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CHILDREN AND FIRE

L.A. FACES TWIN CRISES

EDITOR'S NOTE

BLUEPRINT
A magazine of research, policy, Los Angeles and California

THIS ISSUE OF *BLUEPRINT* MARKS A DEPARTURE IN OUR WORK, NOW in its tenth year. For the first time, we consider not just one but two questions at the top of the regional agenda. In a sense, that is an accident. Events in January pushed Los Angeles leaders in a new and urgent direction. But in another way, it underscores the interrelatedness of the challenges facing L.A. and California.

The two issues we confront here are the care of foster children and the recovery from this year's breathtakingly damaging fires. They are separate, of course: Los Angeles was struggling with questions of how best to protect its most vulnerable children long before the Pacific Palisades and Altadena went up in smoke. But fire is indiscriminate, and the victims of those blazes included some of those same children. Already taken from their original homes, they now watched their adopted homes evaporate.

Child endangerment is perennial and heartbreaking. Fires are instantaneous and heartbreaking. The combination is overwhelmingly, crushingly heartbreaking.

If there is any solace in all of this, it is that these crises have attracted some of the region's wisest and most devoted scholars, researchers and public servants. The tenacious intellects featured in this issue — Elizabeth Barnert, Tyrone Howard, Reece Fong and Shannon Thyne, to name just a few — are joined by committed public officials, including Assemblymember Isaac Bryan and Supervisor Lindsey Horvath, as they tackle problems both immediate and persistent.

Horvath is a case in point. Elected in 2022 by voters focused on reducing homelessness and improving constituent services, she entered a beleaguered Los Angeles County system that has struggled for generations to serve children in foster care. Forced to learn quickly, she had just begun to absorb the complexities of county government before her district caught fire. As she discusses with *Blueprint* in this edition's Table Talk, those are the inescapable challenges of governing in this place and at this time.

Given these challenges, policymakers would be wise to lean on the research community for guidance. Happily, there is evidence that they are.

Some of the work featured in this issue already is informing policy choices in areas as delicate as whether to remove a child from a troubled home, and as pressing as how to rebuild the Palisades and Altadena after the scourge of fire. Horvath has created a blue ribbon commission to recommend approaches to fire recovery. And Charity Chandler-Cole, who heads the county's Court-Appointed Special Advocates, draws upon research and her own experience as she confronts difficult questions of race, family and stability in the foster care system.

Invariably, further inquiry into such difficult topics deepens the dilemmas: Do policies intended to protect children become weapons that criminalize poverty? Should fire rebuilding prioritize getting residents back into their homes, or should it safeguard communities against the next disaster — which, especially with the accelerating effects of climate change, will be upon us sooner rather than later?

These are the questions that motivate researchers and haunt decision-makers. They, in this moment, are at the center of our region's worries. And they are at the heart of this issue of *Blueprint*.

JIM NEWTON
Editor-in-chief, *Blueprint*

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COVER ILLUSTRATION BY NOMA BAR

LANDSCAPE

NOMA BAR

FIRST PERSON

WELCOME TO ALTADENA

My new neighborhood goes up in flames

IN RETROSPECT, JAN. 4 WAS NOT A GOOD DAY TO move to Altadena.

I'd had misgivings, based in part on the weather forecast. It was going to be windy. Really, really windy, with hurricane-force blasts as strong as in 2011, when super-Santa Anas felled thousands of trees, including a thick-trunked pine that very nearly crushed our Highland Park house. Maybe it wasn't the best time to move into a tiny rental surrounded by huge trees.

Also, I wasn't ready. I was still boxing up books, notes, personal mementos — things to surround myself with for a three-month stay while our own house was being renovated. My pile included a children's novel that my father had read to my sister and me when I was in kindergarten, and that I would finally read on my own 60 years later. Photos I would at last digitize, to protect them from time and the elements. Binders with hard-to-find reports from L.A. city and county files, for future newspaper and magazine stories.

But the contractors would be pulling out our plumbing and knocking down walls on Monday. Unable to decide what to leave in the garage, I took everything to Altadena. Sure, it might get windy that first week at our new place on Palm Street, just west of Lake Avenue. But it would be windy everywhere.

I was immediately happy about the move. Altadena was so close to home yet had such a different feel, such friendly neighbors, such a great view of the mountains. And the house — a cute little place, perfect for lunch with friends after hitting the trails through the oaks and canyons a few blocks north. You could see Eaton Canyon from the front yard.

And our cat seemed to be OK with her new digs.

As the wind kicked up on Tuesday, I stocked up on flashlight batteries at Altadena Hardware, knowing the power would probably be spotty in all that wind. I picked up blueberry muffins at Amara Cafe and had lunch at Fox's, a wonderful 1950s coffee shop where the former owner was eating, as the waitress said he did the first Tuesday of every month.

I made a mental note of the nearby landmarks to check out later in the week when the wind died down. Like the eccentric Bunny Museum. A collection of mid-century homes by modernist architect Gregory Ain. The Queen Anne-style Andrew McNally House.

That evening, as my wife, Dana, and I ate dinner and listened to the wind, we caught the scent of something ominous. Smoke. I walked outside and looked northeast. Eaton Canyon glowed bright orange.

Our instinctive L.A. wildfire protocols kicked in. Leaving Dana's car behind, we put the cat in mine and grabbed whatever we might need for a night away. We saw a few of our neighbors doing the same. But as

"ON THE FOURTH DAY, ON A WEATHER SATELLITE PHOTO, WE FINALLY PICKED OUT OUR LOT. EMPTY."

newcomers we didn't know the local routine, so we escaped down Lake toward the freeway. The road was blocked here and there by uprooted trees. Not branches. Whole trees.

Working her smartphone, Dana landed us a pet-friendly hotel room in Arcadia. But on our arrival the building was pitch-black — no power, no rooms. Lights were on at a hotel next door, so Dana booked a room there instead.

In the lobby, the power flickered, and the computers went down as a woman ahead of Dana at the counter tried in vain to register. A long line of anxious people with dogs on leashes and cats in carriers materialized behind them in the dark. Because of Dana's quick fingers on the smartphone, we grabbed the last available room.

At the end of a fitful night, there was no sunrise, just a lighter shade of gray to the east and the toxic stench of smoke and a coating of ash on every outdoor surface. One night at the hotel became four. Fire trucks with out-of-state logos lined the parking lot. It was still not safe to re-enter our neighborhood, so we spent hours sitting on the bed, phones in hand, searching on various apps for evidence of our house's fate. Maps showed black marks where buildings had been destroyed, but our block had not yet been assessed. So there was hope.

In the elevator, younger and more daring fire refugees shared notes about various back routes to their homes, or whatever was left of them. In the lobby, stunned older folks sat, usually silent, but willing, if asked, to talk about their houses and the generations who had lived there. Most hadn't fled until late on the night of the fire. There had been no evacuation orders until well after midnight, with houses already burning.

We learned later that at least 17 people died in or near their Altadena homes. The toll across town in Pacific Palisades was at least 12.

On the fourth day, on a weather satellite photo, we finally picked out our lot. Empty.

When at last we were allowed to return to the ruined site, we saw one frighteningly wobbly wall of stucco left, and a few pipes. One wooden chair sat in the front yard as if nothing had happened. Everything else was rubble and ash.

Also completely gone were the places where, it turns out, I had been one of the last-ever customers — the hardware store, the restaurant, the cafe. And the places I had planned to see — the Bunny Museum, the historic architecture.

I felt oddly guilty, as if by setting one foot in Altadena, I had caused the entire community to vanish before the other foot came down.

Altadena is a community of layers, like the strata you can see on the walls of the Grand Canyon. Built by grape growers who liked the climate and the freedom from municipal temperance laws, then by Midwesterners headed to tuberculosis sanatoriums and board-and-care homes. Then artsy bohemians, and then Black homebuyers elbowed out of other communities because of discriminatory lending practices. And then a new wave of invigorating or gentrifying (take your pick) young buyers, attracted by the quirkiness, the mutiracial neighborhoods, the relative affordability. As newcomers, we had barely waded into that most recent layer. Even the places we visited in our abbreviated three-day stay in Altadena were outposts of familiar places closer to home. There's still an Amara Cafe in Highland Park, where we can get blueberry muffins. Cindy's in Eagle Rock has the same owners, and much the same menu, as the now-destroyed Fox's.

