

9. ‘Charlie’ Opens School Doors for Homeless Kids

One family at our transitional shelter had come from the far eastern part of Aurora, in DuPage County, one of the wealthiest counties in the nation. The family had been doubled-up with friends, their home lost because of a divorce. They had lived that way for about 2 years, but finally the landlord caught up with them and ousted the mom and her three kids. They landed on our doorsteps because we were the only nearby shelter.

Their plight was like so many other families we saw: divorce, domestic violence, economic crisis, no credit record, no safety net from relatives, and no options but homelessness. The mom and her three school-age kids adapted to their communal living environment. As summer ended, I was deeply impressed with the kids’ telling me, a former teacher, how excited they were to go back to their former schools.

I knew very little about what school the kids had a right to attend, so I looked into existing laws governing educational rights of homeless students. I found the federal McKinney Act seemed to vaguely cover the topic by saying the kids could go back to their original school if feasible and if the parent requested it. This mom wanted her kids to go back to their schools because they were doing well there, the stability would help them through this difficult time, and they intended to move back there once they got their own place.

I gave the mother the Illinois State Board of Education flyer, *Lost In the Shuffle*, and she called the Indian Prairie School District 204 administrators to inform them of her desires and to make arrangements for transportation. Shortly after, she sought me out, dismayed, reporting that the school district turned her down. They referred her to the local district, Aurora West District 129. She had no objection to District 129’s schools except that she wanted her kids to experience stability, not mobility. I called, but I too was firmly rebuffed.

I sought advice from other advocates I knew. Their interpretation was the kids *should* have a right, but the consensus was that this right was not clearly stated in the law. The mom told the district she had the right to send her kids there according to McKinney. They drew the line in the sand by saying they’d sue to keep her kids out. *Yikes! This was getting nasty.* We found a *pro bono* attorney to represent the family. The attorney filed a counter-suit, and the whole mess went to court.

All of this “extracurricular” activity was brewing just as I was supposed to be getting ready for the October 1st opening of our emergency shelter and the wrap-up of the always-draining Tent City season, a combination that was a full-time job and then some. This school issue forced us all to go beyond what we thought possible. Suffice it to say that the ensuing two-month legal battle was draining.

After a few days of “home-schooling” at our homeless shelter, the judge at least ruled that the district must enroll the kids and transport them to their old schools pending the outcome of the legal challenge. We garnered tons of sympathetic press and public attention. I spent my days writing press releases, making media calls, plotting activities, and, oh yeah, ordering blankets and supplies for the shelters, hiring staff, supervising our campers, and recruiting volunteers. I will never forget my capable co-workers (Ch. 31) who pitched in spectacularly to make all this possible.

In the midst of this frenetic activity, we invoked assistance from our member of Congress, Denny Hastert, (prior to his Speaker of the House days) and Denny’s Chief of Staff, Scott Palmer. They didn’t offer any miracles as far as the legal struggle, but they found a landlord willing to rent to the family—in the same district—which provided the salvation in this case. The judge ruled against the family on a technicality: the kids finished the school year the previous year as homeless students (by a couple days), therefore the law only provided that they could complete the year in their original schools, requiring new schools for the new year based on where they were staying.

We received the judge’s ruling on Halloween. Although crestfallen, we could at least, thanks to Denny and Scott and the understanding landlord, move the family into their new apartment in that school district so their stability was maintained.

Phew!

Standing back from the insanity, we had a revolutionary thought. This was so crazy that the best interest of children was not considered in the existing federal law. Even the school superintendent, Tom Scullen, thought the law needed revising. Kids need stability, especially when their families were undergoing the trauma of homelessness. Why not get a state law passed that improved upon the federal law?!

