

ANOTHER VIEWPOINT

Covenant House sees different kids with the same basic issues

By JAMES GRESS



Gress

As I consider the plight of homeless people during National Hunger and Homeless Awareness Week, my mind naturally travels to the youth and young adults we serve at Covenant House Florida. Over the last 30 years, we've served more than 35,000 young people.

Despite the passage of time, three overriding issues continue to affect these kids: mental illness, substance

abuse and victimization by adults.

Mental illness typically manifests during a person's late teens and early 20s. Since 1986, we consistently have seen the gamut of mental illness, from depression to bipolar disorder to schizophrenia. As in the '80s, drug and alcohol abuse continues to plague these kids for a variety of reasons including a family history, underlying mental health issues and a series of poor choices, in some cases. Victimization by adults — neglect, abuse and trafficking — also has persisted during

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these 30 years. As an organization that serves these kids who often come to us so broken, we have developed programs to address each of these critical issues.

What has changed during the last 30 years is the face of our young people. In 1986, when thousands of kids from all over the country streamed into Fort Lauderdale beach for spring break, our shelter primarily

saw kids who had no way home after the party was over. As time went on and spring break petered out, we began to see more local youth who reflect the cultural diversity of South Florida. This trend continues today.

We believe the single most important way to touch the lives of these young people is to offer a sense of hope, to be the "yes" in their lives. By this I mean, "Yes, we can help," "Yes, we believe in you," and "Yes, you can do this." Our actions appropriately support this encouragement by providing shelter, services, opportunity and options. We model dependability, encourage trust and offer unconditional love.

We also do what we can to shine a light on the plight of homeless youth and young adults, as these kids often go unnoticed in the glare of the larger homeless issue. Our annual Sleep Out for Homeless Youth, a national initiative that takes place at Covenant House sites across the country, is one way we help generate awareness of the issue. On Nov. 19, about 40 community leaders, having previously worked to raise funds in support our cause, will come to our shelter, spend time getting to know our residents and then head outside for the night to experience — in a very small way — what it's like to be homeless.

I would ask our community leaders to stand with us in support of all who are homeless, particularly the young group of people we serve. In the meantime, we will continue help these vulnerable kids get through the lowest points in their lives and move forward to becoming successful adults.

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