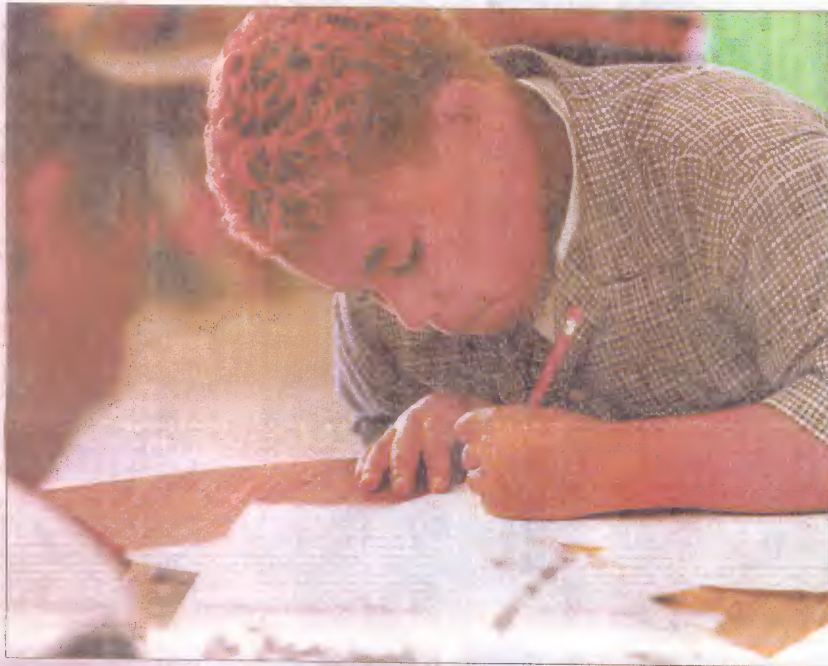


Wednesday, March 14, 2001

SPECIAL REPORT

Educating homeless kids

A school of their own



Carlos Moleley, 10, works on a Mayflower project at Mary McLeod Bethune School. In the last decade, hundreds of kids have temporarily attended Bethune while their parents searched for housing.

L.B. haven offers learning, belonging

By Wendy Thomas Russell

Staff writer

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It's silent-reading time at Mary McLeod Bethune School, but Carlos Moleley isn't reading.

Instead, the stocky 10-year-old skips to the center of the classroom, turns and takes a running leap onto a big, blue beanbag.

He lies there, sprawled out and grinning proudly.

In other schools, Carlos' rambunctiousness might be reprimanded. But here, in this West Long Beach school designated for homeless children, the diversion barely registers a blip on the radar screen of teacher Brian Dilts.

As far as Dilts is concerned, Carlos has earned the privilege of a little tomfoolery and so have the 10 other homeless kids attending Bethune on this chilly November day.

After all, when they walk out of school, reality will take hold: They will once again be the kids without homes. Without security. Without certainty.

In their everyday lives, many have dirty hair and empty stomachs. They don't take



Bethune student Mark James, 9, says he's optimistic that his family will "get settled" soon and move out of the homeless shelter where they've been living.

HOMELESS KIDS INVISIBLE VICTIMS

THE SERIES

- **Sunday:** About a quarter of homeless people are children.
- **Monday:** The sad tale of one family's unraveling.
- **Tuesday:** The Play House, a preschool for homeless kids.
- **Today:** Long Beach's special grade school for homeless children.
- **Thursday:** Runaways and throw-aways — homeless youth on the move.
- **Friday:** A kid's life in a homeless shelter.
- **Sunday:** What's being done to help homeless children.

Fourth in a series

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Brittany
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“(Bethune is) a pretty good deal. You know (the kids) are going to get clothed, fed, cared for and educated.”

Brian Dilts, Bethune teacher

HOMELESS: Bringing continuity to children's lives

CONTINUED FROM A1

trips to toy stores, theme parks or pizza parlors. Their play times are brief and often overshadowed by the worries of the day and the fragility of their lives.

