



Students (clockwise from top) Kyle Callahan, Leticia Posadas, Nikki Callahan, Jasmin Luna, Miguel Walls, Troy Callahan and Margaret Moore pose with school founder Sandra Dowling (center) for a group shot.

The School of Love and Acceptance

Hope for Homeless Children

By Jan Goodwin

Twelve-year-old Thomas and his three younger siblings, ages 10, 7 and 6, were hungry, but they had run out of food. His mother was sick. If his family was to eat, Thomas knew it was up to him. He slipped into the convenience store. *Bread, soup, that should do it*, he thought as he quickly grabbed the groceries. Trying to sneak out, he was caught by the store's security guard, who alerted the police. Thomas was arrested and charged with shoplifting.

At his court hearing the judge learned that Thomas's

mother had been forced to recycle cans and sell her blood to feed her children. The day Thomas stole, the blood bank turned her away because she had a cold. The \$35 she was relying on to buy food was suddenly beyond her grasp. Although she qualified for food stamps, she couldn't read the complicated application form.

Jan Goodwin is an award-winning journalist and author who specializes in investigative reporting.

“A child’s address can be an abandoned car. That doesn’t mean his education has to be interrupted.”

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Thanks to a social worker at the boy’s school who explained the family’s situation, the judge threw out the charges, and the store ended up buying the family groceries. The school also made sure the family was given food boxes from its supplies and applied for food stamps.

burn scars cover parts of little Lamanda Correa’s face, neck, chest and arms. Yet the friendly seven-year-old has all the confidence of a child who has yet to learn she is different. When Lamanda was five, flames engulfed the house she was sleeping in. “It was night, and everyone was sleeping,” she says matter-of-factly. “I tried to rescue my baby brother. I got him outside, but he didn’t make it.” Abel, age seven months, died two months later of his injuries. Lamanda’s other siblings suffered from smoke inhalation.

Lamanda’s bravery is evident in the raised, pink keloid scars left by the flames she ran through carrying her brother. Lamanda doesn’t remember how long she spent in the hospital recovering. She is about to go back again, she tells a visitor. “They are going to give me skin grafts,” she says. The Foundation for Burns and Trauma also helped Amanda and her family with housing, food, clothing and furniture.

Both Thomas and Lamanda have attended the Thomas J. Pappas School for homeless children, a four-acre complex of one-story buildings in Phoenix, Arizona, where the founder, Sandra Dowling, Ed.D., believes you have to make

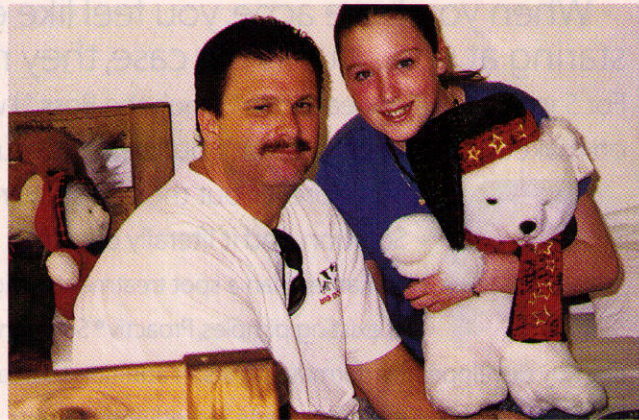
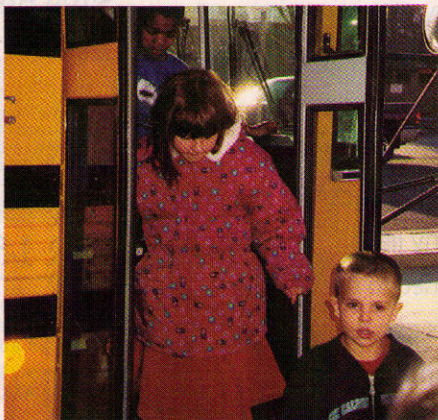
one gets a birthday party complete with gifts, cake and a clown. The school’s holiday gifts are often the only ones the kids receive. So too are the kids’ annual photographs.