It wasn't until we had fled to the Arcadia hotel that we met, spoke and commiserated with people from Altadena's deeper, more rooted — yet now tragically uprooted — layers.

We mourned our losses, counted our blessings (two cars, quick fingers on the smartphone, a home to return to in a few months' time) and found a rental in Eagle Rock. Dana's car, the one we'd left behind, weirdly survived intact on the street next to our incinerated house. I drove it away. As I did, I pretended that lost Altadena might rematerialize out of our view, available, Brigadoon-like, to the people who lived there, even if not to short-termers like us. I'd freely trade away the precious things we lost in the fire to make that happen.

But this is Los Angeles, where magical endings are reserved for the movies.

— Robert Greene

↓ A few homes remain after a fire destroyed the neighborhood during the 2025 Eaton Fire. (Photo by Brian Koester / iStock)

FIRST PERSON

UGH!

On making — and fixing — mistakes

IT WAS BACK IN THE MID-'90S, BUT I STILL clearly remember picking up the phone and hearing the seething voice on the other end of the line.

Parts of a story I had written on a raucous event at a downtown building "David" owned were wrong. Though we had spoken, I also used a few details printed in an *L.A. Times* report, assuming they were correct. They weren't, and David let me have it — and I deserved it for blindly trusting another outlet. "Never call me again," he boomed.

He meant it: It would be two years until he would speak with me.

As a journalist I am used to grinding on stories, securing interviews, digging out facts and making sure they're right. But if you spend enough time in the business and work on enough pieces, you'll almost certainly make an honest mistake.

This happens for all kinds of reasons. I don't know anyone who has ever willingly published "fake news," but I know many good journalists

"THE MISTAKE CAUSES THE UPROAR, BUT A COVER-UP CAN TURN A ONE-DAY STORY INTO A CAREER SINKER."

who were juggling four stories at once with deadlines approaching, and I can understand how something gets garbled. I've seen young reporters get snowed by a source with an agenda, or like me with David, succumb to inexperience. These days, few outlets have fact-checking departments.

The goal is always to be truthful and factual, but sometimes the conversation shifts: You got it wrong. How do you handle it?

Ideally with two words: "transparency" and "apology."

I've learned something important from writing about political and other scandals — the mistake causes the uproar, but a cover-up, or making excuses, can turn a one-day story into a career sinker.

After David's verbal beatdown, we printed a correction in the next week's paper, and I mailed him a letter expressing my regret (after all, he wasn't taking my call). During my years as the editor of a weekly newspaper, when a reporter messed up, we acknowledged it in the next issue (or made an online fix — and clearly noted the update). It was always embarrassing, especially when it never should have happened, but I adopted the mindset that the only thing worse than making a mistake is letting it linger.

This is not to equate knowing mistakes happen with being "okay" about it. The fact that I'm writing about David three decades later shows it still sticks in my craw. It's the same with other screw-ups. I remember a lot of great stories I wrote, but I will also never forget the time a typographical public/pubic error made it into print. Cringe.

As a journalist you can get it wrong in other ways — and I've done that, too. I've spent decades writing political columns, often taking colorful shots at local leaders. Usually I'm on point, but I can err in tone. I remember the press aide who, after a piece published, came at me not for the content but my approach. "You're better than that," he wrote in an email. He was right.

Perspective helps. In one satirical column I leveled barbs at a city council member. Media criticism was part of the game, and he knew it, but not until years later, after he and I appeared on a radio show together, did I go back and re-read the piece. I realized that while the column was funny, my hits were egregious. I called him up and apologized for what I had written. He claimed not to remember it.

Even today, I bristle at every mistake. I'll regularly read a story eight to 10 times before filing, but if a piece publishes and a reader points out a typo, I'm furious with myself, wondering how it slipped through.

I also thank the person who lets me know, so that it can be corrected immediately. Hopefully, each error makes me better. David made me feel 3 inches tall, but he did me a favor — never again would I blindly cop a detail. The goal, after all, is to get it right.

— Jon Regardie

NOMA BAR

"A LIGHTER LOOK" — AT THE WORM

Rick Meyer's regularly appearing column takes a lighter look at politics and public affairs around the world. This month: "RFK Jr."

"THEY'RE BLAMING ME!"

"Because you're the worm."

"Yes. In RFK Jr.'s brain. He says I ate part of his brain. And yes, that's true, but there was trouble in there before I ever got a bite. I told Andy Borowitz that I gave it a bad Yelp review. It tasted awful. And his brain is so small! I almost couldn't find it. I'm a tiny worm, and I was cramped in there!"

"Not many people have worms in their brains."

"He thinks he picked me up during a trip through South Asia. A lot of people say I'm the reason he told Fox News last summer, 'I do believe that autism does come from vaccines.' And why, in 2015, he declared, at a screening for an anti-vaccination film, that people get a shot and then 'they have a fever of 103, they go to sleep, and three months later their brain is gone. ... This is a Holocaust.' "

"But none of that is true!"

"Neither are many other things he says, and *the Washington Post*, *the New York Times* and *the New Yorker* make this very clear. People accuse me of being the reason he has said that the coronavirus vaccine, which has saved millions of lives, is the 'deadliest vaccine ever made.' They say I'm the reason he asked the Food and Drug Administration to halt COVID vaccinations during the pandemic. They also say I caused him to declare, as he did on Fox News, that the Department of Agriculture and the FDA 'have an interest in ... mass poisoning the American people.'"

"That's slander."

"Don't blame me! I'm just a worm. He said crazy things before I took a bite of him."

"Thank goodness you didn't take two bites. He was Donald Trump's first and only choice to head the Department of Health and Human Services, which says something wiggly about Trump, too. I mean, this is serious stuff. The department reaches into what *the New Yorker* calls 'virtually every corner of the nation's health-care infrastructure, from messaging on public health and investment in biomedical research to the approval of new drugs and the delivery of medical care.'"

"He's got plenty to handle with all of that, with or without a worm like me."

"The *Times* says Bobby pledged to 'advise all U.S. systems to remove fluoride from public water.' The Post says he suggested that HIV might not cause AIDS, that chemicals in water are changing children's gender identity, that ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine are effective against COVID, and that the 5G high-speed wireless network is used to 'control our behavior.'"

"Even worms know better than that."

"At least some of this happened after you took your bite."

"If you had gone to a Jesuit school, you'd know that blaming me is a fallacy called, in Latin, *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. No, sir! I was not involved in Bobby's foolishness."

