

https://www.bakersfield.com/opinion/community-voices-creating-new-pathways-of-hope/article_e7716210-47b0-11ea-ae1a-1b076d600ec0.html

COMMUNITY VOICES: Creating new pathways of hope

By Jean Fuller

Feb 6, 2020



Jean Fuller

Here I am back in Washington, D.C., the capital of the United States of America, a country where human talent and innovation is nurtured and everyone and anyone can pursue their American dream. Our local, statewide and national conversation has been heavy with the topic of homelessness and a seemingly helpless undertone has permeated what appears to be an impossible problem to solve.

Yet, sitting in my hotel room, overlooking the Washington monument, I felt a surge of hope and faith in the leadership that is emerging from our local community in taking this issue head on and developing focused, targeted solutions. We have a tradition of great leadership from Bakersfield with Bill Thomas chairing the House Ways and Means Committee and now with Republican leader Kevin McCarthy.

As a small town Shafter girl, I first encountered the formidable Bill Thomas when I stepped foot on the Bakersfield College campus. I fell in love with public service after taking a political science class taught by the popular professor Bill Thomas. Like Congressman Thomas, I eventually went into public service, serving in the California Legislature from 2006 to 2018. However, prior to my productive career in the Assembly and the Senate, I served as superintendent of the Bakersfield City School District and Keppel School District, where I focused on another great love of mine: education for students.

It was in that arena where I also experienced many unforgettable moments, including learning about a homeless fourth grader – a well-liked, successful, sweet boy who wrote an essay about what home meant to him. “If you ask most people that, they’d probably tell you it means the house they live in,” he wrote in his essay. “But to me, it doesn’t matter if I live in a brick house or a cardboard box. As long as I have the people I love most there, too. Then I’m home.”

Home was where momma was — no matter if that meant living with plenty of unknowns — sleeping in a car, in a motel room off Union Avenue or at the Bakersfield shelter. I was hurt by his story and shared it with readers in a letter to *The Californian* in November 2005 to raise awareness about homelessness and ask ourselves what we can do to help. At one point, his mother was arrested and with no other parent or family around, this sweet, smart child was placed at the Jamison Children’s Center until a compassionate school administrator intervened and went through the foster parenting process so that the student could attend his home-school, surrounded by his friends, family and others who loved him. In 2005, BCSD had identified 550 of its students as homeless and another 450 students who were on the outreach list.

Fast forward to today, I wonder if my fifth grader made it to BC, worrying if he is one of the students attending class hungry for knowledge of a better life but attending class hungry. A March 2019 study by The Hope Center showed that 60 percent of California community college students had housing insecurity in the previous year, and 19 percent were homeless. What’s more: first-generation college student status is strongly correlated with housing insecurity. Eighty percent of BC’s students are first-generation students. It is clear additional resources are necessary for our community.

Currently, Bakersfield College and Adventist Health are collaborating on a pilot project to “skill up” 20 homeless individuals that lead to jobs. I am a firm believer that having a job is the best way to build self-efficacy and self-confidence that leads to individuals becoming healthy and productive members of our community. This collaboration also includes the Mission of Kern County, the Bakersfield Homeless Center and CityServ.

I was also pleased to see in the governor's budget a call for \$1.4 billion to go to a variety of efforts aimed at addressing homelessness, citing it as a national crisis and a real emergency in California. I was also thrilled to see that there is an emphasis on solving the homelessness issues with the current administration in Washington, D.C.

Both Sacramento and D.C. should invest in scalable models right here in Bakersfield and Kern County where we have a history of innovation that leads to solutions that advance the health and wellbeing of our communities.

Jean Fuller is a retired state senator.