“My job is to find ways through the system,” says Dowling, a size-four dynamo. “You have to get rid of the bureaucracy. If you don’t, these kids are going to suffer. We’re not here to make a difference. We’re here to be the difference.”

The school’s bus system aptly illustrates this mission. Pappas’s buses alter their routes daily to pick up children who frequently move and may not be where they were dropped off the night before. A child’s address can be an abandoned car, a homeless shelter, a flophouse. But this doesn’t mean his education has to be interrupted.

“When kids are missing from school, we go looking for them,” says Erin Angelini, a social worker at Pappas. “We go to their last known address, find out where benefits are sent. I teach them to use my pager so they can always reach us and we can pick them up. We give them alarm clocks, flashlights. If they need anything, we get it for them. They know they are safe here. They want to be here.”

Fourteen-year-old Nikki Callahan knows about alarm clocks. Her single dad leaves for work at 6:00 A.M. It is her task to get her two younger brothers, Kyle, 12, and Troy, 7, up and out, so that they can all make the school bus at 7 A.M. They used to live in a room at the Salvation Army Shelter. Now they are in a town home, part of a transitional housing program. Nikki’s father, Kevin, a former sheet metal worker, was laid off after the economic slowdown



Lamanda (above), Crystal (center, with her brother, Jonathan) and Nikki (with her father, Kevin) have found comfort at the Pappas School.

children feel safe before you can educate them. “If you don’t take care of their housing, food, clothing,

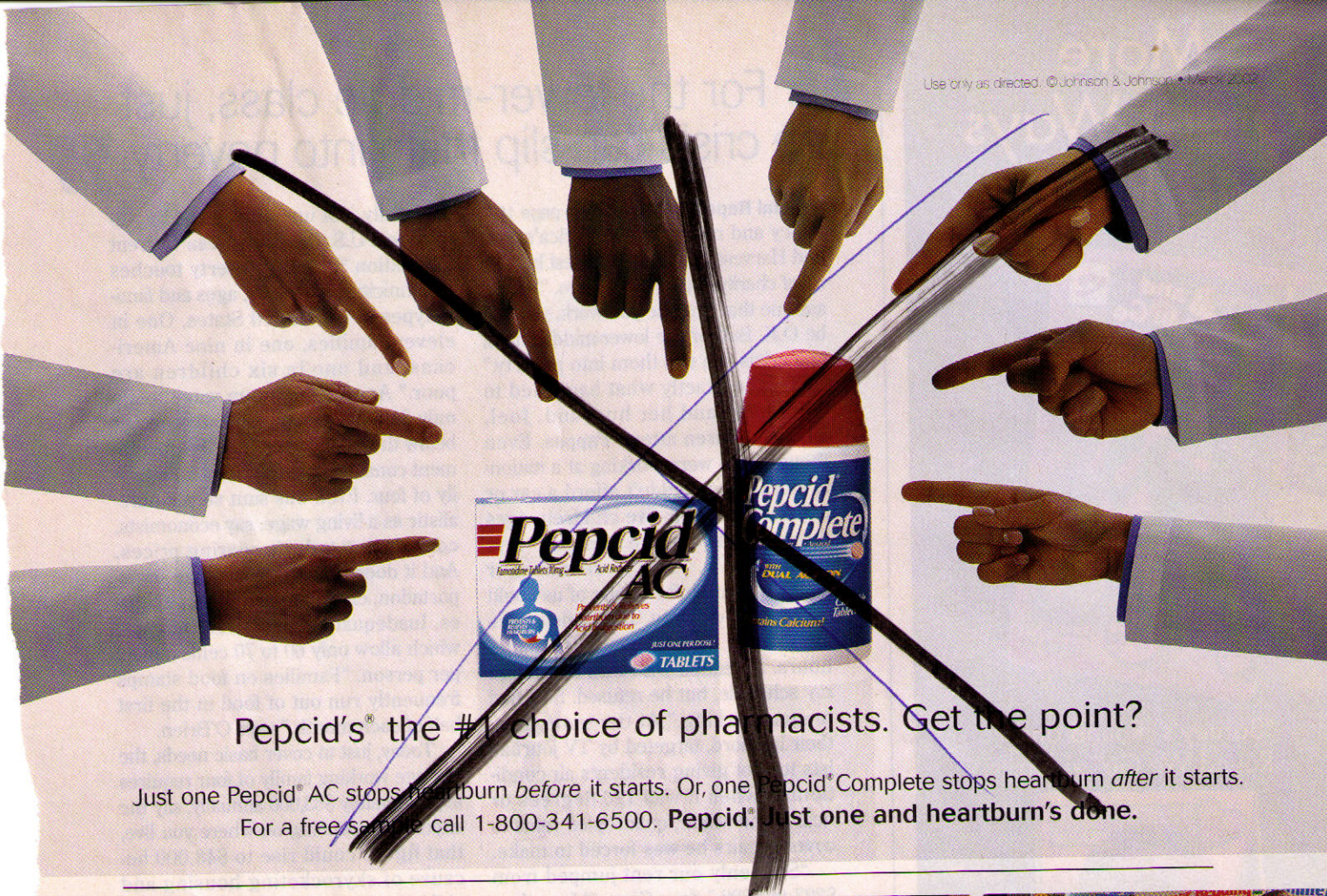
medical and other needs, you’re never going to get to the point where you can take care of their education,” she says.

