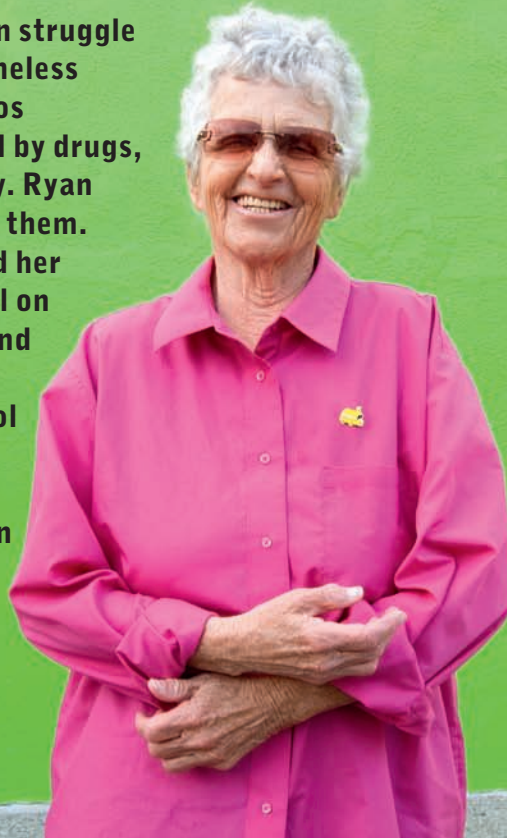


Agnes Stevens

Hundreds of children struggle to survive in the homeless neighbourhood of Los Angeles, surrounded by drugs, violence and poverty. Ryan Wilson, 13, is one of them.

Agnes Stevens and her organisation, School on Wheels, help Ryan and other homeless kids to get through school and feel that they're worth something. There are one million homeless children in the USA.



Ryan gets off the school bus and starts walking towards the worst part of town. Drugs are sold openly on street corners here and homeless people crowd the sidewalk. Ryan and his family have moved around a lot and lived at shelters and in run-down hotels. But they've never yet had to sleep on the street, as tens of thousands do here, in tents or on cardboard.

After a couple of years Ryan recognises many of the homeless people, but he rarely says hello. Some of them are mentally ill or on



WHY HAS AGNES BEEN NOMINATED?

Agnes Stevens has been nominated for her 20-year struggle for homeless children in the USA. Every year Agnes and her organisation, School on Wheels, help thousands of homeless children aged between six and 18. Hundreds of volunteers donate tens of thousands of hours as tutors for children who live in shelters, in motels, in cars or on the streets. The tutors give the homeless children security. When the kids move, School on Wheels follows them and gives them stability in an otherwise unstable existence. The children can stay in touch with School on Wheels using a toll-free phone number. Agnes and School on Wheels help children and their parents with changing schools and retrieving lost documents, like grades and birth certificates. The kids also get backpacks, school uniforms, school supplies and money for the bus or the subway. At many shelters, School on Wheels has created special learning rooms, with computers, books, and drawing and writing materials, to give the children a quiet place to study and the chance to be kids.





Agnes out walking in the homeless neighbourhood with sisters Khadijah and Janine, Ryan, 13, and his cousin, also called Ryan!

drugs and could turn angry or violent if they feel bothered. That's why Ryan rarely looks people in the eye; it's safer that way. During his short walk Ryan has to step over people sleeping on the street, in sleeping bags or wrapped in old blankets. Once he has to jump out the way when an angry old man charges past pushing a shopping cart overflowing with old clothes and odds and

ends. Ryan is used to the dirt, the stench and the chaos. He isn't scared any more but sometimes he sees things he doesn't want to see. Like the other day, when an old woman squatted to pee on the street corner. Or when a couple were arguing and started fighting on the street and all of a sudden the woman tore all her clothes off and ran around naked.

"Nobody should have to live like this," Ryan thinks to himself.

When he sees the familiar yellow sign brightening up

the grey concrete, he feels happy. The round black letters read 'School on Wheels'. The windows are painted bright colours and when Ryan steps inside he meets Agnes, the founder of the organisation. Ryan knows she's more than 70 years old, but Agnes talks and jokes around with the kids as though she was one of them.

Retirement, no thanks Agnes had just retired from her job as a teacher when she read a book that changed her life. The book was about

School on Wheels' learning room in Downtown Los Angeles.



Ryan and Agnes.

homeless families in the USA. Agnes was shocked to learn that hundreds of thousands of children were homeless and that many of

Hi with the hands



It takes quite a long time for South Los Angeles brothers Adrian, 11, and Daniel, 14, to say hi to each other. They go through a whole series of different handshakes before they feel they've said hello properly. Sometimes they do it all over again when they say goodbye!

"What's up?"
"How're you doing?"





Ryan likes helping younger children who come to School on Wheels, since he has received so much support.

them didn't go to school. "Retirement will have to wait," she said to herself. "I'm going to help homeless kids with their schoolwork."

Agnes started to help out at shelters and schools and met two homeless brothers

Agnes with Janine, 9, who has been homeless most of her life.

aged 9 and 11 who wanted her to teach them to read. Agnes prepared all weekend but when she came back on Monday the boys were gone. That made Agnes understand even more about what life is like for homeless children. They never know in advance where they're going

to sleep the next night. Agnes soon found new children who needed her help. But she never forgot the boys who disappeared.

For the first few years Agnes worked alone. She packed her car with schoolbooks, pens, and chalks and drove round to kids in parks

and shelters all over Los Angeles. Soon she realised that she needed help and started School on Wheels. The organisation has grown enormously since then. From being just one tutor – Agnes herself – she now has the support of several hundred volunteers who help



The children who don't exist

There are around one million homeless children in the USA and 200 000 in California.

"But nobody wants to talk about it, it's shameful," says Agnes. "The homeless kids are the poorest of the poor. They grow up in areas without playgrounds or parks, surrounded by drugs, gangs, violence and prostitution. Compared with other children they're more likely to be tired, hungry and sick. They feel ashamed, different and excluded. I want to help them believe in themselves and make them realise they are valuable."



In the beginning, Agnes was the only tutor. Now she has hundreds of volunteers to help her.

homeless children with school.

Good listener

Agnes and School on Wheels helped Ryan change schools, and every week he meets his tutor too.

“She helps me with my homework and challenges me to do better and never give up,” says Ryan, who remembers the first time he came to School on Wheels.

“As soon as I stepped through the door I knew that this would be my learning home. I can focus here. I told Agnes I didn’t have a backpack and she gave me one right away! She’s a really good listener. When I have problems she helps me see the solution and she makes me feel good about myself.”

Agnes says that school is a second home for many children, where they have friends and adults they can talk to and trust. So a homeless child doesn’t just lose one home, but two! Even if they still go to school, they don’t feel comfortable there any more. Like Ryan, who never tells anyone at school that he is homeless.