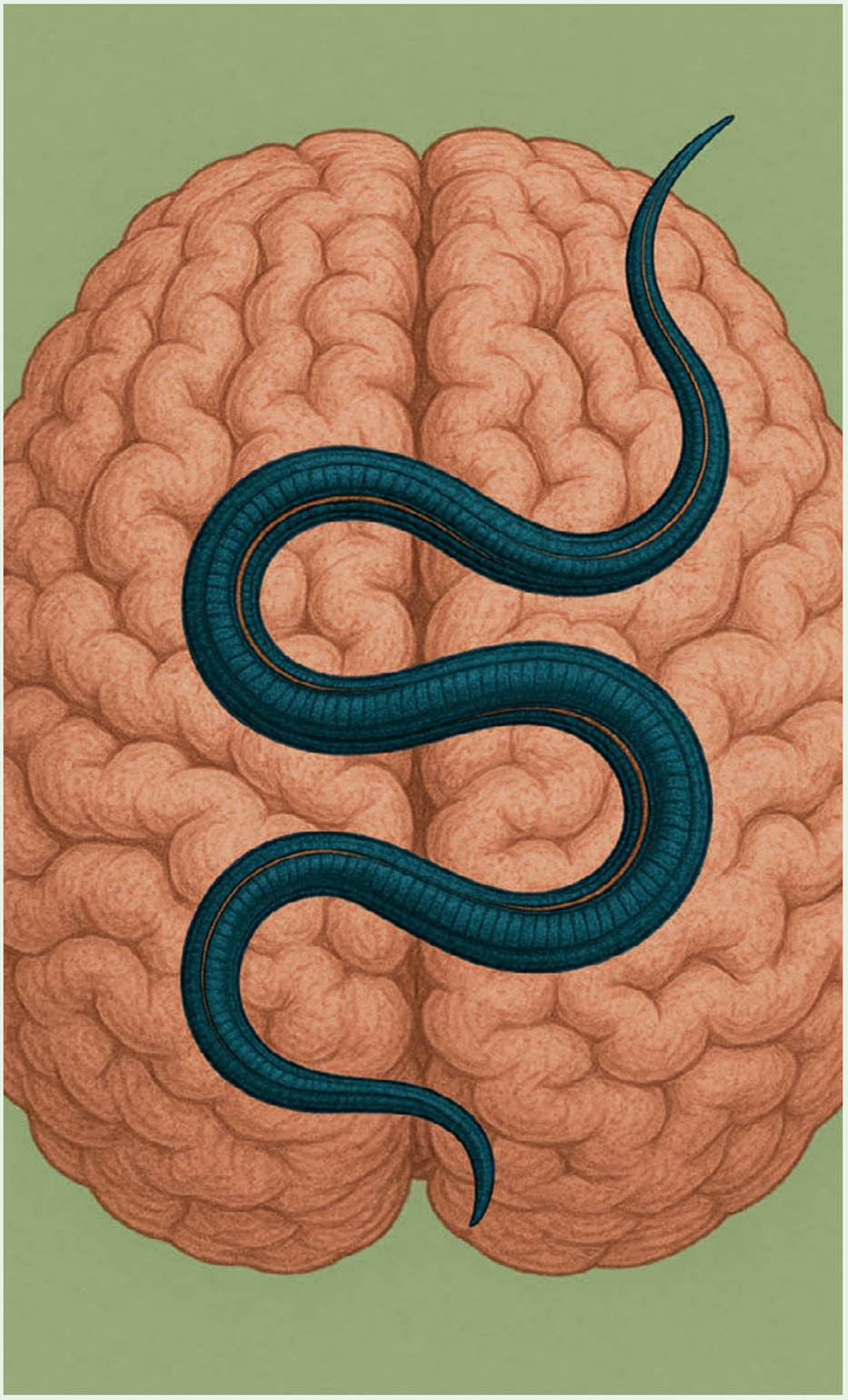
"You mean his dangerous falsehoods."

"Yes. But that's him, not me."

"I don't know. It seems like a strange coincidence that a guy with a worm in his brain has such trouble thinking straight."

"Stuff it! I'm tired of being blamed ... It's so hard being a worm these days!"

— Richard E. Meyer



RENT CONTROL CREATIVE

"DON'T BLAME ME! I'M JUST A WORM."

From foster care to the State Capitol

Assemblymember Isaac Bryan uses his influence for children

WRITTEN BY
MOLLY SELVIN
PHOTOS BY
IRIS SCHNEIDER

ISAAC BRYAN DREW A ROUGH HAND EARLY ON.

Given up at birth by a teenage mother who couldn't care for him, he was raised in foster care. He flunked out of middle school. To get through college, he worked as many as three jobs simultaneously.

Those circumstances gave him a specific understanding of the needs and potential of children and young people in the dependency system. Today, the 33-year-old UCLA graduate is serving his third term in the California Assembly. He has already shepherded significant reforms into state law to improve care and financial support for kids in that system. This year, he's pushing new legislation to further protect children and better prepare them for adulthood.

Bryan's interests range beyond foster care. As chair of the Assembly's Committee on Natural Resources, he muscled oil companies into a deal last year that will ultimately force them to close low-performing wells in the Inglewood Oil Field. Following January's catastrophic wildfires, he and his colleagues are working to protect Californians against future climate-fueled infernos. And he is helping to lead the work to resist Trump Administration efforts to roll back environmental and civil rights protections.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he's a major force in California politics," said UCLA Professor Mark Peterson, one of Bryan's mentors at the Luskin School of Public Affairs. "And maybe beyond."

BRYAN ARRIVED IN SACRAMENTO IN 2021 DETERMINED TO IMPROVE the odds for foster kids.

His foster parents, with whom he remains close, have cared for some 200 children over the years, adopting nine of them, including Bryan.

The family moved often during his early years—from Texas, where Bryan was born, to Florida, back to Texas, then Utah—adding children along the way. They landed in California when Bryan was 12.

His time in foster care was often difficult, but it bonded him to his siblings and foster parents, and it taught him. He saw, for instance, "how being touched by the child welfare system in any capability meant you would struggle in school."

Struggle he did. Bryan attended seven schools, including three high schools. "Middle school was the only school I did start to finish. I needed a 1.0 average, but I couldn't keep it." He was allowed to move ahead anyway.

Other family members have had their hard times as well. One brother was part of the juvenile justice system, another is in state prison, and still another is currently unhoused. Bryan pinpoints the structure of foster care as a big part of the problem.

"Children are not born bad. Parents are not born bad," he said. "I saw how system failures stack on top of one another in a fairly predictable way, and I could imagine a better way."

Since arriving in Sacramento, Bryan has focused on addressing those failures, and eight bills that he has introduced in this area have become law. One measure stops the practice of county foster care agencies using federal survivor benefits intended for children whose parents have died for agency operating costs. Now those benefits must be reserved for the child when he or she ages out of dependency care. Another mandates that court-ordered family services such as parenting classes be evidence-based and work toward reunification. Other laws ensure that counties cannot block reunification simply because parents are too poor to pay court fees or meet other financial obligations.

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA, BRYAN BEGAN TO UNDERSTAND how public policy could change lives. His undergraduate mentor was Michael Polakowski, a former law enforcement officer turned political science professor. Bent on law school, Bryan took Polakowski's classes on criminal justice policy — and began hanging around his office.

Sensing Bryan's interest in the topic, the professor gave him two stacks of extra readings on racism and justice. The first stack focused on the existence of a so-called "superpredator" and "the criminal gene."

"CHILDREN ARE NOT BORN BAD. PARENTS ARE NOT BORN BAD. I SAW HOW SYSTEM FAILURES CAN STACK ON TOP OF ONE ANOTHER IN A FAIRLY PREDICTABLE WAY."
— ASSEMBLYMEMBER ISAAC BRYAN

↑ Bryan with Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass at a February press conference announcing legislation to strengthen the Hollywood film tax credit to lure production back to California.

Bryan read everything and, furious, returned to Polakowski's office.

"My biological father raped my mother," he told the professor. "Does this mean that I have a biological predisposition to commit crime?"

The second pile of readings explored the social determinants of crime—the nature-vs.-nurture argument. Those resonated with Bryan's own experience and that of his family members.

Polakowski "helped me realize that what I cared most about were conditions in the community and the policies that shaped them," Bryan said. "He opened my eyes that you don't have to be a lawyer to shape public policy."

For his part, Polakowski recalled that of the thousands of undergraduates he'd taught over 32 years, "I can honestly say that Isaac Bryan was in the top five in terms of his motivation and what he wanted to achieve."

Once graduated from the University of Arizona, Bryan pursued a master's degree at Luskin and secured a research position with UCLA's Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies. At Luskin, he worked with Professor Laura Abrams, as well as with then-Sen. Holly Mitchell, on legislation mandating that children under 12 years old could no longer be arrested or prosecuted, with a few exceptions. Gov. Jerry Brown signed the measure in 2018.

"I passed my first law as a student," Bryan said.

Mitchell, now a member of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, has remained a friend and confidant.

At the Bunche Center, Bryan explored the impact of high incarceration rates among African American men on their neighborhoods.

When fellow Democrat Sydney Kamlager-Dove, then an Assemblymember, was elected to the state Senate, Bryan won her seat in a special election on a platform that included criminal justice reform. He was 29.

Today, Bryan sports a Lincolnesque beard with a slow smile and attire that leans casual—sport coat over T-shirt.

"To meet Isaac is to be charmed," said UCLA's Peterson. "No one comes away from meeting with him feeling belittled. In this Trumpian era, he's kind of the opposite in terms of the way he behaves and interacts."

He, his wife, and their two Great Danes rent in the Crenshaw corridor, toward the eastern end of an Assembly district that includes Culver City, Ladera Heights, View Park-Windsor Hills, Beverlywood, and Mar Vista. Bryan has moved four times since he was elected, each time heading farther south and east to find affordable housing, he noted.