That is why on any given day Pappas, the largest of at least 40 such schools in the country, offers to its 800 or so students services that families normally supply, right down to the hugs. Here, children receive two hot meals a day, plus the clothing and shoes they need. They are regularly given food boxes and toiletries to take home. There are showers, medical and dental care, family counseling. Every-

following September 11. He brought the family to Phoenix from Tacoma, Washington, because it reportedly had more jobs. But he was running out of money before he landed one at a third less pay than before.

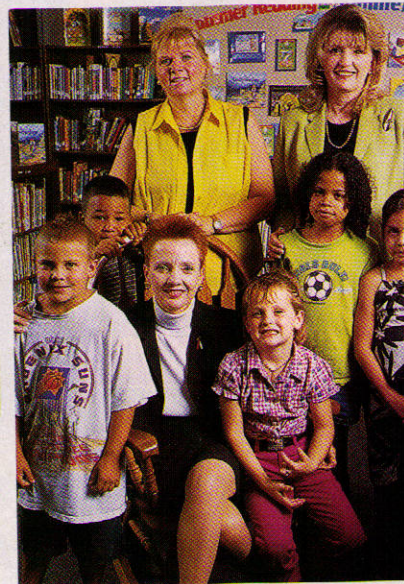
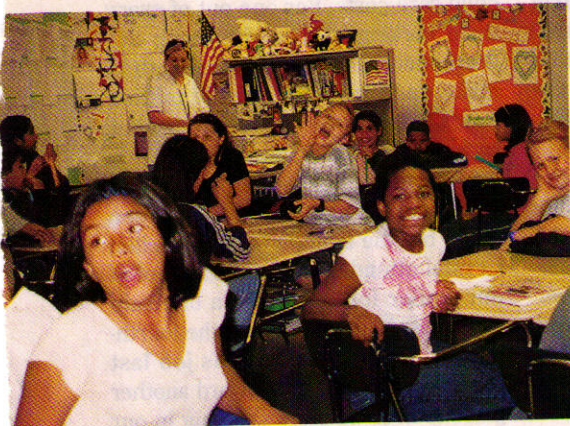
“We had a nice house and a cat. I miss both so much,” says Nikki. “If Dad loses his job, we get kicked out of here. What I like about Pappas is that you’re not treated differently just because you are homeless.”

The economic downturn has significantly increased homelessness, says Dowling. “The way things are going, it looks as though there will be a thirty to forty percent increase in our numbers nationwide.” Pappas has seen children of professionals, including university professors, at



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the school because a parent's contract was not renewed and a mortgage could not be paid. Children of couples who are both working but simply do not earn enough to live on are also common.

The number of homeless people in the United States is a difficult figure to pin down, in part because it is constantly fluctuating. Also, because of their transient lifestyle, the homeless tend to fall under the radar of many surveys. According to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, however, over three million people, many of them children, will experience homelessness during any one year.