“The kids might not be able to afford backpacks or school supplies, or they might lose their school-books because they’re constantly moving around,” says Agnes. “Then they get into trouble, but don’t dare tell their teachers the truth. They are ashamed and feel different and excluded. In the end many of them quit school.”

Ryan sits down at one of the computers to find information for a school project about airplanes. His ultimate dream is to be a pilot.

“I love the internet,” he says. “It’s like the world’s biggest book.”

Ryan catches sight of a little girl struggling through a book. He leaves the computer and helps her spell out the words.

“Without School on Wheels I would have had a harder time getting through school,” says Ryan. “So I feel good when I can help someone else.” 🌐

Homeless capital

Los Angeles is famous for its movie stars and beautiful beaches. But it’s also the homeless capital of the USA. There are more homeless people here than anywhere else. Most of them live in the homeless neighbourhood in Downtown LA, just a stone’s throw from the skyscrapers where banks and big companies have their offices.





Photo: Corinne Noon

How do people become homeless?

There are lots of different reasons, but for children and families it often comes down to money. One or both parents lose their jobs and can't pay the rent. Eventually they get evicted and end up on the street. Lots of single mothers become homeless when they leave abusive partners. Some parents lose their homes because of drug addiction or because they have mental health problems. There are also thousands of teenagers living on their own on the street after having run away from home.

In Downtown, the homeless neighbourhood, tens of thousands of people live on the street.

High standards for tutors

Agnes calls her organisation School on Wheels because her tutors often spend a lot of time on the road. They drive to where the kids are, to schools, libraries, shelters, motels and School on Wheels' learning rooms.

"We have to be the kids' security," says Agnes. "They have been let down too many times and they have to know they're not alone. That there are people who care about them and don't forget about them."

There are currently around 400 tutors but Agnes wants to double that number. Even so, it is quite difficult to become a School on Wheels volunteer. All potential tutors are checked out carefully.

"They have to fill in an application form, hand in fingerprints and a record of convictions, and come to an interview. We have to make sure that each tutor can do a good job and that the kids are safe with them."



Agnes with children and volunteers outside the learning room in Downtown Los Angeles.



Chandalea got a new backpack.



Chandalea gets a new backpack!

Before the start of each term, School on Wheels gives out new backpacks filled with pens, rulers, scissors and other useful things. Chandalea, 11, is pleased with her new backpack and she's looking forward to the start of term.

"My family and I have been homeless a long time," she says. "It's really hard but we take care of each other."

www.SchoolonWheels.org
Change a mind - Be a tutor

What do Agnes and School on Wheels do?

- Help thousands of children with their studies. Hundreds of tutors work a total of over 30,000 hours every year, for free.
- Create special learning rooms at the shelters, with computers, books and materials for writing and drawing.
- Give backpacks and school supplies to 5000 children every year.
- Give homeless children school uniforms when they need them.
- Have a toll-free telephone number that children can use to stay in touch and ask for help.
- Help children and their parents when they have to change schools.
- Help children and their parents trace lost records, like grades.
- Give parents advice on their children's education.
- Work in five regions in Southern California, including Los Angeles, Santa Barbara and Ventura. School on Wheels also exists in two other states, Indiana and Massachusetts.





Ed

longs for peace and quiet

Before Ed, 11, became homeless, he had never imagined that children could end up on the street. The night his family slept in a car was the worst night of his life.

Things really start to go wrong when Ed's dad beats his mother, Edith, badly. When his dad is put in prison they have to survive on his mother's salary and it's not enough to cover food and rent.

"Pack your stuff," says his mother one day. "We have to move out."

"Where are we going?" ask Ed, his little brother Leonard and his big sister Guadalupe. Their mother is silent for a moment.

Finally she admits, "I don't know."

Keep the mask up

The family get help to put their furniture and other bits and pieces in storage. They pack only the bare essentials in a few bags they lug around when they start moving from friend to friend. Most people they know are already short of space. They can never stay in the same place for very many nights. Soon the sum-

mer vacation will be over and Ed is very worried about what will happen when he goes back to school. Of course his mum is searching for a new, cheaper apartment but it seems impossible to find one. All landlords demand the first and last months' rent in advance.

That's thousands of dollars and his mum never has that kind of money to spare. She works at a hamburger place and doesn't earn much. All her pay goes to food, clothes and bus fares.

After six months the family are all desperate. They often sleep on someone's living room floor with all their stuff crammed into bags. It's a nightmare in the mornings when everyone's trying to find clean clothes at once. And it's even harder to figure out how to get to school



Ed Korpie, 11

Lives: Shelter, Venice, Los Angeles.

Likes: Skateboarding, baseball, American football. Reading books. Playing computer games.

Doesn't like: When people steal my stuff.

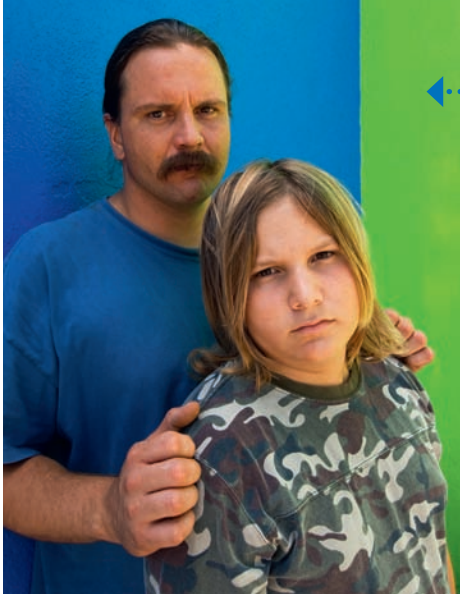
Loves: My family.

Looks up to: Tony Hawk, the pro skater.

Dreams of: Learning to do an ollie on a skateboard.

Wants to be: A computer game designer.





Ed's dad has been released from prison and is staying with a friend. He often comes to the shelter to visit his kids.

Almost everyone in Los Angeles has a car but Ed and his family get around on foot. Sometimes people look at them strangely, just because they're walking!



from a place you've never been before.

Ed is always tired and worried. He often gets headaches and stomach pains. He has neither the time nor the peace and quiet to do homework, since they have to move every other day. Ed doesn't tell his classmates or his teacher that he's homeless now. They might start teasing him and looking down on him. He fights hard

to make sure nobody notices that something is wrong, but sometimes it feels almost impossible to keep up appearances.

Dad doesn't know

The children's dad still doesn't know what has happened. He writes to them from jail and asks when they're coming to see him. When he was in prison before, their mother took

them to visit, but now she doesn't want to. She says they have neither the time nor the money. Ed realises she has decided to leave their dad for good. But how will they manage on their own?

