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Families frame their lives anew

6 who are struggling will get portraits by BU and Boys & Girls Club



BU student photographers will do a portrait of Bill McDonagh and his children, (from left) Christopher, Nick, and April. (Bill Greene/ Globe Staff)

By Meghan E. Irons, Globe Staff | April 19, 2010

Here is a snapshot of Bill McDonagh's life: death, divorce, and hard times.

A single father raising three children, McDonagh has never had the money or inclination for a family photograph.

But tomorrow he and his children will get dolled up, with carefully coiffed hair and gleaming smiles, for their very first family portrait.

"This is to show that we are a tight family," said McDonagh, who, along with his two boys, will wear a dark suit for their portrait. His daughter will be dressed in white. "It says we can depend on each other to get things done."

The portraits are the result of a new partnership between the South Boston Boys & Girls Club and Boston University's Center for Digital Imaging Arts, a certification program that gives students experience at various nonprofits. As part of their end-of-program practicum, students are expected to work full time, building professional skills while learning to manage deadlines and client expectations.

"They do all this work for free," said Urvi Modh, practicum manager at the Waltham-based BU center. "It's professional work these students are giving them."

The Boys & Girls Club teamed up with the center earlier this month at the urging of a club board member.

In addition to general photography and a 3-minute video, the club requested that portraits be taken of six struggling families, said Kristin Ede, a spokeswoman for the Boys & Girls Club.

“We thought it was a great opportunity to give back to deserving families,” Ede said.

A room at South Boston Boys & Girls Club will be transformed into a portrait studio tomorrow with a seamless set of white drapes from ceiling to floor. Bright lights will fill the room along with umbrellas and other light-moderating devices, and the families will have chairs, stools, and benches on which to sit.

Three of the six families, whose children frequent the club, have signed on to have their portraits taken. Among them are a couple with two children who had been homeless after the father lost his job, and a single mother of three who is fighting her way back from the brink. Each will get one 13-by-19-inch portrait and three 5-by-7-inch copies.

“We were interested in . . . giving them a memory that they can hold on to,” said Duncan Manning, one of the four student photographers who will be taking the portraits.

McDonagh, 50, is looking up now. He’s got his life packed in boxes, and the family — including April, 13, Christopher, 11, and Nicholas, 9 — is leaving Dorchester for Hull soon.

“I can’t wait,” said April.

For more than a decade, McDonagh, a Boston native, has shuffled from New Orleans to Virginia and back here, trying to set down roots. He returned home five years ago to live with family, reeling after a divorce and the death of his youngest child, who died of leukemia before her first birthday.

For the past three years, McDonagh and the children have been living in transitional housing while he trained to be recertified as an emergency medical technician and worked to get a permanent home.

His children took up swimming, basketball, and gym hockey at the South Boston Boys & Girls Club, which waived the \$25 annual membership fee.

When they move to Hull, McDonagh plans to put the large portrait on a wall in the living room.

“I’ve taken pictures of them before,” he said in a phone interview yesterday. “But I’m usually out of it because I was the one taking them. . . . Now I’ll be in it.”

Justine Hathaway, 34, said she did a portrait with her oldest daughter once, but that was before her boyfriend left her. She now has three children and has lost jobs and her home, and is gripped by worry.

“It’s been hard,” she said.

Her family isn't making a big to-do about the portrait. Hathaway will wear jeans, and the children — Elizabeth Perez, 14, Luzelena Perez, 11, and Julieann Perez, 9 — do not plan to get too dressed up.

Though she hasn't figured out yet where she will put the pictures, Hathaway said they will be treasured wherever they go.

"This is a way to say we are together again," said Hathaway. "I want to show them how close we are." ■