

# Safety Net

The newsletter of the Coalition for the Homeless

Autumn 2012



**18,000** Homeless Kids Head Back to School

# What Can I Do Today to Help a Homeless Child?

It's a natural reaction to become immobilized when confronted with a huge problem. Time and again, I'm asked, "Yes, I'd love to help the homeless. But it seems so massive – what can I do?"

Here's one practical tip: If you have a school-aged child, chances are, in the next couple of weeks, you'll be buying a ton of "Back to School" supplies. My son, Quinn, is starting 5th grade and I was astonished how the list of supplies has grown over just a couple of years.

But rather than bemoaning this undertaking – take your child along with you. And while you are stocking up, explain to your daughter or son that there are a record 18,000 kids this year who are homeless and can't afford the most basic supplies or a backpack. So buy an extra – notebook, package of pens, crayons – because whatever your child needs, there is a homeless child who is also returning to school soon who needs these basics but can't afford them. And showing up empty handed the first week of school is just one more source of shame for kids who have already shouldered more than any youngster should.



The Coalition is partnering with the United Federation of Teachers, WPIX and many others, to put together 3,500 backpacks loaded with supplies for homeless children. Last year, we were able to give 3,000 homeless boys and girls a leg up as they started school. We raised our goal this year, because homelessness continues to soar. And, since Mayor Bloomberg now doesn't have ANY policy in place to move families out of shelter and into permanent housing, there is no relief in sight.

Within one year of becoming homeless, 41 percent of school-aged homeless kids will attend two or more schools and 28 percent will attend three or more schools! Homeless youth are twice as likely to wind up in special education classes. Stability is a main pillar for a happy child. But as families are staying in shelters longer – up nearly 30 percent since just last year – more kids are being shuffled around shelter to shelter, school to school. Having to travel hours to and from distant schools breeds chaos. Missed meals, separation from friends and family, and constantly moving wreak havoc physically and mentally. The

Coalition's programs for kids in this edition of *Safety Net* bring hope and stability to these young lives. But there's much more that needs to be done to break down the stereotypes and prejudice homeless children face. That's where you come in.

By bringing your children into the process of buying an extra backpack full of supplies, you are also empowering them – letting them know that, first, there is a boy or girl exactly their age with no place to call home tonight. As scary as that is, they can still do something as simple and meaningful as helping that child get off on the right foot in school. Many kids put a short note in the backpack, wishing their homeless counterpart a great year – or letting them know they hope he or she loves Spiderman or Barbie (or whatever is on the backpack) as much as they do!

Most people still associate homelessness with mentally ill men and women on our streets. But homeless families represent three-fourths of NYC's shelter population and it's imperative that we start, at a young age, to humanize this tragedy. If our sons and daughters understand that "homeless" also means someone who looks just like them, someone who likes the same things they do, plays the same games, listens to the same songs and loves the same T.V. shows, then we are beginning to plant the seeds of empathy. Not sympathy – empathy. Let's start young and get concrete with something specific and doable for our kids!

Mary E. Brosnahan

President & CEO

## Safety Net

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Learn more about Project: Back to School at  
[www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/backtoschool](http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/backtoschool)

# Back to School

By Angie Caraballo,  
Bound for Success After School and  
Summer Day Camp

This past summer was full of fun and learning for 30 girls and boys living in a lower Manhattan homeless shelter, thanks to our Bound for Success (BFS) Summer Day Camp. We took trips, improved reading and writing skills and just had a great time.

Each week featured a new theme, and my favorite was “Under the Sea.” On Monday and Tuesday the kids researched different sea creatures, learning about their physical make-up and how they live. By mid-week, they drew pictures and wrote brief essays on what species of sea animal they would be and why. Their creativity and detail were remarkable! Then we capped off the week with a trip to the New York Aquarium, where they reveled in the beauty and spectacle of the underwater creatures. One 5-year-old said to me, “Miss Angie, I can’t believe how big these fish are! You see them in books, or at the store, but these ones are huge!”