DESPITE HIS SUCCESSES, BRYAN HAS HAD "SOME SIGNIFICANT DISAP-pointments," noted Mitchell. In August, a long-running effort he supported to provide reparations to African American descendants of people enslaved in the United States failed to clear the State Senate.

Also last year, Bryan was briefly the Assembly majority leader before Speaker Robert Rivas reassigned him as chair of the Natural Resources Committee, a move widely regarded as a demotion.

Bryan paints the shuffle as a lemons-to-lemonade opportunity. "We turned it into a powerhouse committee," he said.

In his first year as chair, he helped forge a deal to shut down the Inglewood Oil Field by 2030. Oil was first discovered at the Baldwin Hills site in 1924 and at its peak, included over 1,600 wells. Spanning approximately 1,000 acres, it remains one of the largest contiguous urban oil fields in the United States.

Prior to the 2030 closing, the deal also requires that the lease funds the

↑ Bryan meets with Flour Shop CEO Ross Harrow at Harrow's Culver City Bakery.

company pays to extract the remaining oil go toward affordable housing and urban greening in adjacent communities that have borne the brunt of pollution from the wells.

Gov. Gavin Newsom signed the bill in September during a ceremony at the oil field. Holding up his cellphone, the governor displayed a photo Bryan texted him from Hawaii, where he and his wife were on their honeymoon, as an apology for missing the event.

The January wildfires and their aftermath have presented an urgent new challenge. Along with Sen. Ben Allen, Bryan is part of an informal legislative working group that is considering a series of fire prevention measures, possibly including tougher vegetation management rules, controlled burns and additional "home hardening" requirements in vulnerable areas.

President Trump's threats to undermine California's historic environmental protections, along with last year's U.S. Supreme Court decision limiting the scope of the federal Clean Water Act, have pushed the Legislature to beef up statewide clean water protections. Additionally, the state has required local jurisdictions to develop their own plans to respond to extreme heat events, a step necessary should California need to request FEMA's help.

The $10 billion bond that California voters authorized last November will help fund these initiatives and other environmental and climate projects, as well as drinking water improvements.

Because many state lawmakers see the Trump administration as a threat beyond environmental issues, shortly after new members were sworn in on December 2, the Legislature preemptively allocated $50 million to the California Department of Justice for ongoing and future legal challenges, a precaution that Bryan enthusiastically supported. A coalition of 19 states has already sued to override Trump's plans to eliminate birthright citizenship and to protect the personal data of Californians.

"We won 70 percent of the cases in the last Trump Administration," Bryan notes, but "we're in for a long four years."

IMPROVING DEPENDENCY CARE REMAINS HIS PRIORITY. AMONG THE bills Bryan introduced early this year are measures to increase funding for children with developmental disabilities and those cared for by relatives. Another would allow parents who are incarcerated to be physically present at proceedings to terminate the parental rights of their child,

With all this attention, are the long-troubled county agencies responsible for these children — including the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services — improving?

Bryan sighs. "Folks are actively working to make improvements, to increase reunification," he said. "But the need is that great.

"We'll always be paddling upstream unless we improve the conditions families are in. We need to look at this through the lens of improving affordable housing, because families that have their basic needs met tend to be able to provide for their children."

Supervisor Mitchell has urged Bryan to see his time in the Assembly as a "sprint" because with California's 12-year term limit to serve in the Legislature, she said, "Your first day on the job, you know your expiration date."

Bryan still has almost eight years. ◤

1

2

THE BURN.

THE LONG WAY BACK.

PHOTOS BY
IRIS SCHNEIDER

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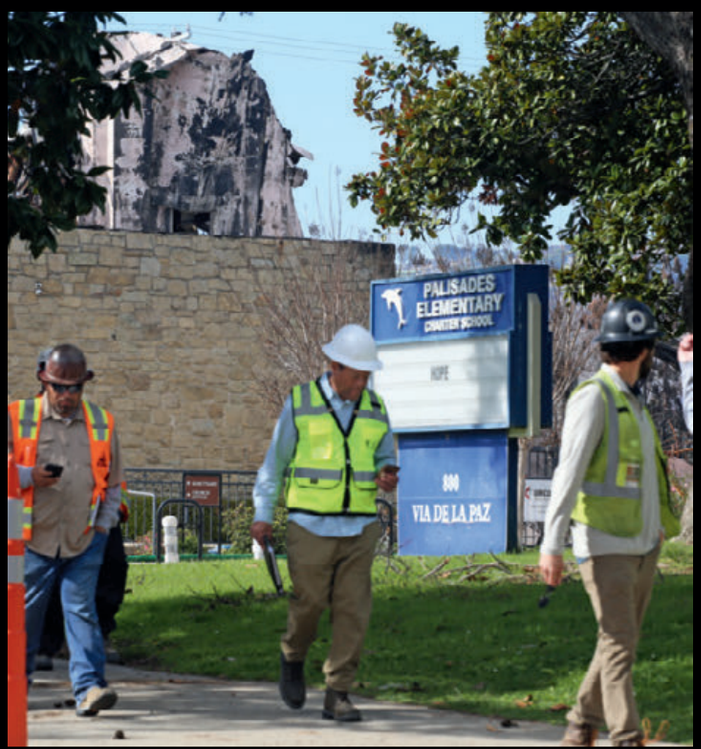
6

(1,2) Homes in the burn zone provide an eerie reminder of lives destroyed by wildfires that swept through Altadena. (3) Utility worker cleans up downed power lines after the fires swept through Altadena. (4) At a donation site that sprung up at the entrance to the burn zone. Among the many donated items, children's clothing, toys, and shoes point to the losses suffered by children in the wildfires. (5,6) Ruins of Palisades Elementary Charter School and a private elementary school are a poignant reminder of what was lost in the wildfires. (7) Construction and demolition experts and engineers survey the damage to Palisades Elementary Charter to assess what is needed to rebuild. (8) A sign with a simple message brings a feeling of optimism to the tight-knit community of the Palisades.

3

4

Fires ignited in Pacific Palisades and Altadena on January 7. Embers strewn on winds that reached 100 mph and barreled across the region from east to west. Those two communities, one in the city of Los Angeles, the other in unincorporated Los Angeles County, were shattered overnight, lives and livelihoods interrupted as if in mid-sentence. In these sets of paired images, *Blueprint* photographer Iris Schneider captured the crest of the calamity and the resolve that will be needed for this region to feel itself again.



