

OPINION

Holding on at the 'Center of Hope'

Being born into poverty

BY MARIAN WRIGHT
EDELMAN

Every 29 seconds, a child is born into poverty in America.

The birth rate into poverty translates to 124 children every hour. Children like 10-year-old Tyler, five-year-old Keiris, and four-year-old Jerimiah, who live with their mother, Christina Wyatt, 24, in Middletown, Ohio.

In the summer of 2011 the family moved into the Center of Hope for Women and Children, a homeless shelter, after their apartment was robbed and they were evicted. Their only income at that point was a Social Security disability check for Tyler, who has Down syndrome.

"I had to, really," Christina said about moving into the shelter. "We didn't have anywhere to go."

When Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Julia Cass met the family there while on assignment for the Children's Defense Fund, Christina's voice broke as she described her determination to "get it back together" and build a life for her children different from her own.

"I don't want them to experience even a little bit of what I did. I want to give them the childhood I never had," she said.

Christina's own childhood in the Cincin-



nati area included a mother who didn't seem to want her, a father who didn't take good care of her, and occasional stays in foster homes.

"I sort of took care of myself from about 12," Christina said. She went to school and made money babysitting. But when she was 14, the father of two girls she babysat for raped her.

"I was really scared," she said. "I didn't tell anyone. Then I got sick and found out I was pregnant."

She continued to go to school for a while but quit because she was "harassed by other kids at the school who really didn't understand my situation." When she found out the baby had Down syndrome she considered giving him up for adoption but "something told me to keep him. He was a gift from God."

As she spoke, Tyler bounded into the family's spartan room at the shelter, smiled broadly and clowned around, demonstrating his ability to do the Michael Jackson moonwalk. He goes to a regular school but is taken out for speech and physical therapy.

"Tyler is actually a very intelligent young man," Christina said. "He has trouble speaking clearly but he gets his point across." She said that his teachers and "everybody he meets" love him. "He's got that joy," she said. "He's very special."

She had to fight to keep him. After he was born, they both lived in a special foster home for teenage mothers and their babies, where

Christina noticed a pattern.

"After a couple months, the girls lost custody of their children." Out of fear of losing Tyler to strangers, she asked her mother to take temporary custody of him. At 17, the foster care system set Christina up in an apartment, paid her expenses, and gave her allowance, but at 18 she was "emancipated" from foster care and on her own.

She got custody of Tyler back. Soon after, she moved in with the man who is Keiris and Jerimiah's father, but "he wasn't a good person."

Christina paused and declared in a strong voice, "Everything I've been through I learned from. I would never put up with anything like that again. I know I'm more than somebody's punching bag."

For most of her children's lives Christina has supported the family with food stamps and minimum wage jobs—McDonald's, Subway, a factory that produced products for Procter and Gamble, waitressing at the country club—and with cash assistance (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) between jobs.

Christina moved to Middletown, where her mother lives, two years ago. She got an apartment and a job at a gas station and made a deal with her former stepfather, a recovering alcoholic: he could live in the apartment in exchange for helping out a little bit financially and babysitting the children while she worked. But that ended when he moved to

Florida.

Then Christina got sick, lost her job, and fell behind in the rent. During the same tough times the apartment was robbed. Christina also lost the Medicaid and food stamps she and the children had been receiving.

The system in Middletown now involves a telephone interview rather than a personal one, but Christina said she didn't get the notice about the phone appointment, and in any case, she had no phone. Finally, they got evicted. That's when she asked her mother to drive her and the children to the Center of Hope with a backpack of their clothes and a book bag filled with a few toys.

Christina also brought along some hopes of her own: She deeply wants to get her GED and then go to college—not a vocational/technical school or online school but a real college. She can't explain why, but she wants to be a lawyer. She also has a passion for writing.

"I feel like I can do better than a minimum wage job. I'd be a lot happier if I were in school and moving forward to something better. That is the only answer, in my eyes, for us to have any kind of life."

Christina is still determined to give her children a better childhood than she had, and though her own childhood gave her few road maps, she wants to find a way to keep moving forward. I truly hope she succeeds.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.

Praying for a 'Just Peace,' a Ceasefire

Another world is possible

BY MICHAEL NEUROTH

On Friday, Sept. 21, people of faith from around the world will take a moment from their daily lives and offer up prayers for peace.

"International Day of Peace" and "International Day of Prayer for Peace" are marked by the United Nations and by the World Council of Churches respectively each year.

In the U.S., the United Church of Christ is partnering with the World Council of Churches to encourage individuals and congregations to pray for peace under the theme "Praying for Ceasefire."

Can you imagine? Justice and Witness Ministries has long used the theme, "Imagine, Another World Is Possible."

It reminds us of the type of world we are working for: a world in which systemic injustice, racism, sexism, poverty, and environmental degradation are things of the past.

It envisions a world in which everyone has quality education, housing, and health care. Security would be defined not by maximum security prisons or pentagon budgets, but by the strength of our community. It points us to imagine God's Shalom, a 'Just Peace,' a Ceasefire.

In today's world, hope for a

ceasefire seems audacious, even impossible. With our troops now engaged in Afghanistan for over a decade, the drumbeat to war with Iran ever-increasing, civil war in Syria raging, and gun violence shaking our consciousness from Aurora, Colo., to New York City, a ceasefire is hard to imagine.

Unfortunately, as adults our imagination is often times limited by our own experience, our own cynicism.

As a parent, I often wish I still had the imagination of my young son. One of my son's favorite books is Richard Scarry's "Busytown". As many parents know, the world of Richard Scarry is truly "another world." It is full of talking animals

and fantastical vehicles such as a pickle car, a hot dog car, and a cheese block car (driven by mice). There is also a page that is full of army vehicles and tanks.

Although he usually wants to skip this page, recently my son's gaze focused on these military vehicles with a quizzical look. "What is this?" he asked, as he pointed to the tip of a tank cannon.

My heart sank as I tried to explain in simple terms complex concepts as violence and the military. I could tell that for him, a car made out of cheese is easier to imagine than a tank designed to hurt others. I wish that I could say the same.

It takes imagination, but imagining "ceasefire," a world without vio-

lence, is a hope and a vision worth working for, dreaming for, and praying for.

Impossible? Maybe. But, if our children see a world without war and find tanks harder to imagine than cars made out of cheese, maybe it's time for us to stretch our imaginations. "Unless you change and become like children..." (Matthew 18:3)

This Sept. 21, join thousands of people around the world in stretching our collective imagination. Offer a prayer for peace, a prayer for ceasefire in our homes, our communities, and our world.

Michael Neuroth is policy advocate for international issues for the United Church of Christ.

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