

A young mother's love, a path to redemption

Brittney Ewing saw her life begin to unravel with her parents' divorce. She was in the fifth grade.

"That was a life-changer for me," said Ewing. "I started acting out, crying out for help really, but in all the wrong ways."

Over the next few years, those wrong ways included running away from home, acting out at school, and then dropping out of Fort Lauderdale's [Cypress Bay High School](#) when she became pregnant at the age of 15.

After her daughter Ne'veah was born in 2010, life got even harder. She suffered from bouts of homelessness, depression and thoughts of suicide, said Ewing.

The turnaround for Ewing, now 21, began six months ago when she arrived at Covenant House Florida, a Fort Lauderdale agency and shelter at 733 Breakers Ave., that serves runaway, homeless, and at-risk youth.

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Covenant House Florida is supported through the Sun Sentinel Children's Fund, a McCormick Foundation Fund, which benefits South Florida nonprofit organizations that help local families and children in need.

Working with counselors, she discovered the path to independence by accepting responsibility for her future. She learned to manage money, pay bills, live on a budget. She took classes in parenting and cooking.

"She is a really resilient young woman, determined to make a better life for herself," said Covenant House associate executive director Renee Trincanello, who helped Ewing set goals. "She is determined, focused, well-spoken, and ultimately she chose her safety and the safety of her child."



Single mother Brittney Ewing and her four-year-old daughter Ne'veah are grateful this Thanksgiving to be receiving support from Covenant House Florida, a Fort Lauderdale agency and shelter at 733 Breakers Ave. that serves runaway, homeless, and at-risk youth.

Several weeks ago Ewing graduated from the shelter to what Covenant House calls its Rights of Passage transitional housing. In a two-bedroom apartment, partially funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Ewing and her daughter live on their own.

Candidates for independent living must have a job, and pay 30 percent of their income as a form of rent, money that is returned upon completion of the program. Ewing is working a day shift as a cashier at a fast-food restaurant.

In January she plans to begin classes at Broward College, with the aim of eventually studying nursing.

"I think the biggest lesson I learned was forgiveness," said Ewing. "I had so much anger in me. I was upset that my family fell apart."

Like many youngsters in crisis, Ewing said she had to learn to trust. She arrived at Covenant House "scared and nervous," and wondering, she said, if her family didn't seem to care about her, why would strangers?

"I had to learn to open up, discuss my feelings and how to love myself," Ewing said.

Ewing's days are long. She rises each weekday at 5 a.m., and using bus passes supplied by Covenant House, takes Ne'veah to her pre-kindergarten by 7 a.m. She then catches another bus to get to her job by 8 a.m. She reverses the journey after work.

Since its founding in 1985, the Covenant House shelter in Fort Lauderdale, along with a smaller unit in Orlando, have taken in more than 30,000 boys and girls under the age of 21, according to executive director Jim Gress. The two nonprofit facilities run on a combined annual budget of \$7.8 million, he said.

"The first thing we presume about someone who comes to us is that for better or worse, they do not have a stable place to go," said Gress. "They are sleeping on the street, or staying where they are not welcome."

Often, said Gress, a former social worker, families descend into crisis due to issues of domestic violence, drug use and mental illness. When that happens, he said, "an adolescent becomes the expendable one.

"So our first priority is to be that welcome, to say yes, you can stay here."

On average, 70 boys and girls are in the crisis shelter, and another 15 are in the transitional living program. Most range in age from 17 to 21, but some can be as young as 11.

Still, there are those who are turned away, Gress said, not because of space but because of money. Covenant House has a daily waiting list that averages from 16 to 23 people. "We rely on charitable donations," Gress said.

Brittney Ewing counts herself as one of the fortunate ones. She found a space and has made the most of it.

"Even when she comes up against some bumps in the road, she will persevere," said Trincanello. "She knows how to make it happen."