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LOCAL

Getting them on their feet

On a recent afternoon in Venice Beach, flash mob leader Shay Land, 19, fidgets with her nails as she talks in a shy voice about her time in jail.

She became a group facilitator there, she said, helping others get in touch with their feelings. Now she's doing things like showing up in to lead a flash mob to draw attention at-risk youth and homelessness.

She arrived with her new crew – girls from The Teen Project, a group started by Lauri Burns in 2007 to get teens and young adults, especially young women, off the streets. “I ran away when I was 12, again when I was 14,” Land said.

Land wouldn't say how she ended up in jail, except that it was there that Lauri Burns and The Teen Project found her, giving her a second chance.

As she warmed up for the dancing, her ankle bracelet monitor bounced along to the music. It didn't even get in her way.

The Teen Project

The young women of The Teen Project line up and strike a pose. Music from a portable sound system switches on, and Beyoncé's lyrics ask, “Who runs the world?” and answer: “Girls!”

People from the crowd, slide into the line formation and soon the boardwalk audience is pressed back by dancers.

Once the dancing finished, Lauri Burns steps forward and asks the gathered crowd to help find homeless young people and connect them with The Teen Project. She tells her own story, and how each of the women in the Teen Project's dance crew had once been homeless.

When many foster care leave the system they have nowhere to go but the streets, said Burns, founder of Teen Project.



Kenyada Bond with The Teen Project at Venice Beach Boardwalk.
KYUSUNG GONG, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

She started The Teen Project in 2007. The project includes Freehab, a free treatment program, the College Home, housing for young women, and PAD, a Protection and Direction drop-in office in Venice that helps connect L.A.'s homeless youth with services.

Although open to boys and girls, Burns said mostly young women find her. Some are homeless, others came from juvenile delinquent centers or are referred by social service agencies. So far, Burns said she has been able to get 110 kids off the streets.

Burns said that when she turned 18 she said she too “aged out” of the foster care system and immediately became a homeless teen mom in Santa Ana, involved with drugs and prostitution. With help, she was able to escape. Now, at age 51, Burns is a businesswoman, speaker, and an advocate for the young and homeless.

There are upwards of 58,000 continuously homeless people in Los Angeles County, not counting Long Beach, Glendale and Pasadena, according to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. The authority counted more than 4,000 homeless young people between age 18 and 25 in 2013; around 800 were children younger than 18.

For more information: theteenproject.com/about.asp