

## Youthsprotectingyouths

By Alexi Horowitz

Generation Next

Keira O'Brian, a 13-year-old brunette from Santa Fe School for the Arts and Sciences, stands up at the tall podium and begins speaking.

Behind her sit and stand several hundred people crammed into the City Council chambers; more than a 100 sets of eyes are fixed intently upon the television monitors on either side of the room.

"We are very concerned that homeless teens have nowhere to go for help," Keira says as she stands at the head of a line of more than a dozen of her classmates. "We hope that you will help solve this problem." Keira is one of 16 middle-school students ages 12-14 who make up Youth United.

Youth United is a group of students from alternative pre-K through eighth grade at Santa Fe School for the Arts and Sciences.

The group has worked for the past two years trying to fix a huge problem in Santa Fe: a lack of shelters for homeless teenagers. There are four animal shelters in the area, but no homeless teen shelters and no daytime resource center for homeless teens.

The kids of Youth United spoke at last Wednesday's City Council meeting to implore the city to do something about the lack of a teen shelter or even a daytime resource center, which provides necessities like food, clothing and counseling.

The group also participated in a protest downtown last Saturday. This latest string of protests and action from Youth United is in response to last month's lease termination

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Corrina Leatherwood, Hannah Sachs and Gioia Berlin, members of the middleschool group Youth United, take part in a protest downtown Saturday calling for the city to give homeless teens more services.

Continued from Page **D-1** “ ***What if your teenage son or daughter was sleeping on the streets? Wouldn't you want them to have a safe, warm place to go?***”

**DIEGO SUAREZ**

*eighth-grader* of a local teen resource center run by Youth Shelters and

Family Services on McKenzie Street. The shelter, set to open last month, was kicked out of the new location by its landlord when neighbors complained.

"What if your teenage son or daughter was sleeping on the streets? Wouldn't you want them to have a safe, warm place to go?" asked eighth-grader Diego Suarez. The councilors nod; and some even clapped in approval.

Last year, Youth United produced a documentary film on teen homelessness in Santa Fe called *The Other Side of the Tracks*. The film won the Mayor's Film Festival and the Española Film Festival and allowed the kids at the School for the Arts and Sciences to become acquainted with the issue and with many of the homeless teenagers involved.

Diego gave copies of the film to all the city councilors at the meeting before addressing the council as a whole.

Rayna Dineen, director of the school, helps the middleschool students organize protests and activities. She and a group of students started Youth United two years ago, with the mission of helping Santa Fe's homeless youth.

Since then, the group has produced two short documentary films about the subject and engaged in numerous protests and discussions around town.

Last Saturday, the students enacted another form of protest. They slept on the green lawn of City Hall with nothing but sleeping bags and a desire to help. The protest, which the kids called "A Night with Nothing" was a planned response to termination of the lease for Youth Shelters and Services' daytime resource center. During the night, the mayor, several City Council members and employees from Youth Shelters and Family Services visited the kids to show their support. City councilors brought hot chocolate and spoke with the young activists who slept through the cold and slightly snowy night.

"It was really cold and uncomfortable, but it was definitely worth it," Diego said. "I think it sent a message to people about the problem of teen homelessness in Santa Fe."

More than a dozen of the students also stood on Palace Avenue outside the Lensic Performing Arts Center with picket signs, laughing, smiling and talking to passers-by about teen homelessness. The picket took place before the students slept outside City Hall. The protest and picket produced more than \$300 in donations in support of more resources for homeless teens.

"I really hope that with this new wave of protests and support from the city we can finally get a night shelter for Santa Fe homeless teens," Dineen says. "But the kids will just keep on doing what they are doing until the situation changes for the better."

With the money raised Saturday, new connections made with the mayor and city councilors, news coverage and at least one commitment of property to help homeless teens, the kids seem to have made at least a small dent in the problem. But they plan to keep fighting for their newly adopted cause. Youth Shelters is searching for a new home for the daytime resource center.

"Everyone always says that teens and young people are our future. What kind of future are we creating by not helping homeless teens now?" Keira asked.

To find out more, to donate or volunteer, contact Youth Shelters Families and Services online at [youthshelters.org](http://youthshelters.org) or at 983-0586. The 24-hour Emergency Shelter at 5686 Agua Fría St. helps youth as well as adults and can be reached at 438-0502.

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Courtesy photo

**Natalina Cotter, Kamon Tari, Sonja Houpt and Laura Heusner, members of Youth United, protest downtown to attract attention to the lack of resources for Santa Fe's homeless teens.**

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