

To all the mothers who are homeless for Mother's Day

BY HAVEN WHELOCK
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

For nearly 10 years, I have had the pleasure of working with the homeless community here in Portland. I have learned so many lessons from these folks but the most valuable lesson is of a mother's love that so many wonderfully different mothers have taught me. For many of us, especially for mothers who are homeless, Mother's Day is a day that stirs up many intense emotions.

No one ever grows up dreaming of a life without a place to call home, and no mother dreams of having her children on the streets. Yet, too often this is the case. There are mothers out there right now with their children with them (374 children under the age of 18 were identified as homeless in county's last street count). These mothers are struggling every day to keep their children safe and fed. They try to show them that they are loved despite the fact that they do not have the security of a home. They are trying to protect them from the shame and stigma that comes from all directions when you are labeled as homeless. These mothers may go hungry to make sure their children are fed. They may have to move from place to place, or to have their children stay with other friends or family to keep them safe. These women have taught me that someone's life circumstance has little to do with how much love a mother has for her children. These



Haven Wheelock is a homeless rights and harm reduction advocate, as well as birth mother.

women are easy to see as mothers but there are many more invisible mothers on the streets as well.

We do not know how many women living outside right now have had children but do not have their children with them. The homeless street count does not report these numbers and many women who are not raising their children do not want to talk about it. These birth mothers may have given up their children through adoption, handed them over to someone else to raise, or possibly lost custody of their children for any number of reasons. These women often do not talk about their children because of the pain and grief they feel that so few can relate to. They often feel ashamed that they were not able to raise their children and fear that people will judge them for not parenting the way people traditionally think of parenting. However, their silence should not be confused with not loving their children, for these are the mothers who have taught me most that a mother's love is endless.

I will never forget the first time a client

showed me a picture of her then 6-year-old daughter. This woman came into my office excitedly holding the photo and until that day I had not known she was a birth mom. Her joy at just having that photograph could not be contained, and the pride in her beautiful little girl radiated off this woman who usually was so guarded. It was undeniable that she genuinely loved that little girl, even though she was never able to parent that child. It was the first time this woman had ever engaged with me, and even though I have seen so many cherished photos over the years the face of that little girl sticks with me. This kind of mother's love is undeniable.

Parenting is hard and there are so many different reasons why a person may not be able to do it. "Good" parenting requires many skills, some of them can be learned, and some of them cannot be. Just loving your child is not enough. Trauma, mental health issues, legal issues, lack of resources and lack of coping skills can all lead people to not be able to parent. But just because they are not able to parent does not mean that they do not love their children, often feeling so much pain and guilt knowing that they were unable to raise their children. I have grieved with mothers who have realized that they are not going to be reunited with their children. I have shared tears with so many mothers whose hearts are breaking because their children cannot be with them. Some of these woman, tried to parent but couldn't, and others knew

when the baby was born that they didn't have the skills or resource to parent but their love for that life was no less real.

I have worked with many women who find out they are pregnant while homeless. Often these women are scared to tell anyone and need a lot of love and support to make the best decision. They know that bringing a child into the world is a huge undertaking and worry about what will happen to their baby both while pregnant and after the baby is born. I have talked with women about what choices they have and how to choose what is best for them. I remember one woman who for months talked with me about her pregnancy but was too scared to tell anyone else. Eventually she did connect with the services she needed. I didn't see her for nearly a year until one day she brought her beautiful baby boy to the office for me to meet. Giving her space to be scared and helping her find the tools she needed helped her do different things for her and her baby and they were both able to thrive.

So, in honor of Mother's Day, I want to say thank you to all the mothers who have taught me so many lessons of love. I am sending so much love to ALL the mothers out on the streets today, whether you are with your children or have not seen them in years; your love for your children is real. And I wish you peace and hope for Mother's Day.

CareOregon goMobile team

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