

DOWNTOWN MIAMI MARCH 14, 2016 6:30 PM

From Overtown streets to the kitchen; homeless grads get job-ready

HIGHLIGHTS

On March 11, John West Davis and Michael Miller earned a certificate of completion from Miami Dade College's Hospitality Institute

Three months earlier, both men were homeless and living on inner city streets

Camillus House in Overtown took them in and got them ready to succeed



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Just three months ago, they were living on dirty sidewalks, bathing in grocery stores and depending on strangers for food.

But on Friday, John West Davis and Michael Miller went from being homeless to being graduates.

“For somebody that was sleeping on the ground at the Brickell station to, you know, going to school every day, bathing every day, putting on clean clothes every day, despite the life that I lived — my heart is up there in the air. It is so high,” Davis said with teary eyes.

He has already landed a job as a line cook at the University of Miami Hospital. He started Monday.

Davis, 50, had slept on a Brickell Avenue bus bench for almost a year.

Miller, 32, curled up in Coconut Grove parking lots for several months.

Both men had reached emotional rock bottom.

Then in November, the two were picked up by Miami police and taken to the Camillus House homeless shelter. Shortly after arriving, they began to take classes at Miami Dade College’s Hospitality Institute. They graduated on March 11 with a state food safety certificate and an MDC certificate of completion.

Davis and Miller were two of about 18 students who took part in this semester’s program. It was designed in 2008 to connect underserved inner city residents — particularly those living in Overtown —with training and job opportunities in Miami’s thriving hospitality industry.

Students undergo several types of training during the eight-week program, which mainly takes place at Greater Bethel Church in Overtown. Courses include workforce readiness, job skills and customer service. Students are also connected to career advisers for future job placement and prepare and cater food for events and ceremonies.

Three of the Friday’s graduates already have jobs. Two are enrolling in the college’s culinary associates degree program, and the remaining grads will work with staff to connect with employers.

“Unemployment rates in the inner city exceed 20 percent even though these neighborhoods are steps away from Miami’s tourism mecca,” said Shelly Smith Fano, executive director of the Institute.

“These individuals need extra help to get connected to the business and educational community. They need a bridge to new beginnings. The Hospitality Institute was developed to serve as this bridge.”

Davis and Miller say their trek included overcoming severe depression, addiction and fear.

Miller lost his mother to kidney failure five years ago. As time slipped by, Miller says his desolation grew. He lost his job as a mail distributor at a law firm, went into construction, and eventually ended up on Miami streets while trying to get into the labor pool.

“It hurt me real bad,” Miller said. “After she passed, I suffered major depression. I took it one day at a time. As the years went on, I got laid off. I should’ve gone to school, but I didn’t. That’s when I started sleeping on the streets and made bad decisions in my life.”

Miller explained that being picked up by the police was “the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“It gave me a second chance,” he said. Without Camillus House, he said, “I don’t know where I’d be. They’ve so much love. Opportunities are there so that we can be successful, but you just got to take it. It’s tough but you got to be a wolf. You got to know that you have to want something in your life. You have to set your goals. Before I die I want people to say: ‘He’s a good dude.’ ”

For Davis, the institute taught him more than how to chop onions and marinate a juicy steak.

“I found my purpose. I am a cook,” he said. “A cook that will one day give back to people who are in the shoes I once walked in.”

Shed Boren, CEO of Camillus House, said he couldn’t be more proud.

“Over half of the graduates [this semester] had a connection to Camillus, with two of them actively living in the shelter while they completed the program. I am so proud of them,” he said.

This chapter of Davis’ story started after he suffered a heartbreaking divorce: “My life spiraled from there,” he said.

“I was devastated. I wound up being homeless. I wasn’t motivated. I was bathing inside a Publix sink every night. I worked the labor pool. I had lost all hope. I was back and forth. When I made some money, I would buy me some soap to bathe again.”

Davis said that after being taken to the shelter and starting school, “it’s like something came alive inside of me. I had a reason to live again.”

“They brought me off the streets and put me in a bed,” he said “They made a way for me; helped me start fresh. You can’t beat that.”

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