

Ketchup Kids' Principal Feeding Hearts, Lives

Earlier this year, CBN News reported on an extraordinary elementary school principal who is helping her students with more than just their education.

Nine out of 10 students at Whitney Elementary school in Las Vegas are either homeless, or in danger of being homeless.

But their principal is keeping these families housed, fed and clothed, thanks to donations that pour in from across the world—without an ounce of help from the government.

Summer School, Desperation

In July and August, some students are in summer school at Whitney Elementary. Summer school students are typically children who need to catch up academically, particularly those who are still learning English.

It's also a chance for fun days—like field trips. On the day that CBN News visited, the children were boarding a bus for a field trip.

As they did that, a woman and her three children showed up at the school, a reminder of just how desperate the community is. They were dirty, hungry, and the mother had no shoes on.

Principal Sherrie Gahn, a teacher at the school and a volunteer in the trailer where donations are kept, sprang into action.

"What size do you use?" a volunteer asked one of the children, as she sorted through a pile of donated t-shirts.

The family had been evicted from a local motel across from the school and had been living on the street for about a week.

That was until one of the children told their mother, "Let's go to school. They'll help us."

Only moments after they showed up at school, the mother and children had clothes, bags of food and new shoes.

Gahn and the Whitney staff put the clothes they had been wearing in the washer, and the family showered at the school.

'Ketchup Soup'

This isn't the first family Gahn has helped, and it won't be the last.

Gahn started working at Whitney Elementary school about nine years ago. It was during her first week on the job that she noticed something that would change the mission of her life.

She saw two boys in the lunchroom putting ketchup packets in their pockets. Gahn asked a staff member about it.

"I said, why are they doing that? And she said, 'They all do that. They put it in their pockets to go home and make ketchup soup,'" she said. "And I said, 'How many?' She said, 'Most of them.' So I said, 'That can't happen on my turf.'"

It took a little while to get a project to help the kids get started, but once the donations started rolling in, Gahn never looked back.

Since then, she's been sending children home with bags of food for the weekend filled with items the children can make for themselves because they are often without adult supervision.

Gahn also uses donations to help the children and their families get clothes and shoes. She even helps pay for visits to the doctor, the eye doctor and the dentist.

When a family is in a desperate situation financially—facing foreclosure, for example—she will use donated funds to help pay bills so the kids don't end up on the street. More

importantly, so they stay in school.

Tough Times

Sabrina Martinez, a mother of four children, has been through tough times during the last couple of years. Her husband, Jose, lost his job and their home foreclosed.

"We were really at a rock bottom. Of course, our children—we try not to stress them out, or give them that kind of panic, tell them that we're like most Americans, we're losing their homes," Martinez explained.

"We came to Mrs. Gahn and told them, 'We might not be here next year,'" she said.

Three of the four Martinez children are school-aged and they all go to Whitney. They are still in school largely because of the help Gahn provided for their family to get back on their feet.

Jose Martinez started attending a job connect program Whitney offers on Thursdays. He earned his GED and is now working again.

"They helped me to go to school, they paid for the school and for the test," Jose said, stressing the importance of having a GED when looking for a job.

Crystal Martinez, the oldest of her brothers and sisters, attended Whitney from kindergarten through fifth grade. She'll move on to middle school this year.

"It's amazing that most teachers love us and they try to prepare us for the future. And we get a lot of things," Crystal said, tearing up.

Whirlwind Year

It's been a whirlwind year for the school. They've had lots of media attention and lots of donations that have led to some much-needed improvements, like a new computer lab and a brand-

new library.

Gahn said it couldn't have come at a better time because the library was outdated.

"Our newest books were from 1999. So, in library terms, especially in education terms, that's very old," she said.

After the summer school day was over, half a dozen teachers were working in the library, organizing and cataloging the books, and downloading electronic books onto more than 700 Kindle Fire e-readers, which have also been donated to the school.

Each student and teacher will get to take one home and use it for educational purposes.

"What a phenomenal motivator for a child to, when the teacher says open up your book, they're turning on a Kindle," Gahn said with a smile.

She said the school has gone from the worst school in the county when it came to technology to being one of the best.

Wanting to Give Back

There's a common theme among the children who are students at Whitney Elementary: They all want to give back.

Crystal, the oldest of the Martinez children, told us when she grows up, she wants to be just like Gahn and others.

"Because they show that they love us, and I want to do that for other kids," she said.

Gahn said hearing things like that make all the difference, even though she does worry about sustainability. She knows the poverty in the community is cyclical.

But she helps when she can and she loves to see things turn around for families like the Martinez family.

“In the future, get another house, if it is possible for my family, to keep them safe,” Jose Martinez said, looking toward the future.

Major Blessing

As for the family that walked in off the streets, Gahn said she may never see them again. She offered to help get them into another place but the mother really wanted help to get to her extended family in Texas.

So, after they were cleaned up, Gahn and staff members of the school went online, bought them Greyhound bus tickets and planned to take them to the bus station that night.

“It’s a major blessing, I thank God. And I really thank God for sending Whitney this way. It’s awesome,” the mother said.

As they left, the children were smiling, all wearing backpacks full of their new stuff.

“It’s like a sense of relief just to know that we don’t have to struggle anymore, you know?” the woman said. “And like I said, I just thank God for Whitney. I thank God for looking over us.”

Click [here](#) to find out how you can help the families of Whitney Elementary.