

Committee helps homeless students

By Paula Stuart

News Chief Correspondent

Polk County children are not immune from being homeless. Since 2007, the homeless student population in Polk County has increased by 600. This impoverished condition has taken many of the county's minors; 2,327 of them. According to the county's breakdown of homeless enrolled students as of May 14 more than half of the homeless students were living with other families; while 19 of them were found living in a car.

Dee Dee Wright has been the Homeless Liaison for the Polk County School Board for 16 years.

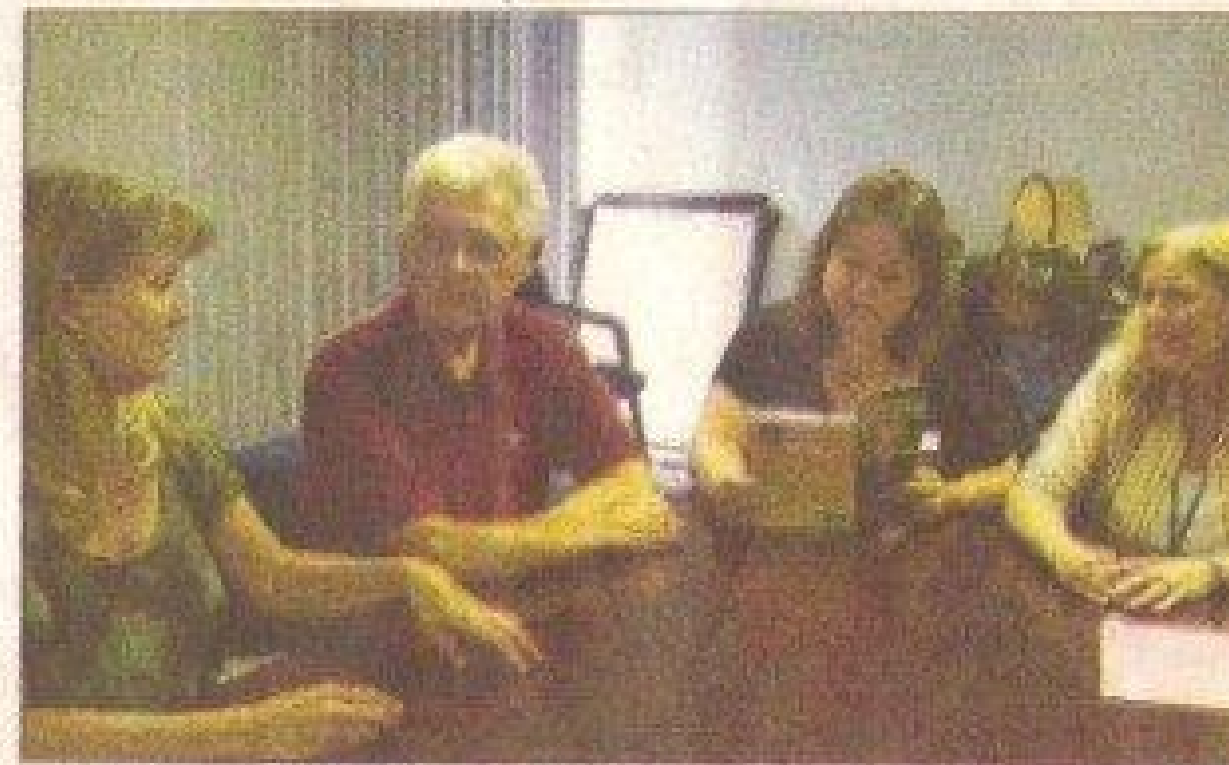
"This is the highest number we have ever had living in cars. They stay at Walmarts and Pilots because they have security and they are opened 24 hours, so they can use the bathrooms," Wright said.

Chuck Warren of Winter Haven worked 20 years with young people; four of those years in New York City with street gangs, a year in Florida with the Job Corps, and more than 15 years with the Flor-

ida Sheriffs Youth Ranches. He published a book about a homeless student in 2011 titled, "Address Unknown: The Struggles of a Homeless Teenager." Warren said he desired to have the story address a serious issue that many young people must face, either as the victim or as a friend or classmate of one.