In the end they have nowhere to go. Ed's mother calls everyone she knows and a friend finally says they can sleep in his van. They spread blankets on the floor and crawl in to the cramped

space in the back. That night, Ed is terrified and can't sleep. The noises outside are scary but the thoughts racing through his mind are worse. Is this how they're going to live the rest of their lives?

The next day, his mother has had enough. She has heard about a church shelter that helps homeless families, but it's in a different area, far away from the children's



Ed with his mum Edith, brother Leonard, 9, and sister Guadalupe, 15. Ed's mother is from Mexico. His dad was born in the US but his grandparents came to the US from Finland, so Ed's surname, Korpie, is Finnish.

The shelter is near the famous Venice Beach area. Ed and Leonard go skateboarding there but they don't swim very often because the water is dirty.



schools. Now Ed and his brother and sister will have to change schools and she'll have to find a new job.

Lawyer as a teacher

Now they've been living in a little room at the church shelter for six months. They have two bunk beds and a wardrobe they squeeze all their stuff into. Once a week, Ed's tutor from

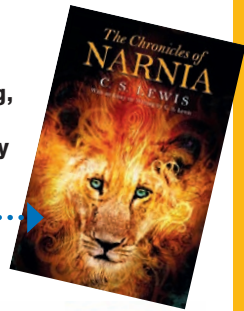
School on Wheels comes by. In the daytime she's a divorce lawyer, but this job is more fun, she tells Ed. He likes Jessica because she's kind and good at explaining difficult maths problems in a way that makes them seem easy. Usually they go to the library to study. It's nice to get away from the shelter for a while.

"The worst thing about

the shelter is all the rules. It's hard for kids not to have any freedom," says Ed to Jessica. "We have to go to church all the time, or they'll throw us out. Our room is tiny and it's hard to keep track of our stuff and even harder to stay friends. The great thing is to know where you're going to sleep the next night. To not be on the street, sleeping in cars or on people's floors." 🌐

Ed's mother has just tidied their room but Ed says it's usually chaos again after about thirty seconds.

Ed likes reading, especially the Narnia books by C.S. Lewis.



Ed goes through his homework with his tutor Jessica. Every time they meet they start by looking at Ed's latest cuts and grazes. He gets a lot from skateboarding.



Ed loves skateboarding.

"I'm happiest when I learn new tricks. I'm trying to learn to do an ollie, I fall and hurt myself all the time but it's worth it."



Ed's favourite foods are double-decker sandwiches and his mother's Mexican menudo.

Ed's dream house

"A green house with a pool, a library and a skatepark. My dream is to have my own room – I've never had that. I'd put posters up on the walls, enjoy the peace and quiet and take care of myself."





5.30 pm

Lining up for a safe bed

Janine, her older sister and their mum join the long queue for the Midnight Mission shelter. It's in the heart of the homeless neighbourhood and hundreds of homeless people are hoping to get some food and a bed here tonight. This is called safe sleep, because it can be really dangerous on the streets in this part of town at night.

5.30 am

Police alarm clock

At dawn, while Janine is still sleeping, the police drive around the neighbourhood and chase away the homeless people who are sleeping outside. It's illegal to live on the streets. Some protest but most of them just get up and pack their things.



JOSEPH RODRIGUEZ



7.45 am

To school

Janine takes the bus to school. School on Wheels gave her bus tokens so that she'd be able to get to school every day.



10 am

Classes

Janine has had to change school several times during the time she's been homeless. Sometimes she has had to miss lots of school days.

"It's hard to make friends and keep up in class when you're new."

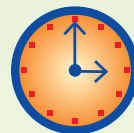


3 pm

To School on Wheels

After school, Janine hurries back to the homeless neighbourhood and to School on Wheels' learning room. All her homeless friends meet here.

"The people at School on Wheels are really nice and helpful."



6 am

Good morning

You have to get up early so you don't miss breakfast. In the morning, all the temporary residents of the shelter have to leave the building. Janine and Khadijah are going to school while their mum looks for work and tries to find somewhere else to sleep tonight.

6 pm

Finally, dinnertime!

Janine gets a plate of meat and vegetable stew. "It tastes better than it looks," she promises.



7 pm

Good night

The adults sleep in large dormitories. Families with children squeeze into a little room on the second floor. Tonight there is only one other family here. A mother and father with three young children.

They've just become homeless and it's their first night at a shelter. Janine feels sorry for them. She has stayed here loads of times and she knows how things work. The worn grey blankets itch, but Janine still falls asleep straight away.

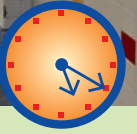
Homeless block



3.30 pm

Snack

Janine eats a honey bun with cinnamon and icing. It tastes delicious but it makes her fingers sticky.



5.20 pm

Time to join the queue

Janine and Khadijah go to meet their mum. Soon they'll find out where they're sleeping tonight. Agnes comes with them some of the way. She and the children have known each other for years. Agnes gives them a flyer with School on Wheels' toll free phone number.

"Call us if you need help. You know your tutors will come to you, wherever you go," she reminds them.

4 pm

Homework

Janine gets help with her homework from her tutor, Steve. He's good at explaining things in a way that's easy to understand. He's a bit of a joker too.



5.27 pm

The balloon man

Halfway there, they meet the balloon man, Joe, who is an expert at making balloon figures. He makes balloon flowers and rabbits for some other homeless children who are there with their tutor from School on Wheels.

"Please, please, could you make me a heart?" asks Janine.



5.30 pm

The heart

Janine walks the last bit of the way with her friends from School on Wheels. She hangs on to her two hearts, one pink and one red. She'll put them beside her pillow tonight when she goes to sleep. What a great end to the day!



Before



After

Half a hairstyle

One day Janine met a homeless woman who was good at doing hairstyles. She gave Janine extensions and braided her hair, but she only made it halfway the first day. The next day, the woman had disappeared and Janine had to go around with a half-finished hairstyle for a few days. But in the end they found each other at another shelter. Now Janine's hairstyle is finished!



Jarifri, 11

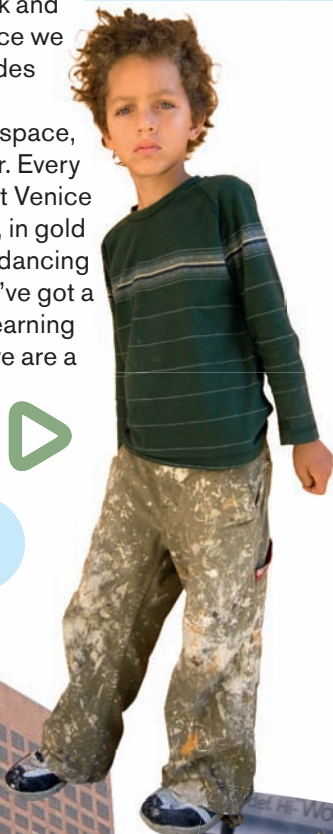
Dream home: A blue house with a black door in Las Vegas, because I like all the lights there. We'll have four bedrooms, four wardrobes and two bathrooms.