But millions more Americans are just a paycheck

Whether getting ready to take a quiz, sharing breakfast before class or gathering with staff members Erin Angelini and Ernalee Phelps (at right, standing), the children know they are safe here.

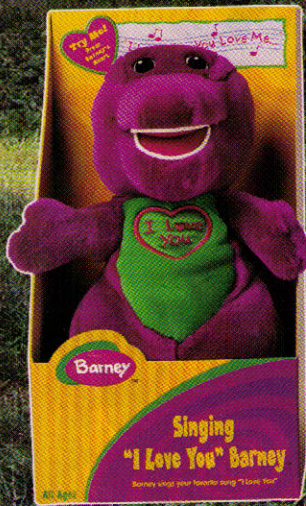
away, says Heather Boushey, an economist at the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank. "If you suffer a job loss or medical crisis and are heavily indebted due to easy credit, you may well suddenly find yourself homeless."

Thirty-one million Americans, hungry or at risk for hunger, many of whom have multiple jobs, hover just above poverty level, adds Doug O'Brien, the director of public

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“ For the lower-middle class, just one crisis can slip them into poverty. ”

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policy and research at America's Second Harvest, the nation's largest hunger relief charity, based in Chicago. "People assume that because you work, you will be O.K. But for the lower-middle class, one crisis can slip them into poverty."

This is exactly what happened to Gina Luna and her husband, Joel, whose children attend Pappas. Even though both were working at a national store, they couldn't afford a car or day care for their five children, ages three to eight. "But we managed," says Gina, age 25. "The store manager arranged our shifts so one of us could care for the children. Then a new manager made us both work the same hours. I pleaded with him to change my schedule, but he refused. So I had to stop working." At the same time, their landlord, targeted by TV journalists for not giving residents air-conditioning when it was 120 degrees or heat in the winter, quadrupled rents to cover repairs he was forced to make.

"Suddenly our rent jumped from \$227 to \$809," says Gina. "More than my husband took home a month." Homeless, the Lunas moved into a room at UMOM, a shelter run by the United Methodist Outreach Ministries. Gina knows they are lucky to be there. Shelters like UMOM and the Salvation Army limit the time a family can stay, usually to a few months. After that families must move to subsidized housing, of which there is never enough. "UMOM has just opened some apartments," says Gina. "But they will only take families of up to six, not seven, like us."

As their options narrow, Gina says she is grateful to Pappas, where her three oldest children, Leticia, eight, Cynthia, seven, and Jasmin, six, are students. "With our income, we can't afford medical insurance. Leticia had an ear infection last week, and a pediatrician at Pappas gave her an antibiotic. We could never afford to take our kids to a theme park or zoo, but Pappas has. Plus the kids grow so fast. Almost everything they wear comes from the clothing room."

Couples struggling like the Lunas

are, sadly, not unusual. According to the latest U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey: "Poverty touches all ethnicities and races, ages and family types in the United States. One in eleven families, one in nine Americans, and one in six children are poor." Annual minimum wage totals only \$10,816 a year, about 40 percent below the \$18,104 per year the government considers poverty level for a family of four. Even this sum seems unrealistic as a living wage, say economists, considering today's soaring prices. And it doesn't factor in costs for transportation, child care and other expenses. Inadequate, too, are food stamps, which allow only 60 to 70 cents a meal per person. "Families on food stamps frequently run out of food in the first half of each month," says O'Brien.

Today, just to cover basic needs, the average working family of four requires approximately \$33,000 annually, say the experts. Depending on where you live, that figure could rise to \$48,000 because of skyrocketing housing and child-care costs. For one out of every three working families with young children, income alone is not enough to make ends meet. Nearly 37 million Americans go without some basics, such as food, shelter, medical care.

Ten-year-old Crystal's parents currently earn \$43,000 a year between them, but the family lives in a shelter. Crystal attends Pappas. "The roof of our trailer fell in during a bad rain storm last November," says the fourth-grader. "My daddy lost his job last summer, so we couldn't afford another place to live. We were sleeping in our truck for a while."

