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She's 21, a Former Addict, and Out to Save the City

UC student revives the Youth Empowerment Program

By Quan Trong

In a city with more than 320,000 residents, a group of young people lead quiet, stagnant lives in Cincinnati. More than 1,000 homeless youths slip into vacant buildings, huddle under bridges and drift from one home to another, according to homeless advocates.

One young woman says she has a plan to pull them in from Cincinnati's economic outskirts, and she knows how to do it because she was once a homeless youth.

Leeah Zornes, 21, is director of Cincinnati's Youth Empowerment Program, a nonprofit project based on a statewide model designed to help those between 18 and 23 achieve more stable lives. She also attends the University of Cincinnati.

More than 30 people have signed up as volunteers and a fundraising plan is being developed. For now, the program is about as grassroots as one can get because it's basically running on the enthusiasm of Zornes and volunteers. It has little money, but has established an office in Corryville. Homeless advocates first tried to jump-start the program in Cincinnati six years ago but it lost steam when those in charge left for different jobs. There was never enough structure or incentive for the remaining employees to keep the program afloat, said Lynne Ausman of the Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless. Advocates gave it another go this year, launching an improved version in April.

For Zornes, it is her first time as a program director, her first time in college and her first time in 10 years to have a home. Her life today is a far cry from her past, one that echoes the lives of many homeless teens. Sitting in a small Clifton café, Zornes opened a scrapbook filled with pictures of people she'd met. She pointed to a picture of "Jude," who lost 120 pounds before he died of a heroin overdose. He wasn't the only one. Zornes said she later lost four other friends to heroin. She said she was an addict herself, drifting in and out of drug rehabilitation for years.

She became homeless around age 11, when her parents finalized their divorce and she bounced through various homes with her mother, who eventually bought a house in East Price Hill. The nomadic life took a financial and emotional toll on her mother, Zornes said. "My mom basically broke down and couldn't handle it. She couldn't handle me."

That's when Zornes joined other homeless youth who flock to Cincinnati. "For years and years, people have made Cincinnati a stop because it's so compact - it's easy to get some money and hop a bus," she said. "And there are so many abandoned buildings and the cost of living is low." Estimates of the number of homeless youth nationwide reach 1 million, according to a Congressional Research Service report.

In Ohio, there are about 60,000, but that's a conservative estimate, said Nick Bates, youth advocacy coordinator for Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio. "Homeless youth are a very difficult population to track because so many don't want to identify themselves," he said.

Zornes wants to narrow the gap in Cincinnati by recruiting volunteers to help better count homeless youth. Getting them to feel comfortable enough to ask for help is half the battle, she said. Zornes recalled her days as a "couch-surfer," when she drifted in and out of different homes, at one point sleeping in a closet. Other times, she joined other squatters on the streets. At night, she searched Dumpsters at the back of pizza shops, hoping to score pizzas that were thrown out after bad orders.

After years of rehabilitation, Zornes said, she decided it was enough. It was time to do something with her life. With no money or support system, she began researching UC, looking for ways to get into college. "It took me two years to learn the system and loopholes," she said.

That's when she met Matthew Sauer, program coordinator of Disability Services and an assistant professor at the university. He helped connect Zornes with money to pay for her education. Sauer called her determined. People like her will drive the city's change, Sauer said. "If you can turn around the young who are really the most dispossessed population, they become not only active participants in the life of the city but the rebirth of the city," he said. "How can there be anything wrong with that? The greatest strength of any city is its people."

Zornes will soon have an office for the program. Starting next month, the third floor of the Anthony House, 2728 Glendora Ave. in Corryville will be available for meetings, along with consulting services to help teenagers learn how to get enough money for school. Anthony House, run by Lighthouse Youth Services, is a drop-in clinic that provides homeless youth with basic medical and psychiatric care.

Zornes has started collecting donated books to turn it into a library. The program has a six-member adult board and has plans to add a youth board. All members are volunteers and the program plans to run on donations, grants and fund-raisers. The current budget? \$100.

But Zornes said she isn't worried. Her persistence has never failed her before. "I want to see the homeless epidemic stopped in this city and be a role model for the rest of the country to follow," Zornes said. "If we can get it together, we can create just so much. I want to see this city grow. This is my home."

For more information on the Cincinnati Youth Empowerment Program, call 513-569-9500.