

## **PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS: Battle against child poverty goes on**

### **28% in Tom Green County struggle**

Casey Jones and Kenneth L. Stewart

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — Arthur Wright wanted his children to get a strong education and to serve others. As he met with them each night in study sessions and required them to perform community service, he possibly never anticipated his daughter Marian Wright Edelman's emergence as a preeminent advocate for children's rights.

Edelman's advocacy position is clearly stated, "A nation that does not stand up for its children does not stand for anything and will not stand strong in the 21st century." She clearly "threw down the gauntlet" by challenging communities to take steps to enhance their children's well-being.

In 1973 when she created the Children's Defense Fund, Edelman's passion could have been well focused on improving the lives of children in Third World countries. But it was not kids in Africa, Latin America, Asia or the Middle East that Edelman thought of defending; it was the vulnerable children of America that she had in mind.

Edelman knew then that millions of children in the wealthiest nation on Earth did not get the head start in life they need to fulfill their potential. Then, as now, the U.S. lagged behind other developed nations with its high infant mortality rate and high number of children in poverty.

Recent evidence says that some things have changed since 1973; others have stayed the same.

Families, of course, have changed a great deal since 1973. A most significant modification is that the rate of working women in the U.S. shot above 60 percent and now stays at levels that are higher than average even for the world's most developed nations.

What has not changed is the level of child poverty. The U.S. child poverty rate of 21.6 percent in 2010 places the nation near the top of the list of advanced countries on that measure, just as it was in the 1970s when Edelman founded the Children's Defense Fund.

Nowadays, though, a growing number of children in poverty live in female-headed families — most headed by working women — where the nation has a shameful poverty rate of 40 percent.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, an international consortium of advanced nations that recently completed a major study comparing families and children in different countries, sees the U.S. as one of a growing number of places struggling to design family benefits "to maintain work incentives" while compromising effectiveness "in protecting the most vulnerable."

This compromise, the study claims, runs the risk of "creating high, long-term social costs for future generations."

What should pique local interest in this topic is that Texas has worse numbers on family and child poverty than our lagging nation, and Tom Green comes out worse than Texas.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2011 National Kids Count Data Book continues to rank Texas in the bottom third of states in an annual state-by-state study of children's welfare. In the Kids Count results, only four states have higher levels of children living in poverty than the 26 percent rate for Texas. Nearly 1.8 million Texas children lived in poverty during 2010, a 24 percent increase over the first decade of the 21st century.

Unfortunately, Tom Green County's rate exceeds the state level of child poverty. Twenty-eight percent of Tom Green County's children lived in poverty in 2010 compared with the state's 26 percent. And 44 percent of the county's female-headed families with children were in poverty compared with the state's 42 percent and a nationwide 40 percent.

Most of us recognize that helping children overcome poverty makes a huge difference to their lives, to their families, their communities, and to society as a whole. Fewer people seem to grasp that solving child poverty means tackling a wide range of complex issues to empower all types (not just some preferred types) of families to move out of poverty for good.

It is too easy for some to leap to quick conclusions that child poverty traces back to irresponsible parents who prefer welfare over work.

More than a decade has passed, however, since policies were reformed from the national to the local level to stimulate work over welfare. The result has been a 72 percent drop in the percentage of local children receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families since the year 2000, a 17 percent decrease in the number of children enrolled in the Children's Health Insurance Program and a 5 percent decline in participation in the Women, Infants, and Children program.

The fact is that the vast majority of poor children have one or more parents who work. The issue is less about welfare dependency and more about low wages and unstable employment leaving families struggling to make ends meet.

Race also is a factor, along with levels of parental education. In Tom Green County, 16 percent of white children live in poverty, while the percentage is 28 percent for Hispanic and black children. More than 60 percent of children in San Angelo's public schools come from low-income households, while 66 percent of the heads of impoverished families have only a high school diploma at best.

Increases in the number of poor children and families in the stormy economy of recent

years stimulated demand for certain basic "safety-net" social services at the local, as well as the state and national, level. One example is the 26 percent increase in food stamp enrollments in Tom Green County since 2007, just before the economic storm started.

Fatefully, rising public expense for the social safety net generates shrill calls for austerity and reduced taxation, along with brooding claims about pending economic and national ruin. Thusly, the struggle to manipulate safety-net policies providing family benefits so that an allegedly dependent poverty class gets a stronger work incentive is set into motion.

Meanwhile, the compromise of all effective means for protecting the most vulnerable of us takes form. A heavier burden falls on the strained network of local private charities and agencies already struggling because of inadequate funding and staffing shortages. Local public programs and institutions designed to support families in everything from health to housing to education and training are forced to cut, reduce or withhold critical assistance to needy families.

Our community has myriad talented individuals and strong institutions trying to help. Lifting children from poverty, however, is not achieved by austerity cuts to public spending trying to teach poor folks about the need to work.

Instead, the safety net for children and families is in need of enhancement so that it can actually lift people up, rather than being merely a last-ditch effort to prevent a fall.

South African leader and liberator Nelson Mandela notes, "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children." It is up to us to pick up the gauntlet thrown by Marian Wright Edelman to ensure that we stand up for children in poverty.

*Casey Jones and Kenneth L. Stewart are directors of Community Development Initiatives at the ASU Center for Community Wellness, Engagement, and Development. Contact them at [casey.jones@angelo.edu](mailto:casey.jones@angelo.edu) or [kstewart@angelo.edu](mailto:kstewart@angelo.edu).*



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