Crystal's mom, Nancy, 34, works at a bank, and her father, Joseph, is now employed as a mechanic. Says Nancy, "After Joseph lost his job, we got behind on our rent, car payments and our credit cards. When the roof caved in, we had nowhere to go. It was 18 degrees out and we were drenched. We called all the shelters, but they were full. We had no choice—the four kids and the two of us slept in our truck."

"I went to work the next day, but was too embarrassed to tell my em-



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ployer. I kept myself nice with baby wipes, and hand-washed my clothes in a truck stop bathroom. When I called the Department of Economic Security, they told me the only way they could help us was if I quit my job. I was beside myself. I'd always given to the United Way at work. Now, when we needed help, we couldn't get it."

A month later the family moved into a Salvation Army Shelter. "Between us, we make a good salary, but we can't find any landlord to work with us," says Nancy. "Every time they do a credit check, we get turned down. Nobody will give us a chance.

"We're in a Catch-22 situation because we earn too much. We just need about 60 days to get back on our feet. The best thing about Pappas is they take away all the bureaucratic rules. And Crystal is doing great at school there."

"Our kids are survivors," says Ernelee Phelps, director of public relations and resource development.

Despite the raves, Pappas is not without its critics. Two years ago, in Congressional testimony, national advocates for the homeless argued that homeless children should be mainstreamed because any school that segregates violates the federal McKinney Homeless Assistance Act and encourages bias. They also pointed to lower academic scores.

"If you compare a homeless fifth-grader out of school for two years with the average child, we are not going to compete on test scores," says Dowling. But what testing does show, she says, is that fifth-graders coming in at a second-grade level catch up several grades within a few months.

Dowling started the Pappas School in 1990, when she nearly hit a young girl who stepped in front of her car. "It was 10:30 in the morning and I couldn't figure out why she wasn't at school. She told me, 'They won't let me go.' I said, 'Of course they'll let you go! I'm the County School Superintendent—

I'll make them let you go.' But when I tried, I was literally laughed at.

"Homeless advocates are arguing on a philosophical level. Utopia would be nice. But it could take fifty years. I'm not willing to lose five generations of children." Pappas operates on a patchwork quilt of funding, including some federal and state funding as well as private donations.

Some of its strongest supporters are graduates now in college with full scholarships from Pappas. "I was eight when we first became homeless," says 21-year-old Chuck Bacon, a sophomore at Phoenix College. "My dad, a master painter, lost his job. Then mom got laid off. We went from living a normal middle-class life to everything falling apart. When we lost the house, we moved in with friends, then shelters and slum motels. Then we started living in a car. It got worse. We spent a few nights in a field, sleeping on cardboard. I was really scared.

"Every morning, I'd wake up my little brother, Ryan, and we'd walk to the nearest gas station to wash up before the Pappas bus would get us. For a while Ryan worked at a rest stop after school in exchange for leftovers.

"Pappas is equipped to take on kids like us. I ended up being a straight-A student and valedictorian. The teachers saw what I was capable of and brought it out. They drilled in me that failure was not an option. Whether it's their flexible bus system or anything else, Pappas works around the student."

In Cynthia Gulley's kindergarten class, kids are getting ready for their edible alphabet lesson. "It's a real favorite," says 64-year-old Gulley, a teacher at Pappas for 10 years. "You know, C is for cookies, O for omelet—we make 'em all." From her rocking chair, she asks her students, "Does anyone need a hug?" As a child slides his arms around her neck, Gully says: "Love and acceptance. We all need it. This is what Pappas is all about." **FC**

How You Can Help

"The Pappas School is always looking for clothes and shoes, new or gently used, in sizes from kindergarten to 12th grade," says Dowling. Also on her wish list are day packs, bathing suits, towels, washcloths, bath soap, shampoo, toothpaste and brushes, hairbrushes, skin lotion, deodorant, knitted hats, sweaters, blankets, non-electric can openers and battery-operated alarm clocks. Send to: Thomas J. Pappas School, 355 North Fifth Avenue, Phoenix, AZ 85003. Cash donations support salaries, after-school activities, the medical clinic and children's field trips. Visit www.tjpappasschool.org.