My familiarity with legislative advocacy was extremely minimal as was that of the rest of our group of advocates. That didn’t stop us and we moved forward in our quest, gathering a legislative wish list from associates across the state, consulting with people who were trying to improve access to school for homeless students in

Chicago, most notably Rene Heybach, then an attorney with the Legal Assistance Foundation's Law Project. Rene and others helped us shape the foundation for a bill by the following March. We called our newly elected Republican state representative, Tom Cross, and asked if he would be willing to sponsor this bill. His willingness was impressive, and probably bespoke his naiveté—or his complete confidence in us to pull off this impossible task.

Many people had a role in the journey of getting this bill passed. We had amazing bipartisan support in the House from the bill's sponsors, including Representatives Mary Lou Cowlshaw and Tom Cross, true compassionate Republicans from our area; along with Chicago Democrats Tom Dart, Judy Irwin and Art Turner. Despite our seemingly impossible goal, they fought hard for us and gave us advice on how to move forward.

Our small group of advocates made weekly treks three hours south to Springfield for legislative hearings, lobbying and meetings with educational staff of both parties. We relentlessly pursued legislators along the “rail” (lobbyist parlance for the area outside the house and senate chambers), restaurants, and softball fields.



Our rag-tag band of do-gooders needed to convince the members of the Statehouse that our bill was worth considering. Undoubtedly the most significant element of our unsophisticated campaign was “Charlie,” the poignant image of a homeless boy, his belly hanging out, his shoes on the wrong feet, cuddling a homeless cat, with the most enchanting look on his young face. Charlie, whose mother gave unconditional blessing and permission for her child's picture to be used by us, adorned every single piece of literature we put out about the bill. We called it “Charlie's Bill” and amazingly enough, legislators referred to “Charlie's Bill,” instead of HB 3244.

My esteemed friend Pat Van Doren, photojournalist responsible for capturing Charlie's image, recognized the key role Charlie could play, offering an identity to emphasize one bill among thousands considered during a legislative session. In addition to creating and producing Charlie's image for our campaign, in the midst of her busy life as a photojournalist, she recruited two other photographers, James Svehla and Karen Kerckhove, who also sympathetically covered events at Hesed House. Pat persuaded them to partner with her on a photo exhibit, *Spirit On the Streets*, in October 1993. We also created a special *1994 Spirit on the Streets* calendar (and a '95 calendar), which included the best of the exhibit photos and the

legislators' birth dates, with a message encouraging calendar purchasers to send their legislators birthday cards reminding them to care about homeless people.

Throughout the often blustery early months of 1994, we would journey to Springfield, three hours south if the State Troopers, road construction and fickle Illinois weather didn't slow us down, lobby—in its various forms, drive back and run the shelter, and repeat the same activities again week after week. Grueling didn't begin to describe the ordeal, but we had to be there—trouble was we had to be there—at the shelter, too.

“Charlie's Bill” made it through the House, thanks to some steadfast support from our amazed cadre of legislators who witnessed us navigating the confusing maze of policy making. Pat optimistically figured we'd be celebrating passage of Charlie's Bill through the Senate at the same time she and her photo-buddies would be displaying their impressive *Spirit On the Streets* exhibit at the Capitol. Her optimism aside, we dug into what would be an arduous battle getting the bill even considered in the Senate.

Thanks to the political savvy and connections of our group we were able to land some key Senate sponsors, including the loveable Aldo DeAngelis, a Republican Assistant Majority leader from the south Chicagoland suburbs. Aldo must have promised his first-born, his golf clubs or to cook one of his famous gourmet Italian dinners to get the bill through the renowned bottleneck of legislative doom controlled by Senator “Pate” Philip, an immensely powerful DuPage County Republican who was close friends with the Regional Superintendent of Schools whose territory included Indian Prairie School District 204, our battleground.

How Pate ever agreed to let our bill be heard, much less even be thought about, is a story I hope I hear in whatever version of life-after-death I make it to. Again, the story has so many ups and downs, crises and miracles, and surprise twists that it could make its own thick tome. So, as our photo-friends were hanging their poignant portraits of our homeless friends in the hallowed halls of the IL Statehouse, the Senate voted unanimously to approve Charlie's Bill in May 1994. We did it! Or so we thought...