“They’ve witnessed abuse,” Dilts, 31, says of many of his pupils. “They’ve been abused. They’re in constant transition. They don’t know where they’ll be sleeping tonight.”

At Bethune, Dilts says, they “get to be kids again, instead of carrying this weight.”

If Carlos is playing, it means he’s in a place that makes him feel comfortable, safe and happy.

Quality questions

That’s much of what Bethune — one of about 40 schools for the homeless nationwide — is about. Its mission has raised the eyebrows of more than a few state and federal agencies, whose administrators say quality of education is sacrificed when homeless pupils are segregated from other pupils.

The federal Stuart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 excludes schools such as Bethune from applying for the federal money to which most schools are entitled. And California’s Department of Education supports the act.

“Many times when we isolate students, they don’t receive the full benefit of public education,” says Doug McDougall, who controls McKinney funds for the department. “The law doesn’t say that we should separate someone because their feelings will get hurt.”

Superintendent Carl Cohn of the Long Beach Unified School District dismisses the criticism as “political correctness run amok.”

“If this were a perfect world, serving homeless youngsters in (regular) public schools would, in fact, be the ideal,” Cohn says. “But ... what you want to do is provide the best possible atmosphere, independent of political correctness.”

Cohn says it’s important that kids who are under a lot of stress receive extra care and attention while they’re at school.

“Whatever works to try to bring some continuity to the lives of these kids is what we all have to be for,” Cohn says. “I will fight mightily for (Bethune).”

Indefinite stays

Most of the youngsters at Bethune are sent from local shelters or arrive by word of mouth. They come for a day, a week, a month or the whole semester; no one really knows.

They’ll stay, Dilts says, until their parents move to another shelter or another town, or, if they’re lucky, into permanent housing.

“You just fill these kids up with as much good stuff as you can,” he says, “because you don’t know when they’ll be coming back.”

Opened by the school district 10 years ago, Bethune depends on private donations and volunteers to supplement an annual budget of \$165,000 and a four-member staff.

On any day, Dilts and two aides may handle between five and 35 pupils, ages 4 to 14. By necessity, the course content is generic.

Dilts must educate children of all ages and levels together in one room. Math lessons are individualized, and children with similar skills are paired up in some subjects. Sometimes, a fourth-grader may be reading at a second-grade level, so an older child is paired with a younger one.

To avoid embarrassment, Dilts tells the older ones, “You’re teaching this kid.”

Each pupil gets two meals a day: breakfast and lunch. They read, work on computers, learn math and science, study current events and take field trips, among other things.

At the same time, they are taught social skills, get lots of praise and enjoy as much one-on-one attention as possible.

And when they leave Bethune, they walk away with new backpacks, school supplies, clothes and even toys — all of them donated.

“It’s a pretty good deal,” Dilts says. “You know (the kids) are going to get clothed, fed, cared for and educated.”



As Bethune’s only teacher, Brian Dilts makes every effort to make each child feel included and respected. “I don’t care if you haven’t had a bath in five days and if you have lice — you’re going to get as much respect as I do,” he says.

Earlier location

Three years ago, Bethune moved from a room in Family Shelter for the Homeless, run by Catholic Charities at 1401 Chestnut Ave., into its two portable classrooms, a stone’s throw from the Terminal Island (47/103) Freeway.

The school has since been integrated into a 26-acre development called Villages at Cabrillo, a development that, when finished, promises to be among the nation’s largest and most comprehensive social-service centers for the homeless.

The school’s namesake, Mary McCleod Bethune, was the first black woman to head a federal office — the Division of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration — and the founder of a girls school in Daytona Beach, Fla. She died in 1955.

“I think (Bethune) would be very proud of having a school like this named after her,” Dilts says. “Because (homeless children) are a population that’s been forgotten, similar to the Negro women at the time.”