Boys and girls often fall behind academically during the summer. Because BFS kids live in a shelter, they usually are already behind their peers in school. The constant moving from shelter to shelter and other stresses inherent in homelessness makes keeping up in school that much harder. That’s why we put such a huge emphasis on reading and writing activities. Reinforcing and building upon basic skills over the summer means BFS kids enter the new school year at a higher level than when vacation began.

As we move into September, BFS transitions into an after-school program. The first half of the afternoon is spent helping the students with their homework. We go over reading exercises and flash cards with one-on-one instruction. Then



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**When I think back to the children I’ve met along the way, there’s not one that we haven’t reached in a special way.**

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switch to fun recreational activities and a nutritious snack.

The recreational component has become increasingly important as families are staying in shelters longer. Now almost half of our girls and boys have been with BFS for over a year – by far the highest I’ve seen in my eight years with the program.

Living in a crowded facility with over 80 other families really wears on a child. While kids living in shelter form bonds and strengthen friendships, it is devastating to live with the stress of long-term homelessness. Many parents become depressed or angry. When it gets to be too much, kids often act out. Luckily, we’re there to pull them aside, talk to them, figure out what is going on and how we can best work with them to get through it.

BFS gives stability to the children’s lives. Each afternoon they know they have safe a place to go with people they can trust. It makes a huge impact on how they are able to cope with all the uncertainties and shame that come with trying to live in the shelter system.

Last summer I worked with Brandon, who had been homeless for a few months. In trying to get him to participate, each morning our staff

would knock on his door. But Brandon’s very shy and nervous about meeting the other kids – so every day he said, “No!” Finally, after much persistence, Brandon

agreed to come with us up to Central Park one morning....and had a blast! A few months later, he was joking around with the other boys and creating his own games in the afternoons. Towards the end of the summer, he told me, “I finally feel like I fit in somewhere. Like I’ve got something to look forward to.”

Brandon’s family was transferred to another shelter (his third) back in April, but he still keeps in touch with us – coming to us with problems he is having adjusting to the new neighborhood and letting us know that he recently graduated from middle school. He grew so much in the year I worked with him. He opened up and let me and the other staff in – breaking out of his shell and morphing from a shy, fearful boy to a responsible young man.

Kids like Brandon are why I love working at BFS. Our after-school program and camp make a huge difference in the lives of homeless kids. After being shuffled around the shelter system, they’ve completely lost what it is to be “home.” But BFS gives them a bedrock of stability and community. When I think back to the children I’ve met, there’s not one that we haven’t reached in a special way. Working at BFS is more rewarding than I could’ve ever imagined.

Many days, when parents come to pick up their children, they ask if it’s okay to come right back – because they want to be there as long as we are there.

You just can’t get that anywhere else!

# What Camp Means to Me

By *Bev McEntarfer*,  
Camp Director,  
Camp Homeward Bound

I have to admit, even after almost 40 years of being a camp counselor and director, I still get giddy with the excitement of a new season at camp. First the Camp Homeward Bound (CHB) counselors and staff arrive to begin setting up and training. Then the big opening day when the kids arrive, some with wide eyes at the spectacle of the great outdoors. Others are returning for the second, third or fourth time with welcoming arms.

The trees. The air. The hugs. The smiles. It's magical.

Looking back on my first experience at summer camp, I was a nervous and withdrawn 12-year-old. But my counselors and fellow campers pushed me to take the lead, and I left with a sense of confidence I'd never known before.

I returned to camp every summer until I went off to college to become a teacher. But by my junior year I realized how much I missed the outdoors and kids and decided to spend the summer as a counselor at a nearby camp. I thought it would be only for a few years, while I finished up my degree. But thirty years later I was still working – now year-round – at that camp, giving thousands of disadvantaged children that same sense of self-confidence I got as a kid.

