



## Homeless to share stories at youth summit

By [Gracie Bonds Staples](#)

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Lorne Brooks lives in an upstairs one-bedroom apartment not entirely at peace with his past.

Lit only by a small lamp on a coffee table, it is a dark space with little more than a bed, love seat and television. And yet, it is more than Lorne has ever had. It is the first real home he has had in his life.

"It's great," the 19-year-old said recently before launching into a tale not that much different from the hazy tedium told by thousands of other homeless youths.

According to the National Center on Family Homelessness, there are more than 58,000 homeless children in Georgia. Of those 29 percent are white, 14 percent are Hispanic and more than half of them are African-American like Lorne.

Where they live? What's the impact on their lives? And how homelessness will affect them in adulthood are just a few of the questions advocates will wrestle with Wednesday when they gather for the second annual National Homeless Youth Awareness Summit.

"Our goal is to improve the continuum of care for homeless and at-risk youths," said Terri Crouch, project manager of the United Way Regional Commission on Homelessness. "We want to make sure we come up with solutions for filling the gaps in services and breaking down the barriers."

For most of his life, Lorne existed in those gaps, bouncing between friends and relatives, foster homes and group homes, the street and shelters. Only recently was he able to grab hold of a lifeline tossed at him at Covenant House Georgia, a nonprofit serving homeless youths and one of the sponsors of Wednesday's summit.

He sits now in his College Park apartment, exposing the sad secrets behind the numbers and a life that begins not on beds of cement and grass, but in the shadows of parental drug abuse and neglect.

It starts on the rough streets of Chicago, where he lived in a crack house with his mother, LaChauncey Crawford, where his uncle often forced him to fight or get beat up. He was 7 years old when his grandmother brought him to Arkansas to live with her; 8 when his mother came to get him only to end up on the streets, alternating between a back alley and a bridge covert.

The back and forth continued until a juvenile court judge sentenced him to a treatment facility in Memphis to deal with his anger. He spent eight months there then headed back to Arkansas.

Lorne was 12 when he saw his mother again but there was nothing different about his life. He pauses, remembering one bright moment.

"You have to put this in there," he says to the reporter. "I wrote an essay contest about secondhand smoke and won first place. I got to be mayor for a day."

It was a big accomplishment for a kid who'd spent most of his school day in special education classes. In addition to the

usual plaque, he said, he got to sit in Mayor Daley's chair and was treated to breakfast and lunch.

The memory brings a smile to his face, but it soon fades. Just days before he was scheduled to enter the eighth grade, he said he boarded an airplane to Atlanta to live with more relatives.

"That was the last time I saw my mother alive," he said.

For a time, it looked like his life in Sandy Springs might be better. He no longer had to fight and he was doing well in school. But relatives soon fell on hard times and, as he put it, were forced to "move from the suburbs to the ghetto."

"Every step forward I made, I took two steps back," he said.

By 2005, Lorne had come to the attention of the Department of Family and Children Services and for the next three years bounced from one foster home to another. He was in a residential treatment center in July 2008, when a cousin called. He needed to see him.

"I don't know how you're going to take this," his cousin told him. "Chauncey is dead."

Chauncey Crawford had died a month earlier of a drug overdose. The family had just been notified.

"I didn't really cry," he said. "Most of my life, I held a grudge against her for putting us in that situation."

He aged out of foster care on Sept. 18, 2008 and that day made a deal with a friend and his mother to come live with them. When the friend's mother realized Lorne didn't come with a check from DFACS, the deal went bad. He had to get his things and go.

It was Jan. 5. Lorne spent the next two weeks sleeping in the boxing ring at the gym where he worked before moving into the Young Adult Guidance Center, a residential and outreach program in Atlanta. It was better than the boxing ring, he said, but "you had no freedom."

Four months later a friend called to tell him about Covenant House. They had a homeless shelter and offered programs to help them get jobs and a GED. There were girls there, too, he told him.

"He came into our shelter ready to change his life," said Allison Ashe, executive director of Covenant House. "He had money saved. He already had a job. We knew he was somebody who'd succeed if given the chance."

Lorne had saved \$700 working at Ross department store. If he ever needed a place to stay again, he said, he wanted to at least be able to pay for a hotel room.

After a month in the Covenant House crisis shelter, Lorne signed on for the rites of passage program and moved here. He still works and saves part of his income.

He recently earned his GED and is exploring the possibility of going to Georgia Perimeter then hopefully the University of Georgia to study business administration and information technology.

Wednesday, though, he will tell his story again to the public. If he's lucky, the telling will give him some measure of peace.

## **IF YOU GO**

What: National Homeless Youth Awareness Summit

When: 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Atlanta Community Food Bank

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