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Building better islands for children

Making a child is a moral act. Obviously, it obligates the parents to the child. But it also obligates the parents to the community. We must all live with the consequences of children who are not brought up properly, whether bad economic conditions or self-centered parents are to blame."



Amitai Etzioni expressed these views in 1993 in *The Spirit of Community*.

Ten years later, Etzioni's words are truer than ever: "Like charity, education, or lack thereof, begins at home." Unless education begins at home, many of today's and tomorrow's children will lead lives of limited fulfillment, marked by poverty, neglect and violence. Some will eventually enter our one steady "growth industry," the penal system.

How many of you read the 12 profiles of Central Texas families in the *American-Statesman's* fourth Season of Caring series and thought the same things I did?

"What is a 19-year-old single woman without a high school education doing with two young children? She says she wants to become a nurse. Why did she have children before getting a basic education? Why should I help someone who has put her own future and her children's at risk?" I pondered questions like these until I decided I had better find some answers.

I found them first in my memory. I thought of the bus ride I took in 1980 through the South Bronx to my first

academic job at Fordham University. I recalled the vacant stare and hopeless expression on the face of a young child looking out from a grimy apartment window. I thought back 20 years to kids playing in vacant, trash-strewn lots, viewed through the rolled-up windows of my dad's 1956 Pontiac driving to the old Lithuanian district in Cleveland where my grandmother lived. I thought of the words of neglected foster child and fellow native-Clevelander Antwone Quenton Fisher in his "Finding Fish: A Memoir" (and now a film): "For the first six years of my life, I waited on an island of uncertainty, confused about how I'd become shipwrecked there in the first place." I found the answer known to all parents who remember holding their own newborn babies: innocence. Kids don't choose the islands onto which they are born.

I then headed over to Any Baby Can (www.abcaus.org) on 1121 E. Seventh St. and asked Kristi Haby, Henaris Curiel-Shaw, Janet Chapman and Molly Suess the same hard questions. Why do you do what you do, and what keeps you going?

Haby and Curiel-Shaw are child development educators in Healthy and Fair Start, one of four programs at Any Baby Can on a continuum of intervention and prevention that gives kids with special needs or at risk a better chance of leading happy lives. One conversation with these bright, dedicated young specialists is enough to remove any cynicism about the families they serve. The children, ages birth to 5, are all at risk of experiencing some form of developmental delays through a combination of factors, including

undernourishment, abuse and mere lack of parental know-how. But at least one parent in every family is seriously committed to helping out their children, and "very few fall down." The work is hard, but the achievements, set in 3-month and longer-term goals, are visible, so good weeks far outnumber bad weeks.

For example, Seuss explains, many parents have never read to their young children. Any Baby Can works with Reading is Fundamental to give families books every month. Curiel-Shaw and Haby spoke of their great joy at finding books worn with use and proudly placed on special shelves, or at hearing kids cry out joyfully, "My teacher is here!"

They also let me know my own thinking in stereotypes was not unusual. A mother with children in need pulls up to the Any Baby Can resource center in a new Suburban. Misplaced priorities? Yes. But this particular mother has no control over her husband, who overspends all the money he earns on himself and not on his children. The children are innocent and need help. The mother goes to Any Baby Can to get it.

Chapman confirms that government, charitable and private funding sources for the four major programs at Any Baby Can are all under stress. Healthy and Fair Start alone has taken on 13 new families since Jan. 6, and nine are on the waiting list. Any baby can, and thanks to loving people like Haby, Curiel-Shaw, Seuss and Chapman, many will.

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