Likes: Dancing, taekwondo, school.

Looks up to: My big brother, Michael Jackson and Elvis Presley.

"Me, my brother and my parents live in a small motel room. Lots of homeless people live here. Frank, my tutor from School on Wheels, comes here once a week and helps me with my homework. Since we started working together, my grades have gone up."

"It's alright to live in a crowded space, it makes our family come together. Every weekend, my dad and I perform at Venice Beach. He's a clown and I dance, in gold clothes and a gold hat. I've been dancing ever since I learned to walk, and I've got a red belt in taekwondo. I started learning martial arts for self-defence. There are a lot of bullies at my school."



Our dream homes

There are over a million homeless children in the US. They live in shelters, in cars, in motels or on the street. Their families have ended up on the street for different reasons, but they have one thing in common: they all dream of a home of their own where they can be safe and happy.

Shatrea Olivera, 12

Dream home: A big pink house with four bedrooms, a big kitchen and a backyard with swings, no, a whole playground. I want my own room, in blue and white.

Likes: Playing.

Looks up to: My mom

"We've been homeless since mom left our dad because he was mean to her. We've lived in lots of different places. With relatives, in motels and in a car. For a while we moved almost every day. Now we live in transitional housing. It's called that because we've come halfway to getting an apartment of our own. Mom works and saves money so we can survive. This shelter is pretty good. There's a playground outside and there are lots of kids to play with. School on Wheels built a special learning room with books, drawing stuff and computers. I go there to draw and to meet my tutor."



Cesar with his younger brother Eric.



Cesar Hurtado, 12

Dream home: A white mansion with white walls and shiny wooden floors, a swimming pool and a skatepark. Every day I'll invite all my family and friends for a huge big buffet with amazing food. I'll have a widescreen TV and all the game consoles you can get.

Looks up to: My big brother, who listens when I need someone to talk to.

Likes: Skateboarding, swimming, eating pizza and ice cream, reading.

"We've been homeless for years. The worst thing about it is moving around so much. We have to drag all our stuff around on the bus. We lose things a lot. I've lost loads of my favourite things, stuff I really need. That makes me sad and angry. Living in a shelter is OK because there are loads of kids there. But the rules are too strict. Us kids don't have any freedom and we have to be quiet the whole time. I like School on Wheels because they've helped me so much. Sometimes I lose touch with my tutor when we move, but we always manage to get back together."



Cesar's family



Matthew, 12

Dream home: A big house with a huge TV and a skatepark out back.

Looks up to: Dustin Dollin, the skater.

Likes: Skateboarding, video games.

"The worst thing about being homeless is having to change school all the time. I've been to three different schools in the last year. I'm always nervous when I change school, it's hard to try to fit in and make new friends. Right now I live in a shelter with my mom, two sisters and two brothers. I have a tutor from School on Wheels who is really great. I hope she can keep helping me even if we move again. We've lived in different shelters and motels, and this is the best place so far. Our last shelter was in a rough area with a lot of gangs. They were always shooting at night. But I miss the friends I made there. My dream for the future is to stop the violence and to become a professional skater or a police officer."

Kibsaim Itsui Gallegos-Sierra, 8

Dream home: A pink house with white stripes. My room will have pink walls with red flowers. The house will be on the beach and it'll have a big garden with a slide and a pool.

Looks up to: My tutor.

Likes: Computer games, hula-hoop, playing hide and seek and tag.

"I think I've always been homeless. My mom, my sister, my little brother and I move around. We've lived in shelters in Los Angeles. Sometimes we go to Mexico. The worst thing about staying in shelters is having to get up so early. When we're in Los Angeles I go to School on Wheels almost every day. My tutor Crystal helps me with my homework and takes me on outings. When I grow up I want to be a teacher too. I want to learn to swim, but it seems hard. I've never been to the ocean, but I've heard that it's really pretty there."





Brianna's tutor Rosemary helps her understand a tricky problem.

Brianna wants to help the hom

It's late in the evening when Brianna, 11, goes with her mother and elder brother Adrian to book a room at a run-down motel. Her two eldest brothers are hiding round the corner. Five people aren't allowed to share one room, but her mother can't afford two. If they are found out they'll end up on the street tonight.

When the coast is clear, their mother smuggles Ryan, 12, and Daniel, 14, into the room. Inside, they all breathe a sigh of relief. They're safe for another night. Since Melissa, the children's mother, left their violent father a few weeks ago, they've moved around

different cheap motels in the poorest and most dangerous parts of South LA. The family can't stay long in each place – the motel staff would notice that too many of them are sharing a room and throw them out. But now their mother's money is

starting to run out. Where will they go then?

Melissa looks for help in the phone book and finds the numbers of a few homeless shelters. She and the children find it hard to think of themselves as homeless. A homeless person – isn't that a dirty man dressed in rags who lives in a cardboard box? She starts to call the shelters anyway, while the children listen. It turns out that some shelters do accept families.

"How many children do

you have?" asks the man at the shelter. "How old are they?"

When he hears that Melissa's oldest boy, Daniel, is 14, he turns them down.

"He would have to stay on his own with the adult men."

"But he's only 14, he's a child!" says Melissa.

"Those are the rules," says the man at the shelter. "We never let teenage boys stay with the families. It could be dangerous."





Brianna doesn't like the homeless neighbourhood; it's dirty, messy and sometimes dangerous.

Homeless when she grows up



Brianna Audinett, 11

Lives: In South Los Angeles.
Likes: Shoes, drama, reading books, writing stories.
Doesn't like: Being bored.
Happy: When I'm at School on Wheels.
Looks up to: My mom.
Wants to be: A doctor or a film star.

The children's mum slams the phone down and tries the next shelter, but it seems hopeless. In Los Angeles, lots of teenage boys as young as 12 are members of violent gangs. The shelters worry that the young boys will turn violent and hurt other children.

But Melissa won't give up. She nags, pleads and begs until she finally finds a shelter that will let the whole family stay together.

Be quiet!

The next day they take the bus to the homeless neighbourhood in downtown Los Angeles. The shelter looks like a prison; it's a big, grey concrete building. Brianna thinks the area is scary. It's messy and dirty. There are

people shouting and waving their arms, drinking alcohol and lying like corpses by the side of the street. Suddenly, Brianna notices an old man staring at her. Her mum sees it too. Eventually she tells him to stop. He walks a little further away but keeps on staring.

"Don't worry mom," says Brianna later, "I can protect myself."