Children end up homeless for many reasons, Dilts says. The most common are that their mothers have fled abusive husbands or that their parents have lost their jobs or become reliant on

drugs or alcohol or have psychological problems.

Choosing Bethune over other public schools is sometimes a matter of logistics: The parents are in Long Beach temporarily and don’t have the time or resources to get their child enrolled in a regular school. Difficulties in getting school or immunization records can make matters worse. Because most homeless people don’t own cars, transportation can be a nightmare.

Other times, it’s a matter of preference: In regular public schools, homeless kids may feel alienated and ashamed. At Bethune, every effort is made to make the children feel included and respected.

“I don’t care if you haven’t had a bath in five days and if you have lice — you’re going to get as much respect as I do,” Dilts says. “That’s the beauty here. The embarrassment factor is not that big. We’re all in the same boat.”

Carlos, for one, appreciates that.

“It’s easier,” says the 10-year-old. “There’s, like, 12 kids here, and they are all going through the same thing. So no one’s better than you.”

Lunchroom discussion

Sitting at a small table in Bethune’s cozy lunch room, Carlos and his new buddy, Mark James, discuss their experiences openly.

School, they say, gives them a welcome break from the shelter where they’re staying until their mothers “get settled.”

Both boys say they don’t like the shelter because the rules are strict. They can’t, for example, have electronics, which means no TVs, radios or Game Boys. They must abide by a strict curfew and lights-out rule. They have to clean. And the only playroom available is full of “baby stuff.”

As for the food: “They don’t make their oatmeal right,” says Mark, 9.

“Guess what they gave us this morning,” asks Carlos. “Powdered eggs. They tasted just like Ajax.”

Like many of the roughly 2,000 children who have traveled through Bethune’s revolving doors, Carlos knows too well what it’s like to be homeless. He has spent most of his life moving from city to city, staying with friends and relatives. Sometimes the stints are a year or two. Other times, only a few months.

For years, he has dreamed of a home of his own. Now, his expectations are lower. He longs simply for “another shelter” or, better yet, a motel room.

“I wish we could get a kitchenette,” he says.

How you can help

• If you want to help Bethune School, call (562) 435-2050

• To make donations or to volunteer assistance to other local homeless organizations through the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services, call Patrick Burkhardt at (562) 570-4003 or Angela Coron at (562) 570-4001

False promises

There are signs of resentment and anger. Carlos is protective of his mom but painfully aware of the numerous promises that have been made to him in earnest only to be broken time and again.

When Mark shows optimism that his mom will "get a place really fast," Carlos cuts in with a less optimistic view.

"Parents say some things," he says, frowning, "but it really doesn't turn out most of the time. Like, they say they're going to get you a scooter when they get the money. Then they don't."

The different perspectives emerge again when the two boys are asked what they'd like for Christmas.

"A home," Mark says, just above a whisper. "A scooter," Carlos says in a louder voice. "Then a home."

They agree on one thing, though: It's not fair that they don't have a place to live. Are they jealous of kids who do?

"All the time," says Carlos.

"Every day," says Mark. But the two quickly rebound from talk of hardships in their lives. They whisper to each other and laugh; they joke and play. To look at them, one would never know they were homeless. Each is well-scrubbed and dressed in a clean shirt, pants and shoes.

And they're smiling. At the end of the interview, they sprint out the door and onto the playground.

The uncertainty and the poignancy make teaching at Bethune a challenge.

Testing is out of the question, as are grade cards, parent-teacher conferences and a scheduled curriculum. The closest thing to a yearbook is an album full of pictures.

The staff tries to make the lessons challenging for all, but the coursework remains fluid, plans flexible.

Dilts understands, for example, that some youngsters are in situations ill-suited to studying, so a child whose homework isn't finished may be gently scolded but isn't kept from recess.

