



A Defender for the Homeless

Homeless for 17 years, Karen sat in the parking lot of Overtown's historic St. John's Baptist Church on an early Monday in late August, waiting her turn to take a shower and accept a handout of food.

Everything she owned was stuffed into three, large cloth bags that were as weather-beaten as the items they held: a few bundles of clothes, a blanket, a pair of shoes – tattered possessions that served as a reminder of her tough life on the streets.



Armen Henderson, M.D., M.B.A.

COVID-19, Karen claimed, does not frighten her.

“Commitment has kept me safe,” she said, refusing to elaborate on her comment.

But while Karen, who would give only her first name, may be unafraid of the virus, Armen Henderson, M.D., M.B.A., an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Miami



Miller School of Medicine, is scared not only for her but also for the thousands of other men, women, and children who are living on the streets of Miami-Dade County and lack the health care and the knowledge of where to go to get tested for the infection.

“There was a dire need to help this segment of the population before the virus began to spread,” said Dr. Henderson, a hospitalist at UHealth Tower, the University of Miami Health System’s flagship hospital. “When the pandemic hit, that need grew immensely because all of the problems the homeless face – underlying health conditions, being subjected to arrest, and put in jail where the virus can easily spread – became exacerbated.”

Helping the impoverished

As a volunteer with the Miami chapter of Dream Defenders, a civil rights organization formed shortly after the death of Trayvon Martin, Dr. Henderson has sought to improve the plight of the impoverished amid the pandemic, going out into the homeless community to conduct free COVID-19 testing, distribute face masks and other personal protective equipment, and provide information and resources on the virus.

He and the chapter’s other “street team” of organizers travel to underserved communities all over Miami-Dade to reach the homeless – from Liberty City and Overtown to Homestead and Miami Gardens.

“When the coronavirus presented itself, it was a new challenge for us. Dr. Henderson said. “We knew we had to respond much like the response that occurs after a hurricane or other disaster.”



The team's service site at St. John's Baptist Church in Overtown distributes free food and clothes and provides shower and toilet facilities for the homeless. When COVID-19 testing was slow in coming to the county's marginalized areas, Henderson helped create a database showing sites where people could go to get free testing.

But the organization's funding and resources are limited. It has applied for grants and appealed to local government officials for assistance, yet the response has been slow. Now, with cooler weather on the way, Dr. Henderson is worried that a spike in COVID-19 cases could occur in homeless shelters.

No stranger to poverty

He is no stranger to the plight of the poor. He grew up in an impoverished Philadelphia neighborhood, often working two jobs when he was a teenager. An accomplished shooting guard on his high school's basketball team, he attracted the attention of college scouts. But when he suffered an injury, recruiters backed off.

Still, Dr. Henderson made it to college. As an undergraduate, he worked nights in a Philadelphia factory that made snack foods, hauling 50-pound sacks of sugar up a ladder and loading them into an industrial mixer – a process he would repeat as many as 20 times a shift.

"It was tiring work," Dr. Henderson recalled.

One summer, he got a job conducting research in a U.S. Department of Agriculture lab, taking a year off after he earned his bachelor's degree to study for the medical college admission exam.



Dr. Henderson's experiences with the homeless hit close to home long before his volunteer work with Dream Defenders. His father and brother were once without a place to live, and during his first year at Meharry Medical College, he and other students gave the homeless free pedicures to prevent infection.

"There's a misguided belief that if you offer services to individuals who are homeless, it somehow perpetuates them staying on the street," Dr. Henderson said. "But that's completely false. There's no evidence to support that in the least."

While he realizes that more needs to be done to help the homeless, he is glad nonetheless that his efforts and those of other volunteers are making a difference.

"When they see our faces," Dr. Henderson said, "they know it's nothing but love."