Brianna and her family stay at the shelter for six months. There's space for them in a dormitory with bunk beds in the family area. There are lots of other mothers with children here, and Brianna quickly makes friends. She thinks the best thing about the shelter is knowing you have a place to sleep. The worst thing is the





Brianna with her family: Daniel, Ryan, Adrian, Brianna and their mum Melissa.

streets outside, and that it's so cramped and noisy in the dormitory. Children scream and cry and ambulance and police sirens wail outside every so often. Brianna's brother Ryan's asthma gets much worse at the shelter, and he coughs all the time. Playing like normal kids is almost impossible.

'Be quiet, sit still,' is all they hear.

"They act like they don't know what fun is," complains Brianna to her mum.

"We're not going to live here for ever," she promises.

School on Wheels saves the day

Right opposite the shelter, Brianna finds her own space at School on Wheels' learning room. Brianna goes there every day after school.

"I love School on Wheels. They take care of us and protect us," she explains to her mum. "If some mean guy on the street starts bothering you, they help you out. They gave us a toll-free telephone number we can call whenever we need help."

Brianna and her brothers get new backpacks and a tutor each to help with homework. Their mum also gets help when the kids have to change school. Lots of important papers and documents have disappeared during the time they've been homeless, but School on Wheels sorts out new ones. Most importantly, the children's mother knows they are safe while she's at work.

"We wouldn't have made it without you guys," Melissa often says to School on Wheels.

One day the family hear that they're going to get help to find an apartment of their own. It feels unreal. It's fantastic. Brianna is delighted to be able to leave the shelter, but she plans to come back to the homeless neighbourhood in the future.

"I want to become a doctor when I grow up, and help sick people, especially homeless people. They have no money, no health insurance, but I will help them anyway." 🌟

Brianna

One day a film team comes to School on Wheels. They're going to make a movie. Brianna and her friends are going to write the script and act in the film.

"I'm playing one of the heroes, I'll be called Ruby in the movie," explains Brianna. She and her friend Janine, who will play superhero Pink Ice, are a team.

"We rescue people and fight bad guys," says Janine, who, at the end of the movie, tries to transform the whole world to a sea of pink diamonds. They wrote the script of the film themselves, with their homeless friends at School on Wheels. The film team is from an organisation called Hollywood Heart.

Normally they work on real movie sets in Hollywood, but on their days off they want to do something to help children who are having a hard time. For three days, School on Wheels is transformed into a film set. The kids get to write scripts, build sets and make props and costumes. Finally they shoot the film and once it has been edited they get to go to a gala premiere.

"It's one of the most fun things I've ever done," says Brianna. "If I can't become a doctor maybe I'll be a movie star!" 🌟



Brianna in full costume as Ruby.



becomes a movie star

Khadijah, 16, takes a break from her college applications to be in the film.



Salmal, 7, has been given silver hair and a dollar sign round her neck.



Ryan Audinett, 13, is playing a detective and has handcuffs at the ready.



Ryan Wilson, 13, shows off his best movie star pose with a plastic rifle.

Hollywood Heart goes to School on Wheels and the homeless children are the stars of the day.



Before shooting, all the children have to get their make-up and costumes on.



Superheroes Pink Ice (Janine) and Ruby (Brianna) prepare for the next scene.



Hiding behind the Red Devils mask is Ryan Mcneil, 9.



Adrian Audinett, 12, likes making movies, but he really wants to be an architect.



FILM FACTS

People call Los Angeles the capital of film, and the Hollywood district is worldfamous. The first Hollywood movie was made back in 1910. It was called 'In Old California' and it was a silent film. The first film with sound was called 'The Jazz Singer' and it came out in 1927. In the beginning, the film companies made foreign versions of American movies so that people who didn't understand English could watch them too. They would shoot a version with, say, French or Spanish actors. After a while they realised that it was cheaper and easier to dub or subtitle the movies in different languages. When more people started to get TVs in the 1950s, many people thought the film industry would die out. But it didn't. These days, the big film companies in LA make around 60 movies a year and the film industry has a multi-billion dollar turnover.



Nick with his dad Frank and his mother Michelle.

Nick is a hero



Nick Barger, 10

Lives: Motel in Los Angeles.

Likes: Skateboarding, drawing, playing computer games, reading.

Doesn't like: Drugs. Being treated like a little kid.

Sad: When my friends move away.

Loves: Being with my family.
Looks up to: Mom and dad. My tutor Laura.

Dreams of: My own home.

Wants to be: A writer.

When Nick was seven, he lived in an apartment block that was a notorious hideout for drug dealers and addicts. One night the police raided the building.

Everyone in the building, in all the apartments, was involved with drugs. People went in and out of Nick's apartment all the time and often passed out on the sofa or the floor. The people downstairs sold drugs around the clock. Nick's parents, Michelle and Frank, didn't sell drugs but they were high most of the time. Doing drugs made them different, Nick felt. Sometimes they just sat or lay still, staring into space. When they woke from their stupor they were usually

unhappy. Nick loved his parents but they were always too sick and too strung out on drugs to be able to be his mum and dad. He had to take care of himself.

Foster family

Late one night Nick was woken by shouts and screams outside. People started to run around the corridors, trying to escape or get to the toilet in time to flush their drugs away. After a while the police stormed into Nick's apartment and started to shout at his par-

ents. The police had dark vests and guns. Nick's parents looked terrified. Then the police caught sight of Nick.

"You can't stay here," said one of the police officers. Nick cried and said he wanted to stay with his parents, but the police officer called a social worker who came to fetch him. Nick didn't know what was going to happen to his parents. He had to move in with a foster family, a family who get paid to take care of children who can't stay with their own parents.

Beaten

Nick turned eight at the foster family's house, but nobody seemed to care. The foster parents had lots of



children in the house, children of their own and foster children. The others were older than Nick and treated him badly. They said cruel things and beat him. Nick tried to fight back but they were bigger and stronger. His foster parents didn't do anything to help him.

A while later Nick's mother went into a treatment centre for drug addicts, and Nick was allowed to visit her there. They cried when they saw each other for the first time and Nick's mother asked him to forgive her. They chatted and laughed together until suddenly Nick's mother saw the bruises on his arms.

"It's my foster family, they beat me," said Nick.

Nick's mother complained to the social workers that

had placed Nick with that family, but the foster parents claimed Nick was lying. That he must have fallen. Or that Nick's mother was beating him. The people in charge believed the foster parents and Nick had to go back to them.

Things got even worse for Nick after that. Everyone was angry with him because he had talked and they beat him even more. By then, however, Nick's mother had been clean for long enough so she could start fighting to get Nick back for good.

Nick was called to court but the first time he saw the judge he didn't dare say anything about the abuse. His foster parents had threatened him.

"Keep your mouth shut or say that it's your mom who's beating you," they told Nick. "Or else."

