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LAKE PARK

Villages of Hope inspires ex-foster kids

Lake Park residence marks 10 years of helping young adults develop life skills.

By Sarah Peters
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Del'Monte Evans was a cart-pusher at Wal-Mart when he aged out of foster care a few years ago. Now, he's a homeowner who works full time for Habitat for Humanity.

The 22-year-old West Palm Beach resident also takes classes in human services at Palm Beach State College so he can one day fulfill his dream of opening a group home for foster youth.

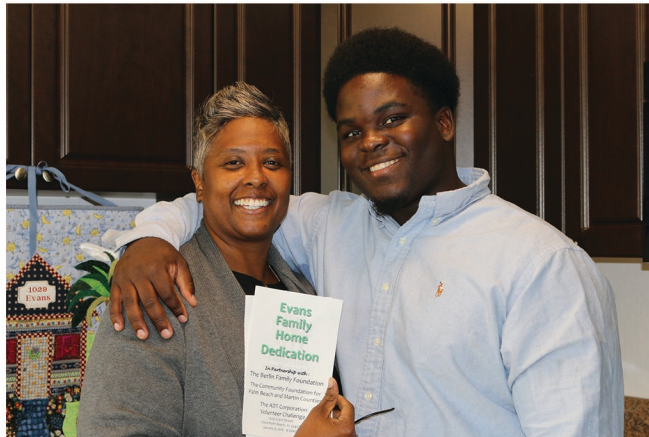
Evans doesn't like to think about where he would be – “lost in oblivion, lost in the world” – if it weren't for the people at Villages of Hope in Lake Park.

“They all believed in me, and they kept pushing me and pushing me,” Evans said. “Even when I didn't believe in myself, they saw the end goal, and they saw my potential.”

Villages of Hope celebrated 10 years of helping young people such as Evans on Thursday with an event at which he and two other former residents, Dawn Marie Turner and David Sarris, were recognized for their accomplishments.

The Place of Hope affiliate provides independent living, support and life skills development for young adults who are in transition. Turner and Sarris now work for Place of Hope.

Josh Kolkana, director of Villages of Hope, said when young people in foster care turn 18, they have no place to go. Many of them end up pregnant, in



Villages of Hope residential manager Theresa Peak poses with former resident Del'Monte Evans, 22, now a homeowner who works for Habitat for Humanity. Villages of Hope has served more than 100 young adults from 18 to 25. CONTRIBUTED

prison or homeless.

Villages of Hope apartments give them a safe home where they can learn skills, such as budgeting money, that they didn't get from living with a traditional family.

More than 100 young adults between the ages of 18 to 25 have been served by the residential program. There's usually a wait list for one of the 18 spots at the Lake Park campus.

There are eight beds for extended foster care at a girls cottage at Place of Hope's Rinker Campus in Boca Raton, which recently received approval to build 66 additional units, Kolkana said. They'll be geared toward the 18- to 25-year-old age group, where there's a big gap in the continuum of care, he said. “We want to be part of the solution,” he said.

They're also putting a big emphasis on education planning and enrichment so that alumni will have careers, not just jobs.

The goal is to develop young adults who will be confident when they live

on their own. Even then, they aren't left to fend for themselves.

They can still call on Villages of Hope residential manager Theresa Peak if they have a bad day, or, in Evans' case, they have something to celebrate.

“It's not just a matter of housing them and getting their needs met and moving on but having a community built around them,” Kolkana said.

When Evans submitted his application to Habitat for Humanity for home ownership, they offered him a job. He now works as a sales associate at the ReStore in Greenacres. Before that, he worked at both Sherwin-Williams and Sports Authority.

Evans got the keys to his new home in January, and Peak was there for the dedication.

“Even when you leave their program, they still care for you,” Evans said, “and they still love you.”

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