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She turns cameras on American hunger

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PHILADELPHIA -- An office party goes on without her, across town in an affluent world vastly different from the one where Mariana Chilton now finds herself. Her husband's tried calling. Twice.

And still she sits in dress slacks and stocking feet, gray suede shoes tossed aside, on the drab carpet of a row house in the Philadelphia projects, playing with someone else's children while her own three kids wait for Mom to come home.

A mouse scurries by, but Chilton doesn't flinch.

She is listening, for the umpteenth time, as another mother speaks about what it means to be poor and hungry in America.

About how this mom scrimps and stretches by adding more than the usual amount of water to powdered milk to make it last. And how, at times, she makes chicken for her children but eats Oodles of Noodles herself, because there's just not enough meat to go around. About the \$50 bucks left on the food stamp card that must carry this family two more weeks.

Tianna Gaines is her name. She is 29, black, with twin babies and a toddler, facing eviction because she's \$300 behind on rent.

The government calls circumstances like these "food insecurity." Chilton knows the term well, although she can't personally relate to its consequences. She is 40, white, Harvard-educated, raised on Martha's Vineyard. She lives miles from here, in a nice brick house with a nuclear physicist husband and children who eat three square meals a day.

How she came to be in Gaines' living room, holding her babies and listening to her problems, is a testament to one woman's dogged determination to make a difference.

For years, Chilton directed statistical studies about hunger and food insecurity without hearing the stories of the people behind the statistics, without really recognizing what hunger means here, in her backyard and yours and mine.

And so the researcher decided to help people see what it does mean. Really see.

She doled out digital cameras to inner-city mothers and made them the chroniclers of a plight too

often ignored, putting their work before the public and turning their daily lives into a powerful statement on a societal ill.

But her gift _ her real gift _ was something far more profound.

"Where is one of my favorite photos?"

The eyes, like the woman, are direct and intense as they scan frame upon frame inside an exhibit hall at Drexel University. The faces of countless children stare back, some smiling brightly. Then Chilton stops at one photograph.

"Let me tell you about this kid." She sighs and reaches out, brushing the glass as if to caress the child herself.

The little girl, 15-16 months old, wears a pink-and-white striped top that swallows her tiny arms and almost completely covers her hands. Her nose is runny, her eyes empty. There is no smile, no sparkle in this child.

Hers is not the picture of hunger that Americans are accustomed to seeing. She isn't emaciated, like those living in squalid conditions in famine-stricken countries, nor is her belly distended, like the many children Robert F. Kennedy described after touring the Mississippi Delta, Appalachia and other pockets of poverty some 40 years ago.

But she is underweight and malnourished, often fed chips and sugary drinks instead of milk and formula.

"Why," asks Chilton, "do people assume that they know when a child looks hungry?"

The very word, hunger, means something different in 2009 in America. It manifests itself in poor diets lacking in fruits and vegetables, in children who are fed fatty, cheap foods like hot dogs or ramen noodles and may be overweight but also hungry. It shows in a child's health: the flus, colds, stomach aches and headaches, an increase in childhood hospitalizations. In everyday hard choices for mothers and fathers: Buy pampers or formula? Pay the heating bill or fill the fridge?

Even before the economy tanked, some 36 million adults and children struggled with hunger in 2007, including 12 million the government considers to have "very low food security" _ meaning they suffered a substantial disruption to their food supply at some point during the year.

The number of Americans receiving food stamps reached an all-time high last year, topping 30 million in September, October and November, even though the maximum benefit for a family of four _ \$588 _ still falls \$78 short of the cheapest possible government-established plan to feed a family that size.

President Barack Obama, whose own mother once received food stamps, has pledged to end childhood hunger; the administration's stimulus package raises food stamp benefits by 14 percent.

What bothers Chilton is that the numbers, startling as they are in a country as rich as this one remains, seem to do little to effect lasting change. And that's not an easy thing for a number-cruncher to admit.

An epidemiologist, folklorist and assistant professor of health policy at Drexel, Chilton has spent the last five years conducting research on hunger. Her assistants would park themselves in an emergency room, gathering data from low-income mothers whenever a health crisis brought them and their children to the hospital.

They'd ask probing questions: Have you skipped a meal in the last month because there wasn't enough money for food? Did you eat less because there wasn't enough money for food? Did your children have to go an entire day without eating because there wasn't enough money for food?

Sometimes the interviewers provided phone numbers for assistance or shelters. But to Chilton it felt like: "Oh, you're hungry? Thanks. Goodbye."

It just wasn't enough. Much of her life had been spent in the field, working to improve health care for Cheyenne Indians in Oklahoma and, before that, in Chile, where she advocated for families whose loved ones disappeared during a harsh dictatorship.

