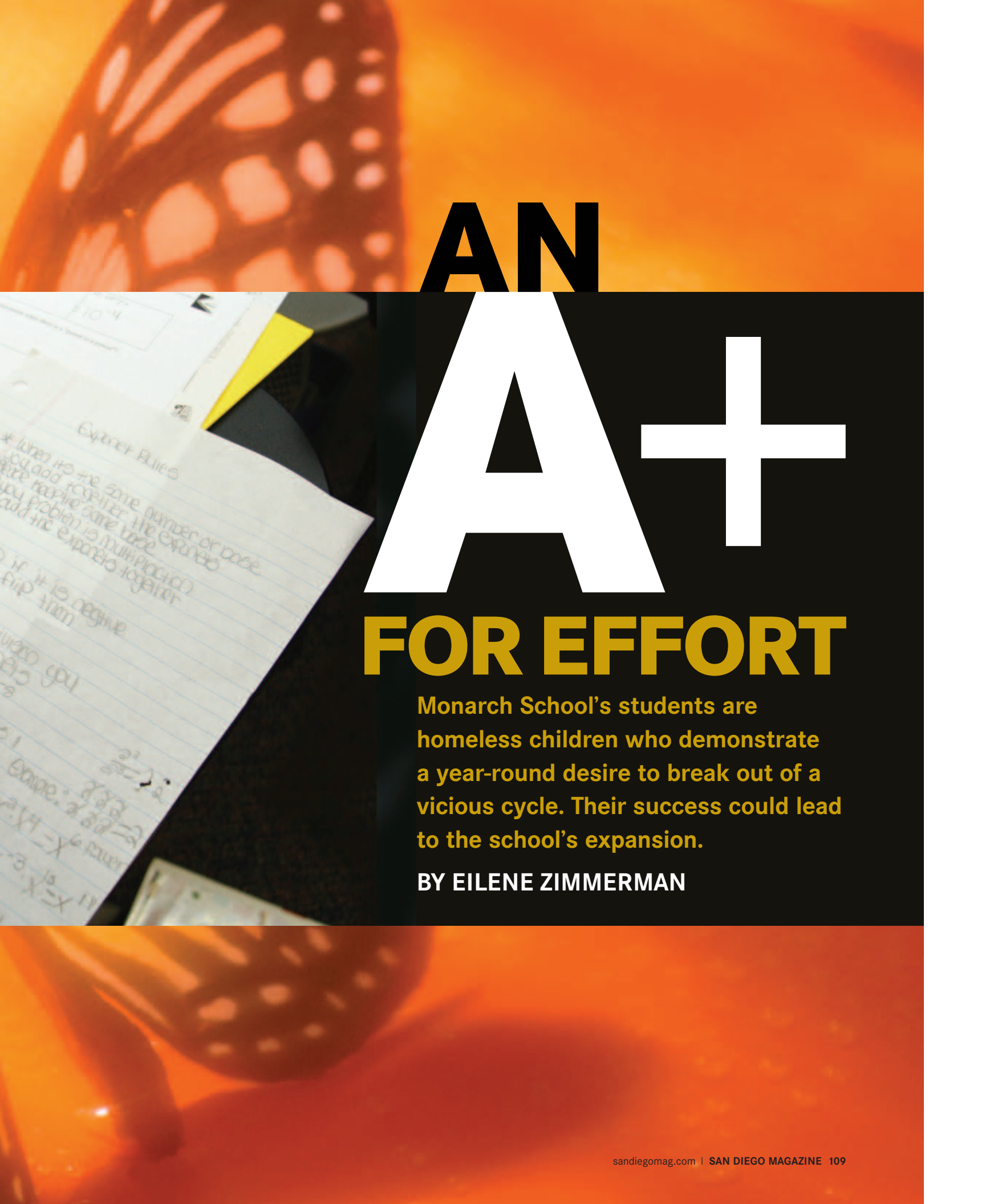


Photos on these pages were taken in teacher Dana Harwood's classroom at Monarch School.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RAMONA D'VIOLA



# AN A+ FOR EFFORT

Monarch School's students are homeless children who demonstrate a year-round desire to break out of a vicious cycle. Their success could lead to the school's expansion.