I actually tried to retire from my post as a camp director to pursue a new career, but it didn't last.

In 2007, I was volunteering in Africa when the Coalition reached out to me for their camp in upstate NY serving homeless and formerly homeless kids. After just one summer here

at Camp Homeward Bound, I knew this was where I belonged.

My decades as a camp director really allowed me to hone my skills, and at CHB I get to use those skills to provide the best experience for our kids. We've expanded the activities and programs, recruited a corps of dedicated counselors – many of whom have come back year after year – and updated our approach and techniques we use to teach the camp-

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ers important life skills.

CHB provides a steady stream of programming from when campers wake up until they go to sleep. During the day, we allow kids to choose two to three activities, from arts and crafts, cooking and nutrition, to nature, sports, music, dance, video production, photography, biking or computers. Everything except swimming, because they do that every day. Giving our campers a choice is a new approach and it has been incredibly successful. For many homeless children, life outside of camp is chaotic and largely out of their control. We've found that by allowing them to choose – as simple as that might seem – the girls and boys feel empowered and begin to understand the importance of owning the decisions they make.

The evening brings a different set of events and activities, like Camp Olympics, Halloween, Pirate Night, talent shows and more. The counselors who run these activities



Camp Homeward Bound Director **Bev McEntarfer** with campers (above) and counselors (below).



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our counselors are able to give their time  
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are so creative and enthusiastic and able to get all of the kids involved.

As you can imagine, being the Camp Director at CHB can get a little intense. As with all camps that serve at-risk populations, many kids come here with behavioral and emotional

issues. You can actually feel their tension and stress when they get off the bus the first day. As if the stress of not having a home wasn't bad enough, many of them come from domestic violence situations and have created a hardened shell as it's the only way they know how to protect themselves. Our job is to gently crack that shell, get them to open up, shed their defenses and more importantly have a good time.

are so creative and enthusiastic and able to get all of the kids involved.

That's why CHB has such a high staff-to-camper ratio. With nearly one staff member to every two kids, our counselors are able to give their time to each child so when problems arise they can show them that they care and teach them invaluable behavior management skills. Our philosophy isn't just to address problematic behavior by telling them not to do it again or else. We strive to show each child that his or her actions have consequences, and that he or she can make good choices, which will lead to happier outcomes.

Last summer we had an 8-year-old boy, Jake. When he came to camp, he literally told me, "I've seen more than a boy my age should see." Jake was so closed down and angry those first days that he required a lot of counselor attention. But by the talent show on the last day of camp, there was Jake on the stage, singing and dancing to a goofy song – just being a kid without a care in the world.

You can't change these kids' lives completely. I can't take back the years of abuse or the instability or the shame they have felt. But at camp, we do give these girls and boys a bit of peace, respite and some skills to go back and better cope with their situation.

I've been lucky to spend most of my life at camp. I've seen the transformation in countless kids like Jake. I've had campers grow into counselors and then go on to run their own youth programs. I've had counselors who've seen the impact they can make in a child's life wind up changing careers. I've seen life-long friendships form and gotten thousands upon thousands of hugs and "Thank you's."

So what is camp to me? I guess you could say camp is me. It's my identity now. When I was younger, people would always ask me, "When are you going to get a real job?" The truth is, in some way they are right. This isn't a job. It's my life.

# Our Counselors Reflect on Camp



## Kerryyn "Jack Sparrow"

**Job:** Lower Boys Unit Leader. I oversee the counselors working with boys ages 7-10.

**Years at CHB:** 4

**Outside of camp:** I manage a seafood chain in Australia, and they allow me to take all of my vacation at once, so I can come to Camp Homeward Bound each year.

