

Local attorney sleeps on streets to raise awareness of homelessness

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Attorney and Voorhees resident Jeffrey Cohen spent a November evening in an unusual way: By sleeping on the corner of 15th & Cherry Streets in Philadelphia. 100 other local business leaders joined him as part of Covenant House Sleep Out—Executives Edition, with the goal of raising funds and awareness for Covenant House Philadelphia, an organization serving homeless youth age 21 and under. Cohen, a shareholder at Flaster Greenberg PC in Cherry Hill, learned about Covenant House Sleep Out while interviewing Dan Esposito, Board member of the NFL Alumni Association, and John Ducoff, executive director of Covenant House, on “Heart of Sports,” the radio show on 610 ESPN Cohen co-hosts with Jason Springer.

The radio show focuses on how athletes impact the community in a positive way. “They mentioned the event,” said Cohen, which they said was for C-suite executives, 1,700 of whom would sleep on the streets of 19 cities across the U.S. and Canada. “They had 89 people doing it in Philadelphia and were looking for two more. I decided to do it on the spot. We talk about helping others, but we should also do these things.”

This was far from Cohen’s first brush with fundraising for youth. For some time, he’s been involved with CADEkids, raising money towards prevention programs for inner city elementary and middle schools. Cohen claims his teenaged son as his inspiration. “Ever since I had him, I’ve always been fascinated with stories of helping people who are less fortunate. As a family, we talk about charities we want to give to. I think it’s important, if you have something, not to keep taking but to give back.”

But Cohen couldn’t have known that when he volunteered to sleep on the street, he would be doing so in a Nor’easter. “In the days before the event, people kept calling and texting me with weather predictions. They assumed they would cancel the event. But I said, ‘That would defeat the whole purpose. This is for awareness about youth homelessness; homeless kids don’t get to pick when they sleep outside.’”

The event began with each participant getting a cardboard box and a sleeping bag with which they could make shelter, then attending educational workshops to learn about the work Covenant House does: Providing housing for youths while they find work, gain skills, and save money; assistance with going to college and finding employment; and one-to-one support to help the kids plan and achieve their goals. They also got to meet some of the youths who were recently homeless and hear their stories.

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"It was fascinating and sad," said Cohen. "I have a son who's a teenager, and to hear stories of kids my son's age who don't have the same opportunity... They don't get a chance. One of the people asked them, 'Do you have questions for us?' One of the kids looked at all of us and said, 'I don't understand why you're doing this.' He was genuinely confused by people who are well off who choose to sleep in rain and snow and freezing temperature."

For Cohen, it was an emotional experience. "There were a lot of tears. The staying outside is what raised awareness, but it's talking to the kids that left a lasting impression on me. People think of the homeless, unfortunately, as people who are lazy or don't want to do something. But these are abused children; they don't want to be on the street. But if you give them a chance, an opportunity, they can make something of themselves." He noted that one of the kids who went through the Covenant House program was hired by Nick Bayer, the CEO and founder of Saxbys (who was also at the event) to clean tables. He's now an executive at a store they run.

Then it was time to head to bed—out in the freezing rain. "I tried to sleep in the box, so my torso and head were covered. I stayed awake most of the night, with the wind whipping and my body soaking. I kept thinking, at least I get to go in and take a hot shower. These kids think, 'Where am I sleeping tomorrow?'"

Financially, Covenant House Sleep Out was a huge success, raising \$350,000 for the organization, along with some new devotees to the cause—Cohen included. "It was a special experience. I plan to do it again next year."

ATTORNEYS MENTIONED

Jeffrey Cohen