



***“All Our Kin For All Of Us:
How Four Powerful Women Change Welfare As We Know It”***

By Jennifer Y. Schaffer

When a single mother, already lashed by waves of deep trouble, receives her first welfare check, she is warned that a job must soon replace public support. Finding work is hardly ever the challenge. Finding and paying for childcare almost always is.

Four women, each extraordinary in a revolutionary sort of way, offer a solution called All Our Kin. They provide a safe, loving place where parents and their children can learn together in an environment that fosters literacy and school readiness for children and rigorously prepares the parents to enter the workforce as certified early childhood educators and child care providers. The strategy is powerful in its simplicity. It’s been working in New Haven’s housing projects since 1999.

Who are they? Jessica Sager (co-founder and executive director), Jana Wagner (co-founder and program director), Tanya Rusanowsky (director of their networking project), and Tyree Dickey (supervising teacher). They each have extensive teaching experience. They are fiercely smart, fearless, ridiculously underpaid, and committed to each other and to the women and children in their care.

Jessica concisely sums up the needs that are met simultaneously by All Our Kin.

“It provides economic development and workforce development opportunities to low-income communities, it expands the pool of high-quality child care providers available to these communities, it permits parents of very small children to move off welfare successfully, it provides intensive family support services to families at risk, [and] it provides a high quality learning environment for infants and toddlers.

Got it?

All Our Kin is a place where love and action come together for the community as well. With pivotal support from The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven, All Our Kin spearheaded a massive outreach effort involving the media, social service agencies, churches, and businesses to enroll hundreds of eligible families in Connecticut’s child care subsidy program.

Jessica grew up in Greenwich Village with a love for language and the arts attended Barnard, and taught in the New York City school system before becoming a Yale-trained lawyer and dreaming up the idea for All Our Kin. Today Jessica is quite lethal to any unsuspecting

legislator or caseworker that confuses her pleasant smile for weakness. Janna helped establish All Our Kin following an undergraduate degree from Yale, a graduate degree in education from Harvard, and a long stint with Teach For America in the South Bronx. Tanya, also a Teach For America alumna, earned a graduate degree in early childhood education from Sacred Heart University and taught bilingual pre-K through second grade for 10 years before joining the team.

Tyree, a mother herself, makes everything believable and alive to her students. She looks into their eyes with tenderness devoid of judgment. She knows frailty, their fear. With an assured voice she helps them discover the truth about themselves that at first disturbs, then galvanizes, and then stays in their minds—that they are worthy and capable and their children can join them on their triumphant journey.

When we struggle to see through the political, racial, and economic walls that welfare throws up, these four women come along with a window that permits us to recognize the real potential of these women and their children. Tyree, frankly considered by her colleagues as brilliant, is completing her undergraduate studies at Southern Connecticut State University. Tyree was a member of All Our Kin's first class of graduates.

It's interesting to note that the much-celebrated national program Head Start had its beginnings in a childcare program in a new Haven housing project. Perhaps the same magic will work for All Our Kin. What could make a more promising beginning than having these four resolute revolutionaries at the helm?

Giving Stories profiles the staff, benefactors, and beneficiaries who animate the charities that give such vigor and sustenance to our community. Jennifer Schaffer traveled the world as a medical relief worker for 10 years before becoming a mother, local volunteer, art teacher, and a shoreline real estate professional. Please send your comments to givingstories@aol.com. Contact The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven (www.cfgnh.org) and All Our Kin (www.allourkin.org) for more information.