Four years ago, she helped launch a "GROW Clinic" at St. Christopher's Hospital in Philadelphia that monitors nutrition in underweight children. And she frequently testifies before Congress about hunger.

But her work left her with a nagging thought: "There's something greater that we could do here."

So when she learned she'd won a \$100,000 award in late 2007, she ignored suggestions that she take a vacation and instead started work on "Witnesses to Hunger." She purchased dozens of digital cameras and distributed a flier to some of the mothers who had been interviewed over the years.

"Speak. Teach," it said. "We want to learn from you."

The brochure promised a free camera, transportation costs, and at least \$175 for participating in the project and any community forums or interviews.

Chilton was tentative, not sure these women would be interested in working with someone almost literally from the other side of the tracks. Then the phone started ringing.

Some, at first, just wanted the camera and the money. Some were more than a little skeptical of Chilton. She didn't live like they did; how could she understand? Would she judge? Call social services? Would she somehow just make things worse?

But more powerful than their fear and skepticism was a desperation to simply be heard.

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The text message arrives just after 9 in the morning from Barbie Izquierdo, 21 years old, a mother of two.

"Im at salvation army. i would like u 2 c this. i've been here since 8."

Chilton is in her Honda Civic, driving the streets of Philly in a downpour to visit one mother after another. She turns toward Hunting Park, a neighborhood laden with corner food markets whose doors are covered with burglar bars and windows boarded with plywood. Every few blocks, Chilton slams on her brakes, stops in the middle of the street and stares in disgust.

Who'd want to buy food in a place like that? she wonders aloud.

She finds Izquierdo inside a sprawling sanctuary packed with hundreds of people waiting to pick up donations.

Izquierdo, already late for work, holds a slip of paper with her number in line: 633.

"Who are all these people?" Chilton asks her.

"People just like me," she says.

She works full-time at a rent-a-center store. She takes two buses, traveling an hour each way, to bring home \$9 an hour, \$268 net every week. When she submitted her paystub to the welfare office, a letter came in the mail saying she was ineligible for food stamp benefits. "PURCHASE OWN FOOD," it stated.

If only it was that easy. Izquierdo pays \$400 in housing every month, \$80 for daycare, \$54 for the phone, \$60 for electricity, \$80 on pampers and baby wipes, another \$80 or so on transportation (she doesn't own a car), leaving a few hundred dollars for food, health care and anything else she needs for herself, her 3-year-old daughter Leylanie and 1-year-old son Aidan.

"As of yesterday, I had 4 cents on my debit card," she says.

She doesn't pity herself, not when the refrigerator and cupboards are empty, not when she gives her kids hot dogs instead of something more healthful because that's all she can afford, not each and every day that she goes without breakfast and, often, lunch or dinner. Not on this day, when she has yet to put a single morsel in her mouth.

Years ago, when the hunger was almost too much to bear, she learned a trick: She'd flip through takeout menus to look at pictures of the food and, eventually, just looking was enough to diminish her cravings.

"At times I am ashamed, but there's a difference between being ashamed and not doing anything about it," she says.

Izquierdo, a bony woman, 5-foot-8, who dreams of college and a criminal justice career, was Chilton's inaugural project participant.

Her first photograph showed a neighbor's kitchen, covered in sewage and streaked with dirt, muck-filled buckets sitting next to a broken sink. When Chilton saw this, she understood that hunger goes far beyond what's in someone's refrigerator or stomach. It is the life that exists all around them,

"a vortex of very negative experiences," she calls it.

The photographs of the 40 mothers who joined with Chilton for the project depict that vortex, in stark reality.

Blood on the sidewalk in one mother's neighborhood. A bum sleeping on a stoop. Marijuana bags next to a playground slide. A family eating noodles, because that's all they can afford. Food hidden behind piles of clothes so it's not eaten too fast.

Imani Sullivan, 29, works as a janitor while caring for her two small children, making as little as \$111.20 a week if her kids are sick and she can't work. "I wanted somebody to hear my story, and I figured this was the only way I was gonna let it out. I just took the pictures that I felt was right."

Like one of her 2-year-old, his arm outstretched, asking her welfare case officer for something to eat.

"He was saying, 'Please,'" Sullivan says.

Erica Smalley, 24, is also a mother of two. Months ago, Smalley landed a job on her own as a customer service representative at a cable company, no thanks to the many welfare-to-work programs she's completed. Her benefits — food stamps, cash assistance, child care — were quickly terminated, making it harder to survive with a job than without.