The legislative process is never over, but we didn't know that then. We basked in victory, stunned that this fairly revolutionary piece of legislation made it through, much less in the first try. It would be impossible to cite the legislators whose significant efforts made this bill reality. Thousands of volunteers, homeless

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persons and ordinary citizens also called, wrote and otherwise offered support throughout this endeavor.

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10. Illinois' Seeds Yield Bountiful Harvest

Shortly after Charlie's bill was signed, some people in Washington we had consulted, including coordinators from across the country responsible for their states' efforts to educate homeless students, invited us East. "How did you get that bill passed?" they asked with no small bit of jealous astonishment echoing in their voices. They listened to the tale of Charlie's role, improbable legislative support, and seemingly miraculous occurrences.

Their wise consensus was that their legislators were not as "crazy" as Illinois lawmakers, nor did anyone think they'd succeed in the labor-intensive process of getting massive support for homeless kids to get into school. Eventually, the hope of the state coordinators, who comprised a fairly low profile organization called the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, was to include some provisions of the Illinois bill the next time the McKinney Education for Homeless Children bill came up for reauthorization in Congress, scheduled for 1998.

The year following passage of Charlie's Bill offered some alarming diversions from the never-quiet life at the shelter. As we geared up for the reauthorization push, Congress' devised a plan to eliminate all funding for McKinney programs in 1995, including the education component, at the time a paltry \$28.8 million for the entire nation. My respected colleague in DC, Barbara Duffield, called me with this news. I knew I needed to pull out all stops. That potential disaster (which would have yanked Charlie's Bill back in the statehouse for revocation faster than I can type) threatened everything we worked for and everything we hoped for in the future reauthorization of McKinney. I placed a desperate call to Rep. Mary Lou Cowlshaw at home, something I never did before, to ask her help.

I explained the situation to which she immediately reacted like a mother bear watching her cub Charlie under attack! She promised to call me right back after she called "Harris," none other than the esteemed Harris Fawell, Congressman representing Mary Lou's home district Naperville. This Republican legislator evidently responded favorably, calling in some favor or something, because very soon after that the threat was removed.

In the meantime we had been encouraging our thousands of volunteers to fax messages to their Members of Congress, so much so that Denny Hastert sent one of his staff to ask us to STOP! UNCLE! You won. OK, that's more like it...homeless kids should count in Congress. Many people across the nation added their voices to

this campaign, an effort capably headed by my friend Barbara, then with the National Coalition for the Homeless, an advocacy group in DC.

Barbara and I had the pleasure of working together over those exciting years, both of us passionate about true solutions to homelessness and both of us feeling a desperate need to do something to get the attention of Congress on behalf of homeless kids and their families. Our challenge: how to do it without endangering the small progress we had made on issues, without appearing to be wild-eye radicals, without causing a seismic and tragic shift in Congress to further reduce the inadequate but life-sustaining housing and assistance for homeless adults and kids.

Barbara and I shared the same frustration—how to get Congress aware of homelessness and poverty when they seemed consumed by myriad issues, including what turned out to be the nastiest phase of politics in history, President Clinton’s sex scandal. The political arena provided stiff competition, but **“Never doubt that a small, group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has,”** a humbling, but inspiring reminder from Margaret Mead, an enlightened 20th Century anthropologist. Sadly, our efforts to get Congress to improve the McKinney Education for Homeless Children and Youth program were faltering, for one main reason, Congress was preoccupied with other activities and shelved the reauthorization process.

