

The Path Changes Lives

Homelessness and poverty are not customary topics of casual conversation over coffee, or community issues with quick, easy solutions. These take time, compassion and persistence. One local non-profit has a vision to meet the challenges: The Path of Citrus County. Located in Beverly Hills, The Path is a faith-based homeless shelter that provides a structured living environment with a variety of programs addressing spiritual, physical and emotional needs of homeless men and women who want to change their lives, become self-sufficient and maintain a stable home.

About thirteen years ago, DuWayne Sipper relocated from Palm Beach, Florida to Citrus County. One day, he got a burning desire to volunteer at a local homeless shelter. After several days of inquiries, DuWayne realized that no homeless shelter existed in Citrus County. So, he felt compelled to start one. It took 3 ½ years for the first door to open: first, land donated and immediately sold; the sudden availability of two houses next to each other, purchased with the cash proceeds from the land sale; an active 501-c-3 with a board of directors seeking an executive director. The Path of Citrus County was established in 2001 with DuWayne Sipper at the helm.

During their stay men, women and children are provided safe, supervised shelter while the proper long-term needs are addressed. Through the joint efforts of Citrus community churches, local organizations, scores of volunteers, private donors, and foundation grants, The Path of Citrus County provided one house dedicated to sheltering homeless men, another to sheltering homeless women, an administrative office, play-ground and recreation areas. An additional house for men was acquired in August 2008. Today, The Path consists of two adjacent houses for men, six beds each, and a third house for women with six beds. The Path accommodates single parents (male or female) and their children, who are always housed with their parent. A small wood shop has been added for building and refinishing furniture.

Two businesses have been established to provide structured labor for clients, jobs, community service opportunities, and contribute financial support for The Path. One enterprise is a small organic farm. A local church loaned 10 acres of farmland to grow organic fruits and vegetables for the shelter, since most clients are malnourished when they arrive, and to supplement local food distribution programs feeding the hungry in Citrus County. This farm yielded approximately 1,000 pounds of fresh greens, broccoli, cauliflower, cucumbers, yellow squash, zucchini and other produce during 2009. The other business is a thriving bargain store for new and gently used furniture, appliances, home furnishings and other household items. Today, The Path Shelter Store (on Hwy. 44 in Lecanto) is managed by a Path graduate.

The Path's program addresses any phase of sheltering, according to the needs of clients who commit to The Path's guidelines at intake: attending local churches, participating in spiritual growth activities, group and individual counseling, work programs, coaching for life-skills, addiction recovery, financial responsibility, and seeking full-time employment. Clients are individually case-managed and stay as long as necessary to transition effectively (although a client can leave at any time). Once clients have stabilized, obtained employment and accumulated modest savings, they are ready to graduate from the structured shelter environment.

Throughout their program, Path clients are referred to a variety of local agencies and services to enhance their personal growth and employability. From the beginning DuWayne Sipper saw the need to get help in the hands of the people who need it most. He developed an extensive resource guide, posted it on The Path's website and distributed to over 140 local churches and other community service groups.

This guide is still used today, and posted on many other organization websites as well. The Path is also listed with **211**, a resource hotline of community services.

Although the work of people can look difficult and seem disappointing, The Path has many success stories that may be hard to recognize. When dealing with people who are addicted or live in fear because they cannot financially take care of their children on their own, the “success stories” are different from the familiar. To be clean and sober for 30 days is a dramatic statement for some clients. To complete a certification program and get the first full time job when the individual never graduated high school. To get a driver’s license. To go to a big church and fit in where most believe they would never set foot.

At The Path of Citrus County, success is measured from a different perspective. It is visible every day in the faces of the transformed men and women who make their way to The Path and work hard to rebuild their lives. Take for example, the drug-addicted woman who graduated from The Path program drug-free, attends church regularly, and lives in a good home with an elderly woman who needed her assistance. She has a car and a job now, and a strengthened relationship with her 11-year old daughter. Consider the young woman in her twenties who suffered from out-of-control grief, anger and eating disorders. After finding self-esteem and confidence to tackle her issues, she graduated from The Path and reunited with her sister. Hoping to further her education one day, this young woman cares for her nieces and nephews while her sister and brother-in-law are at work. Two men were accepted into a special program for chefs after battling anger, drug and alcohol addiction. Recently, a man in his early 50’s overcame his alcohol addiction and successfully completed state qualification to become a Certified Nurse’s Assistant. A role model for the other men before he left The Path, he inspired another to pursue CNA certification. The word “success” takes on a new and very specific meaning for each of those people.

Other stories are inspirational because of the compassion shown by strangers in the community, as in the case last year of a young single mom with two small children who arrived at The Path eight months’ pregnant, no money, and desperate. Staff worked with her to reconcile with family in New York State so that she could return home to have her baby. The Path sheltered this family a few weeks, through Thanksgiving, while funds were being raised for a bus ticket. Someone called The Path, desiring to help a family after hearing DuWayne speak at a function. DuWayne explained the young woman’s predicament, and they responded by donating their frequent flyer miles to fly her back to New York. The generous couple went a step further by offering spending money to cover their needs while traveling. She arrived home safely, and her baby was born within the week.

No one can say they are not shown ways to make a better life for themselves. At The Path, they do experience a different way of living from the lifestyle that brought them there. They are the fortunate ones. Due to lack of space, The Path still turns away 3 of every 4 persons who call needing shelter. For now, working together with our community, The Path continues to help as many as possible--strangers in need or in trouble. The Path does make a difference, though -- one life at a time.

[About Kathryn Sipper](#)

Kathryn Sipper serves as Development Director for The Path of Citrus County alongside husband and Executive Director, DuWayne Sipper. A published author and public speaker, Kathryn has an undergraduate degree from Duke University and an MBA from Fairleigh-Dickinson University. She has also served for many years in Christian Education. Prior professional experience includes over 20 years in HR/Benefits administration, technology and consulting. Contact Kathryn at ksipper@pathofcitrus.org. For more about The Path, visit www.pathofcitrus.org.