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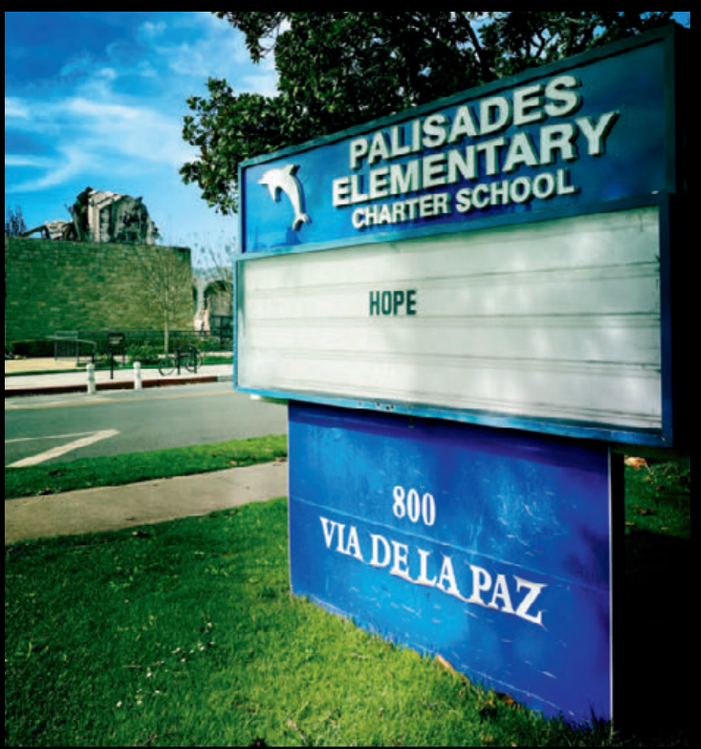
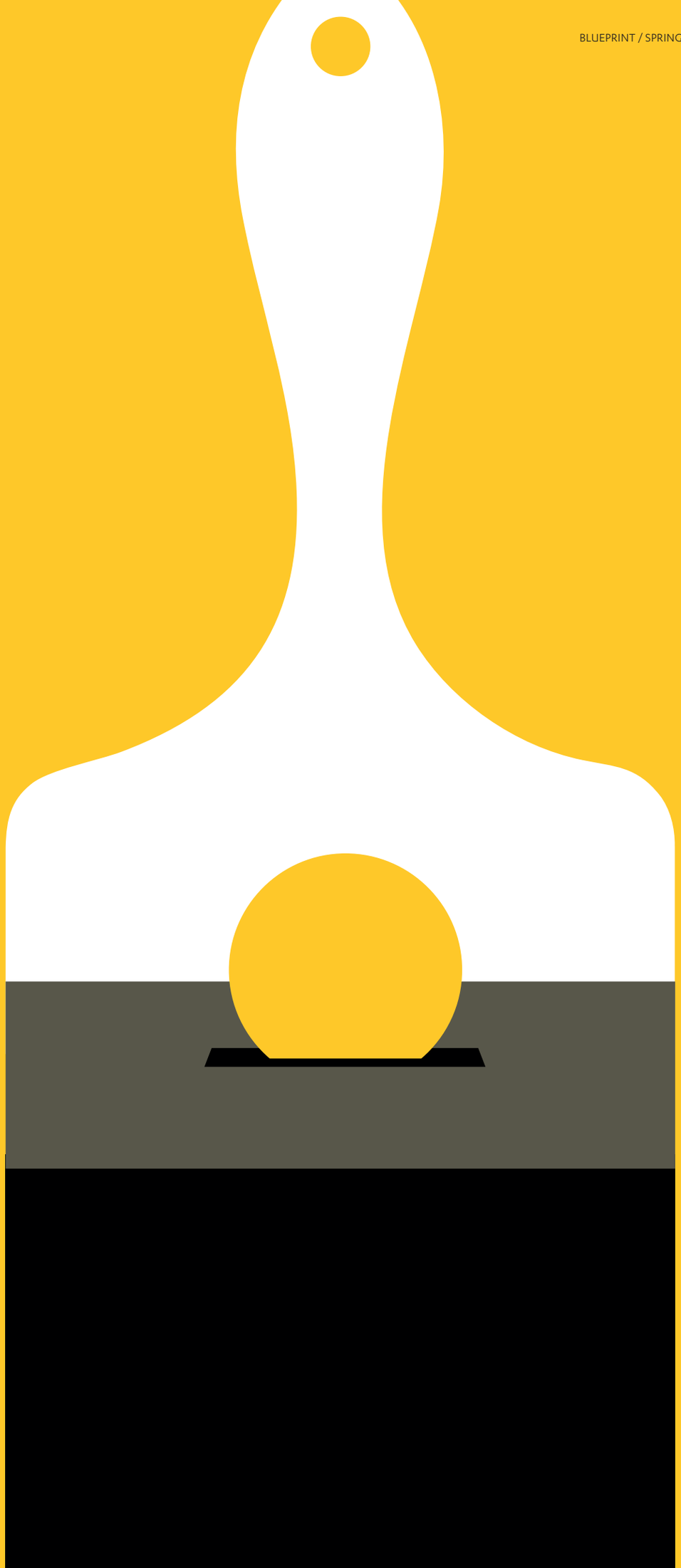


8

Follow the Money

California voters approved arts funding. Where has it gone?

WRITTEN BY
JON REGARDIE



NOMA BAR

IN THE WORLD OF EDUCATION BALLOT MEASURES, WHERE ADS AND MAILERS COMMONLY consist of a teacher standing in a classroom and grimly detailing financial needs, Proposition 28 stood out.

As the 2022 general election approached, celebrities including Katy Perry, Dr. Dre, Issa Rae, John Lithgow and Barbra Streisand were among those championing the measure, initiated by Los Angeles civic leader and former LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner. The star-powered campaign succeeded: 64% of voters said yes to the proposal to guarantee 1% of California's education budget, or about $1 billion annually, for arts education in public schools, with 80% going to hire teachers.

For those on the ground, the potential was enormous.

"It really is a game changer for expanding access to arts for students," said Ricky Abilez, director of policy and advocacy for the nonprofit organization Arts for L.A. "A student can't ever know that there's a creative career waiting for them if they don't have exposure to that creativity."

The rollout began in 2023, with school districts receiving allocations based on student enrollment, and schools with large percentages of low-income learners getting an extra boost. A key was that the new money had to supplement what districts were already spending, rather than supplanting existing dollars. There was a wide berth; the funds could support music and visual arts instruction, but also theater, graphic design, video production and more.

IS PROP. 28 HITTING THE TARGET? THE RESULTS ARE MIXED. LAST SUMMER BEUTNER, A GROUP of school employee unions and arts organizations charged that LAUSD was misspending some of the $77 million it had received. In February, Beutner and a collection of parents sued in Superior Court, alleging that the LAUSD and Supt. Alberto Carvalho were depriving students by not hiring enough teachers and providing misleading information to the state Department of Education. The district countered that it has increased overall arts education spending.

Beutner and his allies say other districts are doing better; they point to Long Beach Unified, which hired 150 arts teachers and aides after receiving $10.7 million in Prop. 28 money.

While LAUSD is in the crosshairs, other districts are struggling to capitalize on Prop. 28 for a variety of reasons. That's a key takeaway in a report by Lindsey Kunisaki, a research and evaluation specialist at the UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture's Visual and Performing Arts Education (VAPAE) program.

ARTS FOR L.A. COMMISSIONED THE REPORT, WHICH KUNISAKI COMPLETED WHILE SERVING as the group's Laura Zucker Fellow for Policy and Research (the fellowship has now ended). Kunisaki told *Blueprint* that a goal was to examine implementation in the early stage. She conducted her research last summer, and the 66-page "Exploring Prop. 28 Implementation and Public Perceptions in Los Angeles County" was released in November.

The report was driven in part, Kunisaki said, by the benefits of arts education — from an impact on social-emotional health to providing some kids a reason to attend school — and how low-income students have historically had less arts exposure than their more affluent peers.

"This opportunity was so important, because it could be a way to close some of those gaps," said Kunisaki, who is also a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University. "It's worthwhile to really look at how Prop. 28 can expand those pathways."

Kunisaki gathered information in multiple ways. She conducted interviews with arts leaders from 10 school districts of various sizes in Los Angeles County. Interviewees were granted anonymity, and their answers to questions were used to analyze how Prop. 28 was being put into play. A second component consisted of 264 people completing a 59-item survey. Their responses to questions evaluated broader public understanding of and involvement with Prop. 28.

"THIS OPPORTUNITY WAS SO IMPORTANT, BECAUSE IT COULD BE A WAY TO CLOSE SOME OF THOSE GAPS."

— LINDSEY KUSINAKI, UCLA RESEARCHER

JACOB WACKERHAUSEN/ISTOCK

> **"WE GET SO EXCITED WHEN NEW FUNDING PASSES, THAT WE FORGET THERE IS A WHOLE PROCESS TO ACTUALLY IMPLEMENTING THAT FUNDING."**
>
> **— RICKY ABILEZ, DIRECTOR OF POLICY AND ADVOCACY FOR ARTS FOR L.A. ORGANIZATION ARTS FOR L.A.**

Although every public-school district in California received Prop. 28 funds, the ability to take advantage of the money varied. Kunisaki classified three districts as taking "Rapid Action," while four were "Building Momentum," and three more were "Waiting to Hire." The districts were given pseudonyms for privacy (e.g. Valley Unified). There was no overall correlations found between size and using Prop. 28 money. For example, two large TK-12 districts made the "Rapid Action" ranking, while two others were in "Waiting to Hire."

Yet there was a through-line, according to Kunisaki, and it depended on the overall commitment to arts education. The best-performing districts, she said, had someone in a leadership role who valued and deeply understood the arts sector.

"The main commonality was that they had a strong and clear strategic vision for the place of the arts in their districts," Kunisaki said. Such a launch point, she said, "gave them a starting point they could build on."

