"Pictures of Hope is providing our students an opportunity to document in a photojournalistic manner how they see their world as they leave behind their high school years and step into their future," López said.

And, hopefully, viewing that future through a new lens.

UpFront is a regular Journal news and opinion column. Comment directly to Rick Nathanson at 823-3929 or rnathanson@abqjournal.com. Go to www.abqjournal.com/letters/new to submit a letter to the editor.