BY EILENE ZIMMERMAN



**J**OHNS MOTHER WAKES HIM UP FOR SCHOOL AT 6 A.M. She doesn't fix his breakfast in the kitchen or pack his lunch while he gets dressed. John, his mom and two older brothers are sleeping on the street, outside St. Vincent de Paul Village, hoping for a spot to open for them inside the shelter.

John's family arrived from Arizona, where his mother was out of work and suddenly homeless. "She thought it might be better here," he says. "But right now we live on the sidewalk." John is 15, tall, handsome and soft-spoken, with a talent for fixing cars. In the morning, before school, he showers at the Neil Good Day Center and takes a trolley to Monarch School, a school for homeless children 8-18 on West Cedar Street.

During the day, the shopping cart holding his family's belongings is stored at Neil Good, while John's mom works at a job she just got at St. Vincent's. Before that, she worked briefly at a taco shop. John's half-hour trolley ride is paid for with tokens he gets from Monarch. When he arrives, he'll be able to eat breakfast before class.

Linda has been at Monarch for several months. The 11-year-old is shy but quick to laugh, with a ragged head of hair constantly falling into her eyes. Her mom, two brothers and sister have moved around a lot, usually living in hotels and shelters. Her younger brother, she says, constantly sneaks away and sets fires, a propensity that made it impossible for Linda's mom, who is disabled, to continue cleaning houses. At one point last year, after being kicked out of a church shelter, the family began panhandling.

"We had to ask for money on the street to get enough so we could stay for two

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## HOW YOU CAN HELP

**MONARCH SCHOOL'S** planned capital campaign would raise millions to expand the school's current capacity. Preliminary plans are for a new school on the current site on West Cedar Street in downtown San Diego. It would hold three times as many children as the present school, including students ages 5 to 8, a group that cannot be accommodated now. The planned facility will more than double the number of classrooms and add a multipurpose room and an activity center.

Also needed is financial support for programs like health, dental and vision care, field trips, after-school programs like art and music, food and clothing supplements and educational supplies. Monarch School also has a constant need for tutors, volunteers and mentors.

If you would like to make a donation or are interested in volunteering at Monarch, contact Paula Kelly, vice president of development, at 619-685-8242, extension 227, or [pkelly@monarchschoools.org](mailto:pkelly@monarchschoools.org). To learn more about Monarch School, go to [monarchschoools.org](http://monarchschoools.org).

days in a hotel,” says Linda. She rocks back and forth in her chair, studying her fingers as they lace and unlace.

A man offered to rent the family the living room of his National City apartment, which Linda’s mom now pays for with her disability checks; her son is in a hospital receiving treatment for psychological problems. The new living arrangement is far from ideal.

“We all stay in the same room and go to bed at the same time. This guy has other roommates, and one gets up at 4, another at 5 and another at 6, so it’s hard to sleep,” says Linda. “But I get up in the morning and take the trolley to school because I like it here so much. The teachers help us a lot.”

For kids like John and Linda, the month of September doesn’t signal an end to summer vacation, because there is no summer vacation when you’re homeless. Monarch School is open 51 weeks a year; without it, many of these children would have no place to go during the day, no one to supervise them. Studies show they would likely become involved in crime or with drugs or wind up victims of hate crimes and sexual assault.

**NATIONWIDE**, about 1.35 million children experience homelessness in the course of a year. Put another way, one-quarter of the country’s homeless population are children. And the fastest-growing segment is households headed by women, says Michael Stoops, acting executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless in Washington, D.C. According to rough estimates by San Diego’s Regional Taskforce on the Homeless, there are about 1,625 homeless children and adolescents in San Diego County.

All of the students at Monarch live in poverty. More than a quarter live in local shelters, and about 30 percent live in motels or SROs (single-room-occupancy hotels where you can rent by the night—but your neighbors are often drug dealers), in cars or on the street. The rest generally find a place to stay, temporarily, with family or friends.

Peter, for instance, is staying with a friend of his father’s, “kind of like an uncle,” he says. An adorable 10-year-old with big brown eyes and a head full of black curls, Peter doesn’t remember a time when

he wasn’t homeless. Right now, his mother and father live in Tijuana, the only place they can afford; his mother works at a food stand, and his father is a janitor.

Peter’s brother, who is just 14, is largely responsible for Peter and his 12-year-old sister. On weekends, the three children travel alone by trolley to Tijuana, where they see their parents.

