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Families Find Respite, Warmth During Coldest Storm of the Season

Braving the unexpected winter-like cold of 2024’s first Friday in April, nearly 300 children in foster care and their resource parents embarked on a three-day, all-expense-paid excursion to the San Bernardino Mountains with Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) social workers.

Ascending thousands of feet upward along the curvy two-lane Rim of the World Highway in a fleet of tour buses, families beheld a dense snow-dusted forest on one side and a rugged mountain face on the other. Their excitement increased with each passing mile as they neared Pali Adventures, an overnight camp known for its hands-on learning and outdoor activities.

(L to R) Children Services Administrator Kimberlee Bilbrew, Resource Parents Tanya Walters and Myesha Robbins, and Glen Friedman with The Change Reaction.

Upon arrival, Resource Family Support (RFS) Division team members, led by Kimberlee Bilbrew, quickly settled parents, children and colleagues into their cabins as snow continued falling throughout the night. Awakening to crisp temperatures and powdery snow, guests were guided to the breakfast hall by RFS’ dynamic team of warm, caring social workers, ensuring a smooth start to the day for all.

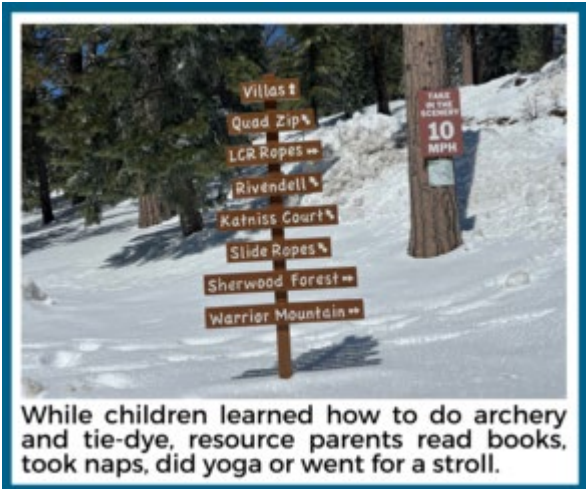
Among those present were Tanya Walters of Carson and Myesha Robbins of Lancaster. When Tanya registered for the event, she couldn’t have anticipated the wintry conditions that awaited. Self-assured, resourceful and tenacious, however, Tanya and her 16-year-old foster daughter were set to go — rain, shine or snow.

A resource parent of two years who exclusively welcomes teenagers into her home, Tanya said she wanted her foster daughter to have the chance to connect with other young people in care who may be open to friendship and potentially able to relate to her experiences better than peers at school.

“I wanted her to connect with friends beyond social media,” said Tanya, a mother of four adult children and grandmother of three with a deep passion for investing in young people. A school bus driver, she has had as many as four teenage foster daughters in her home at one time.

Myesha, a retired criminal investigator and former Court Appointed Special Advocates volunteer who has been a foster mother to nine children, journeyed more than 90 miles from home to reach the camp with her 8-year-old son, whom she’d adopted together with his 5-year-old brother from foster care, hoping to let him experience nature just as she did as a Girl Scout. Also in attendance was her 24-year-old biological son.

“It took a lot for me to let him be out here on his own,” Myesha said while observing her young son participating in activities independently. She explained that her son



While children learned how to do archery and tie-dye, resource parents read books, took naps, did yoga or went for a stroll.

has a developmental disorder that can sometimes affect his communication and social interactions. "But I wanted to let him shine and I know, if he falls, there are people here to pick him back up."

Throughout the sunshine-filled morning, parents enjoyed some free time while children, grouped by age, engaged in archery, tie-dye and cupcake decorating. Some parents zip-lined or took a stroll, while others enjoyed indoor activities like yoga, cake decorating, reading, napping and connecting with other resource parents.



(L to R) Grandmothers Maria Velasco of Baldwin Park, Loreto Garcia of Boyle Heights and Maria Olvera of San Fernando, who are relative caregivers, saw snow for the first time with their grandchildren at Camp Pali in the San Bernardino Mountains.

The excursion, conceptualized by DCFS partner The Change Reaction partly in response to a survey that found caregivers had little downtime, aimed to give caregivers much-needed respite while providing a safe, nurturing environment for their children.

With more than a year of meticulous planning and coordination led by Deputy Director Kym Renner together with RFS Division Chief Naftali Sampson and his team led by Kimberlee and Alycia Keys, the adventure became a reality, subsidized by Flexible Family Supports and Home-Based Foster Care Funding using state funds earmarked for enrichment activities to support the well-being of children in foster care. Additionally, The Change Reaction provided financial assistance and gifted each participant a hooded sweatshirt, sleeping bag, pillow, backpack, reusable water

bottle and towel. The camp also reduced the overall cost to attend.

For three grandmothers in attendance with their grandchildren who, like many on that mountain, were seeing snow for the first time, the experience was ultimately exhilarating and liberating.

Maria Velasco of Baldwin Park, who is raising four grandchildren between the ages of 7 and 15 while also working as a caregiver to older adults, shared: "Pues, es algo muy bonito porque he tenido libertad." ["Well, it's something very nice because I've experienced freedom."]

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