

# POLA Students Bring Hope for the Homeless



Riley Beres, photo courtesy of the Beres family.

The project started out with a visit to a local homeless shelter to deliver canned goods. Sixteen year-old directors Riley Beres and Jimmy Deshler agreed homelessness was a topic that needed to be illuminated.

"Our hope right now is to get it into film festivals so it can be seen," Beres said. "Our ultimate goal is to have it screened in other schools so it can become an education piece for our generation"

Beres believes that many people are simply uneducated about the topic of homelessness.

Her film goes a long way towards enlightening us on the topic. Although she and Deshler live in San Pedro, they took it on themselves to visit homeless shelters throughout Los Angeles. Face-to-face interviews conducted with people, many of whom spent years on the streets, reveal the many causes of homelessness.

The well-crafted film opens with a street poet cautioning us to be careful of what we plan for our lives, because plans can go awry. Most of those interviewed on the street lived productive lives, which fell apart following a divorce, job loss or other life crises that prevented them from maintaining a home of their own.



Director of Family Services at Harbor Interfaith Services, Sharl Weaver, screen capture from *Hope for Our Own: LA Story*.

said. "Eventually the abnormal becomes very normal.... I pitched a tent on 5th and Crocker and became very comfortable on the street."

A few of the individuals interviewed in the film will be familiar faces to San Pedrans. People we pass each day, standing in front of the 7-11 asking for a handout. Others interviewed have stories that almost any of us can relate to.

Brigette tells us how she ended up in deep depression following the sudden death of her son in a car accident. Her depression led to her inability to work.

"I had a meltdown and I ended up losing everything," she said.

She eventually spent five years living on the streets.

"Skid Row is not downtown L.A.," she explained. "It is wherever you lay your head for that moment. That is Skid Row."

Beres says she learned a lot from the people she interviewed.

"I learned that there is so much more to life than we believe it to be," Beres said. "It may take some self-evaluation, but there is always hope. If you just stick in there and you believe in yourself, you can get yourself out of any kind of situation."

"The most common story is economic turmoil, and not knowing how to get out of it. Losing a job or missing a payment on your house, any kind of economic loss is the most common theme."

Families and children are the highest growing number of homeless on the streets. Some shelters, such as Harbor Interfaith Center in San Pedro have daycare centers so the parents can be free to seek employment. According to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, there are 60,000 people living on the streets in Los Angeles County. Of that number, one-fifth have been homeless for more than a year. Many are veterans and runaways.

*Hope for Our Own* isn't Beres' first go at directing and producing film. A budding actress, comedian and model, Beres has directed and produced three web series episodes and a short film. As homelessness affected members of her own family, she created this documentary. She became even more compassionate and focused on this complex subject while visiting Hope of the Valley Rescue Mission as an honorary youth board member of Children in Film.

Jimmy Deshler is an actor, best known for his role as "Rafe" on ABC's *General Hospital* and has made other co- and guest-star appearances on *Criminal Minds* and Disney XD's *Kickin' It*. He makes his directing debut with *Hope for Our Own*.

Beres and Deshler were assisted by editor Nik Peter. Peter states he always wanted to help with the problem of homelessness and saw this as an opportunity to make a difference.