

'Youth Thrive Summit' a big success; foster-care professionals strategize

By Ken Datzman

In the early 1940s, Johnny Mercer wrote the lyrics for the song "Accentuate The Positive," which was sung by various popular artists in the style of a sermon. The opening line: "You've got to accentuate the positive/eliminate the negative."

In a way, Brevard Family Partnership is doing just that with one of its cutting-edge initiatives in the community, and is drawing wide recognition for its work.

For three consecutive years, Brevard Family Partnership has brought together professionals who work within the foster-care system, directly or indirectly, to hear firsthand the stories of those who have gone on to be successful in life after aging out of foster care.

"We looked across the country and found young people, adults at this point in their lives, who had gone on to be great successes. We wanted some of them to tell their success stories at our Summit," said Ashley Carraro, the senior director of programs at Brevard Family Partnership.

These successes include people like Rollins College MBA graduate Lucas Boyce, who once worked in the White House and flew on Air Force One and is now the Orlando Magic's director of business development and legislative affairs.

"Lucas Boyce is a young man who was born to a teenage drug addict and prostitute," said Carraro. "The odds were stacked against him. He was not supposed to be successful. And look what he has accomplished in life. What he says is that he is not different, and that's what he's telling young people in foster care. Don't let foster care 'define you.' It's just a 'place in life.' That's not 'who you are.' We are trying to change the stigma of foster care in society, and Lucas is helping us do that."

His dramatic story is detailed in the book "Living Proof: From Foster Care to the White House and the NBA." The story not only demonstrates that dreams can be achieved, but that people can also rise up from very difficult beginnings to achieve great success. The book recounts how he was taken in by a loving foster mother who later adopted him.

Boyce's uplifting message on the speaking circuit centers on his mother: "My mom taught me you can be whoever you want to be, and you can accomplish whatever you want to accomplish, and you can do big things." Dorothy Boyce took in 40 foster children and adopted six.

His story and those of others are inspiring because the words "foster care" often have negative connotations in our society.



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

Brevard Family Partnership recently hosted its third Brevard 'Youth Thrive Summit,' which drew more than 200 people, from attorneys to foster-care parents. The event emphasized the success stories of former foster-care youth and what helped them rise up in society. From left: Ashley Carraro, senior director of programs at Brevard Family Partnership; Leonard Burton, Senior Fellow, Center for the Study of Social Policy based in Washington, D.C.; and Sarah Greenblatt, consultant, Center for the Study of Social Policy. They are at the Heritage Isle Clubhouse in Viera.

PRESORTED
STANDARD
US POSTAGE
PAID
BREVARD BUSINESS
NEWS, INC.
32904



Brevard Family Partnership

Continued from page 1

Statistics suggest “bleak futures” for children who grow up in foster care.

“But what about the ones who are successful? What are the key ingredients that made them a success in life? So Brevard Family Partnership decided to launch this Summit three years ago to not only bring people together in the community, but also to use the feedback to create strategies and models. And we decided who best to tell the stories but former foster youth themselves,” said Carraro, during a break from the Feb. 12 Brevard “Youth Thrive Summit” held at the Heritage Isle Clubhouse in Viera.

The Summit was attended by more than 200 people, including attorneys, foster parents, social workers, dependency care managers, and newly minted protective investigators from the Florida Department of Children and Families, “who are probably going to face some of the hardest work that they will ever encounter in their careers,” Carraro said.

On any given day, there are some 400,000 children in foster care in the United States. More than 8,000 children are in foster care in Florida, of which some 200 are in Brevard County. They are removed from their homes, not through any fault of their own, but because they have been abused or neglected.

“We actually serve about 800 families in the child-welfare system in Brevard,” said Carraro. Brevard Family Partnership and its community partner agencies provide child-abuse protection, foster care and support, adoption, independent living, and community-outreach services to children and families in Brevard County. Headquartered on West Eau Gallie Boulevard in Melbourne, the organization manages the child welfare system in Brevard.

Brevard Family Partnership and its partners provide independent living services to youth and young adults in the foster-care system, and later when they are on the road to independence. It is a requirement that youth aging-out of the system (those turning 18 years old without returning to the care of their parents or being adopted) have the basic life skills to function successfully on their own.

Led by Chief Executive Officer Dr. Patricia Nellius, who holds a Ph.D. in counseling, Brevard Family Partnership made a “paradigm shift” a number of years ago and began focusing its foster-care efforts on “positive youth development” versus constantly looking at behaviors and symptoms, for example.

“What we decided to do was essentially appeal to the ‘heart.’ Before, we appealed to the ‘head.’ To be in this field, we recognize that an individual has to have education and training, but he or she also has to have a heart,” said Carraro.

