

# Students battle homelessness



South Salem senior Claire Adams sorts through jackets the leadership program at her school collected on Tuesday. Adams is working to raise money for mobile showers for homeless people.

MICHAELA ROMÁN/STATESMAN JOURNAL

## Salem youths take action and work hard to raise funds to help those in need in the community

**Natalie Pate** Salem Statesman Journal  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Salem-Keizer Public Schools had more than 42,000 students last year — 60 percent living in low-income households and more than 1,100 considered homeless.

There are programs to help, yet increasingly, students are the ones taking action.

Last year, McKay High School senior Raul Marquez raised about \$410,000 to create Taylor's House, an emergency, over-night house for homeless youth.

His work, in turn, inspired Claire Adams, a senior

at South Salem High School.

She's grabbed attention this year by successfully raising money for a mobile hygiene unit, complete with three showers, a hair-cutting service, donated clothes and, eventually, an attached laundry service.

And advocates like Tricia Ratliff with the Mid-Valley Community Action Agency say they've seen a wave of youth stepping up to help their peers, with students painting new shelters, donating clothes and giving up time and money to

**See HOMELESSNESS. Page 3A**

# Homelessness

Continued from Page 1A

help their friends in need.

"Students like Claire and Raul represent our true goal of public education," said Salem-Keizer Superintendent Christy Perry. "Not only are they exceptional students, but they look at their community with that critical problem-solving lens and effect change."

"What's really rewarding, though, is that there are thousands more students just like Claire and Raul," she said. "They are lobbying their legislators, running voter registration drives, speaking in front of thousands at marches and Ted Talks, all the while inspiring adults to do more."

## Building confidence through showers

Claire Adams remembers seeing people experiencing homelessness when she was younger and wondering, "Why?"

That same question gnawed at her as a teen when she learned about the growing homeless crisis and heard families were resorting to bathing their children in nearby rivers and creeks.

"It isn't just about taking a shower," Adams said. "It's the confidence of being clean."

"(That) confidence in yourself can lead to getting a job, getting a house and, hopefully, getting out of homelessness."

The South Salem senior previously served on the United Way of the Mid-Willamette Valley with Marquez and was inspired by his project to fund Taylor's House.

Adam is now working to raise at least \$150,000 for a specialized mobile trailer. She's already halfway there.

The trailer would be pulled by a truck and would fit three showers, compared to only two allowed in other mobile shower models.

The goal is to haul the trailer across Marion and Polk counties and help as many people as possible, she said.

Adams, 17, has spent much of her life helping others. The daughter of a police officer, she credits her dad's work for teaching her the value of helping others.

She spends time every Monday with the school's leadership class picking up trash in nearby neighborhoods. She also volunteers through her involvement with the National Honors Society. This is in addition to her work as an assistant

ballet instructor.

After high school, Adams plans to attend the University of Oregon and pursue a career in medicine. But until then, she wants to do everything she can to complete her fundraiser and get the project off the ground.

"I hope people will see this project and want to do more," Adams said.

"We have to teach the younger generations — we are the future," she said. "We can do a lot, we really can."

## Empowering a younger generation

After the death of a homeless girl named Taylor, Raul Marquez took action and raised the money to buy a house in Salem, now known as Taylor's House. It's helping fill the gap in over-night shelters for homeless youth.

Marquez's involvement in Taylor's House is complete and the Mid-Valley Community Action Agency has taken over the program's management. But Marquez's work is far from over.

A freshman at Willamette University, Marquez, 19, still takes time to speak with Salem-Keizer students about the work he did and the work they can do.

"We've failed our youth for so long," Marquez said. "I hope our youth will take a stand."

Throughout his work on Taylor's House, Marquez said the community support stayed the same. He's worked with Adams and said he is thankful for her leadership.

"We've paved the way for students to feel empowered," he said. "It's common to think our voices don't matter. That's the first hurdle."

Marquez said one thing he'd like to see youth work on is the lack of family shelters in the area. He advised students to take on any size project they can, saying Taylor's House was just an example that "the sky's the limit."

"No matter your age, what grade you're in, you can make a difference by taking a stand and doing what you're passionate about," he said.

## Taylor's House nearly ready

Every morning, Tricia Ratliff goes to work and finds something on the steps of the HOME drop-in center.

One homeless student sleeps there almost every night, she said. In the morning, he folds up his possessions and leaves a note on top that he's gone to school and will be back to pick it up later.

This youth is one of many Ratliff



**Tricia Ratliff, program director of the HOME Youth & Resource Center, speaks during the grand reopening of the center Sept. 24, 2015, in Salem.**

BRENT DRINKUT/STATESMAN JOURNAL

works with. She also oversees Taylor's House.

Though it hasn't opened yet, the staff has been hired and trained and Ratliff said they are just waiting to finish the licensing process. Once open, the emergency home will start with 10 beds serving an estimated 100 youth a year.

The initial agreement is that youth can stay for 21 days. Depending on the case, if beds are available, there's flexible funding, etc., Ratliff said they may be able to extend someone's stay.

But it costs approximately \$125 per kid per day and they still need more beds to meet the local demand.

Ratliff calls Taylor's House an emergency youth house, not a youth shelter, hoping to flip the negative connotation many have with shelters.

"It will be very much a family atmosphere," she said. Youth will have daily chores and be responsible for making family-style meals every day.

In addition to sleeping spaces, the finished basement will have various treatment rooms. Ratliff said they are developing contracts for on-site mental health and drug/alcohol counselors. They also will have assessment rooms for if a youth is sexually assaulted or a survivor of sex trafficking.

Additionally, Taylor's House will be responsible for connecting youth with educational programs within 72 hours of arriving. For example, if a youth is not currently going to school or came from a different district, staff will reconnect them with local schools. They will also provide on-site tutoring.

Ratliff said she's seen a change in the way students and youth are helping make these opportunities a reality.

"We've had just as many, if not more, youth volunteers as adult volunteers work on this house," she said. "It's impressive."

## A community of peers

Several youth from the HOME drop-in center — those who have previously experienced homelessness — have been helping at Taylor's House.

McNary High School's Key Club students have probably helped the most, she said, coming multiple times to paint.

And youth from the juvenile justice system also have volunteered, she said, some court mandated and others not.

"I've really seen more than any other time that kids are not helping 'the homeless kids' — they're helping their peers, their friends," Ratliff said. "They're not coming and doing it because they want to look good."

Ratliff said the passing of Taylor and the unfortunate spike of suicides in Salem-Keizer schools over the last year has really brought people together.

"That's no consolation prize for anyone involved with those kiddos, but that's definitely the bright side," she said.

While Ratliff wants to see continued support for existing programs, she said the 18-24 year old population experiencing homelessness "needs some love right now."

She also said homelessness in rural school districts is a large problem, especially since the need is often as large as urban areas, but there are far fewer resources.

"We definitely need to continue focusing on what they have been doing," she said. "Keep sustaining projects already started ... and just loving on each other and loving on those less fortunate."

For more information on Adam's mobile hygiene unit, contact the United Way of the Mid-Willamette Valley at 503-363-1651.

For more information about HOME or Taylor's House, contact the Mid-Valley Community Action Agency at 503-585-6232.

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