"We've just added to the money that goes out," she says. "Hunger, to me, was not just the food issue. It was an everything issue: Hunger for resources. Hunger for support. Hunger for change in the community."

One of her photos is a self-portrait of her own tear-streaked face. Her caption describes the despair that accompanies hunger and the many other side effects of poverty.

"When you're trying to do positive things and move forward and make things better, it's discouraging and it's hard and that's depressing. It makes you sad. It makes you tired. It makes you want to give up," she wrote.

Now, since the project, Smalley tries to reach out to others who may be struggling. One day after meeting with Chilton, Smalley saw a homeless man digging through the trash. Chilton had given her \$10 for lunch and refused to accept any change.

So Smalley gave the change to the man, along with a leftover taco.

"You can do something small," she says, "and it can make a big difference in somebody's life."

The exhibit debuted just before Christmas at Drexel. State welfare officials came, along with hunger advocates, folks off the street and many of the women, who stood before the crowd of suits and told their stories.

Izquierdo was among those who spoke. "I would endure any wound before my kids endure a scar," she told the crowd. She left feeling like she'd made a difference.

"I was so proud of myself. For once in my life, I didn't have low self-esteem. I was like, 'Oh my God. That's me. That's my picture right there. That's something that I did.' I was never given a voice like the one that Mariana gave me. I was never given the chance to actually speak about something that mattered."

When Izquierdo arrived home that night, she found her basement flooded, her kids' clothes _ already stuffed in a trashbag for protection _ floating in the murky water. She did what came naturally, and took a picture to share with Chilton.

Retelling this story, sitting late for work while waiting for a handout from the Salvation Army, Izquierdo begins to cry.

But Chilton is there to comfort her.

"You can make it," she says. "You can do it."

Chilton calls her mothers agents of change. They call her their Dr. Phil.

In truth, she is part therapist, cheerleader, sister, savior and, most of all, their friend.

The photographs have all come down, for now _ although Chilton was invited to show the exhibit in Washington, D.C., this spring. She wants to bring some of the mothers, too, and finally have these "real experts" talk to members of Congress.

In the meantime, she still visits them. And they still call, all the time. They call when they're short on rent, not to ask for money but to lean on their new ally. They call with good news, too. When a co-worker offered financial assistance to Smalley, the first person she called was Chilton.

She listens to their stories, offers advice, rubs their backs, wipes their tears, tries to help monetarily when she can _ buying them lunch, dipping into another project to purchase a refrigerator for Tianna Gaines when hers broke.

"I care so much about the women and I care so much about their children ... but I know that helping them with a little money here and there helps them just enough," she says. "It takes widespread policy change to have a true impact."

That, she says, and getting enough people to see the photographs and start changing the way they treat others.

"I'm fighting on a very deep level of indifference. How do you do that? I don't really know. I'm just trying my best."

The night she missed the office party for a visit with Gaines instead, Chilton stuffed an envelope in the mother's hand with \$25 donated from a men's group that read about "Witnesses to Hunger." There was also a little extra.

It was only then that Gaines, so strong, broke down. The two women embraced.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you," Gaines said again and again through her tears.

"I wish it could've been more," Chilton said.

But Gaines shook her head. "It's enough."

Chilton left that night with the weight of the world on her shoulders, then drove home to her own house, near a driving range and a Lord & Taylor and a shopping center housing a clothing drop-off bin for the needy, people just like her moms.

When she walks through her front door and her own kids run to greet her, she feels like a rock star who lives in a palace. "I turn my lights on, and they work," she says. "I can open the refrigerator and most of the time find something to satiate myself."

She does what she calls "the hungry kid thing" to her children at dinnertime. They'll be eating baked chicken and colorful vegetables and some rice, and she'll remind them of the children from her project: "Their mom doesn't have enough money to make their plate look so nice and healthy."

Even they, at ages 4, 7 and 10, aren't all that comfortable hearing it.

Once, several years ago, Chilton brought her son Sam downtown with her to work. At lunch, they happened to walk by a shelter and saw a woman sitting on the stoop with a toddler. It was wintertime, freezing out, and the woman was obviously distraught.

"Is something wrong?" Chilton asked, as Sam waited by her side.

The shelter was full, the woman explained. She needed to get on a bus, to go anywhere. Tears streamed down her face, and both the child and adult were shivering. Chilton listened a little while longer, then pulled out a \$20 and gave it to the woman.

As Chilton and her son walked away, Sam was visibly shaken. "I didn't like that, Mommy. Why did you talk to her?"

Chilton searched for the words to help him understand.

"Because," she finally told her little boy. "She needed help."

In her mind, no other explanation was necessary.

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