Seemingly out of the blue, Rep. Mary Lou Cowlshaw called me to offer some help getting “a champion for homeless children in Washington DC.” Her proposal was for us to jointly invite newly elected Congresswoman Judy Biggert, who took the place of retired Harris Fawell, to visit Hesed House and to ask her to help homeless kids from her position in DC. Wow! Mary Lou arranged for me to meet Judy at her office, drive the Congresswoman to Hesed House, and let us do our magic. We did a major sprucing up at Hesed House. I even cleaned up my Saturn wagon! I headed over to Naperville, not wanting to hope that this encounter could be the breakthrough we needed.

Mrs. Biggert was as gracious as can be. Her chief of staff, Kathleen Lydon, followed in her car. As I drove toward my home-away-from home, Hesed House, I began explaining homelessness, answering questions and offering stories. Judy and Kathy toured the entire facility, even venturing out to the mid-July steamy Tent City in our back yard. When we concluded the tour, we sat down and Judy asked, “So, what can I do to help?”

I knew she wasn't asking a rhetorical question, so I simply replied, "Get a version of the Illinois Education for Homeless Children Act, Charlie's Bill, passed on the national level." Might as well go for broke! I assuredly offered national support from people who felt as strongly as we did about this issue, knowing my buddy Barbara would be able to deliver that essential element. Judy agreed to lead the charge, and offered to send her legislative director, Jim Brown, to tour Hesed and talk over details as soon as he could come out.

Jim, from all appearances was a very young conservative Republican, with no prior experience touring homeless shelters, much less discussing issues pertaining to homeless students' educational needs. He was so affected by his tour and visit that he fervently apologized for the limousine that was waiting to return him to the airport. We assured him that limousines often parked in our lot—because guys who lived here drove them!

Shortly after that landmark visit, Barbara and I germinated an idea to generate visibility for our ambitious campaign. We devised a plan to use packets of forget-me-not flower seeds to call attention to the needs of homeless kids. We confidently figured that we could get someone to donate thousands of packets of forget-me-not seeds; we'd specially mark them with a message "Forget-Me-Not, Help Homeless Kids Blossom." Our thousands of allies across the country could enclose the packets with their letter to their Congressperson, and we'd have a lobby day, with homeless kids and their supporters talking face to face. Thus was born the "Forget Me Not, Help Homeless Kids Blossom" campaign.

The nice thing about working with Barbara is that she not only does what she says she'll do, she always does more. It keeps me hopping! We strategized: our timeframe—TOO SHORT—our resources—TOO SCARCE—our constituents—TOO BUSY WITH HOMELESSNESS IN FRONT OF THEM—our legislative supporters—TOO FEW—so we figured we better get going.

I was confident I could get seed packets because my good friends Gary and Donna Hartman of Geneva Flower Farm always could be counted on to help. I quickly called Gary and asked if he knew whom we could go to for our mission. He offered horticultural reality to say that it was getting beyond seed-planting time but he'd call Anna Ball, of Ball Seed Company fame. Yeah, that will do!

Gary called back to give me George Ball's number. He was president of Burpee Seeds. I got through to him, explained what we were doing, and he asked, "How many packs?" Well, that was something Barbara and I never discussed, so I

grabbed the number 5,000 and he said it would take awhile, a few days, but he'd do it. He wanted me to send the proposed design for the label and he'd see to it that the seeds would be sent out as soon as possible. Wow! That worked.

Other pieces of our plan had similar success, relatively speaking. I called Denny Hastert's office to see what we needed to do to get a room in one of the House Office Buildings in mid-September. Barbara used her contacts to line up speakers, food, and other essentials. She put the word out to DC area shelters and programs for homeless kids, asking them to participate in this event. We worked with other advocates and steadfast supporters who contributed key elements to our plan.

We invited legislators who had seemed supportive of our relatively minor issue in the past. Republicans, Democrats. Scheduling, a logistical nightmare, but we lined up a few brave souls willing to participate. Reps. Biggert and Louise Slaughter (D-NY) committed to participate. Barbara used and abused her agency's interns, her spouse, her friends, and anyone she could think of to pull this impossible event off. I did what I could from the middle of the country.