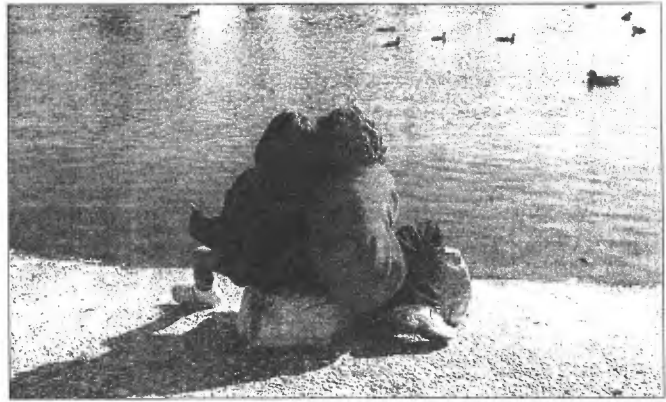
The staff must be equal parts teacher and counselor. They constantly want to do more, they say, and they sometimes worry about their pupils when the sun sets.

"The kids really are the victims," says Paula Oba, Bethune's steadfast administrator.

After three years at the school, Dilts says resources are still far too low. He's tired, physically and emotionally. But he's still passionate about his work and has learned a valuable coping mechanism that helps him through each day.

It's the same mechanism he learned during his days as a substitute teacher, he says. He does what he can, then shelves the rest and heads home.

"At the end of the day," he says, "I (have) to move on."



Two young girls make fast friends on a class outing to El Dorado Park. Bethune's pupils may be in school for a day, a week, a month or a whole semester.

End of the day

It's 3:10 in the afternoon. A school bus will soon roll up outside the chain-link fence and take most of the children to a bus stop, where their parents are supposed to be waiting.

When they leave, the staff will wonder whether the children will be OK and which ones will be back tomorrow.

"Half the time, we have no clue where they go," Dilts says. "It's kind of sad. You're sending 4- and 5-year-olds (on the bus), and you're just hoping someone's there to pick them up."

Bethune aide was once one of its pupils

By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

Sandra knows how it feels to clutch her mother's hand in the middle of the night and sneak away from a drunk, abusive father.

She knows how it feels to sleep in shelters. To have strangers give her clothes, food and toys. To be left out, stared at and judged harshly by her peers.

So when the 18-year-old teacher's aide shoulders up to a child who's having a bad day at Mary McLeod Bethune School for homeless kids, she can say — truthfully — that she knows the feeling.

"Most of the kids have their anger, and they don't know how to express it," says Sandra, a freshman at Brooks College in Long Beach who attended Bethune as an eighth-grader. "I tell them about my experience and they're usually surprised."

Sandra says she listens — really listens — to what the children have to say and assures them they can rise above any hardship.

"I tell them, 'You shouldn't let (homelessness) stop you. Look at me: If I can do it, you can do it,'" she says.

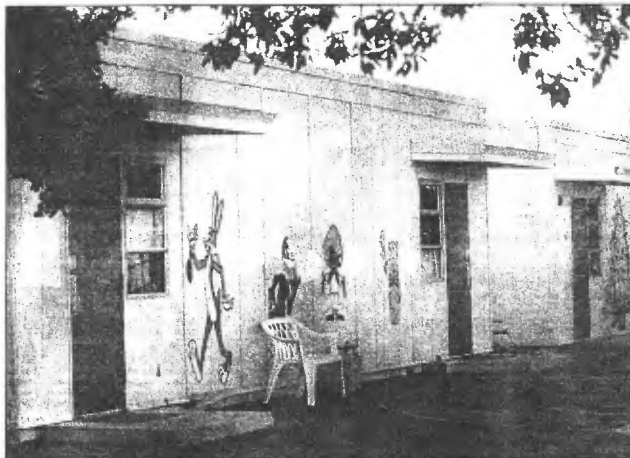
Work and school

Sandra, whose real name is not being disclosed in this story, took the job as a teacher's aide at Bethune last fall. The part-time hours work with her school schedule, she says, and both the pay and the emotional payoff are great.

