A true makeover is more than a splash of paint or a fresh, snazzy clothes hamper. It’s about switching up your perspective and creating a space that replenishes you. When Oprah learned that Covenant House Los Angeles, which lends a hand to hundreds of homeless youths every year, needed a major overhaul, she promptly enlisted designer Jeremiah Brent. His warmly elegant renovation was just what the shelter needed—and more.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID TSAY
BEFORE A STROKE OF GENIUS

What a difference some color makes. Painters broke out their brushes and covered the interiors in Smokey Taupe from Benjamin Moore, one of Brent’s favorite shades. “I’ve got the same color in my own home,” he says. “It’s soft, gender-neutral, and elevated enough without seeming like it’s trying too hard. To me, it’s like a hug.”

WE HAVE LIFT-OFF

Designer Jeremiah Brent drives down the new beds. He got involved after a call from Oprah. “She said, ‘The Covenant House beds haven’t been changed in about 20 years,’” says Brent. “I told her I needed a new idea every day.”

WE HAVE LIFT-OFF

Designer Jeremiah Brent test-drives the new beds. He got involved after a call from Oprah. “She said, ‘The Covenant House beds haven’t been changed in almost 20 years,’” says Brent. “Once I visited, I realized, We’ve got to change everything.”

WELCOME HOME

“When a young person walks in, this is the first space they see,” says Ami Rowland, Covenant House California’s COO. “Now it says, ‘We’re gonna love you, show you grace, and give you second and third chances. There’s more to life than what the world has shown you so far.’”

Since tech is vital for job searching—and staying in touch with friends and family—Brent added the FUYL Tower from LocknCharge (the thing in the corner that looks like a prop from 2001: A Space Odyssey). The charging station has compartments that keep phones, tablets, and laptops juiced up and secure. Midcentury-modern–inspired furniture from Living Spaces creates a look that’s friendly but posh.

E ALL LOVE the idea of a fresh start. But for homeless and trafficked kids, it’s an urgent need. Since 1972, Covenant House has been offering shelter, food, services, and comfort to at-risk young people, and 14 years ago, Alex Molina was fortunate enough to be one of them. At age 19, after a turbulent childhood and stints in a dozen foster homes, Molina scored a spot at the organization’s Los Angeles facility. “They gave me life skills I’d never learned: how to cook, clean my room, make a résumé,” she says.

The following year, Molina heard about an Oprah Winfrey Show contest offering one lucky student a makeover. She sent in her story, and to her utter shock, she won—not just the makeover but also a car, a $10,000 wardrobe, and college tuition. After graduating from Loyola Marymount University, Molina returned to Covenant House L.A., this time to work as a case manager. During one of her regular email exchanges with Oprah, she mentioned that the 21-year-old shelter was showing its age. And indeed it was—think squashed institutional mattresses and bedraggled carpets.

Oprah knew just who could help: virtuoso designer Jeremiah Brent. Brent lives just three miles from Covenant House, but that wasn’t the only reason he felt connected to the project: When he first came to L.A. in 2004, he was homeless himself for nearly a year. “I slept in my Jeep,” he says. “My first apartment was across the street from Covenant House.”

Brent dreamed up a revamp that would build the residents’ sense of pride—and the results brought tears to Molina’s eyes. “I wish there was a bigger word for grateful,” she says. “I’m so humbled and blessed, it knocks me to my knees.”

“Before, the lobby was dark and dingy, with old carpeting,” says Molina. “Now it feels so inviting. The change is like night and day.”

INSPIRED TO CREATE A MASTERPIECE OF YOUR OWN?

Check out page 71 for the perfect way to get started.
THE YOUNG AND THE RESTED

A lot of our kids have bounced in and out of different foster and group homes,” says Molina. “Some have never had a bed of their own.” Fresh linens and bunk beds (courtesy of IKEA), window treatments from Smith & Noble, and spotless mattresses make things extra serene.

“Where I lived here, I didn’t have a work space, so I did my homework on my nasty bed,” says Molina. Now modern angular desks from Pier 1 Imports and woven chairs will make study breaks more productive. Volunteers from the surrounding community clamored to help Brent realize his vision. “At one point, there were 50 of us unwrapping sheets and making beds and getting things organized,” he says. “I was shocked by how many people wanted to be involved.”

Some volunteers made bunk beds for kids in short-term programs, while the single beds are for those in a two-year program, during which they work regular jobs, go to college, or study for a GED. Each snug sleeping nook now has its own bedside lamp—a pretty big deal.

“Being in a room with four people with four different schedules and only one overhead light creates a lot of friction,” Molina says.

“A homeless kid needs to wash her clothes, so these amazing modern washers and dryers are game changers,” says Molina. Maytag put a much-needed spin on that situation.

Something that will never change? One of everybody’s favorite weekly activities: movie and popcorn night.

CHILL ZONE

This common room was serving up more gloom than graciousness. Easy, lovely pieces from Living Spaces (and of course, pristine TVs) bring this refuge into the 21st century.