

I would first like to thank Dr. Suzanne Keeley for nominating me for this award and the selection committee for recognizing the work that I do at the South Miami Children's Clinic. This is an incredible honor but I am one of many people sitting in this room today working to improve the lives of the most vulnerable citizens in our community. So, thank you as well for what you do!

When I started at the Clinic ten years ago, my primary goal was to provide high quality healthcare to the community and to improve access to care. This task proved much more difficult than I had imagined because of multiple barriers that patients and their families face on a daily basis. Inadequate housing, illiteracy, food insecurity, substance abuse, child abuse and neglect and domestic violence are just a few of the factors that impact the care that patients receive. These are some of the social determinants of health that we now know must be addressed in order to reduce health inequities.

It wasn't until I started doing home visits with certain patients whose symptoms weren't improving, that I was able to get a complete picture of their health care needs.

And I became a one woman warrior helping them to find resources in the community to deal with some of the non-medical issues affecting the care that they receive.

Poverty, of course, is at the root of everything and it's difficult, if not impossible in most cases, for patients to follow through on a given treatment plan. Especially, if someone doesn't have running water or electricity, or if they live in conditions that provide constant triggers for a child's chronic illness. The challenge to provide adequate healthcare, is one that is daunting, because the problems are complex and generational, and seem impossible to overcome at times. But I decided early on, that helping one person, or one family at a time, was the best that I could do on my own. And that strategy has paid off with many success stories over the past ten years.

I would like to talk about one story in particular that really demonstrates the effect that early childhood trauma can have on one's life but how building resilience can help an individual to overcome even the worst traumas:

"James" is a patient who presented to my clinic two years ago. He and his sister had suffered extreme neglect

from their drug-addicted mother and witnessed things that no young child should ever see. All of this was coupled with physical abuse and a biological father who was incarcerated for drug dealing. Both children were ultimately placed in the care of a great aunt.

When James started to see me at the Clinic he was in kindergarten at a local public school and had already been suspended twice, with one suspension lasting almost the entire month of December. The reports from his school depicted an out of control 5 year-old boy who was violent, needed to be medicated, and transferred to a school for children with emotional and behavioral disorders. The outbursts at school resulted in multiple trips to Nicklaus Children's Hospital, sometimes with a police escort, attempts to Baker Act, and treatment with Abilify, an antipsychotic medication.

The child that I saw at my clinic was a child that did indeed have anger management issues but was also incredibly bright and inquisitive with the vocabulary of someone twice his age. The bad behavior unfortunately overshadowed his academic prowess and he was falling through the cracks in the public school system.

I knew that this would be a travesty for a child who had experienced multiple childhood traumas but clearly had untapped potential that was being overlooked. So, I found a pediatric psychiatrist at Jackson Memorial Hospital who accepted his Medicaid insurance and blocked out my schedule every Friday morning for 6 weeks to drive him to therapy sessions. The Abilify was stopped and he was placed on a stimulant medication to treat Attention Deficit Disorder. I also had my sister, who's a licensed clinical psychologist, test him for gifted. I was then able to take the test results to his school and advocate for gifted placement under Plan B for underrepresented students. I worked with his kindergarten teacher the remainder of the school year to implement techniques in the classroom to deal with his outbursts in a non-confrontational manner and I did the same with his guardian at home, by enacting a reward system. He continued with intensive counseling in and out of school and successfully completed kindergarten without incident. He was placed in a gifted program the following year.

The gifted placement has been life changing for this child. He was a straight A student last year, an A/B student this year, and the disruptive behaviors have almost completely dissipated. He loves school and the support systems now in place in school and at home have provided the reinforcement and stability that he needs to succeed. I monitor his grades online weekly and tutor him after school to make sure that he is successful in the gifted program as he moves forward, since he doesn't receive academic support at home. His legal guardian is elderly and has a 4th grade education. I also shower him with tons of attention and love that he so desperately wants and needs.

My work at the clinic has been incredibly rewarding over the years with stories like these. But the thing that I've come to realize is that I have to be the change that I want to see! There are many times that certain resources aren't available that are needed, or access is an issue, and that's when I step in to try and fill the gap. Yes, I'm the medical doctor for my patients, but more often than not, I'm also their mother, father, tutor, mentor,

counselor and shoulder to cry on! I've provided food, clothing and even job opportunities. Because the truth is, we've reached a point in our society today where we can no longer pass the homeless person on the street and roll up the car window because homelessness is too big of a problem for one person to solve. We can't continue to pull our kids out of failing public schools because our educational system is broken and that problem is too big for us to solve too. We can't continue to drive through poverty and crime ridden areas of Coconut Grove, Liberty City, Overtown and South Miami and wait for someone to make a policy change on a local, state or national level to deal with the problems we all see on a regular basis. Because you know what? We've reached a tipping point now, where if we don't as individuals start to do our part to address these social determinants of health, there won't be any gate high enough at our homes or area left to move to, to prevent these issues from encroaching on our safety and quality of life!

It's easy to see the challenges that face many of the residents that live in our community and feel that these problems are insurmountable and that you can't make a

difference. But change is really hard, it doesn't come overnight, and it requires a level of commitment and dedication over many, many years.

The relationships that I've built with families over the past 10 years, have laid the groundwork for my clinic to be successful, because there has to be a level of trust from patients that you have their best interest at heart. This is the reason the Melissa Institute has been successful as well and has had a positive impact on so many individuals in our community. The work that we do is hard and it's ugly and messy and gut-wrenching at times. But it is absolutely vital if we want to live in a society that promotes good health for all.

I would like to thank my staff who are an integral part of the clinic's success. They carry out the mission and vision of the clinic every day. Going above and beyond what is required of them in their job description. Always recognizing that the welfare of the patient is first and foremost above everything else.

I want to end with a quote that really sums up my motivation to continue doing what I do, for as long as

possible. It's by Winston Churchill and says: "We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give."
And I can honestly say that all of our lives have been richly blessed by the work we do at the clinic.

Thank you!