Districts that fared better, she added, also had some kind of arts advisory council that engaged with different constituencies, including parents and community partners. If these existed before Prop. 28, even better.

"I think having those things in place from the get-go put these districts in a really good position to envision their ideal arts education landscape," she said. "Then once the Prop. 28 funds came in, they were able to hit the ground running."

WHILE BEING PREPARED HELPED SCHOOL DISTRICTS, VARIOUS HURDLES COULD BE DIFFI- cult to clear, particularly those involving space or scheduling. Kunisaki's report said that, even after Prop. 28 funds arrived, a school literally might not have a room for a photo lab, or a place on campus to hold a dance class. In an elementary school, a teacher could have trouble squeezing in arts instruction amid all the other subjects that had to be taught. The problem could be exacerbated if test scores were low.

Then there was staffing. "In particularly short supply are certificated arts teachers," the report said. Instructors who are certificated, it said, are authorized to interact with students independently; non-certificated instructors require supervision.

This could lead to further issues, with some districts competing for a limited pool of qualified teachers. The report detailed instances where a district was ready to hire, but someone who had been scheduled for an interview never showed up. This delayed implementation.

Given the numerous challenges, the report offered a hefty set of recommendations. Kunisaki suggested growing the teaching pool, in part by making it easier and more affordable for working artists to receive teaching credentials.

The report recommended that philanthropic organizations subsidize credential or certificate programs, which would help working artists who have to put paid gigs on a back burner while they complete the lengthy process.

There is also a role, Kunisaki said, for UCLA and other institutions.

"We have been committed to this question of how can we prepare these great artists who are coming out of UCLA to bring their creativity and their skills into the classroom," Kunisaki said. "There is a need for specifically certificated staff, and that's something that we in the VAPAE program are thinking about and working with. ... Statewide, we are all working together to try to figure out how we can meet this need in a hurry."

While the challenges are broad, the work is not occurring in a vacuum. Especially if a district has a full arts strategy, Kunisaki said, Prop. 28 funds can be "braided" with other arts-oriented financial streams, as well as private money.

"Prop. 28 is one piece of a much larger puzzle," she said.

Additional benefits could come from involving more people. The report's public-perception component found that, while many survey respondents were aware of Prop. 28 and they valued arts education, few felt involved or engaged with its implementation in local schools.

A need for transparency about how funds were being spent was also cited.

ALTHOUGH THE REPORT SHINED A LIGHT ON WHAT WAS HAPPENING WITH PROP. 28, KUNISAKI acknowledged the limits of her work. They included a small sample of interviewees and, among survey respondents, a disproportionate number of highly educated, older white females.

The study, she said, provided "a snapshot of the early, early days." Abilez said the snapshot had merit, and that the report influenced Arts for L.A.'s recently released policy and advocacy agenda. The organization is calling for subsidizing credentialing, and is trying to help community-based organizations better navigate Prop. 28.

The overall situation is a reminder, Abilez said, of something seen time and again with ballot measures: Getting approval is just step one.

"I think we get so excited when new funding passes," Abilez said, "that we forget there is a whole process to actually implementing that funding."

In this case, once the money rolls, it's kids who benefit. ◤

A Life of Helping Children

Guiding young people through adversity

WRITTEN BY
JEAN MERL

AT THE CORE OF PEDIATRICIAN ELIZABETH S. Barnert's consequential career as a medical doctor, researcher, teacher, author and children's advocate lies an overarching drive to improve the lives of youngsters caught in daunting circumstances.

While still in medical school, Barnert, now an associate professor of pediatrics at UCLA's Geffen School of Medicine, traveled to El Salvador to help reunite families whose children had been ripped away during that country's 12-year civil war. After earning her M.D. and other advanced degrees, she came to UCLA on a research fellowship in 2012 and joined the faculty in 2014.

Since then, Barnert has helped legislators form new laws and policies regarding kids in the justice system. She is the physician for youngsters held at Los Angeles County's juvenile halls or, more typically, living at home under court supervision. Her research on youths in the justice system probes ways to improve their chances of overcoming long odds to thrive.

During a recent interview in her office at UCLA's Marion Davies Children's Clinic, Barnert said her guiding principle has been that "all children should receive the support they need to be healthy and thrive." And that includes those who have been especially marginalized and challenged by involvement in the juvenile legal system, severe family dysfunction or separation, mental illness, substance abuse or sexual exploitation.

BORN IN LOS ANGELES, BARNERT WAS RAISED in a comfortable suburb on the city's Westside by her psychiatrist father and her Cuban-born mother, a counselor at a local public high school. Her parents' commitment to education and social justice helped set their daughter on her career path.

"I care a lot about social justice and so I found that I was attracted to where the most injustices are and where the most vulnerabilities lie," Barnert said. "And so that led me to doing research with kids in the juvenile legal system, and then I sort of stayed in that research area."

Although the situations she comes across can be challenging and sad, Barnert said she finds hope and inspiration from knowing she can make a difference.

"Being in the juvenile legal system is a very difficult situation, but at the same time, it's a system that's based on laws. So if you can change the laws, you can improve the system," she said. "It's actually much more flexible than you realize."

To that end, she values her work on several boards and commissions, especially as chair of the Juvenile Health Committee of the National Commission on Correctional Health Care.

In 2005, while enrolled in the UC Berkeley-UC San Francisco Joint Medical Program, Barnert went to El Savador to help find children of families torn apart during that country's civil war, which raged from 1980 to 1992. Her work and research over four years with a Salvadoran nonprofit led to a book, *Reunion*, published in 2023 by the University of California Press to glowing reviews. All proceeds are donated to the nonprofit that Barnert worked with.

"Children have a very natural and healthy response to fear for their lives."
— Elizabeth Barnert

RENT CONTROL CREATIVE

SOLSTOCK/ISTOCK

> **"The philosophy is that giving people a small amount of money helps them get back on their feet. It helps them meet basic needs so they can pay rent, go to school and not be on the streets."**
> — Elizabeth Barnert

AT UCLA, BARNERT FOCUSES ON RESEARCH that has guided reforms aimed at providing more effective treatment of youngsters in the legal system. That work led to roles advising Congress and the state Legislature on juvenile justice policy. She helped secure passage of several laws in California, including one that required formal training for police officers working on cases involving sexual exploitation of children. Working closely with Laura Abrams, a professor of social welfare in UCLA's Luskin School of Public Affairs, Barnert helped California pass a law that prevents children under age 12 from being prosecuted as adults (except in cases of homicide and forcible rape).

Barnert and Abrams also have teamed up on other research projects. They recently completed a study with Los Angeles County that conducted research on young people, ages 18 to 24, as they were released from custody. The purpose was to test ways to ease their transition as they adjust to freedom while meeting the challenges of becoming adults. The project, undertaken with an initial group of 2,525 young adults in the county's Whole-Person Care-L.A. Reentry program (WPC Reentry), sought to compare the outcomes of program recipients with those who received no transition services once they were released from custody.

Most participants were male (72.6%), 80.2% were Latino/a or Black and nearly 61% had been homeless. Mental health and substance use disorders were common, while physical health was generally good. The re-entry program links newly released young people to legal, medical, mental health and social support services, as well as jobs, housing and transportation possibilities; it also offers mentoring and empowerment coaching.

Researchers found the study "can facilitate development of age-appropriate reentry policies and programs to support young adults during reentry."

Among them were access to housing, healthcare and mental health services. And Barnert said the study has helped inspire a similar effort at the federal level.

Barnert has a proposal to study a similar program nationally.

"It's been neat to watch the Los Angeles program grow and get implemented and then watch federal law come into effect," Barnert said, "and wonder how that's going to play out at facilities around the country."

Other studies included an assessment of health needs of detained youth with limited justice involvement and the role of parent engagement in overcoming barriers to care for youths returning home after incarceration.

Barnert and Abrams also are working on a promising pilot project with the Anti-Recidivism Coalition of California that tests the effects of providing transition-age youth clients with a basic income supplement of $500-a-month for one year.

"The philosophy is that giving people a small amount of money helps them get back on their feet," Barnert said. "It helps them meet basic needs so they can pay rent, go to school and not be on the streets" while adapting to life back in the larger society.