**What camp means to me:** I just love being around the kids, being creative and getting into all kinds of fun. Some find this population complicated, but I find it easy because all of the staff work together so well to help the kids. My first year, there was a boy, he was really troubled and we didn't get along to start with, but then mid-way through the session, we were building sand castles on the beach and chatting away. That moment changed everything. We were close. By the end he was in tears saying he didn't want to go home because he wanted to stay with "Jack Sparrow." That was a big moment for me. That moment said to me, "Ok, now you need to come back," because you definitely see how much of a positive effect you have on the kids. You just can't get enough of that.

## Jordan

**Job:** Program Coordinator. I am in charge of organizing all big camp events, like the Halloween Party, talent shows, Olympics, and all the all-camp activities.

**Years at CHB:** 3

**Outside of camp:** I teach in England and Italy.

**What camp means to me:** Camp is a little bit of an addiction. It feels almost like a home away from home. The people. The kids. It's everything. There is something special about Camp Homeward Bound that makes you not want to go to another camp, or to find a job at home so you can keep coming back! For the kids, they get to get away from their life in the city and be out in the open. Nature is very special for them. By the time they leave, the smiles on their faces and tears down their cheeks really show you how much it's meant to them. For the counselors, you make some of your best friends. You come and you are not the same person when you leave. Even if you do it once, you learn more about yourself.



## Kirsty

**Job:** The Older Girls Unit Leader. I help the counselors who work with the 10-15 year-old girls.

**Years at CHB:** 3

**Outside of camp:** I am a teacher in Australia.

**What camp means to me:** Camp is like my second home now. From the minute I pass the gate, I feel like I'm back with my family. Every year we make a new family and it keeps getting bigger and bigger. My first year I had a camper who never swam before. She was 15 and was really scared and embarrassed. I made sure I got in every swimming lesson with her and by the end she was finally able to let go and float. It might seem really small, but it was a great step for her. A lot of the staff come to camp thinking they are going to change a camper's life. But what they don't realize is that the campers are going to change their lives, and by the end of the summer, we will be completely different people. Much better people.

# Carnival Night Raises \$191,000 for the Coalition's Youth Programs!

By Haja Kakay

**O**n June 13th, Central Park's Victorian Gardens was magically transformed for Carnival Night for Kids, benefiting the Coalition's Camp Homeward Bound and Bound for Success programs.

More than 500 guests were treated to amusement park rides, arcade games, face painting and delicious food, as well as Izze Juices, South Pacific Wines and Brooklyn Brewery beer. Award-winning children's book authors Elise Broach, Adam Rubin and Doreen Cronin were on hand to sign their books. A photo booth by the Bosco and pop-up portrait studio by NY Classic Kids allowed families to capture the fun and excitement of the day.

The night ended with

a performance by our Camp Homeward Bound counselors, giving guests a glimpse of the amazing work they do at camp each summer.

The event was a remarkable success, raising more than \$191,000 to support programs for hundreds of NYC's most vulnerable boys and girls. Special thanks to our title sponsor, Draftfcb, and to the many supporters who helped make this our most successful Carnival Night ever!



**Board Members Andy Kramer and Laurence Boschetto with Diego**

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# Thank You to Everyone for Making the Women Mean Business Luncheon a Success!

By Maria Fregoso

**M**ore than 300 guests joined us on April 13th at the Pierre Hotel for the 18th annual Women Mean Business Luncheon, raising more than \$170,000 for the Coalition's First Step Job Training Program for homeless and low-income women.

New York City Council Speaker Christine C. Quinn presented an inspiring keynote address reminding guests of how critical the homelessness epidemic has become in NYC and underscoring the Coalition's unique role in creating innovative and effective solutions to the problem.

The afternoon would not have

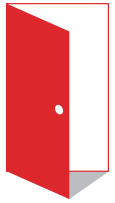


**Employees of corporate honoree, Marsh.**

been possible without the support of our generous sponsors. We would also like to thank our corporate honoree Marsh, First Step graduate speakers Rasheedah Boyd and Marvette Allison-Harding and Diana Mejia for sharing her story in this year's video.

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