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According to a story by Margie Menzel, published on July 25th, 2012, in The News Service of Florida, a new report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Florida ranks 44th in the economic well-being of its children. “The number of children in Florida living in poverty is up 28 percent from 2005 to 2010, the last year for which data were included in the study. That measurement considers such factors as whether the parents have secure employment or the ability to cover their housing costs.”

The numbers are just numbers; statistics of sorts! We wanted to humanize this terrible situation the Sunshine State is facing. To do so, we asked Pam Woods, Volusia County Schools Homeless Liaison, if she could introduce us to a local homeless teenager. She did. The opportunity of meeting and interviewing Cheyann, a tenth grader who has been struggling with homelessness ever since her mom lost her job, had a huge impact on us!

When we asked Cheyann if she could tell people one thing about life, she said, “Always be happy and live your life because there is always something to be happy about.” Typically, when someone has faced so much adversity at such a young age, anger and frustration are the first emotions that are noticed. As we interviewed her, we couldn’t help but feel as if we were meeting an old friend for lunch. We soon discovered that behind her piercing smile was a story that needed to be told; one that everyone should know about.

During the 8th grade, Cheyann’s world took a turn for worse when her mother lost her job. Living at the motel was not an option anymore. However, instead of seeing the cup as half empty, Cheyann keeps her spirits high because in her words “it could always be worse.” When asked what she would like to do in the future, Cheyann stated that education is the most important thing to her and some day she would love to create some sort of a foundation for anti-bullying, a topic that is very personal to her and one that she has lost many friends to.

Homelessness is a growing problem in Volusia County. According to Pam Woods, the number of homeless students enrolled in Volusia County schools in 2011-12, was updated to 2,228. That is more than double of the number in 2007, when Food Brings Hope (FBH) was established to help homeless and economically disadvantaged students enrolled in our schools. That’s when we became interested in the local issue as we got to know some of the students enrolled in the FBH sponsored programs.

When we asked Cheyann if she could have one wish, what would it be? We were expecting a typical answer most of us reply with, whether it is to have super powers or to be a billionaire. To our surprise, Cheyann responded with a simple statement. “That people weren’t so judgmental. I try to stand up for as many people as I can because honestly, you just never know what they’ve been through!” As we continued to ask questions, each answer seemed to have an unprecedented effect on our thinking. We were mad, sad, and frustrated simultaneously! We couldn’t understand why someone like Cheyann and her story, and the many more in situations similar to hers, hadn’t been heard. Yet, the newest style for the fall and the most current celebrity breakup was top news in seconds.