

The Dallas Morning News

July 15, 2016

Camp Bravo gives Dallas-area homeless kids a chance to shine

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Published: 15 July 2016 06:41 PM

Updated: 15 July 2016 06:41 PM

Camp Bravo brings the arts to kids who don't have much of a chance to be kids. They are homeless, and they sometimes have to act like adults. They don't often get to smile, or laugh.

But at Camp Bravo their troubles melt away.



Photo by: David Woo, Dallas Morning News Staff Photographer

"I love it," said longtime camper Elizabeth Morales, kind, and they never judge you."

Elizabeth is one of about 300 children ages 4 to 12 who get to cook, try karate, sing and dance at the weeklong camps at Lovers Lane United Methodist Church.

The nonprofit Rainbow Days offers the camp twice. The first session ended Friday. The second will run July 26-29. Rainbow Days sends buses to pick up the children from shelters.

The goal, says Rainbow Days founder and CEO Cathey Brown, is to give the kids a chance to shine, "The idea is to give them a positive experience through the creative arts," Brown said. "Each child gets to be on stage and be a star."

The camps conclude with a performance led by singer and songwriter Eddie Coker. "He's just magic with the kids," Brown said.

Coker, who was born and raised in Dallas but now lives in Colorado, has been part of Camp Bravo for almost 30 years. "It's all about the children and loving them," Coker said. "The arts stop the spinning" of their lives.

At rehearsal on Friday, the campers eagerly danced and sang along with him. He drew out lots of laughter and talent.

"He's cool and silly," said Autumn Hunter, 7. She admitted she was nervous about performing at first but then was able to enjoy herself. She'd like to be a singer and writer when she grows up.

Erica Chase, a parent of twin 4-year-old boys at the camp, came to watch the show. "They love it," Chase said. "They enjoy the singing and dancing. They don't want it to end."

Former attendee Karaan Chism, 17, is now a camp volunteer. He said he helps out because the camp built him up when he lacked confidence.

"I didn't believe in myself," Karaan said. "And they showed they cared. I felt love and attention here."

Kelly Wierzbinski, who directs the camp, uses about 50 volunteers at the camps. A few restaurants pitch in by donating food. "Rainbow Days started the camp here but then moved elsewhere and is now back," she said. "It's like we've come full circle."

The church has made Rainbow Days a part of its ministry. It hosts other events for the nonprofit, such as a Christmas party and an Easter activity. "We immediately fell in love with Camp Bravo," said Kristen Larkin, events director at Lovers Lane.

To close the camp, the kids celebrate with a party. They leave with goodie bags filled with treats, including a golden mini-Oscar, and with big smiles.

