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By Phil Roth, UT Dallas

For a few days this summer, children from Dallas-area homeless shelters and motels came to UT Dallas to experience the fun of summer camp, while also learning skills that could help them overcome adversity in the future.

UT Dallas has hosted Kids University for 21 years. This year, nearly 300 youngsters filled the UT Dallas classroom buildings across from Berkner Hall in two separate four-day sessions.

“We have an obligation to make contributions to the community. We invest a little bit each summer and, hopefully, it really will change some lives,” said [Dr. George Fair](#), who has been spearheading UT Dallas’ involvement in the camp since it began in 1995.

Fair, vice president of [diversity and community engagement](#), said UT Dallas provided the meeting space and meals for Kids University, and students from UT Dallas’ [Academic Bridge](#) program introduced the children to basic concepts of algebra.

Buses transported children from 26 shelters in the Dallas area — shelters for victims of domestic violence, sexual trafficking, drug recovery and other emergency situations. Children also came from crowded motels where several families share a single room.

According to the Metro Dallas Homeless Alliance’s 2016 “Point in Time” homeless survey, there are nearly 1,300 homeless children living in Dallas. The National Center on Family Homelessness says that compared to non-homeless children, homeless children are nine times more likely to repeat a grade and exhibit three times more emotional and behavioral problems. In addition, 83 percent have been exposed to at least one serious violent event.

“Drug use and domestic violence is very common in this population — even without them being at a domestic violence shelter. A lot of these kids don’t have fathers involved in their lives, so they don’t have that male role model,” said Kelly Wierzbinski, director of [Rainbow Days](#)’ Family Connection program.



Dr. George Fair, vice president of diversity and community engagement, and Hannah Donaldson, children, youth and family services specialist for Rainbow Days, congratulate a young camper for graduating from Kids University.



In the Home Depot room at Kids University, children painted or built various craft projects.

Rainbow Days, a Dallas nonprofit that has run Kids University since its inception, is dedicated to helping children and youths in adversity build coping skills and resilience to create positive futures.

“During the year and at this camp, we provide the kids with the tools and skills they need to overcome adversity and build their resiliency, so they can stay drug-free, stay in school and make healthy choices. We try to inspire and prepare children to live a life filled with hope and promise,” Wierzbinski said.

Camp participants attended interactive classes during the week, including engineering, computer science, geology, math and nutrition. At this year’s camp, a workshop presented by the Home Depot and a science center presented by the Perot Museum of Nature and Science were favorites of the children.



Three children are ready for graduation ceremonies at Kids University, a summer camp for children who live in Dallas-area homeless shelters and motels.

In addition to the activities, the children met with a mentor and peers to discuss the importance of staying in school, making healthy decisions and staying drug-free.

One reason Kids University is at UT Dallas, Wierzbinski said, is to introduce college as an option for the children.



Students from UT Dallas' Academic Bridge program taught some campers the basics of algebra.

“It’s not by accident that we have them on a college campus. When they walk across that stage on the last day of camp and we do the ‘graduation’ ceremony, Dr. Fair says he hopes to see them in about six to seven years,” she said. “We hope they will aspire to attend college and see that it’s within their reach. The world opens up.”

Shawna Elkins, the mother of two boys who participated in Kids University, believed the camp encouraged her children to consider higher education.

“I hope it will motivate them to want to go on to college. Just being on a campus and knowing there is something beyond high school helps them understand you can further your education and do better and greater things,” she said.

One 11-year-old boy who attended the June camp said he was inspired by the UT Dallas campus.

“I actually was thinking I’d like to go to this college,” he said. “I really like this college.”

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