Not all vulnerable children are from disadvantaged families, as demonstrated by the recent local wildfires that devastated the communities of Altadena and Pacific Palisades. While Barnert has not worked with children affected by those fires, she realizes the events will have a lasting impact on them and their families.

"Children have a very natural and healthy response to fear for their lives," she said, adding that the fear can linger long after the last flames have been extinguished.

"Many children lost their homes, and many children lost their schools and communities. So I think there will be a very lasting effect that will take years" to mitigate, she said.

"On the bright side," she added, "I think that the children will be imbued with a sense of resiliency and a sense of what really matters."

Barnert spends the equivalent of half a day a week seeing patients and has some teaching duties. But most of her time is devoted to research — and to the time-consuming but necessary task of writing applications for grants to support that research.

"Grant writing is good because it really pushes you toward innovation ... but it's not a very efficient way of spending my time," said Barnert, who much prefers doing research and advocacy and interacting with a constantly changing stream of young patients in the legal system.

Barnert says she gets moments when she sees that a patient has made progress toward a better life or left her a poem or note of gratitude. But she doesn't often get the opportunity to work with given patients over time or to see how they progress or to form a long-term relationship with them. And that's a good thing — if it means her patients have moved on from the legal system.

"I don't have continuity, so I don't get to see what happens to them," Barnert said, then added with a small laugh, "I tell them I will be very happy if I don't see them again." ◤

A SENSE OF

PURPOSE

Giving to others is good for the giver

FROM A VERY YOUNG AGE, REECE FONG HAS BEEN GUIDED BY A SENSE OF PURPOSE.

Sure, his stated goal of becoming a doctor has never wavered. But for the 21-year-old UCLA graduate, who benefited from having supportive parents, teachers and members of the community, nurturing young people has always given him purpose.

Whether helping to coach swimmers at the local Boys and Girls Club, tutoring high school students preparing for the SATs, mentoring adopted children from China or spending spare hours at a hospital pediatrics unit, Fong has sought out opportunities that feel meaningful to him.

"To me, volunteering is great, but it's something that I don't think is useful when you just put it on a piece of paper or check off a box," he said. "I was searching for volunteer opportunities that I enjoy a lot but can help people — especially kids."

Fong feels a sense of fulfillment from volunteering because it allows him to have an impact on the children with whom he interacts. "I can go through life, no matter what kind of hardships I'm facing, no matter what difficulties there are," he said, "and still be a beacon of hope and light for other people."

WRITTEN BY
LISA FUNG

NOMA BAR

A RECENT REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL ON Adolescence at UCLA spotlights why developing a sense of purpose is a key element of healthy development in adolescents.

"When people feel a sense of purpose in life, they reap a whole host of benefits," said Andrew Burrow, an associate professor of psychology at Cornell University and a coauthor of the report. "Purposeful people live longer. They have a better physical health profile. It's not just that they live longer, they literally are physically and physiologically healthier. They sleep better. They have a bigger and deeper social network. They're less lonely."

The NSCA report describes purpose as "a self-organizing and forward-looking aim." Other researchers, including Stanford psychologist William Damon, define purpose as "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond the self."

Purpose differs from goals because "goals are terminal. You can accomplish a goal; you can't accomplish a purpose. A purpose is always an aim," Burrow said. "When I accomplish a goal, it's my purpose that tells me what I am going to pursue next. It's the path to get to wherever you're trying to go."

While there has long been research into purpose among adults, there is less about adolescents and purpose. But scholars believe the roots of purpose develop during adolescence.

"Adolescence is such a fascinating time for studying development of purpose, largely because it's such an important time for figuring out who you are and figuring out your identity and, really, what are your values? What are you committed to? What broader aspirations do you have for life?" said Patrick Hill, a professor of psychological and brain sciences at Washington University and a coauthor of the NSCA report. "All of those things go hand in hand with a sense of purpose, or a sense of direction."

Burrow, at Cornell, said exposing youth to opportunities that "they can see, can appreciate and can grapple with" makes it easier for them to navigate toward a prospective aim.

"A majority of people end up feeling purposeful, so this is by no means a rare commodity in the world," he said. "We should talk about purpose, and we should talk about its value and utility in people's lives."

PURPOSE, RESEARCHERS SAY, INVOLVES AN EXCHANGE BETWEEN AN individual and his or her environment. To cultivate purpose, it is important for adolescents to be exposed to diverse opportunities that allow them to explore or discover different paths.

"It's finding things that are meaningful to you — not just things that you might be good at," said Leslie Leve, a professor of counseling psychology and human services at the University of Oregon and a coauthor of the NSCA report. "It doesn't have to have a global impact. It is just something that you find intrinsically meaningful, motivating or interesting that keeps you going, that is forward-looking."

The exposures can come from the young person's community, school, church, friends, family or even from social media. Fong's experience during middle school, as a member of the swim team at the Boys and Girls Club, led him to return to the club years later as a volunteer assistant coach. At school, he watched how his math and history teachers engaged with and supported students, then followed that path as he began tutoring.

Sometimes chance encounters trigger purpose, said Leve. "Perhaps you're at the library, and there's a performance going on in the courtyard, which sparks an interest in singing, or drama, or something that the person didn't even know was there."

THE NSCA REPORT ACKNOWLEDGES THAT SOME YOUTHS WHO ARE part of underserved or marginalized communities may face challenges that make it difficult to explore and engage in their desired purpose. "The adolescents who face the most challenges cultivating purpose," the report says, "are also among those who could benefit from it the most.

"Youth in poverty who have a greater sense of purpose are less likely to engage in negative behavior that can be associated with the stresses of poverty," the report says. A sense of purpose can limit the negative consequences of racism. That is why the cultivation of purpose is so important, but also why it is crucial to create opportunities for marginalized groups.

"We could all have a sense of purpose in lots of different areas, but if we're only exposed to this little sliver of opportunity in life, maybe what would have resonated is not in that sliver," Leve said. "The goal is to open that window

"WE SHOULD TALK AND WE SHOULD VALUE AND UTILITY

— ANDREW BURROW, CORNELL UNIVERSITY

and make as many exposures to different kinds of things that a person could be interested in."

Despite the severe headwinds some may face, said Burrow, the associate professor at Cornell, there are times when the challenges that come from marginalization can actually spark the pursuit of purpose. "We know that young people and people who've experienced marginalization oftentimes end up feeling purposeful."

Hill, the professor of psychological and brain sciences at Washington University, said researchers have codified purpose into five broad domains: financial occupational purpose, pro-social purpose, creative purpose, personal recognition purpose and activist purpose.

With a financial occupational purpose, people strive toward success at work or making a difference in their occupational field, Hill said. Pro-social purpose involves helping one's community or helping others in need. "This is where a lot of environmental aims often fit, such as striving toward combating climate change and promoting environment health."

People with a creative purpose, or a creative orientation, strive toward producing literature, visual arts or music. "It's often tinged with other themes," Hill said. "We hear from artists who might be using their art for promoting their community, for promoting social justice initiatives or other community initiatives."

Less common, Hill said, is personal recognition purpose, in which someone is striving to gain recognition. "It's not as much, 'I need to be honored or awarded.' It's, 'I like being recognized by my colleagues. I like being recognized for the work I do.'"

Finally, there is activist purpose, where people have aims related to social change and social movements.

"None of these things are necessarily in contrast to one another, and some themes often work hand in hand," Hill said. "But those are the five broad categories we've heard from people when we ask them this big, daunting question: 'What is your purpose?'"

YOUNG PEOPLE, THE NSCA REPORT EMPHASIZES, ARE PARTICULARLY motivated to pursue a sense of purpose when facing societal or global challenges, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic, environmental issues or situations that might put their mental health at risk.

"When adolescents have anxiety about climate change, this can, in many cases, promote their feelings of purpose related to protecting the planet," the report says. "Ultimately, youth want to take actions to address a global threat."

For adolescents who are especially committed to helping others, purpose is associated with greater personal growth and integrity over time. And the benefits to mental health cannot be overstated, researchers said.

"If you have a sense of purpose, it can help you through those tough times when something bad or unfortunate happens in your life," Leve said. "It gives you this protective factor — a buffer that can be protective against depression and anxiety."

THE REPORT COMES AT A TIME WHEN RESEARCH INTO ADOLESCENTS is growing and maturing.

