

Bryant on a mission to help LA's homeless

HOLLYWOOD, Calif. — Kobe Bryant's season ended much sooner than he and Los Angeles Lakers fans had hoped. But the All-Star guard has gotten a running start on his summer activities.

He and his wife Vanessa have formed the Kobe and Vanessa Bryant Family Foundation, a nonprofit organization that will battle homelessness in Los Angeles. The foundation will partner with My Friend's Place, a center for homeless youth, and Step up on Second, an organization that assists those with mental health issues, to help homeless youngsters and their families rebuild their lives.

Homelessness is pervasive in Los Angeles, with nearly 10,000 people under the age of 24 living on the streets. On any given night, nearly 50,000 people have no place to sleep with a roof over their heads.

Bryant was stunned to learn the magnitude of the problem.

"Shocked the hell out of me," Bryant said during a news conference at My Friend's Place, where he was accompanied by his wife. "I had no idea.

"After the games, you're driving by and you see it – but you don't really see it. It's always around you, but you don't see it. Once you stop and realize what's going on, it makes you want to do something. It's such an important issue because you see it all over the place, and it's not fair. But it's something we can solve, so let's do it."

Bryant admitted he's new to the cause, but he and his wife are working hard to understand the situation and figure out what they'll be able to do to help put an end to it.

"My wife and I have both learned the numbers and how crazy it is. We're educating ourselves on the issues. There are cases just outside of Staples Center, down on Skid Row, a lot of it in the area where I work. So, it's important for me to look at goals, start in that area and see where we end up.

"We've wanted to do something in our own (city). There's a lot of issues, but homelessness is something we felt we could attack and solve.

"This is just the beginning. We're going to try and raise as much awareness as possible, and reach out and interact with kids as much as possible. (We want to hear) some of their stories and put our arms around them. That's one of the big steps. Financing and raising money are important, but having interaction with them and being able to communicate with them and see their faces, that's important as well."

There's another reason Kobe wanted to get behind this project – his daughters Natalia and Gianna. He said it really brings the seriousness of the problem home to him when he thinks about having kids the same age as some of the children living on the streets.

"Oh, that's a big part of it. We're trying to do a good job of teaching them to care for other people and be good human beings. It's just the right thing to do. I don't think it's anything special that I'm doing. If someone needs help, I want to help them."

And Bryant made it clear that he's not just lending his name to a cause, showing up to make a few donations and then fading away.

"You know me. When I go after it, I go after it," he said with a tight-lipped, no-nonsense smile. "What I do in the game of basketball is easy compared to what (homeless people) have to go through. And they have the determination and the fight to get through it."

He also was transparent when it came to talking about the Lakers and basketball after a few reporters tried to ask him about Mike Brown and the NBA Finals.

"There's a time and a place. Now's not the time nor the place. We've got bigger issues to deal with: (helping) these kids. It's not fair to them (to talk about basketball). So, when the time comes, I will address it."

Until then, Kobe Bryant will be trying to do something much more challenging than putting a ball through a hoop – putting a roof over the head of someone who desperately needs and deserves it.

For more information, go to www.kvbf24.org.