“My brother takes good care of us,” says Peter. It’s gray and windy outside, and he shivers slightly in a thin white T-shirt. “I like school, especially math, but I wish I could just go to TJ and be with my mom,” he says.

Later that morning, Peter and a small group of students are learning about bears in preparation for a field trip to the zoo. Teacher Ellen Smith De La Cruz asks about the difference between teddy bears and real bears. Peter answers, “Teddy bears are something you can hug and keep in your room, but real bears attack and kill you.” He adds, “Can I have some more juice and another breakfast bar?” and picks at the crumbs in the wrapper of the bar.

In another part of the room, teacher Stephen Keiley and two boys are reading a story about a family living in Alaska in the 1800s. Mike, a smart, sweet 9-year-old, listens intently, sucking his thumb.

“How did people survive then without television or telephones?” asks Keiley.

“They had a very busy life, Mr. K.,” Mike answers, removing his thumb and patting his teacher on the shoulder. This leads to a discussion about how technology has changed over time. “When I was little, I saw a black-and-white TV,” says Mike. “I thought the whole world was black and white.”

A third group of students is reading aloud with a classroom volunteer, some struggling to sound out words. All these students work diligently, despite the fact there is often little pressure from their parents even to attend school; in fact, many have missed months and years.

Monarch may be the only school in the United States where a student can enroll himself. The first questions they are asked aren’t about where they live but instead are “Are you hungry?” and “Do you have a place to stay?” says Monarch’s principal, Sarita Fuentes, a native San Diegan who grew up in poverty.

“On average, the kids here are three

years behind grade level, but we have eighth graders reading on a second-grade level,” says Fuentes. “Either they haven’t been in school and have big gaps in their education, or because they’ve been focused on surviving, education wasn’t a priority.”

Although federal law requires public schools to help students who become homeless stay in their own school, providing transportation, if necessary, and other required services, one county in Arizona and three in California—San Diego being one—are permitted to have schools just for homeless children. Monarch is part of San Diego County’s Community Schools Hope Region, five schools that serve homeless and at-risk kids. As a county school it is held to the same standards as any other public school, including standardized tests and a high school exit exam students must take.

“For me, the biggest challenge is knowing everything these kids are dealing with and still having really high expectations so they can be successful,” says Dana Harwood, who teaches seventh and eighth graders.

Yet despite the enormous difficulties the kids face—living in a shelter, absent fathers, mothers in jail, domestic violence, drugs, crime, hunger—most still make it to school each morning.

“These kids love school because it makes them feel like any other kid,” says teacher Lora Swanger. And they get services and attention—free school supplies; after-school programs in art, music, business and sports; mental health counseling; dental and medical care; meals—they don’t get elsewhere. For every six months spent at Monarch, the average student progresses more than one full grade level.

**THE SCHOOL PLANS TO EMBARK** on an ambitious capital campaign, hoping to raise millions of dollars for a planned expansion. Julie Dillon, a member of Monarch’s board and a former board member of the Centre City Development Corporation, is among those leading the expansion effort.

“The little picture is to get these children off the streets into a safe, caring environment where they can get a good education,” says Dillon. “The big picture is to break the cycle of homelessness. You get them an education and work experi-

ence, you break that cycle.” Many of the students here believe they will go to college.

“I was surprised to find a school like this; they understand us,” says Eric, a tall, thoughtful 14-year-old who wears wire-rimmed glasses and attended public school in Logan Heights before coming to Monarch. “Most teachers don’t help you like they do here. They want us to go to college—they talk about us going to college all the time.”

One of Eric’s brothers has been in and out of jail for drugs; he, another brother and his mother have spent years living in a variety of apartments, SROs and shelters. Eric has been witness to a good deal of violence during his young life, but he is well-behaved and quiet. One of his favorite things to do is cook. On Friday nights, he and other Monarch students prepare and eat a big dinner together, and their parents and siblings are invited. It’s enormously popular, both as a way to put off the coming weekend and because it is, in many ways, a family dinner.

“The kids like to hang out there for a while,” says Paul Arreola, the teaching assistant in Dana Harwood’s class. “Weekends can be uncertain for them, but at least on Friday nights they know they can eat a good meal here.

“Because after that, you know...,” he says, palms turned up, “who knows?” ■