Back to mother

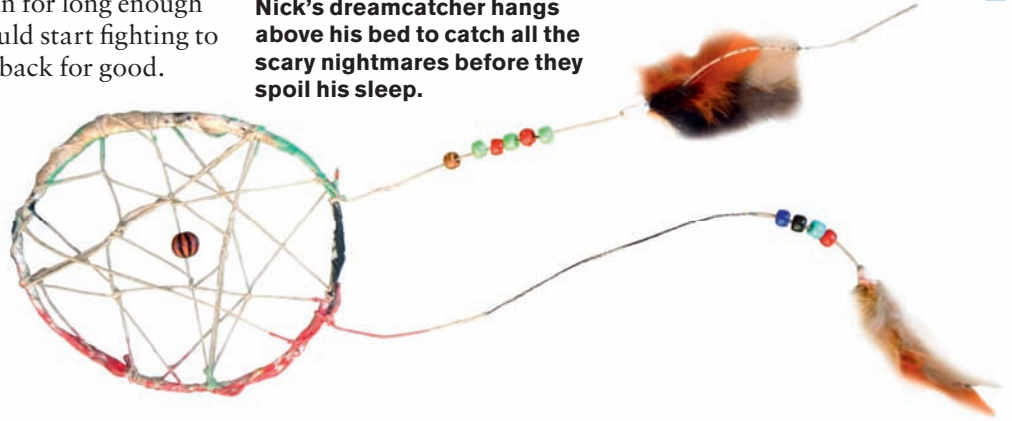
Finally, on the third visit to court, Nick couldn't take it

any longer and told the truth. The judge brought down his gavel and said,

"You may move back to your mother."

Nick was allowed to move to the recovery centre where his mother was fighting to get over her addiction. His dad was at another recovery centre for men. Nick and his mother shared a room with two other mothers and their five children. It was crowded

Nick's dreamcatcher hangs above his bed to catch all the scary nightmares before they spoil his sleep.



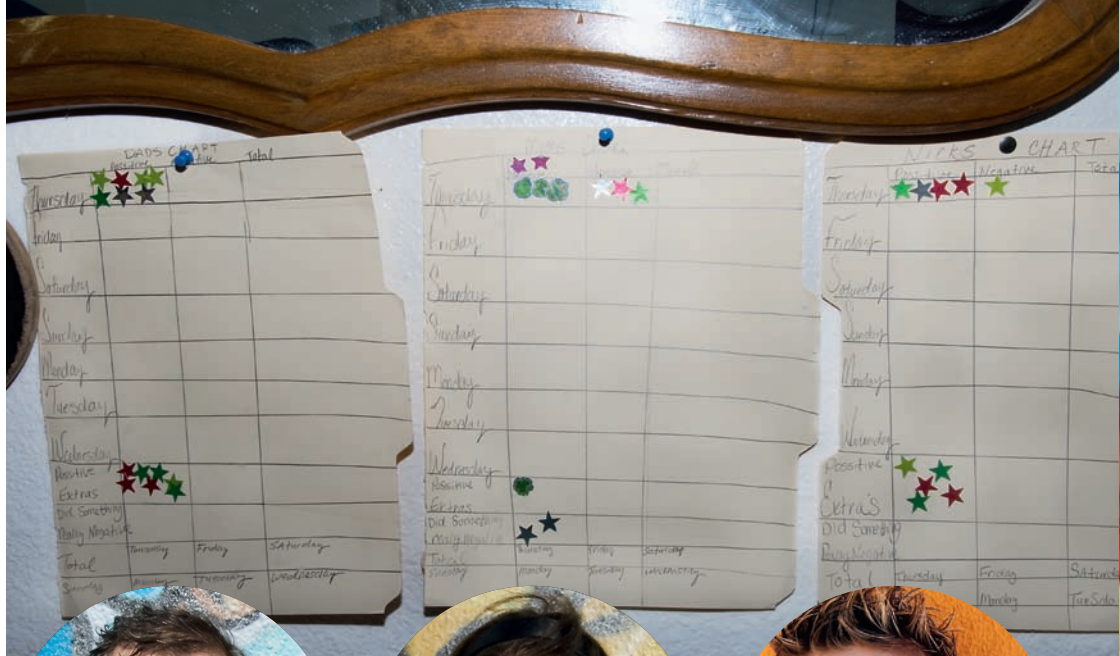
The motel room where Nick and his parents live is really cramped.



My extra teacher

Nick's tutor from School on Wheels is called Laura.

"She's like my friend, my teacher and my big sister. She helps me with my homework and she is very patient. Laura also took me to a baseball game and to the movies."



Nick and his parents each have their own daily schedule on the wall. They get minus points if they do something negative and plus points if they do something good.

"It helps us to be positive," says Nick.



but Nick soon made new friends and things were going well for his mother. She was not only coming off the drugs, but also learning things like how to pay bills and take care of a child. She was learning to live without drugs.

Together again

Both Nick's parents have now been drug-free for three years. They left the recovery

centres long ago, but they still haven't managed to find a place to live.

"My dream home is a penthouse on the 42nd floor," says Nick. "My room will be gothic, with black walls and furniture, fluorescent lights and plastic bats hanging from the ceiling. But actually, it doesn't matter. I don't care if we live in a cardboard box as long as we're together."

Because Nick and his parents are homeless, they have to live at a motel with lots of other homeless people. They pay for a month at a time but they could be thrown out at any time. Nick has had lots of homeless friends who have disappeared from the motel.

"It's almost impossible to find and keep a best friend," he says to his parents.

At night, as he is falling

asleep, Nick often thinks about everything he's been through.

"I'm going to write a book about my life, because I want to tell people what it's been like. I survived a lot while I was waiting to get back with my parents."

"You're our hero, Nick," say his mother and father. "We'd never have made it without you." 🌐

Nick can't bring friends back to the motel. People who don't live there aren't allowed in.



Spider friend

Nick's mum got a spider tattoo because Nick loves spiders.

"Once we saw a spider on the wall in the classroom. All the kids screamed and wanted to kill it but I stood in front of the spider and told them all not to touch it. The teacher said 'Listen to Nick, he's right.' I let the spider out through the window."



Nick

loves skateboarding



Whenever Nick has the chance he grabs his skateboard and tries out new tricks on the street outside the motel. Skateboarding is one of the most popular sports in the USA. Some say it was invented by a bored surfer who put wheels on his surfboard and started to “surf” the streets.

What is a skateboard?

Board – often has a design underneath that gets worn off when you ride

Griptape – for better grip on the board

Tail – the back part of the board

Nose – the front part of the board

Wheels – four wheels

Trucks – two trucks hold the four wheels

The most common tricks

Ollie – A basic trick that is the starting point for lots of other tricks, a jump on flat ground without holding the board.

Nollie – Like an ollie, but instead of jumping from the tail of the board, jump from the nose.

Kickflip – The board is kicked so that it flips longways, under the feet.

180 – A half turn of the board so the nose ends up where the tail was.

360 – A full turn of the board.

900 – Two and a half turns, on a vert ramp.

Grind – Sliding on the trucks.