With several calls and faxes between Barbara, Jim and me, the crux of a bill was crafted. On September 21, the day before our event, our champion, Congresswoman Judy Biggert, introduced the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 1999 in Congress. I couldn't believe it! Even though we had much ground to cover, we had made it this far, significant progress in my mind.

Soon it was September 22, the date of our event. Kids from shelters and schools piled off buses and filled our 200 seats in the huge event room in the Cannon Office Building. Some media coverage was present. Representatives Biggert and Slaughter and advocates spoke of the importance of remembering homeless families and the need to improve access to education for the estimated 1 million homeless kids in the nation. (We later figured too many adult "talking heads," an adjustment we made for subsequent events.) Following the rousing gathering, kids and their chaperones roamed halls of Congress, delivering packets of seeds, urging support of our meager "flower roots" campaign.

Our ferocious momentum was momentarily derailed when the legislative clock ran out on the reauthorization process. Undeterred, we planned a bigger and better "Forget-Me-Not" event for 2000. Mrs. Biggert remained committed and our unlikely enthusiast was none other than Jim Brown who developed the unfathomable alliance with his polar opposite, Barbara Duffield. Whatever works

was my thinking...In the meantime, forget-me-not seed packets by the thousands made their way to the desks of congressional representatives, bearing heartfelt messages about the need to remember homeless families. I ordered another 6,000 packets which Burpee Seeds graciously and expeditiously provided.

Now that we established the framework of a national campaign, complete with an ideal piece of legislation to inspire our multitude of homeless kids' crusaders across the country, we focused all energies on creating a blockbuster Forget-Me-Not (FMN) event for May 2000. Our alliance expanded to include the Better Homes Fund and MASS Interaction, enabling us to broadcast our Kids' Day by satellite to thousands of students across the country. The FMN 2000 event focused on stories of homeless kids, poignantly related in front of an audience of 250 homeless and non-homeless kids and adults assembled in the impressive Hart Building Senate chambers, with student-viewers from across the country calling in with questions and comments for both legislators and homeless panelists. We brought a busload of kids and their families from Hesed House for this unique event. Congresspersons Judy Biggert (IL) and William Coyne (PA) participated at the Hart Building and Reps. Sheila Jackson Lee (TX), and Brian Baird (WA) by satellite/telephone connections from their states.

Nancy, a student from Aurora who had stayed with her family at our transitional shelter, was one of the panelists who shared some of her experiences, "Even doing schoolwork was hard because of the noise from all the other people in the shelter. But, even though my life was hard, I have done pretty well in school. I am on the honor roll and am studying hard so I can go to medical school and become a doctor. I want to help people. Our family became very close because of our experiences. As we were getting ready to go to sleep, we would talk about what happened to us that day. We dreamed of times that we would be back on our feet. We were at least happy to be together and to be safe." The icing on the cake for all of us was when the video of this event received an Emmy nomination!

While in DC, we took our IL contingent to visit their congressman, Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert. We were graciously received in the Speaker's chambers, in a room that has probably never been visited by homeless children and adults. I can't help but believe that our face-to-face encounters with Denny combined with the relentless efforts of Judy Biggert and the behind-the-scenes pushing by Mary Lou Cowlshaw paved the way for the eventual successful passage of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act of 2001.

The inconceivable success of FMN 2000 floored us. The student panelists had far exceeded our wildest dreams in their ability to convey the painful realities of homelessness. FMN 2001 became a reality before the last extension cord was put away following the 2000 event.

FMN 2001, held April 23 at the Hart Building, attended by homeless youth from across the nation, including a busload from IL, assembled a powerful set of student panelists and Congresspersons Martin Frost (TX), Betty McCollum (MN), Holmes-Norton (DC) and Schakowsky (IL) to round out the panel. Many tears were shed as each of these courageous teens shared stories about their families' journey to and through homelessness.

