



Photo: Melanie shows her camera to two boys at the Quality Inn overflow shelter

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Five Years of Bright and Exuberant Children

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Since I joined the Playtime staff five years ago, the organization has served thousands of children living in shelters across the region. It's staggering to consider the number of families who have entered and exited, and in some cases re-entered, the homelessness system in those years.

I joined the team on October 10, 2016. It was my first full-time job with a nonprofit and, after a long career in the corporate world, I was thrilled to be contributing my communication skills to an organization doing more than just giving something back to society—Playtime was bringing joy and hope to the lives of children and young people struggling to rise in a world that seemed keen to keep them down.

There's a transitory nature to homelessness. Families come and go. Some we interacted with for long periods—three years in some cases; and others we met only once or twice. But in every instance, we touched a young life in a positive way. We gave them a space to decompress from the stresses of their living situations, school, and unknown traumas that infiltrated their lives. Playtime made them feel valued, gave them a reason to belly laugh, to explore marble painting, visit Smithsonian museums, attempt rock climbing, interact with sea creatures and reptiles, and even create their own haunted house.

As the Communications Coordinator, I was the storyteller, keeping record of Playtime's various activities and events. I witnessed many changes, including the closure of D.C. General Emergency Family Shelter; the launch of play programming at three New York Avenue hotels, used by the city as emergency shelters; new partnerships with My Sister's Place, D.C.'s oldest domestic violence shelter, and Shepherd's Cove Shelter for Women and Children, our first partnership in Prince George's County; the first-ever "daytime Playtime" program at Rita Bright Youth Center; and the first school partnership with J.C. Nalle Elementary School.

I am leaving Playtime just shy of five years to pursue an opportunity to work with a nonprofit organization that supports Black writers. And though I'm shifting to a new area of focus, I take with me all that I've learned about family homelessness and the profound layers of racism that contribute to extreme poverty in Black and Brown communities. I hold a deep respect for the countless people who serve and fight for equity across the region. And I take with me the stories and faces I encountered along the way.

One activity that brought me much joy was taking pictures of the children. I will miss the smiles, the giggles, and countless inquisitive faces peering back at me through the camera's lens. Each picture brings back memories of the children posing, frowning, grinning, or completely oblivious to the camera. I wonder where their bright and beautiful faces are today and hope every one of them is finding their way and flourishing wherever they are. I'll miss my colleagues and the amazing volunteers, but most of all, I will miss these exuberant children.

I've gathered some of my favorite pictures of the youngsters who touched my heart and share them here with you.
PICTURE GALLERY

I hope you enjoy them.