50-50 – A grind on both trucks.

Five-0 – A grind on one of the trucks.

Boardslide – Sliding the underside of the board along an object.

Manual – A balancing trick on two wheels, rolling forwards or backwards.

HOW TO DO AN OLLIE:



1. Put your back foot on the tail and your front foot in the middle of the board.



2. Crouch down and bend your knees.



3. Jump and make sure the tail hits the ground so that the board is angled upwards.



4. While you jump, let your front foot slide forward. That way the board lifts up and your balance evens out.



5. Pull your legs up to go higher.



6. Straighten your legs and centre your weight.



7. Don't lock your knees when you land. Roll off.





Mexicans in Los Angeles often wear gold necklaces with their names on – or the name of a loved one. Marlen's necklace was a present from her mother.

Marlen's aunt is her 'mom'

When Marlen's mother discovered she had HIV and couldn't work any more, they lost their apartment. The social worker said, "Move to a shelter for homeless people with HIV and AIDS, or we'll take your daughter away."

Marlen and her mother didn't want to move to the shelter.

"We were really scared," says Marlen. "We didn't know anything about AIDS. Mom thought I'd catch it too if we lived with other people who were HIV positive. Now we've stayed here for a few years. I like it here and I've learnt a lot about the illness, like you can survive for a long time if you take medicine and look after yourself."

Marlen was born in Mexico but she came to the US when she was two weeks old.

"The person I call mom is actually my aunt. I've never met my dad and my biological mom couldn't take care of me. She drank a lot and ended up in prison. My Aunt Angelina brought me to America to give me a better chance in life. I call her mom, because she has always taken care of me like a mother."

Worry about mom

"When I was young we lived with my stepfather. I liked him a lot. Then they split up and mom met a new man who used to beat her. Once my stepfather came back to see me but the man refused to let him in. I saw my stepfather through the window and I cried, shouted and banged on the window but he didn't hear me and he



Marlen calls her Aunt Angelina 'mom' because she takes care of her and she has always loved her like a real mother.

© TEXT: CARMILLA FLOYD PHOTOS: KIM NAYLOR



Marlen Contreras, 13

Lives: At a shelter for people with HIV and AIDS.

Likes: Skateboarding, music, drawing, school.

Doesn't like: Mean people.

Sad: When my mom is ill.

Loves: Mom.

Would like: A little dog but unfortunately the shelter doesn't allow pets.

Wants to be: A nurse or a doctor.

Marlen's wardrobe



Marlen's favourite sneakers are called Superstars or shell-toes, because the front part looks like a shell.

The children get school uniform gift vouchers from School on Wheels.



Marlen gets a new school uniform from School on Wheels once a year, or more often if necessary.

"There's a lot of pressure in school to wear designer clothes. And it's dangerous to wear certain clothes or colours, because people might think you're in a gang. It's easier to wear a school uniform – blue top and pants."



"These are my favourite jeans. They're perfect for jumping and dancing. Sometimes I get really angry and frustrated. It helps to listen to music and jump up and down and dance like crazy. Music makes me happy. My favourite kinds of music are hip hop and Spanish rock."



"I like gym class, but my favourite sport is skateboarding."



never came back. The man just got worse. He beat and threatened my mom. Finally the police came and took him away. Then mom found out that she had been infected with HIV.”

Marlen’s mother’s health isn’t bad, but sometimes she has to be admitted to hospital.

“I get really worried then,” says Marlen.

There are three other kids at the shelter but they are younger.

“I had a friend who was my age but she moved to another shelter. We were best friends and we could talk about anything. I miss her.”

Marlen can’t tell anyone where she lives because there is still so much prejudice surrounding AIDS. One of Marlen’s schoolmates once found out where she lived.

“She told everybody at school that I lived at an AIDS shelter and that everyone should stay away from me. ‘Don’t talk to Marlen,’ she used to say. ‘Don’t let her sit with us. She might give AIDS to you and your family.’ I complained to the principal and in the end I threatened to call the police on her. She got scared and stopped.” 🌐



Prom dress

“I wore this dress to the prom when I graduated from junior high school. Mom gave it to me. I love the colour and the design.”

Michael homeless when mother got cancer

When Michael’s mother got lung cancer and ended up in a coma, she lost both her job and their beautiful house by the ocean.

Michael and his mother

Michael’s mother was in hospital in a coma for several months. Michael, who was 14 at the time, stayed with his best friend from the football team. Every other week, Michael stayed with his mother in hospital.

“It was hard. I had to grow up fast and my mom became like a child I had to take care of.”

When his mother’s money ran out, she was moved to a cheaper hospital. The staff there were overworked and stressed.

“They treat me like crap,” his mother cried. “I’m in terrible pain but they won’t give me enough painkillers because the hospital has to save money.”

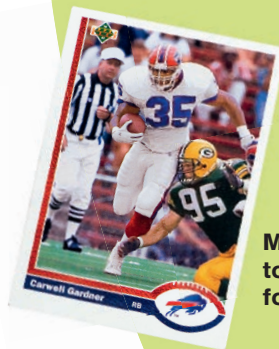
When his mother was finally allowed to come



home, they had nowhere to go. In the end they moved to a homeless shelter. Michael didn’t tell anyone at school about what had happened. He was afraid that people would look down on him. His grades dropped and he almost lost his place on the

football team.

“Through School on Wheels I got a tutor, Rafael. With his help, I managed to catch up and get through my schoolwork. We still meet once a week. My dream is to be a professional football player or a fireman.” 🌐



Michael wants to be a professional football player.



Michael loves American football.

“The game has taught me a lot about cooperation and inspired me to be less self-centred. Everyone’s important in a team. We’re only as strong as our weakest link.”



Michael’s football trophy.

Costs to be sick

Almost 50 million Americans have no health insurance, and many are hit hard when they have to pay sky-high hospital bills. The USA comes pretty far down in the WHO (World Health Organisation) ranking of different countries’ healthcare systems.



Children worth just as much

Sierra is woken by her father shaking her shoulder. It's only 5.30 in the morning, but if she doesn't get up now she'll have to wait in line for the shower.

Sierra slips out to the shower room in the corridor and steps under the warm water, still half asleep. Wrapped in a towel, she tip-toes back to the room and jumps straight back into bed for another hour before breakfast.

At eight they have to leave. They have to take their valuables with them because there's no lock on the door to their room. Nobody is allowed back into the shelter until late afternoon. Sierra goes to school and her dad to work.

"Don't forget we have to practice for our next pow-wow tonight," says her dad.

"Okay," Sierra replies. She and her dad, Big Bear, are

Native Americans and belong to the Hunkpapa Sioux Nation. Sierra dances and her dad plays the drum. A pow-wow is a big party where Native Americans meet to talk, dance, sing and play music together. Sierra loves doing traditional dances, especially the Fancy Shawl Dance that's only for girls and women.

