

Camp St. Vincent offers fun, enrichment for homeless children

When Lynette Voss resided in a homeless shelter during the summers of 2008 and 2009, the Baltimore resident wanted her children to have something to do during the day, as opposed to sitting around the shelter idly.

She found what she seeking for her children, LeighAnn and Michael Sydnor, now ages 8 and 9, in Camp St. Vincent, a summer program run by St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore.

“They were able to interact with other children in the same situation at the time, which made it more comforting for them,” she said, explaining that LeighAnn and Michael were “a little depressed and disappointed because they couldn’t see their friends every day.”

Voss, who now lives in her own apartment, said her children enjoyed swimming, putting on shows and seeing live performance.

“The camp lifted their spirits on a daily basis,” she said, noting that the children responded well to instructors and volunteers, who were great with the kids and understanding of their situation.

Started more than 100 years ago as an overnight fresh air camp for city children, Camp St. Vincent served both homeless and low-income youths. Now, for the first time, the academic enrichment camp, offering instruction in both reading and math, will serve only the former group, said Stephanie Archer-Smith, deputy director for St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore.

“What we’re seeing is different populations, although similar, do have different needs,” said Archer-Smith. “We wanted to serve one population really well, instead of doing a little bit for everybody. The needs (of homeless children) tend to be more complex.”

For that reason, Archer-Smith said the curriculum this year has also “been

redesigned to place greater emphasis on the development of reading and math skills, while adding the structured social skills group component that develops resiliency in campers.”

She explained research has shown “those children who are able to develop resiliency skills are able to go on to be positive, productive adults.”

Thus, while these children are engaged in “fun and creative activity-based learning” to help close the summer learning gap, said Archer-Smith, they will also encounter eight weekly themes focused on the development of self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

“Children living in shelters or moving from family to family lose a sense of themselves,” said development director Janice Williams.

Williams explained these children are at risk for “depression and anxiety surfacing from a lack of place.” She said Camp St. Vincent, which operates in Baltimore’s Patterson Park from June 28-Aug. 20 this year, seeks “to get them out of the homeless, transitional environment during the day.”

But the children aren’t the only ones to gain from the program.

Resource Coordinator Mary Czar said, “Camp St. Vincent is a great opportunity (for these counselors) to really make a difference.”

Czar explained, “It’s a chance for volunteers to do something meaningful with their time. Counselors really do form meaningful relationships with the children.”

Czar said counselors, most of whom come from private schools around the area and are placed five or six each with groups of 25 campers led by one group instructor, gather themselves for about 45 minutes at the end of each camp day to reflect on their time working with the children. “We discuss what happened and digest the experience,” she said, adding they also talk about social justice, looking at issues of homelessness and poverty, and the difference between helping and serving. “The counselors really find they get something out of the sessions. We’re able to take the time to process, discuss, and connect and really come out learning something.”

Czar said Camp St. Vincent is still accepting applications for volunteer counselors

and explained most counselors have completed their freshman year of high school.

Additionally, the camp needs sponsors to cover the cost of attendance. Williams said, "It costs about \$360 for two weeks of camp, but sponsors can provide any portion of that."

She said anyone can make a donation: "For individuals, groups, churches, clubs, foundations that do sponsorships, this is an appropriate way to give."

To volunteer or to donate, visit www.vincentbaltimore.org/camp_st_vincent.html, and click on "Donate Now!" or "Volunteer Now!" on the left side of the page.