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At Camp Bravo, Dallas-area homeless kids take center stage

Written by Meara Isenberg | July 31, 2017

Photos by Ron Baselice, Dallas Morning News Staff Photographer

A blistering sun may have been beating down on North Dallas on a recent summer evening, but inside Lovers Lane United Methodist Church, Christmas was in the air.

Children gathered on the church's main stage, singing to a bluesy beat in a show called "Christmas in July". Among them was 7-year-old Micah Wilson, strumming his inflatable guitar with purpose.

"When I grow up, I want to be a rock star," Micah said. "I told my mom that I want a guitar for Christmas."

The stage is not the only thing Wilson shared with the children alongside him. Living with his mom and two siblings in a Shared Housing Group Residence program, he joined kids from homeless, transitional and domestic violence shelters to spend a week singing, dancing and performing at Camp Bravo.

"They are enthusiastic, they are accepted, there's no judgment," said Cathey Brown, founder and CEO of Rainbow Days, the nonprofit that produces Camp Bravo.

The camp was created by Brown in 1985 to get kids out of Dallas shelters and allow them to express themselves in a safe environment. The team started small, but thanks to years of generous donations and support from local talent, Camp Bravo is now able to support 300 kids in two, week-long sessions each summer.

'They are shining'

Director Kelly Wierzbinski has been with Camp Bravo for 26 years, and has seen how its positive environment impacts kids.



Micah Wilson, 7, performs in the show's finale with fellow campers at Camp Bravo.

"We focus on what they are doing right, when many grow up in an environment that shows what they are doing wrong," Wierzbinski said. "You see them get up on stage, and they are shining."



Children's singer and songwriter Eddie Coker, of Dallas, performs with campers in a Christmas-themed show at Camp Bravo.

Through movie making, song creation and various other activities during the week, kids were able to be just that -- kids. On Friday, they put on the Christmas-themed performance, complete with red and green shirts that they tie-dyed themselves.

They sang and danced onstage alongside children's singer-songwriter Eddie Coker in a joke-riddled, fun-filled finale to the week.

"It's a break from the monotony of their life," Coker said. "It makes a difference."

Coker has been performing music for more than 30 years, and has worked with Camp Bravo for most of that time. His goofy personality was a hit with the kids. When he demonstrated a karate kick that sent his shoe hurtling through the air, they roared with laughter.

Coker was also responsible for perhaps the most memorable part of the afternoon -- or at least what Micah called his favorite part.

To the crowd's delight, the song stopped mid-performance and was replaced with C&C Music Factory's "Gonna Make You Sweat (Everybody Dance Now)." Kids poured out of the aisles, some grabbing a partner, dancing uninhibitedly.

"I was spinning and I was jumping and I was throwing my hands in the air," Micah said, throwing his hands up once more.

An escape from the everyday

Although camps last only a week, they leave a lasting impression on some of the kids that pass through. Tony Ballard, a Camp Bravo volunteer who was once a participant, can attest to that.

"When I hear Rainbow Days, I think of fun times, I remember it being an escape," said Ballard, 37. "I remember the teachers treating us like we are important."



Tony Ballard elicits a response from campers Friday at Camp Bravo at Lovers Lane United Methodist Church.

Growing up with his mother and siblings in East Dallas Section 8 housing, he says he knows "exactly what most of these kids are going home to."

"When you identify with the kids, they feel familiar with you," Ballard said. "They put their emotions out, about how they are feeling today, how they are feeling at home, and that's how you know what they are going home to."

Nine-year-old Matthew Rojas, who lives in transitional housing, was not afraid to share how he was feeling during the performance Friday.

"I like to dance and I like to sing too," Rojas said. He held one arm outstretched and proceeded to sing "Frosty the Snowman" as a volunteer dressed as a snowman walked by.

Rojas lives with his parents and three siblings in a home where he says he has no privacy and can't watch TV by himself. At camp, he has the space to do things on his own.

"I've been making a video, making signs, dancing, making art and playing," the East Grand Preparatory Academy fourth-grader said.

For Rojas, the best part of camp was "having fun and being loved by everyone."



Matthew Rojas, 9, performs with fellow campers at Camp Bravo.

'It matters'

"We know it works," Wierzbinski said of the camp. "We know even if they get this message once, it matters."

It mattered to Wilson. When he heard his bus number called for him to go home, he jumped out of his seat and ran out the church doors. He couldn't be late for his encore performance.

"I'm going to sing the song for my mom," he said.

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