"You spin round and round, swinging beautiful, colourful shawls until you almost look like a butterfly," Sierra explains. "When I dance I forget all my problems,"

Sierra is proud of being Native.

"In our culture, children and adults have the same value. We are allowed to join



Sierra with her father Big Bear. She has a Native name too – it means She Who Walks With Thunder.



Her dad's drum is made of wood and the skin is made of cow hide.

in their council and our voices are heard. It's great."

Some of the kids at Sierra's school have found out she lives at a shelter.

"Some of them are mean and say 'I don't like her, she's homeless. She's poor.' I only have three friends at school. People only want to hang out with people the same colour as them. It's depressing. Just because I'm different I'm treated badly." 🌐



The rooms at the shelter are cramped.

Sierra Longfeather, 11

Lives: Shelter, Santa Barbara.

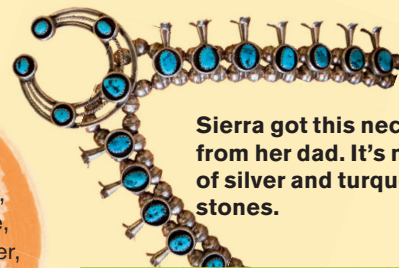
Likes: Playing drums, dancing, singing.

Sad: When adults don't respect me.

Loves: My dad.

Looks up to: Martin Luther King.

Sierra wants to be
A motorcycle designer, an artist, a police officer, a world traveller, a dancer, an author, president



Sierra got this necklace from her dad. It's made of silver and turquoise stones.



We are the First Nation!

When the Europeans came to North America there were around five million people living there, people that are now called Native Americans. Back then there were thousands of different groups and several hundred different languages and dialects, but now there are only about two million Native Americans left in the US and one million in Canada. Many were killed by the Europeans but most died of disease, starvation or other problems caused by the white people's invasion. Native Americans are now the poorest minority group in the US.

"I look up to Martin Luther King because he fought for all races, not just his own but for us Natives too. It's sad that he died for what he believed, and still people are discriminated against today."



Kattranece was nine years old and had just been shopping with her mother when she heard a loud bang. A few seconds passed before she realised that someone was shooting at them.

Kattranece was shot

Get in the car, quick," shouts their mum. Kattranece and her younger sisters jump in the back and their mother steps on the gas. The shot came from another car that is now chasing them along the free-way and still firing shots at them. Suddenly Kattranece feels a burning pain in her chest.

"Mom, it burns!"

Kattranece's mother realises her daughter has been shot but she doesn't dare stop. In the end she drives down a street full of people. The police come and their pursuers give up.

Shot in the lung

Kattranece has been shot in one lung and nearly dies. She has to stay in hospital for three months and have several operations before the doctors manage to get the bullet out. Then she has to go to court to testify against one of the men who shot at her. He's a gang member and says he got the wrong person. They meant to shoot someone else.

Kattranece has to learn to do a lot of things all over again, like talk, walk and remember. It's going well but unfortunately the bullet wound has made her asthma much worse. This causes problems when she becomes homeless. After a big fight with their dad, their mother takes only what she can pack in a hurry and tells her daughters it's time to leave. From then on, every day they move to a new place. Kattranece thinks her mother did the right thing, but it's hard when her coughing gets worse because of the dust, dirt and cold in cheap motels, at shelters and in cars.

For a few months now, the family have been living at a special shelter for homeless families. Kattranece's favourite thing is singing.

"I performed when the shelter had a picnic. I was nervous and once I started laughing in the middle of a song. Afterwards I was happy and relieved. People said I was really good. If we find a place to live I want to sing in a church choir again." 🌍



Kattranece with her sisters Shacarla, 4, Shatrea, 12, Kathiella, 6, and their mother Kathleen.



Kattranece Fuguoa, 14

Lives: Shelter for families, South LA.

Likes: Writing songs and singing. Reading.

Listens to: Alicia Keys.

Sad: When adults fight.

Happy: When I sing and when I'm with friends and family.

Looks up to: My mom.

Wants to be: A singer, fashion designer or journalist.

When Kattranece left her home she took a teddy bear that looked like this. It got lost somewhere along the way. She misses it, and a pearl necklace she got from her grandma.



A tutor from School on Wheels helps Kattranece with her homework in the learning room they built at the shelter.

Someone donated a keyboard to School on Wheels and asked them to give it to a homeless child who is interested in music. Kattranece got it!





At the festival all the children get their faces painted to look like wild animals.



Zachery misses his sister and brothers

Zachery, 10, is having a good day because he's meeting his sister and brother and going to a festival with them and their mother. Usually his siblings stay with their dad while Zachery and his mother live at a shelter. A third brother lives at a foster

home. Zachery's mother has been drug free for two years and he hopes that soon they can have their own place.

"The worst thing about being homeless is I can't play football and that people at the shelter steal our food. When we moved in we

bought lots of food but when we came back it was gone. Now I'm worried that people will take my stuff. I also worry when I can't be with my brother Desmond to protect him when kids at school start hitting him."

Three sisters = one family

Big sister Ashley, 19, came as soon as she heard that her mother had been put in prison again. Her younger sisters were alone in their apartment and about to be evicted. Ashley had to give up her job and her evening course to take care of her sisters. There wasn't space for them with Ashley and her boyfriend so the sisters started to move around. After a few months on the road, they have

finally found a good shelter.

"I've seen movies about homeless people," says Brittney, "but I never imagined I'd be one of them. I miss my mom and hope she gets sober so we can stay together again."



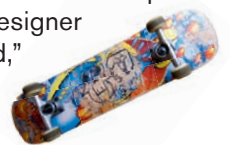
Brian & Byron have found a home!

Brian, 14, and his brother Byron, 13, are very excited. After two years at a homeless shelter, their mother has proved that she can stay off drugs and they've been given help to move into their own apartment. It's in a dangerous area with gangs where you sometimes hear shooting at night. But there's a private courtyard where they can play and skate without risking getting into trouble. They both like school and want to design computer



games when they grow up.

"Our role model is Shigeru Miyamoto, the best computer game designer in the world," says Brian.



Clifton won poetry prize

Clifton's teacher suggested he should enter a poetry competition and Clifton, 11, who lives at a shelter with his mother, wrote a poem about love.

"I thought about things I like to do and talk about with family and friends. I called the poem 'Love equals...'. I worked hard and it got longer and longer. It's about how it's what's on the inside that counts, not the outside.

And how love can help us survive, even when we go through hard times."

Out of 10,000 children's poems, Clifton's was one of the few winning entries. The winners went to a big ceremony in Beverly Hills and

their poems were read out by Hollywood stars.

"Mom cried. I won 500 dollars and they gave a lot of books to the School on Wheels learning room at the shelter. That made me proud and made me focus more on school."

