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Party ignites holiday magic for homeless D.C. children



Emanuel Howard, 9, is amused by the magic tricks of the Great Zucchini during a holiday party at the Foundry Building in Georgetown. The event was sponsored by Dreams for Kids. (Jahi Chikwendiu/the Washington Post)

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By [Darryl Fears](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, December 22, 2009

Bright eyes twinkling, Alissa Poe, 7, bounded across the floor, leaped into Santa's lap and threw a little arm around his neck. She wanted a bike for Christmas, and a four-wheel truck, because "I already know how to drive," she said with a wide smile. "My friend taught me."

Alissa's moment with [Santa](#) was a sight for her mother Christina's sore eyes, and it was exactly the gift the young volunteers at [Dreams for Kids](#) wanted to provide when they arranged the Holiday for Hope celebration for 120 homeless children in the District.

The weekend snowstorm tried to play Grinch, and it succeeded in keeping many of the children away. Two buses that were supposed to pick up children at several homeless shelters and transitional apartments became stuck in ice. And one shelter shut its doors for the day before transportation could arrive.

It was a triumph that even 30 children reached the Foundry Building in Georgetown. Snow and ice turned the sloping one-way street that leads to the building into a slushy Slip 'n Slide. Their bus skidded sideways after dropping them off and had to be pulled out of a snowbank by a massive tow truck.

The trouble was worth it, said Andrew Horn, director of Dreams for Kids.

While moving with her mother from shelter to shelter in recent years, Alissa had trouble concentrating in school. She acted out so often that Christina Poe, 30, considered having medication prescribed for her.

Poe once slept in cars while struggling with joblessness and substance abuse. Now that she's completed a rehabilitation program, and was provided with transitional housing in Southeast, "Alissa is doing so much better," Poe said.

Alisa Mathis, 42, noticed a similar spark in the eyes of her son, Khalif, 8. As he glided from room to room eating a lunch of turkey with macaroni and cheese, cutting out paper Christmas trees and posing for pictures with Santa, Mathis said, "I've never seen my son so happy."

Mathis, a mother of four who lives in transitional housing, said she attended the celebration "because it gets them out of the house, helps them have fun and helps with Christmas." A single mother hit hard by the recession, Mathis can barely afford the electronics her boy wants. She works a part-time job as a recess monitor for Prince George's County schools.

"Us moving into shelters and stuff, he wasn't focused in school," Mathis said of Khalif. "Kids made fun of him.

"The cost of living is so high. The rent is so high. I thought maybe I could get some education to get a better job to afford it. Hopefully, this is temporary."

In the District, 1,426 children like Alissa and Khalif were counted in the [2009 census](#) of people living on the streets and in shelters in metropolitan Washington, a 24 percent increase from the previous year.

Montgomery County had 335 homeless children, an 18 percent jump. There was a 20 percent jump in Prince George's and a 15 percent increase in Prince William County.

Shelter life darkens a child's mood, according to the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#). Half of homeless school-age children experience anxiety, depression and withdrawal, compared with about 18 percent of children who have homes. By the time a homeless child is 8, one in three experience a major mental disorder, according to the group.

Christmas "is a painful time of year" for homeless children, said Ellen L. Bassuk, president of the [National Center on Family Homelessness](#). "They've lost so much. And on top of it, you have this hyped-up holiday that tells them they should be getting this and that. They don't have the understanding to know what Christmas is all about."

As the children watched the magic tricks of the [Great Zucchini](#) (Eric Knaus) and [Urban Artistry's](#) funky dance moves, hundreds of gift bags filled with donated toys waited. Dreams for Kids volunteers Niki Adebwale, 27; Sara Miller, 24; Regi Lyons, 28; and newlyweds Aaron and Amanda Jones spent hours filling them with dollhouses, Nerf ball guns and basketballs. On Tuesday, they plan to take the gifts to children who couldn't get to the party.

"It's very nice," Poe said. "It's been kind of rough for me. I haven't had much money, and I was real scared that I wouldn't have anything for Christmas. Everybody says it's not about toys, but the kids don't know that."

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