

DATE: 5/22/09

SOURCE: USA Today

HEADLINE: School Caters to Homeless Children



School caters to homeless children

Updated 5/22/2009 9:48 AM

By Maggie Rodriguez and Lisa Weiss, Special for USA TODAY

SACRAMENTO — Justin Bisher, 11, attends one of the few schools in the country dedicated to homeless children, and that's where he met Lazarus the cat.

"If we're feeling sad at school, Lazarus hops up on our desks and cuddles with us," says Justin, one of an estimated 1.5 million homeless children in the U.S., according to the National Center on Family Homelessness.

Justin is a fifth-grader at the Mustard Seed School, a free, private school for homeless 3- to 15-year-olds funded by grants and donations. Lazarus lives in Ms. Madelyn's fourth- and fifth-grade classroom.

Mustard Seed is serving more students like Justin, who had homes before the recession but lost them during the economic downturn, says the school's director, Angela Hassell.

Most stay only three to four weeks before moving to their next public school, though some, such as Justin, stay longer.

School districts elsewhere report sharp increases in homeless children, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

Mustard Seed is one of about six schools nationwide just for homeless students, says Barbara Duffield, policy director of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth.

She says studies have shown that homeless students fare best in mainstream public schools.

Justin's mother, Lisa, began struggling financially three years ago, as her waitressing tips dried up and then she lost her job.

As her situation worsened last fall, the single mom could no longer provide housing for her family.

She found shelter through Family Promise, a non-profit group that supports homeless families, and enrolled her two children at Sacramento's Mustard Seed in September.

"There was a lot of uncertainty in his (Justin's) life," says his teacher, Madelyn Hall. "He couldn't have a pet of his own, but Lazarus became his pet."

Lazarus was at the school before Justin arrived, but the calico was weak with feline leukemia. Justin and his classmates adopted the cat and helped nurse him back to health.

Hall says Justin's hardships have increased his empathy. Homelessness "has not made him angry or resentful," she says.

DATE: 5/22/09

SOURCE: USA Today

HEADLINE: School Caters to Homeless Children

At night, Justin and his family sleep in church classrooms, moving to a different church every Sunday. Each morning, when a Family Promise van arrives to pick up the kids, Justin looks forward to seeing his feline friend.

Justin's teacher says the cat begins to meow with anticipation before his arrival. "I feed Lazarus and change his litter, but Lazarus and Justin are the ones who are best friends," Hall says. "Justin and Lazarus have helped heal each other."

Rodriguez anchors CBS' Early Show. Weiss is one of the show's producers.