Bethune's staff jumped at the chance to hire a former pupil.

"It helps to have somebody who has been here," says Paula Oba, the school's office administrator. "She understands the whole picture."

The second-oldest of six children, Sandra is a daughter of Mexican immigrants and the first child of the family born on American soil.



If the walls of Bethune School could talk, they'd spin numerous tales of triumph and tragedy. Even the school's 18-year-old teacher's aide has a story to tell. She was once a homeless child herself.

— alcohol abuse — and Sandra's life became a pingpong game. From her father's home to the shelters and back to her father's home.

"Every time we left, we had to start from scratch," she says.

When they returned, their rooms would be practically barren. Their pets would be gone. The smell of her dad's friends, who had partied there in the family's absence, would linger in the air.

After five long years, Sandra's mother took the kids away for the last time.

"At first I was scared," Sandra says. "And then I didn't really care anymore. I would see my mom, and as long as our family was together, that's all that mattered."

Help at Bethune

Sandra attended Bethune for several weeks until her mother could move into an apartment with the help of government welfare checks. The family got furniture from their church and food from the shelter.

The kids enrolled permanently in school, and Sandra graduated early.

Today, Sandra lives with her mother, brother and two of her sisters in a two-bedroom apartment. The two remaining sisters have chosen to live with their father.

Sandra says she's proud beyond words of her mother, the first woman in three generations of her family, she says, to leave an abusive husband.

"She was the first generation who broke the chain," she says. "It was a blessing for me because I wouldn't want that for my kids, and I'm glad she broke it."

No matter how bad things got, she says, she knows it could have been worse.

"We never had to sleep on the streets," Sandra says, adding that her mom "always would find a way to keep under shelter. We never went a day without food."

"All the barriers against her, and she still managed to bring us up healthy."

Worst time

While she was growing up in Torrance, her father worked for a company that made shampoo. Her mother, who learned to speak little English, was a homemaker.

Sandra says she doesn't remember the first time her father hit her mother. But she has distinct memories of the bruises left time and again on her mother's body — always strategically placed, so they could be covered up by clothing.

Likewise, Sandra doesn't remember how many times she picked up the telephone and dialed 911. But she recalls numerous times that police pulled up outside her house and her father explained the problems away.

The police always believed her father's lies, she says, because he was a good liar and because he spoke English fluently.

"They always tell you in school: 'The police are the good guys. They're going to help you,'" Sandra says. But the police in Torrance and Los Angeles never helped her, she says. Not once.

Sandra remembers the worst incident of abuse she and her siblings witnessed. Around Christmas, her mother asked her father for some money to buy gifts. The request was met with a punch to the head, which rendered Sandra's mom unconscious.

"We were all screaming," Sandra recalls. "We thought she was dead."

Finally, when Sandra was in the third grade, her mother took the six children and led them out the back door. It was nighttime, Sandra says, and her father had passed out drunk.

They slipped away without suitcases, money or food. Without their teddy bears or photographs or any of their most prized possessions. They even left without their pets.

For Sandra, the empty-handed exit was a welcome one. She was angry at her father and wanted only to get away.

It was worth having to show up at her aunt's house for a supply of

hand-me-down clothes and shoes. It was worth staying in shelters, where other kids teased her and treated her poorly because she was Latina. It was even worth the humiliation and isolation she felt at school.

"We never really had any stable friends — anybody we could talk to," she says. "Everyone looked at us as different."

Back at home

So it was with frustration and fear that Sandra accompanied her mother back to her father's house several months later.

"She felt it was too much for her," Sandra says of her mom. Homelessness had taken its toll.

But, for Sandra, the weight of domestic violence was much heavier than the weight of homelessness. While her father never hit Sandra or her sisters, she feared for the safety of her mother and brother.

Her father soon reverted to his old