Thirteen year-old Alicia related, "My father tumbled down a flight of stairs carrying an old refrigerator, breaking his back in three places...Not only did we lose almost everything we owned, but we were looked at and treated like garbage. We were almost thrown out of school. Some of the kids who lived near the shelter told us their parents didn't want them near us."

Spunky Leah from Wheaton, IL, shared, "When we (Leah and her mom) became homeless we freaked out...The worst part of being homeless was my dog, Breezy, couldn't stay with us...We had always been together during our trying times..."

Rejection and deprivation permeated the other kids' stories: Living in an abandoned apartment with no heat, electricity or water; being forced to wash in dirty restrooms, knowing that dirty clothes would stay dirty indefinitely; inability to concentrate on schoolwork because they had no quiet space to study in noisy shelters; and the inability to form friendships because of their homelessness—and the stigmas it created—caused Congressional staffers and media representatives in the audience to become knowledgeable about how homelessness hurts kids the most.

Their growing concern about homelessness, especially as it affected families, was evident. The cumulative effect of over 11,000 forget-me-not seed packets spilling out on the desks of lawmakers began to get their attention. Finally...

Jim Brown and Barbara Duffield continued to hammer away at legislative language for the bill that shaped the McKinney reauthorization, now called McKinney-Vento, adding the name of Bruce Vento, compassionate Congressman from Minnesota who died in October 2000. The bill contained almost all aspects from the Illinois Education for Homeless Children Act plus some bonuses

harvested from other states. Funding for this national program even started creeping upward at a time of widespread budget cuts.

In the last weeks before what became passage of this bill issues kept exploding that threatened to destroy all of the work that so many people had invested in the legislation. Language needed to be compromised between House and Senate versions of the bill.

The most controversial matter was “separate schools.” The current law allowed for schools to be set up to serve only homeless students. While some people figured it was beneficial for the students and educators, it segregated homeless students from mainstream classrooms. The potential for disaster if this element was kept in the bill was monumental. Barbara and others fought like banshee hens to prevent separate schools from being allowed. In the end a grandfather clause was inserted to allow existing programs to continue.

The final days found Barbara, Jim Brown and a few other dedicated souls working 80-hours a week or more to finalize language for the bill. So much invested, so much to gain, and finally, on December 18, 2001, Congress passed the final version of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act as part of the all-encompassing No Child Left Behind Act.

Ironically, passage of this bill that had consumed so much of my life for the past 8 years was fairly anticlimactic. It came at a time when I was immersed in the stress caused by the growing numbers of families and single persons seeking shelter, our ambitious expansion of our sleeping spaces for women families, simultaneously struggling with trying to get our board to address what I saw to be a serious collapse in leadership.

A few of my trusted co-workers “celebrated” this victory by presenting me with a commemorative plaque. The fact that this celebration occurred privately in my office bespoke the strained work environment. This humongous victory for the “little people,” powerless homeless kids just seeking an education, swirled into the vortex of organizational crisis, staff discord and holiday insanity.

The actual bill, which Congresswoman Judy Biggert had introduced in September 1999, became reality as part of the broad No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, signed into law by President George Bush in January 2002. Illinois activists celebrated passage of this bill in March, bringing together legislators, advocates, McKinney-Vento program representatives, and friends who contributed extensively to this success. Based on language in the McKinney-Vento law, Gary

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Dickirson, Illinois State Board of Education's homeless student coordinator, decided to strengthen the enforcement of this law throughout the 900 school districts across Illinois. This restructuring led to my employment as Lead Liaison for ISBE in May 2003 (Ch. 25).

Little did I know how passage of that bill would change my life....

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NOTE:

This reader-friendly book, [Crossing the Line: Taking Steps to End Homelessness](#), shares behind-the-scenes insights on a variety of homelessness issues.

For people seeking a greater understanding of homelessness and of the children, teens and adults who find themselves without a place to call home, this book is a great place to start! And proceeds from sales go directly to [HEAR US](#).

Enjoy!
Diane

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