

24 hours on a bench: A raw, rainy conversation about homelessness



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Maybe the deluge that greeted [New Life Mission](#) CEO Amy Lyon and [CITA Rescue Mission](#) CEO Buddy Morrow Thursday afternoon and much of Friday — as they spent 24 hours on a bench in downtown Melbourne sparking a community conversation about the homeless — was serendipitous.

Being exposed to the elements seems only right while discussing the [homeless problem in Brevard County](#).

Protected somewhat by a tent, Lyon, Morrow and their everflowing stream of guests, ranging from elected officials to law enforcement officers to homeless individuals, still got plenty wet. I should know. [I was one of them, taking a seat on the bench shortly after the 24-hour conversation began at 3 Thursday afternoon](#). And I loved sitting there with people I hadn't met before, discussing such an important issue.

The conversation on the bench ended at 3 p.m. Friday, World Homelessness Day.



Amy Lyon, center, CEO of New Life Mission, with Kristen McGil and Courtney Barrow, who their program has helped, during “Conversations on a Bench,” a 24-hour livestreamed initiative held on a bench in Melbourne.

TIM SHORTT/FLORIDA TODAY

The event, 'Conversations on a Bench,' was a nationwide initiative with 70 other mission groups and nonprofit organizations taking part. The entire 24 hour conversation was live streamed on Facebook through the CityGate network.

As we chuckled about getting a little wet while talking about the importance of humanizing homeless people instead of our normal go-to of judging, Lyon reminded me how tough it must be for those out in the rain without a tent, or those without shelter during the scorching Florida summers.

"We've been talking about that a lot as it's been raining on and off the whole time we've been out here," Lyon said. "When it rains we've watched people run for cover to their cars, homes and businesses. Where do the unhoused go? When it's really cold the community opens cold shelters, but there are no rain shelters. Some may seek shelter under the awning of business and risk the police being called. That's why we're out here... starting the conversation!"

The idea was to have authentic, raw, unscripted conversations. And it worked.

Why a bench?

"It's simple. It's accessible for everyone. It represents a public space where public conversations can happen," Lyon said. "A bench is a place where judgements can be set aside, real people can be heard and solutions explored, and the dignity of every human being is affirmed."

There were a pair of young, single mothers who have been staying at New Life Mission for the past year or so as they get their lives in order and plan for better things ahead.



John Torres takes his turn on the bench with Amy Lyon and Buddy Morrow. TIM SHORTT/FLORIDA TODAY

"The hardest part is realizing and accepting that you need help," said Courtney Barrow, who was living in her car with her three-year-old son before going to New Life. "It was really, really rough and joining the mission was the best thing that ever happened to me."

Kristen McGill said for the first time in a long time she actually has hope.

"I can see a future now," she said, talking about her education and desire to become a licensed clinical social worker. "I was scared at first, but I knew something had to change."

So, how much can really change on a public bench over a 24-hour period?

Who knows? But every conversation was a chance to change someone's perception, offer someone else hope, spark an idea on how to best help the homeless, and maybe remember that the homeless population is made up of people, real people who are sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, friends.

About the organizations

- **New Life Mission:** New Life Mission equips homeless moms with the tools they need to transform their families in a Christ-centered environment. Through education, accountability and goal advancement, the program empowers families to become self-sufficient and break the cycle of homelessness. www.newlife-mission.org
- **CITA Rescue Mission:** CITA's mission is to inspire true life transformation for the homeless, at risk and hurting in the community by sharing the Gospel and compassion of Jesus while providing shelter and intervention through faith-based, life changing support. www.cityrescuemission.org