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Music Serves to Ease the Pain of Childhood Hardships

A program is providing an artistic outlet to help young people process homelessness.

By ANDY NEWMAN

In a little room lined with computers on the ground floor of a homeless shelter in Brooklyn one Monday afternoon, it was time for music class.

"We're going to be making a beat," Dannyele Crawford, 27, said as the kids settled noisily into their seats. "I want you to imagine that you live on another planet. The beat is going to be based off that."

Bella Diaz, 6, and the other five children in the room donned headphones and began choosing from hundreds of audio loops in the music software program GarageBand. The room filled with clashing tinny riffs leaking from headsets as the pint-size producers danced and bobbed in their seats.

What the children did not know was that Ms. Crawford is not just a teacher. She is a music therapist, there to help children deal with the stress of not having a permanent place to call home. Since 2015, therapists who work for the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music have made regular visits to the 158-family shelter in the Brownsville neighborhood, run by the nonprofit Camba.

Around the city, as across the country, children and teenagers face a mental health crisis that has grown since the pandemic and has led to a spike in discipline problems. At the same time, the number of children in homeless shelters in New York has risen sharply, as tens of thousands of migrants arrive in the city.

"It's not that easy for kids and teenagers to talk about what they've been through, especially while they're going through it," said Toby Williams, director of the conservatory's music therapy program, which serves more than 2,000 people per year. "Music provides an opportunity for people to process trauma in a different mode of expression."

The city has been offering free online



TODD HESLER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

therapy to teenagers since last year, and Mayor Eric Adams recently announced that the city would open 16 mental health clinics for students inside schools in Brooklyn and the Bronx in the coming months.

Joslyn Carter, administrator of the City Department of Homeless Services, said that the conservatory's music therapy program "really does help children just be children." Bella and her little brother, Aiden, took turns, blending the rhythm track and three minor-key melodies. Ms. Crawford and an intern therapist helped out with the technical stuff. Then everyone took turns playing their beats over the speakers.

Two 10-year-olds, a girl and a boy, played their song. After a 30-second percussive processional, the drums faded and an organ swirled up in the mix. They explained that their planet, Muzi, had a house with a tree

Dannyele Crawford, center, showing two of her students how to assemble a beat using GarageBand. Ms. Crawford uses the program to help children deal with the difficulties they face.

growing inside it and vents for fresh air. "This planet also greets you with a warm welcome," the girl had written.

Bella and her four siblings have lived in the shelter since 2021. The beat that she and Aiden made started out loping and dense, punctuated with rocket-ship swooshes. After a minute it dissolved to a gentle, syncopated pulse as instruments dropped out one by one. Everyone applauded.

Bella said their planet was called the Bronx. "And we are moving to it!" She was right. Recently, her parents had found a landlord who accepted their subsidized rent voucher. The family moved into the apartment April 20.

Ms. Crawford had a question for Bella. "In the beginning, it seemed like there was a lot going on and then at the end, it was really calm," Ms. Crawford said. "Did you have a

reason for doing that?"

Bella said, "Aiden and me were putting the song together, and then we heard it and it was the best song ever!"

Bella's older brother, JoAngel, 8, said his siblings' composition "sounded a little New York-y" and made him think of "kitties and flowers" — specifically roses.

Bella gave a thumbs up. "My name is Bella Rose, like a rose," she said. "I'm going to name my planet 'Bronx Rose.'"

Ms. Crawford replied, "I like that, Bella, a lot."

After the session, Ms. Crawford shared her own theory. The busy part of the song, she said, "I interpreted as everything going on with the move." The quiet part, she said, was Bella "settling in once she's where she's at."

Over the past year and a half at the shelter, Ms. Crawford said she had noticed something about children: "Even though they are children and they like childlike things, they're just worried about issues that most people wouldn't be concerned about until they're in their adult lives."

There are two music-therapy groups at the shelter, one for younger children and one for older ones. A few years ago, a 12-year-old in the program named P.S. recorded a song where she raps, "I've been in and out of homes/I have always been alone/With just a little of support/We had to keep going to court."

At a recent session for the teenagers, everyone went around the circle singing "Hello" and "How are you?"

"I'm mad right now," said a girl with her hair combed completely over her eyes.

Ms. Crawford asked, "Why are you mad right now?"

The girl said, "Because during school I was just minding my own business and then this dude kind of jumped me with his other friends because I didn't give him the answers to a test."

A few minutes later, everyone was playing a game of hot potato with a drum. The girl with her hair in her eyes grinned as she pounded the drum and passed it on to her neighbor.

