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Verde Gardens Farm Program Gives New Life, Work To Miami-Dade Homeless Families

The Huffington Post | By Christiana Lilly

A mother living with her two children in a car. A family forced to leave their home after their landlord raised the rent again. A father whose job gave only inconsistent work.

These are the faces of homelessness in Miami-Dade, and just three of hundreds of stories at Verde Gardens. The Homestead farm community is a place where formerly homeless families can work the land to help pay rent at a home down the street.

“My son never had his own room,” Alma Santos said. “I have a place where my son can lay his head, in a place we can call home.”

Santos lives in one of 145 units at the year-old Verde Gardens, and more than 580 formerly homeless and low-income residents, 10 percent of whom are veterans, now make up the burgeoning neighborhood. A short walk away from the farm, Santos works at the Gardens' farmer's market and pays 30 percent of her income -- \$117 per month -- toward her two-bedroom, two-bathroom home.

Verde Gardens caters only to families with at least one person with a disability. Residents agree to random drug and alcohol testing, and a social worker visits their homes every month. The community is a conglomeration of nonprofits and social organizations working together, and funded by a number of grants and donations -- namely, a \$20 million partnership between the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust and developer Carrfour Supportive Housing.

Combining a threefold effort with the farm, homes, and the Homeless Assistance Center, Verde Gardens is the first program of its kind in the country.

“We hope that this is a model for other people to do,” said Ron Book, director of the Homeless Trust.

Local efforts like Verde Gardens have led to a decrease in Miami-Dade's homeless population. In 1996, there were 8,000 homeless both living in shelters and in the streets. In January 2010, that number was down to 3,879. The most recent streets count on Aug. 30 found 882 homeless, according to the Trust, compared to 2,161 in 1997.

Verde Gardens was built on the old Homestead Air Force Base property, destroyed by Hurricane Andrew. Now, it's a 22-acre farm teeming with herbs, vegetables and fruits that are sold at the weekly farmer's market on the property, and most recently, the tables at Miami restaurant Tuyo. There are plans to eventually add a fish farm, sell meat, and become certified organic.

Juan Lopez spends his days working in the farm's nursery or chopping up the land to prepare for the next season's harvest. His slide into homelessness began when the economy took a downturn, affecting his job at an independent construction company.



"We couldn't pay the rent," Lopez said, adding that bills mounted for his chronically diabetic son.

Finally, the family had to move onto the streets, where they lived for a week before a member of the Homeless Trust's outreach teams found them. Today, the Lopezes live in one of the townhomes, paid for by his work on the farm.

Alma Santos and her 12-year-old son, Jaime, were one of the first to move into Verde Gardens. Her struggle with homelessness began when she was pregnant with Jaime. Suffering a high-risk pregnancy, she could no longer work in her job in construction when her doctor advised bed rest. Left with little money, she moved into a shelter with her then-boyfriend until she went into labor. She gave birth to Jaime almost two months early and he weighed only 2 pounds. A month later, Santos was able to bring him "home" to the shelter.

Santos moved to Chicago with her son and then, seven years later, back to Miami. They lived in an efficiency for three years before her landlord raised rent by \$155. Santos said it was difficult to keep a job with Jaime's borderline autism; she had to constantly leave work for doctor's appointments or help her son through a meltdown at school. She found herself homeless again.

"It's hard to ask for help," she said, "but for your kids, you do what you have to do."

Thanks to help from an outreach team, Santos and her son moved into the temporary shelter at Verde Gardens. Two weeks later, they moved into their own townhouse, which Santos has covered with inspirational messages and family photos. It was here that her son was formally diagnosed with borderline autism, and she learned how to manage it.

Lori Mestre, a program administrator, said contact with residents like Santos has illustrates a shift in homeless demographics.

"The face of homelessness changed for me," Mestre said. "It's women and children."

Of the residents living at Verde Gardens, 315 are children. This past summer, they were able to participate in an entirely volunteer-run summer camp guided by the older teens living in the community. All of it was coordinated by Courtney Hill, who has seen a lifetime of change since she was pregnant and living in a car with her two children, one of whom has ADHD.

As a single mother, Hill found it hard to find a job that could pay for a home and day care. She moved back to Georgia to be with family, then decided to give life a second chance in Florida. However, she was back in the streets when banks foreclosed on her home almost two years ago.

"It was discouraging for a parent who wanted to get up and go to work, and not have anything handed to them," she said. When Hill was seven months pregnant with twin girls, she and her older two children lived in a car close to their school so they could continue getting an education.

Now, through help from the Homeless Trust, her older son and daughter are attending a private school equipped to help her daughter with her ADHD. While Hill is working, her twins are cared for at the Homeless Assistance Center -- just a stroll away.

"We're helping each other help ourselves," Santos said. "Now that we're here, we don't feel stuck."

 *Verde Gardens Bring New Life for Homeless*

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