

Orlando teen stops in Jacksonville on his walk to Washington

David Ashby of Orlando stopped in Jacksonville on his 1,100-mile walk to Washington, D.C.

- **BY STEVE PATTERSON**
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ANDY JACOBSON/The Times-Union

Timothy Hogg (left) hands David Ashby a clay heart the children made at the Sulzbacher Center to honor Ashby's arrival. Ashby's trek to Washington started on June 15, in Orlando. On the walk to the nation's capital Ashby hopes to raise awareness for child homelessness.

Andy Jacobson

David Ashby slept in some woods off U.S. 1 Thursday night. Friday night, he stayed at the I.M. Sulzbacher Center for the Homeless in Jacksonville.

What made him different from others checking in was that he didn't have to be there. And that a crowd of people applauded him because he was.

Ashby is a 14-year-old from Orlando, walking to Washington to focus public attention on problems affecting homeless children.

"When you see a homeless person [in popular culture] ... you see a homeless man," Ashby said. Usually, they're assumed to have done something wrong.

"There's a stigma," he said.

But at the Sulzbacher center, in a room with an old piano, a television and a series of small tables, Ashby sat facing about 20 homeless children - toddlers to teens.

Sitting on the floor, they raised hands to ask about his trip, which will cover about 1,100 miles.

"How do you keep your will to keep doing this?" asked Timothy Hogg, who is 15.

Ashby smiled and motioned at the kids in the room: "This," he said.

About 1.5 million American children are homeless at some point in the year, according to the nonprofit National Center on Family Homelessness.

Ashby, who starts ninth grade this fall, said he'd been thinking about homeless kids for a while, but in December he decided he needed to do more than think.

He did some training to get in better shape, but is still feeling his way through the reality of daily exertion.

His routine is pretty simple: Walk about 25 miles per day, sleep where you stop, consume a lot of Gatorade and energy bars. He expects to be somewhere north of town tonight, headed toward Brunswick, Ga., and then Savannah.

Friday was the seventh day of walking, having started the trip in mid-June and been interrupted by some unplanned personal complications.

He has an adult companion somewhere close by, although it's not the same person all the time. The companion is driving a van, and Ashby can sleep there instead of outdoors. Ashby also has a dog, Dexter, a miniature rat terrier, along for the ride.

Ashby wants to be part of a publicity event when he reaches Washington, hoping to raise attention to the presence of homeless youths and families.

Sulzbacher staff organized their own event to mark his arrival in Jacksonville.

Children and parents stood at a street corner and applauded as he walked the last block to the center just east of the Duval County jail downtown. Indoors, they gave him a painted clay heart that had been made for a center outreach project. Timothy Hogg, who had asked Ashby about keeping his determination, recited a poem about staying true to your own course.

"You've really touched the hearts of people," the center's volunteer coordinator, Sara Dougherty, told Ashby.

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