Advocate: Renée Wilson-Simmons stands up for impoverished youngsters as director of the National Center for Children in Poverty.
Gladys Wilson always went alone when government-surplus food—cheese, dried eggs in a can—was distributed to those in need at a public elementary school in the family’s East End Pittsburgh neighborhood. Renée Wilson-Simmons and her sister stayed home. “My mother dreaded having to get in line on those days,” says Wilson-Simmons, who, driven by intense distaste, often hid the canned eggs. “They were so terrible,” she says. “I was too young to understand that we needed the food.”

Wilson-Simmons was lucky—her mother served as a powerful buffer, insulating her girls from some of the worst insults of poverty. Many children don’t fare so well. The insults of poverty are simply too pervasive for one parent—or even two—to fend off.

Today, as director of the Mailman School’s National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), Wilson-Simmons, DrPH, advocates for children in need. As head of the nonpartisan research center, she champions public policies to promote the economic security, health, and well-being of America’s low-income children and families, confronting stereotypes and caricatures with hard facts. Her goal: to galvanize policymakers, journalists, advocacy organizations, researchers, the professionals who work with impoverished people, and the general public to confront the realities of kids growing up poor in America and to respond with evidence-based policies. The effort hinges on tackling—head on—the inextricable links between childhood poverty and the policies that affect impoverished families. “Efforts to address this crisis are hampered in part by inaccurate and damaging beliefs,” she says. “Chiefly, that children are poor through no fault of their own and so deserve support, but poor adults—their parents—are responsible for the choices they have made and so must accept their fate.”

The connection between childhood poverty and public health can’t be underestimated. Kids boast extraordinary resilience; even so, the combination of stress, sleep deprivation, exposure to pollutants, limited access to health care, and poor nutrition imposed by poverty can have profound lifelong effects by disrupting the rapid brain, endocrine, and immune development under way during early childhood. “Many of those born into poverty have higher rates of morbidity and subsequent developmental delays,” says Wilson-Simmons. “They’re less likely to be prepared for school, more likely to experience cognitive and behavioral problems, and ultimately more likely to experience illness and unemployment as adults.”

The data behind such trends—and their relationship to public policy—is freely available online, at nccp.org. The site’s Young Child Risk Calculator offers state-specific answers to such questions as How do my state’s policies compare to those in other states? Which children in my state are at high risk of poor school or health outcomes? How many infants and toddlers in my state are vulnerable? The Early Childhood State Policy Profiles help users evaluate trends across the states. “Evidence like this is essential,” says Wilson-Simmons. “With evidence, we can understand what’s out there, understand how current policy and practice work, and see what needs to improve.”

About to embark on its 25th year, NCCP was founded in 1989 as welfare reform and broad expansions to Medicaid were signed into law. Today, its reach extends far beyond the staff’s 125th Street office, to foster policy change nationwide. In Illinois, the NCCP provided the governor with the facts and figures he needed to increase the Earned Income Tax Credit from 5 to 10 percent, boosting the family finances of 1 million children. Working with two partner nonprofits, NCCP staff are providing data and recommendations to help 20 states boost the quality of the early childhood programming they offer. Closer to home, the organization serves as an evaluator for NYC Project LAUNCH, a federal program that promotes the mental health and school readiness of at-risk children in two of New York City’s highest-needs communities.
SUCH WORK IS ALL THE MORE RELEVANT AS millions of families continue to pick their way out of the rubble left by the latest recession. Though the national poverty rate saw a dramatic drop in the ‘90s, of the 72 million children in America today, 32.4 million live in poor or low-income families. “The nation’s share of poor children is one of the highest in nearly 50 years,” says Wilson-Simmons. “Many of these children start out early on a path that puts them far behind more advantaged children, and many never catch up.”

Wilson-Simmons credits education with brightening her own future: She and her sister, whose parents divorced when Renée was in second grade, were the first black children to attend the Catholic grade school in their Italian-American neighborhood. Buoyed by SAT-boosting Latin and French courses—and toting the line etched by some very strict nuns—each of the girls gained college admission. Wilson-Simmons majored in journalism, covering her hometown for the city’s flagship African-American newspaper, before earning a master’s in urban journalism from the University of Minnesota.

Dedicated to helping—not just writing about—people stuck in the urban poverty cycle, she found a foothold at Education Development Center (EDC), a Boston-based nonprofit that designs, implements, and evaluates programs in education, health, and economic opportunity. After 18 years, during which she ascended through the ranks at EDC, Wilson-Simmons enrolled at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where she earned a doctorate in public health. During a subsequent six-year stint at the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Baltimore, her work involved equal parts administration and mentorship. To foster collegiality, Wilson-Simmons frequently opened her home, inviting colleagues to share a casual meal. “It created this great working relationship,” says Lindsey Mason, then a junior member of Wilson-Simmons’s team. “Those outings were really designed to make you feel special.”

In her first year at NCCP, Wilson-Simmons has tested her dual capacity for warmth and leadership as she guides the 20-employee, $4-million organization through a strategic planning process. (NCCP has lacked a full-time, permanent director since 2009.)

During her first month, Wilson-Simmons hosted one-on-one, hour-long interviews with each of the NCCP’s employees. “She really hit the ground running,” says J. Lee Kreader, PHD, NCCP’s deputy director. “She wanted to know everything: what turned people on, what frustrated them. She really made it a point to get to know everyone really well, really fast.”

Over the coming year, Wilson-Simmons intends to hold to the fast track, mustering allies for a campaign to put childhood poverty front and center in the nation’s consciousness. “We have to change public sentiment before we can change public policy,” she says. “We have to help people understand who is poor and why, launch a national conversation about the effectiveness of poverty reduction policies, and engage the organizations to support new policies.” To bring that vision to fruition, she’s making the rounds of Mailman School departments, inviting faculty researchers to join in the NCCP’s efforts. “Their expertise is very exciting,” she says. “I look forward to identifying more ways we can collaborate.” On the wooden table where Wilson-Simmons holds meetings, an austere steel can contrasts sharply with the garnet-colored area rug and African wall hangings. “Dried whole egg solids,” declares the label of the 13-ounce tin. “Not to be sold or exchanged.” The can is one that Wilson-Simmons hid as a child and rediscovered four decades later as she emptied her childhood home. Today, that relic of her youth stands as a testament to a mother’s love, her capacity to shield her babies from the harshest truths of a family’s struggles.

For Wilson-Simmons, it’s a reminder of the human truths at the heart of NCCP’s mission. “Children do better when families do better,” she says. “The NCCP’s vision is an America where all families are economically secure and nurturing, and all children thrive. I have no doubt that vision will be realized. It’s just about how we get there.”

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