

U.S. Senator, Others Sleep in Streets in Support of Homelessness

By Tiamoyo Harris, Howard University News Service On November 20, 2015

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WASHINGTON – With city officials poised to demolish a makeshift homeless community oftents and with the imminent destruction a huge homeless shelter in southeast Washington, the Covenant House International's annual "Sleep Out" demonstration and fundraiser took on a more poignant significance.

The 50 people who awoke from their sleeping bags on the streets on 13th and Pennsylvania Street around Freedom Plaza on last Friday were not part of the estimated 11,000 homeless people in Washington.

Instead, they were people with homes who were trying to help the homeless and disconnected youth during a national fundraiser in more than 16 U.S. cities.

The event, now in its fourth year, urged people to register to be "sleepers" on the street, encouraging each sleeper to raise about \$2,500.

According to Covenant House, the point the demonstration is to show youth that someone cares for them and that they care enough to see their struggle.

Brandon Martinez, 18, a former homeless youth, participated in the effort. Martinez said seeing other people sleep out in support of the homeless gave him a lot confidence to speak on homelessness.

He now has a home thanks to D.C. Covenant, he said, and plansto enroll in culinary school after getting his G.E.D. diploma.

Martinez participated in a panel in the John A. Wilson building across from Freedom's Plaza before the Sleep Out with four other participants in the D.C. Covenant program.

"I feel like a lot of people are ignorantand blissful about teen homelessness," Martinez said. "'D.C. Covenant has really been wonderful to me and everyone else. They accept everyone, no matter what."

During the event, sleepers and supporters heard the stories of other D.C. Covenant volunteers, and listened to local talent before finding a spot in the street to sleep.

Sen. Dan Sullivan of Alaska also participated. Sullivan came in support of the Alaska Covenant, which also had sleepers supporting the homeless Thursday night and Friday morning in Anchorage, Alaska.

Sullivan said he was impressed by the stories he heard from the participants.

"I was kind of blown away by listening to these young men and women," he said. "They have wisdom way beyond their years." "I'm very honored to be here, and just like I think a lot of people that you see here are sleepers, I just want to be able to give back."

The D.C. Covenant, which 20 years ago, has helped thousands since its inception, said Guy Brami, chair of the board of directors. Last year, the organization provided over 58,000 meals and placed over 351 people through its GED program, Brami said...

Bramisaid the purpose of the organization's annual event is to focus the city on the issue.

"The upper side of the awareness is the awareness to the business community," he said. "This is focused on bringing sleepers here who are business community leaders so that they can come here and be sponsored. It's just like a 10 k run."

Jasent Brown is director for D.C. ReEngagement Center, a government-sponsored program that helps young high school reconnect with educational options and receive a high school diploma or GED.

She and her staff of five raised over \$5,000 for the Sleep Outin the past six weeks by asking friends and family to donate.

"A lot of times especially since we're all case manager as well, we get phone calls in the middle of the night saying 'I'm sick and stuck at the park and have nowhere to go,'" Brown said.

"In order for us to understand how they felt that night, how scared they were, how cold they were, we're sleeping out. So when they call us and say it was cold, we can say, 'Yes we know how cold it was for you.'"



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