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10-year staffer at Place of Hope 'mother to many' foster children



COURTESY PHOTO
Theresa Peak, who joined the staff at Place of Hope 10 years ago, was presented the "Decade of Dedication-Guardian of Hope" award. She is an on-site residential manager.

SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

When Theresa Peak joined the staff of Place of Hope 10 years ago, she had no idea she was about to become a mother to many.

But over the course of a decade, Ms. Peak has grown with the foster care organization, developing her education and skills as she helped hundreds of young people develop their ability to cope with life's challenges.

Place of Hope Executive Director Charles Bender recently presented Ms. Peak with a "Decade of Dedication-Guardian of Hope" award for her dedication to the county's largest foster care and child welfare nonprofit.

"Theresa represents the type of parent that each of these children and young people deserve. She counsels them with honesty, maturity and love," Mr. Bender said in a statement. "She has been a dependable force in their lives, encouraging, guiding and listening to them in a way that makes them smile — and that is the heart of our mission."

Ms. Peak is an on-site residential manager for Villages of Hope, a Place of Hope program that helps young people who age out of foster care transition successfully into adulthood on a campus-like setting in Lake Park.

In 2004, she started as a relief parent, working two days a week and one weekend a month in the foster care homes of Place of Hope Palm Beach Gardens' gated neighborhood.

She took the position on the recommendation of a friend and saw it as an opportunity to impact young lives. At the time, she was a senior Central Control Officer for the Palm Beach Juvenile Detention Center, but felt she was reaching them too late.

"Place of Hope was still somewhat new, and I was going into the homes and seeing the challenges the foster parents were having with the kids. We were giving them the love and attention they needed to keep from going the wrong route," Ms. Peak said. "The atmosphere

was loving. I started off in the Brett Harris Weinstein Family Cottage, working with boys and girls. By the time I left, I had worked in all of the cottages, as well as the Seven Stars' shelter for emergency services for boys."

In 2007, Place of Hope received an opportunity to continue its work with the children who left the state system at 18. Mr. Bender was approached by several supporters interested in finding apartments which could be turned into housing for emancipated youth. At the time, only four organizations worked with kids who aged out and needed support with education, jobs and life skills.

Mr. Bender created a position for Ms. Peak to help youth who would become clients of Villages of Hope.

Mother, aunt, counselor, driver, paperwork administrator, job locator, personal reference, nurse and friend — Ms. Peak covered the gamut of roles and continues to do so on Village of Hope's fully realized campus of eight apartments, two cottages for extended foster care, JoAnn's Cottage maternity home and administration building.

Currently, only Villages of Hope and Vita Nova serve emancipated youth for all of Palm Beach County, Ms. Peak said. In 2014, Villages of Hope gave 86 young people a place to live, while they worked toward successful independence.

Ms. Peak also grew with the organization, earning her bachelor's degree in organizational management in 2014. She just began work on her master's degree in counseling from Jacksonville Theological Seminary.

"I view what I do here as counseling, talking with them as they try to figure out what's next," she said. "Some of them come to us homeless, but others come from households where there is simply no guidance, no instruction. This age is just as important as when they are little."

Place of Hope is at 9078 Isaiah Lane in Palm Beach Gardens. For more information, call 775-7195 or visit online at placeofhope.com. ■