"The housing and economic crises have resulted in an increasing number of homeless families. These families and their children are pretty much invisible to most of us. Most students aren't aware of the homeless student sitting in their classroom," he said. "This phenomenon of such a large number of homeless students is fairly recent. I imagine that many students would be unsure of what to say or how they could offer support should they learn of a fellow student being homeless. My hope is that "Address Unknown" will open the way for discussions to answer those questions."

In the back of the novel, there is information in the appendix which offers suggestions for discussions and



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Dee Dee Wright, Homeless Liaison for the Polk County Public School system discusses her experiences with the Sunshine Committee about homeless students in Polk County, including unaccompanied minors, such as high school seniors living on their own.

activities to help individuals and groups learn more about the homeless and how they can help.

"I also wrote the book as a way to offer help to the homeless student — helping them to see that they are not alone, and their plight will not last forever," Warren said.

Wright said, "Right on target with what homeless students and families go through; a compassionate and engross-

ing story about homeless people in America. The book truly describes situations that our homeless students live in and experience. I have spoken with families who have done what is in this book."

Vickie Griffis is an exceptional student education budgetary accountant with 13 years of service to the PCSB. She is part of The Sunshine Committee; a group of eleven employees of the Learning Sup-

port Division which includes Exceptional Student Education Department, Student Services and Florida Diagnostic & Learning Resources System (FDLRS). Their mission is to provide good will in the department, school system and in the community.

"I have had the pleasure of working with ten dedicated employees who are willing to sacrifice time and effort to all of the projects that the Sunshine Committee puts forth. Not only do we work with the graduating seniors who are homeless, provide Thanksgiving dinners to families within the school system that would otherwise not have a Thanksgiving, but we reach out to the community by providing Christmas presents for those families who are less fortunate in conjunction with Peace River Center, donate to American Cancer Society in memory of one of our former employees, The American Heart Association in honor of another of our employees as well as recognizing accomplishments within the Division," she said. "Each project has its own unforgettable experience, but I can nev-

er forget the comments from those students who are graduating that are homeless. When a student says, 'I didn't realize that anyone cared,' and you see the excitement on their faces when they open their graduation gift and hug 'their pillow' it makes everything that we do worthwhile."

Other members of the Sunshine Committee include Tracy Hannah, Terri Jenks, Tammy Charbonneau, Angela Bottom, Ann Hild, Lajonna Key, Cathy Lerner, Maggie Miller, Lorrie Prince, and Joanne Stidham.

The group's recent event was "Adopt a Senior;" a project to honor homeless seniors for their success, against all odds. Committee member Lorrie Prince said a steak luncheon was provided for the 100 homeless graduating seniors in Polk County.

"We wanted to provide them with a graduation gift they could use and to let them know that folks in their community cared about them. So we started by providing them with a collapsible hamper filled with toiletries, pillows,

PLEASE SEE HOMELESS, B12

HOMELESS FROM B7

ponchos, towels and many other things. So many people have been supportive and have given the seniors bus passes, food cards, quarters for laundry, detergent and make up kits for the girls," she said.

This year a special luncheon was provided by the owner of The Stanford Inn, Tony Grainger and his staff.

"The students had a wonderful luncheon at the Bartow Airport Runway Bistro and had casual graduation pictures taken by a photographer on our committee. It was a big success and we can't thank enough, the city government departments, schools, churches, elemen-

tary students and families for all their help. We had many folks on a fixed income give what they could to help the students; Sunday school classes, and even single parents. It has been an amazing outpouring," she said.

The Polk County Sheriff's Office, city of Lakeland, city of Winter Haven, Board of County Commissioners, John Stephens Inc. and numerous individuals gave gift cards, sheets, and money for those gifts.

"Without the community involvement we would not be able to tackle this project. It is hard to believe that Polk County has over 2,300 students who are homeless, with 100 of them graduating



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Lorrie Prince, Vickie Griffis, Angela Bottom participate in a recent strategic planning session held at the Bartow Airbase.

this year. We hope that other school districts will look at helping their graduating seniors who are homeless with a similar project. If these 100 students can graduate against all odds, should they not be

recognized for their accomplishment? I think so," she said.

Warren's book may be found at www.amazon.com, www.barnesandnoble.com, and other online booksellers.