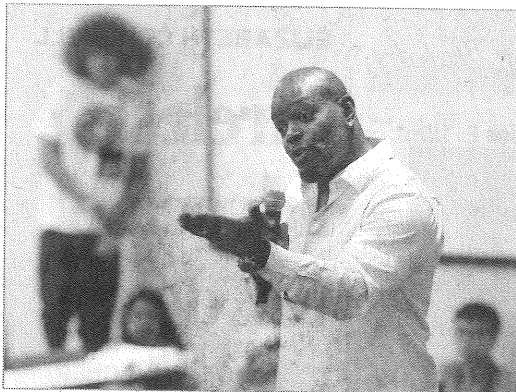


124 graduate from children's program

Scores of youngsters participated in graduation exercises for Kids University, a summer learning camp for homeless children from 24 shelters across Dallas and Collin counties. **8B**

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Brad Loper/Staff Photographer

Former Dallas Cowboys running back Emmitt Smith was the graduation speaker at Kids University on Thursday.

UT-DALLAS

Kids University gives ideas to 124

Homeless children learn about education, possibilities in program

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RICHARDSON — Less than a week ago, 10-year-old Mychayla Brown was spending her days in a Dallas homeless shelter, dreaming about becoming a fast-food cook.

But after four days of classes this week at the 18th annual Kids University, Mychayla has a new food career goal.

"I want to be an engineer," she said Thursday. "I want to invent a new type of" potato chip.

Mychayla spoke moments after she and 123 other youngsters participated in graduation exercises for Kids University, a summer learning camp for homeless children from 24 shelters across Dallas and Collin counties. The camp — the first of two this summer — was held on the campus of the University of Texas at Dallas.

It features various classes and sessions ranging from dancing to sports to algebra. It is operated by Rainbow Days Inc., a nonprofit organization founded in 1982 by Cathey Brown, originally as a support group for the children of alcoholics. Brown, a recovering alcoholic, included her child in the original group of seven Rainbow Days participants. The Dallas-based organization has now helped as many as

155,000 children in the Dallas area.

"The long-term goal is for them to break the cycle of poverty," she said. "We want to give them that hope and belief that they have a purpose, have some level of control."

Thursday's commencement ceremony featured Cowboys Hall of Famer Emmitt Smith as the keynote speaker. He told the children about the importance of working hard and getting a good education.

"It takes a person that is very focused and committed to their dreams and goals to stay on the right path," Smith said. "If you believe you can do it, can't nobody stop you."

Marissa Gonzalez, who graduated from Texas Tech University last year, was a part of an after-school Rainbow Days program when she was 8 and 9. The 22-year-old kept in touch with her mentors from there and now works as a counselor for the camp.

"I never thought that these principles would remain with me throughout my life," Gonzalez said. "I don't think I would have had the courage to move away after high school."

Derrick Ingram, 13, said he was participating in his eighth Kids University, adding that he's been in a homeless shelter "for as long as I can remember." But he said his visits to Kids University help make his life easier.

"Things change," he said. "Things get more exciting every year."