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## Hands4Hope hosts homeless discussion

Hands4Hope continues to put local kids on the front lines of challenging social issues most would never face in El Dorado Hills.

The nonprofit's founder and president Jennifer Bassett hosted a panel discussion on homelessness Friday that attracted roughly 100 attendees. Half were kids, many too young to comprehend the powerful message from three brave homeless people who sat before them calmly telling their story and answering questions.

Bassett's quest to enhance her own children's compassion for others led her Wind Youth Services, which provides outreach, social services and an emergency shelter to homeless youth in Sacramento. Bassett wanted to deliver more than a handout, so she arranged for local kids to work side by side with "Wind kids," preparing sack lunches and "care packages" of underwear, socks and other items that homeless men and women desperately need for distribution at selected sites in Sacramento and Placerville.

The panel at Friday's event traced the roots of their homelessness to drugs and criminal activity. They spoke frankly about life in the shelters, and the frustration of trying to better themselves while spending so much time around active drug and alcohol users.

"Nobody ever thinks they will grow up to be a drug addict or homeless," said Donnie Maggard, who stays in shelters in and around Placerville. "But believe me, it happens. My family was well to do when I was growing up, but here I am."

Maggard said he sees a lot of addiction among the homeless in Placerville, many of whom live that way by choice. "Some of these people have family willing to help them, but they choose the streets, and live that way until they die.

"I'm in this situation because I made poor choices," said Maggard, adding that he now thinks that firm, even strict, parenting helps kids develop a framework for making life decisions.

El Dorado County homeless advocate Mike Barr represents F.A.I.T.H. (Feeding and Inspiring the Homeless), which operates a rotating shelter at three local churches and one ranch for the estimated 400 homeless in El Dorado County. He said the No. 1 need in the local homeless population is access to drug and alcohol rehabilitation services.



**HOMELESS TALK** — Donnie Maggard, Vivek Anand and Jessie Mills, standing left to right, discussed their experience with homelessness at a panel discussion at the CSD on Friday, moderated by Hands4Hope President Jennifer Bassett, far right. Village Life photo by Mike Roberts

By comparison, Lisa Campodonico, director of Wind Youth Services in Sacramento, said she currently serves 1,700 youth. Some live at the shelter; others come for daycare and other services.

“I hear what these kids have been through and it’s unbelievable,” she said. “They’re survivors.”

Jessie Mills’ earliest memories are of riding the BART cars all night with her family when she was 5 years old. She recalled bouncing from shelter to shelter as a young girl, constantly losing her friends, never feeling like she could get close to anyone.

She’s been on her own since her father dropped her off at a shelter at age 14 and drove away, leaving her “a girl in a shelter full of adults,” she said.

At 17, Mills is a Wind Youth Services success story. “I have a job, I’m graduating and I’m going to make something of my life,” she said flatly, exuding a quiet confidence born from overcoming obstacles most young girls can’t imagine.

She said she uses her drug-addicted parents as motivation. “I just don’t want to be like them.”

Vivek Anand traced the roots of his homelessness to early incarcerations. He recalled being in and out of jail, homeless and increasingly disconnected from family and school. He lived in Sacramento’s tent city, which gained national media attention when it was shut down, then finally found Wind Youth Services. He rejoined society and is currently working on the restitution he owes, which is difficult with a criminal record, he said.

At Wind Anand said he learned that staying positive and helping others keeps him on track. “I had to accept my past, but not worry about it,” he said. “I try to do one positive thing a day.”

Afterwards, Mitch Hauser, 13 said the discussion changed the way he thought about homeless people. “I never heard their story ... it’s not necessarily their fault. ”

Brother Matt, 12, added, “It’s a tough thing for them ... their parents might be drug addicts.”

Campodonico blames the culture for turning a blind eye to homelessness, especially in youth. “We need to start by acknowledging that homelessness exists,” she said. “There are families out there that need help. Organizations like Hands4Hope are doing something about it. Thank you.”

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