

Jennifer Friend: A Beacon for OC's Unhoused Youth

NONPROFITS: Project Hope ups student reach by 400%+

■ By KAITLIN AQUINO

Despite Orange County's reputation of affluence, there are thousands of local families experiencing homelessness.

Jennifer Friend knows that feeling personally as her family struggled to find a permanent roof over their heads while she attended **Huntington Beach High School**.

Today, over 30,000 children in OC are living what Friend endured as a teen.

A decade ago, Friend joined **Project Hope Alliance**, a Costa Mesa-based nonprofit to assist OC's unhoused youth with necessities such as clothing, food, transportation and career and college help—all resources she wished were available to her when she shared a 214-square-foot motel room with her three brothers and parents.

"I deeply feel like I am called to do this work," Friend told the Business Journal. "This is not a job for me—it's a life purpose."

Since she became chief executive, Project Hope has more than quintupled its reach to about 400 students across Irvine, Newport Beach, Santa Ana and 10 other OC cities.

She also oversaw the nonprofit's fundraising campaign, which garnered \$2.8 million last year, up 40% from the year prior.

Friend was one of five honored on Sept. 7 at the Business Journal's ninth annual **Innovator**



of the Year Awards at the Irvine Marriott.

De Facto Housing

Friend's family at one point lived in a Newport Beach oceanfront home.

Her father worked as a technology entrepreneur, her mom a preschool teacher. The income they earned did not always cover enough for apartment rent.

They moved out of their coastal home and checked into various motels, sometimes relying on the kindness of family and close friends for a place to stay.

"We didn't tell anyone what we were going through," Friend said.

Her situation is common for some families in OC. Motels along Costa Mesa's Harbor Boulevard and Buena Park's Beach Boulevard are filled with families who use them as de facto housing, she said.

"We have a lot of job opportunities in OC's service sector," Friend said. "Those don't necessarily pay enough for people to be able to live here—but if people were to move out of the county, they wouldn't have a job."

Promoting Joy

Friend's economic situation not only prevented her family from having secure housing, it also hindered her from freely pursuing her childhood passions.

In middle school, she auditioned for the

school play and earned the part she wanted, but was unable to take it due to financial concerns.

Friend today works to ensure Project Hope kids don't have to turn down extracurricular opportunities because of financial barriers.

The nonprofit covers the cost of supplies for children to pursue their interests, from athletic equipment to musical instruments. It also takes children on field trips, like summer camps in Yosemite, "so they can experience the beauty of nature," she said.

Giving Hope

After graduating high school, Friend attended **Goldenwest Community College** in Huntington Beach and worked 50 hours a week at retailer **Loehmann's**, restaurant chain **Marie Callender's** and **Nordstrom**. She transferred to the **University of California, Irvine** as a criminology major but paused her education for a year to work additional hours so she could cover back housing fees.

She then attended **Whittier Law School** and graduated in 1998.

She became an attorney at corporate law firm **Selman Breitman LLP**, where she eventually made partner.

About a decade later, Friend joined Project Hope.

Her decision to become the nonprofit's CEO stemmed in part from an experience in church, in which she heard a sermon about Esther, an ancient, Persian queen who,

Project Hope Alliance



- **FOUNDED:** 1989
- **HEADQUARTERS:** Costa Mesa
- **CEO:** Jennifer Friend
- **BUSINESS:** nonprofit serving youth experiencing homelessness
- **EMPLOYEES:** 29
- **NOTABLE:** Friend wins Innovator of the Year Award

ORANGE COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL

Vol. 46, No. 38

THE COMMUNITY OF BUSINESS™

September 18-24, 2023

according to the Bible, risked her life to save thousands of Jews persecuted by a high-ranking official in the kingdom.

“God was calling me to share my story so that other kids like me wouldn’t carry around this shame,” she said. “I realized I never want another child to think that their inherent value is diminished by their parents’ economic circumstances.”

Taking the job as Project Hope’s CEO required taking a sizeable 75% pay cut.

“It was a huge family decision to come to Project Hope,” Friend said. “I still had all my law school student loans.”

“When I told my husband, he looked at our finances and said to me ‘we could live on credit for a year if we absolutely had to,’”

Friend said of her partner, **Rob Smith**, a local broker with **Compass**. “It never would have been possible for me to do this without his support.”

On-Campus Integration

Project Hope’s growth has primarily been driven by Friend’s method of integrating the nonprofit’s services onto school campuses.

“We don’t have signage,” Friend said. “Our offices don’t say anything about homelessness, so kids don’t have to feel ashamed or worried that they’re going to be discovered.”

The model has earned Project Hope national recognition for best practices on

how to end youth homelessness, Friend noted. The nonprofit also has the data to back that up: 95% of Project Hope’s students graduated high school last year, notably higher than the state’s average of 83%.

Scaling Project Hope to reach all the roughly 30,000 unhoused youth in OC is Friend’s ultimate goal. The nonprofit has already identified three school districts it can further expand into: Garden Grove, Fountain Valley and Westminster.

Maintaining the nonprofit’s quality of work, however, comes first, Friend noted.

“We’re not going to dilute our work for the sake of growth,” she said. “We have the ability to disrupt the cycle generational homelessness.” ■