

# Once homeless, now spreading hope

Co-workers at The Lord's Place are helping build a bridge to housing, job training



*Joey Nieves of The Lord's Place, right, speaks with a group of homeless people in downtown West Palm Beach on Monday. [PHOTOS BY RICHARD GRAULICH/PALMBEACHPOST.COM]*

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**By Daniela Perez**  
**The Palm Beach Post**

WEST PALM BEACH — The staircase to Shelby Swiderski's old bedroom was a chain-link fence and a dumpster in the back alley of the former Sears store at Forest Hill Boulevard and Military Trail.

"I would have to climb to get onto the roof," said Swiderski, a Loxahatchee native who lived atop the former appliance center in 2016, when she was a student at Palm Beach State College — and homeless.

"You used to climb a chain linked fence?" said her coworker, Joey Nieves. "That's that Loxahatchee grit."

They both laughed. Both once were homeless. Now they help homeless people in Palm Beach County.

Nieves, 40, and Swiderski, 28, work at The Lord's Place, an outreach agency that links homeless people to housing, job training and other services. Palm Beach County had about 1,400 homeless

people and families when county officials and volunteers took the January “Point In Time” count.

Nieves and Swiderski engage homeless people around the county every day. On Monday, they went to the Dunkin’ Donuts at Clematis Street and Dixie Highway and chatted with five people in need outside the store.

As pedestrians filed in and out with coffee and donuts, Nieves and Swiderski lit cigarettes with people who seemed like old friends. From afar, you’d see them in their The Lord’s Place shirts; Swiderski with immaculate black hair, a product of a haircut she receives every two weeks, Nieves with a shaved head and toothy grin.

They asked the crowd about their days or updated them on their housing or employment paperwork with The Lord’s Place, if they had filed any. They also informed those not involved with The Lord’s Place about the services provided and urged them to seek help there.

Nieves and Swiderski act as bridges between homeless people and The Lord’s Place. Swiderski, who graduated from PBSC with a criminal justice degree in the spring of 2017, never expected advising homeless people to become her career.

“I never in a million years thought I would be homeless,” Swiderski said. “Everyone says that will never be me. That’s easy to say until it happens to you.”

Swiderski’s mother died in 2011 while Swiderski was a full-time student at Palm Beach State. She was left to make the payments on her childhood home and soon could not. She began renting rooms around South Florida.

For five years, Swiderski said she struggled to pay her tuition and rent. In the summer of 2016, she realized she could only afford to pay one.

She gave up the room she was renting and began sleeping at the Sears. She said it was near a streetlight and she could still do her assignments at night.

“I was going to school for law enforcement and was hiding from police at the same time,” she said.

Swiderski’s hazel eyes glazed over the walls and corners in the abandoned truck loading area, saying at first she stayed in the back corners of the loading dock, but moved to the roof because it was safer.

The headlights, the sirens, the pedestrians screaming in the middle of the night along Forest Hill and Military — it was too much, she said.

Nieves said safety was a priority for him when he was homeless, too. He lived in a tree house behind an abandoned house in 2005 in his home state of Ohio. He said he would jam the door with a stick before he would fall asleep.

Both Nieves and Swiderski said they never told their families or friends they were homeless.

“It’s embarrassing to be homeless. It’s seen as such a negative thing. People don’t think about it as you being down on your luck,” Swiderski said. “Maybe it was a pride thing, but a lot of it was shame and embarrassment.”

That’s why building trust is paramount in providing aid to people at risk, they said.

“I look in their eyes and I can see the pain in their eyes, and I know that they’re trying to mask it. ... They always smile because they don’t want you to see into what’s really going on and that’s where the relationships come in,” Nieves said. “When they really see like, ‘OK, Joe, he’s been through this,’ they know I know what I’m talking about.”

Nieves and Swiderski hope to reach them through programs and resources available through The Lord’s Place. They said they tell their clients their stories of how they broke the cycle and give them the tools to do it themselves: links to jobs, access to counseling and treatment programs as well as places to live.

That effort to persuade, to build trust in a person conditioned not to trust, is what takes them to Dunkin Donuts and places like it every day. It pushes them to place calls, keep appointments.

More than anything, they say, the homeless want a human connection.

“Instead of walking by and looking at a person like they’re lesser of a person because they’re sleeping on the floor say, ‘Hey, how are you doing today?’ ” Nieves said. “Whoever is sleeping on the ground (will feel like) someone cares (and) that hope can bring them out of a very dark place.”

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