



A Close Look into IDignity

An organization focused on treating everyone with respect.

By Maya James

In Downtown Orlando, there sits an organization composed of a team of volunteers, attorneys, and staff members who are dedicated to helping people change their lives. That organization is called IDignity.

Based upon the concept of treating all individuals with dignity, IDignity is an organization that helps U.S. citizens and legal residents obtain identification such as birth records, driver's licenses, and social security cards.

Communications Manager Ben Jimenez says that IDignity is a big resource for the homeless, with 56% of their clients being homeless and 76% being unemployed. According to the Homeless Services Network, there are 6,315 people experiencing homelessness in Central Florida.

Jimenez says receiving identification after struggling with factors like homelessness, unemployment or incarceration takes a large burden off all clients who use IDignity's services.

"When you go running with weights on your ankles, when you take them off, you're going to feel incredibly light, and that's how these clients have to feel sometimes," Jimenez says.

IDignity has now helped over 25,000 individuals obtain identification through their events that occur twice a week on Tuesdays and Thurs-

days. Attorney Sharlene Stanford says that volunteers are the driving force behind IDignity, with over 120 volunteers helping make appointments with clients and keep the operation going.

Stanford handles comprehensive initial interviews and immigration cases for the organization.

While she is unable to help with getting a client naturalized or have a change of status, she can request a replacement for immigration documents such as a green card.

Stanford says that her favorite part of the job is making a direct impact in her community and combining her love for the law and her love for helping people.

"It's a beautiful blend," Stanford says. "It's a beautiful union of the two. And I think that's what keeps me going."

Several past clients such as Rahsaan Graham maintain a bond with IDignity even after acquiring their identification and starting new chapters in their lives. Jimenez spoke of Graham fondly as he recalled his journey of moving down to Florida without valid ID to work a temporary job.

In a self-written essay on IDignity's website, Graham explains how the last names on his birth certificate and social security card didn't match.

"I discovered that my birth certificate listed Johnson as my last name - the name of the father I had never met," Graham wrote. "But my social security card had the name of my mother - the woman who abandoned me at birth."

This discrepancy resulted in Graham being unable to obtain a valid Florida ID. No ID meant no work, and with no work came many years of homelessness for him and his wife. Graham wrote that he spent three years trying to fix the issue with no luck, until a friend connected him with IDignity.

Graham wrote that IDignity petitioned the state of Pennsylvania to amend his documents, allowing him to finally get a Florida ID after getting his last name to match.

"Now, they're doing pretty well," Jimenez says. "He moved to Atlanta, he's got a new job there and he's doing freelance writing."

With over 25,000 people served, Jimenez says he has high hopes that IDignity can expand to the point of becoming a nationwide effort, with the help of government agencies.

"The lofty goal that we have to take little steps toward every day is national presence," Jimenez says. "That's the goal - to reach people who cannot make it to Orlando." **I**