

Determined to make a difference

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
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This year New York is facing the worst homeless crisis since the Great Depression. The city homeless population included a record-breaking 42,888 children. The many ways poverty scars a child today and long into the future are well-documented. Children who have to navigate the harsh reality of homelessness on top of poverty often fall through our already porous safety nets and disproportionately drop out of school and then too often drop into the prison pipeline.

The New York Department of Education tracks these students, and according to Wayne Harris, “the data spoke about how two-thirds of [homeless] high school males aren’t even making it to the 12th grade, never mind graduating—two-thirds aren’t even making it, because of obvious reasons. They have to work. A lot of them leave the family structure because it’s one less person to feed in the household. Then we also were moved by the data that spoke about how many of them wind up in prison industrial complexes as well. So we said we’ve got to do something about this.”

Harris saw the need and decided to make a difference. The result is a program supporting homeless youths in Brooklyn called Safe In My Brother’s Arms (SIMBA). “We went to the shelters, identified some young people, young men—and we just created a safe space. We just wanted to create a safe space for high school homeless males to come support each other, receive a little bit more intensified services around education, some social emotional supports, and even some supports for parents.”

Just providing that safe space where homeless students can go fills a key need, especially since children who live in shelters often have strict rules against being at the shelter during the day or any time their parents are at work or not home. SIMBA goes much further and includes educational and youth development and college and career readiness programs. Young people receive after-school academic supports like tutoring and help preparing for the SAT exams and the statewide standardized Regents exams. Even Harris was surprised by the immediate success: “We were shocked ourselves at our retention rate . . . They felt so safe that they really stayed in the program, and since then, you know, it really took on a life of its own.”

One of Harris’s success stories is Raymond Perez, a senior at New World High School in the Bronx who is already taking classes at Hostos Community College. Raymond is one of this year’s recipients of the Children’s Defense Fund-New York’s annual Beat the Odds® awards, which provide a minimum \$5,000 college scholarship, guidance through the college admission process, and an invitation to join CDF’s leadership development training programs, to high school seniors who have overcome tremendous adversity, demonstrated excellence, and given back to their communities.

In Raymond’s case, this adversity included a new beginning in the United States that was far from an American dream. Two and half years ago, Raymond’s mother finally received the visas that allowed their family to move from the Dominican Republic to join her new husband in New York. Raymond’s stepfather became abusive. His behavior escalated to the point where Raymond’s mother needed to flee with Raymond and his younger brother, and the three of them wound up homeless.

But Safe In My Brother’s Arms and Wayne Harris as a mentor made a big difference in

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Raymond's life. Raymond increased his academic success despite being homeless. He was such a model student he was invited to become an intern with the program and serve as a tutor to others. Harris encouraged Raymond to apply for CDF's Beat the Odds award, saying, "[Raymond] could be the Beat the Odds poster child . . . He is resilience embodied. If we could bottle what he has and sell it, we'd really be closing some achievement gaps in this town." He sums it up: "I just want for Raymond to break this cycle of poverty and to become self-sufficient, healthy, and happy . . . I have no doubt at all Raymond will succeed."

If we could bottle what so many youths like Raymond have, we would have a generation of young people determined to succeed despite all odds—and if we could bottle what Wayne Harris has, we would have many needed adults in every community willing to step up to do whatever it takes to support them. Become one of those adults for children and youths in your community today and find out what you can do to change the odds for children struggling to succeed.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.