



Sheila E. shows kids how to beat odds

Star drummer, Oakland native visits center for abused and at-risk children

By Laura Casey, STAFF WRITER

September 19, 2004

OAKLAND -- Percussionist and vocalist Sheila E. has much in common with the children and young adults at the Lincoln Child Center. The Oakland native was the victim of abuse as a child and spent some of her youth acting out. That is when she discovered drums were an outlet for her emotions. She eventually went on to a career in music and toured in the 1980s with the musician Prince and many other famous performers.

Last month Sheila E. gathered with about 40 of the 60 Lincoln Child Center residents who have been using the drums donated by her foundation, Elevate Hope, which she started in 2002 to identify and help "worthy" community-based organizations that work directly with abused and at-risk children, according to her Web site. The foundation organizes events that attract the likes of Ringo Starr and Carmen Electra, and has raised \$350,000.

The children at Lincoln Child Center have been abused physically or sexually, or both, said the center's executive director, Jack Soares. Some have mental illness, others have been the unwilling victims of crimes splashed across newspapers.

"By and large, each kid has a troubled story to tell," Soares said.

"It is a rare kid who is sent to us with an intact family."

If not for Lincoln Child Center and other such organizations, those youths would be lighting houses on fire, stealing cars, in jail or dead, Soares said.

"Interesting choices, right?" he added.

One Lincoln Child Center student, already proficient with the drums before he came to the center, played with Sheila E.'s band at a December concert she hosted.

When Sheila E. visited Lincoln last month, she beat on drums, took pictures with the students and tried to convince them they can get over their troubles by finding an outlet.

"She talked to our kids and said fighting is not the way," said Carl Oddo, vice president of Lincoln Child Center's Clinical Services, who also jams as a nightclub musician. "When Sheila E. comes and says, 'Oh yeah, you shouldn't do that. I did that,' she's got cred."

Oddo said the teaching and psychotherapy community has known for years that music is therapeutic. California now requires schools such as Lincoln Child Center to offer music classes and other programs to help students learn.

"Kids have different ways of learning," he said. "It is also a cathartic effect for the kids; it is cathartic to get it out."



While Sheila E. donated a drum set, congas, timbals, bongos and floor drums to the children, Lincoln Child Center turned one of its "time-out" rooms into a music studio. Time-out rooms are where hyperactive and usually aggressive kids go to calm down. They need sound-proofing to keep from annoying the neighbors, Oddo said, but it works.

"(Drumming) is not annoying if it's therapy, if it's done correctly and with a competent music instructor or therapist," he added. "And if kids play music, they're cool."

Oddo said Sheila E.'s visit was a treat for the kids, all of whom asked to take their pictures with the star and showed how they had cleaned their rooms -- which they had to do to participate in the event.

"They weren't going to let her get away without seeing that," Soares added.

One student said the best part of Sheila E.'s visit was that she actually took time off work to be with the students.

Lincoln Child Center accepts youths who would not otherwise succeed in a regular class setting. While it costs a traditional public school about \$7,000 per year to teach one student, an education at Lincoln Child Center costs \$85,000 per year, in part because the children and teenagers are required to live on-site.

Lincoln Child Center also serves about 2,500 off-campus students through special programs each year.

The center is supported with state funds, grants, charitable donations and fund-raising events.

A few years ago, because of budget cuts and a shrinking pool of wealthy donors, Soares feared the center might have to close. Lincoln acquired a new president and chief operating officer, Richard Clark, and the school is now operating in the black.

Soares said Lincoln still needs help from the community to make learning for the area's most difficult kids possible. He said the center will take any donations of quality musical instruments, including amplifiers. Musicians who have a few hours a month to work with kids are encouraged to contact Lincoln as well.

Oh, and he said he needs help to make that time-out room a happy place for Lincoln Child Center neighbors as well.

Call Lincoln Child Center at (510) 531-3111.