



Kobe Bryant

Brings His A-Game to Help the Homeless

By Dennis J. Freeman

Jermell Foster has been living on the streets for the last five years. Being homeless for that amount of time means having to watch your back at all times. Survival for the 26-year-old Foster comes by scrapping for food and living one moment at a time. No minute is taken for granted on the streets, Foster told me.

"When you're homeless, you are surviving," he stated. "When you have a career job, that is when you're living. Homeless is about surviving for the moment. One of the disadvantages of being homeless is that you have a lot of people out here who are just roaming the streets looking for bad stuff to get into. You have to protect yourself. It's pretty vicious. I've seen some horrible stuff just walking. It ain't cool. But you just have to breakthrough."

Foster received his own breakthrough when he came to My Friend's Place four years ago to seek temporary shelter and put some food in his stomach. My Friend's Place, which is a Hollywood haven for homeless youths, has been a Godsend for Foster, as it is for so many young adults who go there. But there are thousands of other young people on the streets of Los Angeles who are not so lucky to stumble up on a shelter like My Friend's Place. Some hit the streets to escape abuse they were subjected to at home. Others are on the streets without a high school diploma. Heavy alcohol and drug use by parents or guardians are also common contributing factors for a large number of young people who are homeless. Seeing hordes of young people without a home as he drove to the Staples Center to work, ignited a fire within Los Angeles Lakers superstar Kobe Bryant.

Definitely something needed to be done to bring attention to this largely ignored issue. So, Bryant decided to do something himself. He and his wife launched the Kobe and Vanessa Bryant Family Foundation (KVBFF) to garner help and fight for those who are homeless in Los Angeles and have no voice. The first stop on their agenda was to go to My Friend's Place for a press conference in June and address the problem.

"On my way to the games, I noticed the many children and families living on the streets—just blocks away

from where I play basketball and it didn't sit well with me," said Bryant. "I wanted to help make a difference in homelessness, and what better place to start than in my own back yard."

The KVBFF will focus primarily on youth homelessness in Los Angeles as its first initiative. Funds raised by the foundation will support organizations and programs that transform the lives of youth people and families who have no place to live. It will help create permanent housing as well as by providing resources for education and career development. Heather Carmichael, is the executive director of My Friend's Place, which assists young people ages 12 to 25 and hosts up to 1,600 youth annually. Carmichael said what Bryant and Vanessa are doing to bring attention to the plight of the homeless should be applauded.

"He was amazing with the young people," Carmichael said referring to Bryant's interaction with the kids at My Friends Place. "He gave them space. He was completely respectful. He really made their day. I'm certain this was a life-transforming experience for this group. So many others their age will benefit from the

work Bryant is doing. He's a true champion for the cause and he is committed to helping all of the homeless."

Right now Los Angeles has the largest homeless population in the country. Driving through the Downtown section of LA, it is impossible not to notice the women, men and children sitting or sleeping

in cardboard boxes or wrapped in blankets on sidewalk concrete. They are barely surviving day-to-day. These seedy and unsafe conditions are despicable. What for them is a daily routine and way of life—is for those not accustomed to such a sight simply heart wrenching.

People live in broken, dirty boxes and stay warm with old, worn out blankets and shredded newspapers. The majority are African Americans and Latinos. According to statistics reported this year by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, African Americans make up 43.7% of the homeless population in Los Angeles County with Latinos at 27.7%. Within LA city boundaries African Americans

make up almost half (49.3%) of people without homes and living on the streets. Perhaps even more disheartening was for Bryant to see first hand all the children and teens with no home to go to.



Kobe Bryant speaking with young people at My Place

The LAHSA now

shows in its executive report that the demographic age group of 25-54 represent the largest number of homeless victims in the county, accounting for 62.5% of streetwalkers.

Bryant is determined to get these young people help. He is actively involved in several charitable foundations such as The Center for Abused Children, the Boys & Girls Clubs of America and St. Jude's Children's Hospital. The father of two daughters himself, Bryant continually steps out front to make his celebrity work hard for those less fortunate. His annual Kobe Basketball Academy, which this year takes place in July on the campus of UC Santa Barbara is another example of his philanthropic efforts. By publicly taking on the homeless situation, he has positioned himself to be more than just a leader on the basketball court; he is leading the way, helping people get their lives back on track and children on a path to productivity.

Foster, who considers himself to be chronically homeless, said Bryant lifted his own spirits greatly when he went to My Friend's Place to talk about solving the homeless problem. It meant a lot to him that Bryant would take the time to speak to him and the others. "It's monumental," Foster said. "Just his presence was enough to bring attention to the devastation we feel being homelessness. LA is the mecca of homeless youth and it needs to be taken out from behind the shadows, talked about and solved."



Jermell Foster is in the front row of the photo wearing a green t-shirt.