

Homeless

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 life. Living life day by day, not knowing where your next meal or dollar is coming from. It doesn't matter, it's just cool. You don't have to worry about a thing, (not) coming home to a curfew (or) people telling you what to do," he said.

His experience, if pleasurable, is so largely due to the efforts of Life Line.

"They have definitely, definitely picked my spirits up. I was a little down," he said. "I ran out of cash and didn't know what I was gonna do and then 'pow,' all of a sudden these people come up to me with little blue buttons and they're like, 'We wanna help.' They gave me clothes, McDonalds food stamps, they gave phone cards so I could call people when my pager blows up," said T.K., adding, "they gave me general support and guidance when I needed it."

"Shadow," 20 and also from Tacoma, left home at age 16. He's been here for the four years since then, "and on the streets for most of that."

"A lot of different situations put me there," he said. "I was basically raised as a slave. If my father wanted

something done, I did it or I got beat."

He attempted suicide times. He claims an incident in which his father "put a gun in my hand," and, he says, "asked me to kill him" proved to be pivotal.

"I pointed it at his head, without thinking twice, and pulled the trigger," Shadow said. "He had loaded a blank."

"So, to laugh at him," he continued, "this little .44 deringer I turned on myself, and put a bullet through my head."

Then, lowering his head, he placed his fingers toward the rear of its crown and parted the hair to reveal a scar.

"When I got out of the hospital, I said, 'You know what? I'm outta here.' I figured anything was better than what I was dealing with," he said.

Shadow said the bullet remains in his brain today and is a reminder of the desperation he felt four short years ago.

"Sixty-two percent of the kids who are living on the streets have attempted suicide at least once," said Mereaux, who was present when the Sentinel-Voice interviewed the young men.



A recent homeless teenager finds a few personal items at the drop-in center.

Sentinel-Voice photo by Ramon Savoy

Shadow's mother had already left his father and came to Las Vegas. He had a brief reunion with her, but said, "I found her and had the worst time of my life possible."

"My regret is that I didn't choose a better place to go when I left my father's house," he said. "Vegas is pretty cool (but) it's the worst place in the world for somebody who does not have the money to live here. There's very little to help you out."

If his mother hadn't been living here, he said, "I'd have been screwed from day one. I would have definitely picked somewhere else."

Of Life Line, he said: "They've helped me a lot—food, clothing, counseling when I've needed it." His reactions, upon encountering the program, were amazement and disbelief. "When I first found out about them, it was, like, 'Wow! There's actually someone in Vegas who'll help?'"

He has made a rather good impression on the staff — helping them in many ways — and may have the skills to be a volunteer counselor.

"I've already given some good advice and even advised some of their volunteers about how bad it can be," he said.

The counselors at the center are volunteers, "and they do go through a formal training," Richmond-Morris noted. "We have a lot of social workers that are volunteering their time," she said, and she's rallying other forces to meet the challenge.

"I'm truly elated about such a diverse group of people — prominent citizens, elected officials, service providers, educators, social workers and community activists — banding together to address what has become apparent: that this is an issue of such magnitude that it must be addressed by the Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth," she said. "I'm equally excited that the Drop-in Center has been located at Lifeline, where comprehensive services will be delivered to this population five days a week."

The Drop-in Center is open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Monday through Friday, with extended hours on Tuesday and Friday from 4 to 7 p.m.

Mereaux said raising the public's awareness of and sensitivity to this issue is a prodigious task.

"I haven't seen a change in awareness," he said. "I've never given a presentation

(where) the people don't just sit there with their mouths open, they're absolutely aghast at what the reality of it is. No one has a concept of how many kids are in the streets. The most conservative numbers put it at 1.3 million," according to the national runaway switchboard, he said.

When the children of homeless families are added, the average age of a typical homeless person in the United States is estimated to be nine years old, according to government studies.

Mereaux called the status quo scandalous, "outrageous."

"And it just infuriates me when I see the millions of dollars we're spending on Elian Gonzalez — one kid — and look at the good that could do for these kids here, and around the country," he said.

He said national involvement by concerned people can solve the crisis.

"There's nothing for these kids, there's nothing here in this state," he said.

Mereaux believes strongly that the true measure of society can be discovered in the way it treats its weakest and most vulnerable members.

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