In October of 2012, Brevard Family Partnership began the development of a system-transformation project which entailed establishing a framework for the incorporation of child “trauma-informed care” across the community of practice. The goal of this initiative was to develop and foster broad community awareness and knowledge regarding the impact of trauma on children and families, and upon those who serve and care for them. “Positive youth development” is the outcome of a trauma-informed system of care.

“Brevard Family Partnership is a leader in this nation with respect to child trauma-informed care and positive youth development,” said Leonard Burton, a Senior Fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based Center for the Study of Social Policy, who attended the Summit in Viera.

“They are doing it the right way with respect to the Youth Thrive framework, looking at the protective and promotive factors that we care about, and people’s resilience, the social connection, having concrete support in times of need, and understanding adolescent development, as well as their cognitive and emotional development.”

The Center for the Study of Social Policy, which also has an office in New York City, designed the Youth Thrive framework using protective and promotive factors that focus on ways in which youth can be supported to advance healthy development and well-being, and reduce the impact of “negative life experiences.”

The Youth Thrive framework is a “lens” for assessing current agency efforts and for making changes to more fully embrace and support young people in foster care — with a history of trauma, juvenile justice, and other systems — so they thrive and reach their full potential. The framework is founded upon the “Five Protective and Promotive Factors,” which include youth resilience, social connections, knowledge of adolescent development, concrete support in times of need, and cognitive and social-emotional competence.

Burton joined the organization one year ago. He brings more than 25 years of executive leadership, youth development, and systems improvement experience to the Center for the Study of Social Policy’s Youth Thrive initiative.

For more than 35 years, the Center for the Study of Social Policy has worked with policymakers and communities across the nation to improve the lives of the most vulnerable children and families.

Burton is helping engage and support public agencies that are implementing the Youth Thrive framework, a multi-year body of work to ensure healthy development and well-being for youth involved with child welfare and other public human services systems.

“This meeting has been amazing,” he said. “And what I really like about what I’m hearing and seeing, is Brevard Family Partnership is creating space and opportunities to hear the voices of young people and bring the community partners together to be responsive to the voices of young people, though policies and practices.”

The six spheres of influence of Brevard Family Partnership’s trauma-informed system are: maximize the psychological safety of children and families; identify trauma-related needs of children and families; enhance well-being and resilience; enhance well-being of those working in the system; partner with youth and families; and partner with agencies and systems that interact with youth and families.

The Summit attendees “learned different strategies,” said Carraro. “It was like a workshop.”

Sarah Greenblatt, a consultant with the Center for the Study of Social Policy, said she learned a lot from the Summit. “I think the most important thing I took from this experience is feeling the power of the stories of the young people. Knowing their stories, understanding their stories, and being able to share those stories for their healing

ability, that’s very important to me.”

Greenblatt has more than 30 years experience in child welfare, working with a variety of public and private agencies and foundations on helping child-welfare systems ensure that youth in foster care have stability and permanence in their lives.

To launch the initiative, Brevard Family Partnership created the Brevard Youth Thrive Steering Committee three years ago. “We started with four people in a conference room and today we have more than 50 committee members,” said Carraro. “Over the last three years we have developed a training curriculum. We go out into the community and educate our partners.”

One of the many goals of the training is to disseminate useful information to parents, caregivers, and community members so that they will better understand how they — in their respective roles — can prioritize healthy development for young people so they grow into successful, productive, and caring members of society.

Late last year, Florida state government announced that the University of Central Florida, in collaboration with the Florida Association of Deans and Directors of Social Work, will lead a new statewide project that will help reshape and enhance the work force at the Florida Department of Children and Families to better protect children under state care.

UCF is the lead university that will implement a \$5.3 million contract to train social-work students across the state who would then become child protective investigators and case managers for the state.

The Department of Children and Families received more than 190,000 calls about potential child abuse or neglect in fiscal year 2014–2015. There were more than 262,000 active investigations during that same period of time, according to DCF.

The contract between DCF and UCF involves 14 public and private universities in Florida, including Barry University. The program will provide a maximum of \$12,000 in stipends per student.

Full-time undergraduate and graduate students are eligible for two annual stipends of \$6,000 per year if they earn their degree in social work, take classes specifically designed to prepare students to work in child welfare and who pledge to work two years at a local DCF office, a sheriff’s investigative unit, or a community-based care lead agency or one of its subcontractors. Part-time graduate students are eligible for three annual stipends of \$4,000 per year with similar work obligations.

A day before the Summit in Viera, Brevard Family Partnership hosted 50 young people who are in foster care. The event, “Youth Café,” was held at an area hotel, Carraro said.

“It’s all about positive youth development and who better to tell us their needs than our young people. At the Youth Café event, we asked them two specific questions: What do you need to be successful in foster care, and what do you need to be independent as you age out of foster care? Those answers were given to the Summit participants, who will use them to create strategy. This is a continuous process. We are always asking the kids to provide us with their insight. And they are uplifting us with success stories,” said Carraro.