

A school for homeless students

By Sherry Posnick-Goodwin



Stephen Keiley, San Diego County Teacher of the Year. Photo by Scott Buschman.

Yeseina is a half hour late walking into her class at Monarch School in downtown San Diego. Her teacher, Stephen Keiley, looks concerned and not one bit annoyed.

"Welcome," he says, smiling warmly. "Why are you late?"

"I woke up late," replies the youngster.

Keiley nods understandingly and asks if she has had breakfast. She tells him she has already eaten and settles down for a math lesson in the combination fourth- and fifth-grade class.

Yeseina is homeless, and so are all of her classmates and students attending Monarch School. So members of the Association of

Educators CTA/NEA who teach here are flexible. They know punctuality can be a challenge for students if they are sleeping in a shelter, motel room or car with their family.

They may look like any other students, but those attending Monarch face obstacles unimaginable to most of us. They may lack food and health care. Many have been exposed to violence and adult relatives with mental health or substance abuse problems. For them, the year-round K-12 school is a safe haven.

"I love it here," says 14-year-old Noelle. "It feels like family. I feel comfortable here."

Students may switch shelters or motels, but many find some stability at Monarch, a school that provides meals, showers, laundry facilities and a clothes closet. The school has partnerships with health care providers for vision and dental services, and a clinic is slated to open on campus. Doors open at 6:30 a.m. since shelters close early, and many students stay until 5 or 6 p.m., when the shelters reopen. Family dinners are held two nights a week. Students are given free passes to take the trolley or bus to school from throughout San Diego County, and some travel many miles to get to school each day. It's worth it, say students, because Monarch is the closest thing to having a home.

“The key word is services that Monarch provides to students and their families,” says high school math and science teacher Karen Daley, who began teaching at the school last January. “We have ‘shopping day’ here at the school where students can get toiletries including shampoo and conditioner or clothes that are nearly new. It’s almost like having a store at school. We also have after-school programs where kids can do homework, yoga and dance classes.”

The school was founded in 2001 and is located in a renovated warehouse. The population has grown by 75 percent since 2009 due to a worsening economy, and the school will be moving to a larger facility next year to meet rising demand. It is one of the few schools for homeless children in the nation. Federal law mandates that public schools allow homeless students to stay enrolled even when they leave the attendance boundaries so they are not segregated from other students. However, Monarch School was given a waiver and is allowed to serve only students who are homeless. If families find permanent housing, students can finish out the school year.

Staff members say the alternative campus helps meet students’ needs in ways that traditional schools may not, and students don’t have to worry about being teased by other students about being homeless or dirty, having body odor, or wearing old clothes. Some students say that at other schools they were embarrassed to be living in motels and told other students they were on vacation.

“The majority of the kids here are two to three grade levels behind,” says Keiley, a Teacher of the Year in San Diego County. “They arrive here deficient in reading and math and other basics. They have had gaps in their education. Part of homelessness is moving around, and when you’re transient, you’re often missing school.”

Students typically gain a year of academic achievement for every six months at Monarch through intensive interventions, says Principal Joel Garcia, and they are assessed every 100 days in language, reading and math. For high school students, the emphasis can also be on “credit recovery” so they graduate on time or earn their GED.

“Our school is about educating the whole child,” says reading specialist Stacy Bermingham, who has been at the campus six years. “We make sure every child receives love, care and attention. Students know there are adults here that they can rely on. We don’t take for granted that our children have had a good night’s sleep, or been fed, or had any sort of consistency in their lives. They are living lives of trauma, and there is no soft-selling that.”

Schools like Monarch are necessary, says Bermingham, because society no longer takes care of those who cannot fend for themselves.

To learn more about the school or to contribute to the foundation, visit www.monarchschoools.org.

MEET THE STUDENTS

Noelle

Noelle, 14, says her family has been "struggling" for quite some time.

For the past two months she has lived in a motel room with her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, 1-year-old brother and 6-year-old sister.

"Honestly, it's complicated," she says. "We live in a little area, and it's very stressful. I sleep with my grandma and my little sister. There are two beds there."

Being homeless, she says, is constantly worrying about having a place to stay and enough to eat. She experiences anxiety and says she has an ulcer.

Before enrolling in Monarch School in San Diego, she had attended 10 other schools and had poor grades. "I was failing because of the stress," she says, choking back tears. "I couldn't focus on things because of my family situation."

At other schools, students made fun of her for being homeless. "I felt like a nobody and a failure," she relates. "I missed four years of school because I was badly bullied. But here I don't feel like a failure. At Monarch, I'm somebody."

Noelle is now staying after school to receive special "academic support" to bring up her grades. She is doing her best to turn things around so she can graduate, join the Marines and go to college. She would like to be a photographer, and the school has a fund to buy her a camera.

"I have a lot of friends here at Monarch," she says. "I love it here. This is the longest I've ever stayed at a school because I like coming here."

Fabian

Fabian, 17, has lived at three shelters in two years with his mother and two brothers, and says living in shelters is "hectic."

Currently his entire family is renting a studio apartment from a friend. For a time his family owned a home near Riverside. But Fabian broke his arm and his mother broke her legs, and without health insurance the family went through its savings and lost their home.

He attended 15 schools before arriving at Monarch one year ago. He likes that it's a small place with caring adults, and that students are immediately welcoming and nonjudgmental.

"I find it very comforting," he says. "Nobody puts you down, and everybody co-exists. I have a bigger interest in school. I am doing my assignments and reading the material and doing my homework. I like my teachers, too."

Lots of people, he says, have the wrong idea about the kinds of people who are homeless.

"Not all homeless kids sleep on the street," says Fabian.

"A lot of kids become homeless and become depressed. I try to stay optimistic. It's just another journey and another path. It has made me become more independent. I'm definitely going to college and having a career."