"It's really an interesting moment for adolescents. There's national interest in this; there's international interest in this," said Andrew Fuligni, co-executive director of the UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent, which houses the NSCA. "We want to change how folks think about adolescence and understand how adolescence presents us with an opportunity to learn how we can best support and invest in our young people, so they can make a successful transition into adulthood."

The NSCA report shows ways that adults can help to cultivate purpose in adolescents, including creating equitable and inclusive educational, extracurricular and vocational opportunities, and providing emotional support for youth as they try — and sometimes fail — at new things.

For their part, youths can cultivate purpose in a number of ways, such as taking advantage of opportunities in the community, at school, online and through friends and family; exploring a variety of activities to discover new interests; and volunteering to see what types of purposeful work feel the most meaningful.

"There are no three easy steps to purpose," Hill said. "There is no single interest that is more linked to purpose than the others. It's a very individual process — everybody is going to have a unique journey. Purpose is very much a lifelong journey." ◤

ABOUT *PURPOSE*, TALK ABOUT ITS IN PEOPLE'S LIVES."

When Trauma Persists

New research to identify and respond to childhood stress

SHANNON THYNE'S LITTLE BROTHER COULD BARELY WALK WHEN SHE MET HIM.

At just 2 years old, his legs trembled beneath him — unsteady from an early life confined to a crib.

He showed other signs of a difficult infancy. He was accustomed to talking to himself, a habit born from loneliness, with a father behind bars and a mother battling addiction. He ate every meal as if it were his last, stuffing himself until his stomach revolted.

Thyne was just a fourth grader when her parents adopted her brother from the Los Angeles County foster care system. She understood, even then, that her brother had been shaped by something invisible yet deeply rooted.

It would take decades for science to catch up to what Thyne sensed: Childhood adversity imprints itself on the body. And it does not fade easily or quickly.

Thyne's mother, a teacher at the time, built her son's world from the ground up. She created structured routines to nurture a sense of consistency. She taught him how to eat in a regulated manner. She enrolled him in piano lessons to develop his fine motor skills. She enforced a disciplined bedtime routine to bring order to his restless nights.

Years later, Thyne took that knowledge from her childhood home into the heart of medicine. Today, serving at the helm of trauma-informed pediatric care in Los Angeles, she spearheads efforts to reimagine the way healthcare providers identify and respond to childhood adversity.

At the core of that mission is UCAAN — the UCLA/UCSF ACEs Aware Family Resilience Network — a program that integrates a screening system known as "Adverse Childhood Experiences" or ACEs. Healthcare providers screen for ACEs to assess exposure to potentially traumatic events in a child's life. ACEs are broadly categorized into three groups: abuse, neglect and household challenges. By identifying experiences early, doctors can work toward providing patients with adequate resources to mitigate long-term health risks associated with childhood adversity.

The ultimate goal? To make trauma and mental health as much a part of children's medical records as their blood pressure and weight.

"When I went to my doctor, she had me do my diabetes screen, my cholesterol screen, my blood pressure screen, my mammogram," Thyne said. "And hopefully — and she does — she checks in on my mental health and my social safety. She asks me if I'm in a safe relationship, if I have sexual safety, if I have all those things. And ACEs is one way to do that, and it's a way that's evidence-based."

A NATIVE OF LOS ANGELES, THYNE INITIALLY SET OUT TO STUDY PSYCHOLOGY AT Yale University. But studying abroad in France in her junior year during the AIDS epidemic convinced her to switch her major to biology. She attended medical school at Brown University and completed her residency at the University of California, San Francisco. There, she turned her work toward the use of medicine to address trauma.

The ultimate goal? To make trauma and mental health as much a part of children's medical records as their blood pressure and weight.

WRITTEN BY
IRA GORAWARA

JESSICA PONS

"People have come to recognize that healthcare is more than shots and medication."
— Shannon Thyne

And now, she's making evidence-based, trauma-informed care a pillar of pediatrics. She is the chief of pediatrics at Olive View-UCLA Medical Center, and the director of pediatrics for the L.A. County Department of Health Services.

Her approach starts with the observation that childhood trauma can rewire bodies as much as it can sculpt minds. The scars of early-life adversity often run deeper than memory — silently but profoundly altering the body, raising the risk of illness and stealing years before they're lived.

"People have come to recognize that healthcare is more than shots and medication," Thyne said. "Not only does stress or toxic stress ... impact your psychosocial health, like make you more anxious or more likely to have substance use disorder, it [also] actually increases your chances of dying from heart disease, getting diabetes, having asthma flares."

The ACEs screening process involves patients answering a questionnaire to generate an ACE score, which acts as a medical roadmap. It is indicative of a child's exposure to childhood adversity, with a higher score signaling greater health risks. Pediatricians then use scores to connect families with the right support, helping break cycles of trauma before they take root.

UCAAN operates on the notion that primary care providers are well-positioned to intervene. Pediatricians, after all, see children from infancy through adolescence, often forming some of the most stable relationships in a child's life. If they can identify children with high ACEs early, they can connect families to services that buffer the effects of toxic stress — before they become chronic.

Nadine Burke Harris, in partnership with the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS), pioneered an initiative in 2021 — the first of its kind — to screen for childhood trauma and treat toxic stress at its root.

Medi-Cal providers trained under the ACEs Aware initiative receive a $29 reimbursement per screening — funded through Medi-Cal, which is supported by both state and federal contributions. And through UCAAN, California has screened more than 4 million patients for ACEs, providing critical data on the prevalence of childhood adversity.

But while pediatrics lead the way in trauma-informed care, adult medicine is catching up. UCSF's Dr. Edward Machtinger — co-principal investigator of UCAAN alongside Thyne — said internists play an indispensable role in rupturing the generational cycle of trauma by healing caregivers.

"Internists have the most powerful role in the healthcare system to reduce childhood trauma by helping adult parents and caregivers heal from the impacts of their own trauma, like substance use and mental illness," Machtinger said, "and, in that way, interrupt generational cycles of trauma."

As the program elicits more and more information and is embraced more widely by the medical community, supporters have set their sights on social transformation.

"We continue making progress toward our goal of cutting ACEs and toxic stress by half in a generation," Harris, a former California surgeon general, said after enacting Senate Bill 428, which expanded coverage for ACEs screening.

ASKED WHICH UCAAN PROGRAM HAS MADE THE BIGGEST IMPACT ON HER, THYNE did not hesitate: SHARK, she said.

SHARK — Strong, Healthy and Resilient Kids — redefines care for children facing trauma and complex health challenges. By integrating pediatricians, psychiatrists, physical therapists and social workers, the grassroots program attempts to build individualized support systems, whether through ADHD management, anxiety-reducing meditation programs or in-home visits that connect families with essential resources.

Employed at Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center in Downey, SHARK relies on the full range of access points and services. Patients can connect using virtual visits but also can receive hands-on support through after-school programs and special education resources. It starts by asking doctors to think differently about a child's issues.

"One of the best ways I have found is to move from asking yourself what's wrong with somebody," Machtinger said, "to asking what happened to them."

From there, the goal is to secure the right help. "Say I have a kid who's got pretty bad anxiety, and maybe a little ADHD, I can refer them to SHARK. We'll see them for a virtual visit and say, 'Oh, wow, you've got a lot going on. Let me send a community health worker to your house, and we'll help you get set up with food boxes,'" Thyne said. "And, 'Oh, man, your ADHD is really acting up, let's help you find a psychiatrist that can give you your medications.' And 'Oh, your brother has down syndrome?' Okay, well, let's refer him to TASK (Treatment Advocates for Special Kids) so that we can make sure he gets all of his school accommodations."

"We don't want to protect kids from the truth, but we also need to help them figure out how to feel safe."
— Shannon Thyne

One particularly successful pilot project involved an online meditation program for children with anxiety and depression. After 10 virtual sessions, children saw measurable improvements in their GAD-7 — an anxiety score — and their PHQ-9, a depression score.

"Someone gets screened for ACEs, someone ends up in a specialized program because after their screen for ACEs, someone said they had anxiety and depression, and that specialized program SHARK said, 'Maybe you'd benefit from this program that we found in the community.' They enroll them in that, then — back to the academics — they investigate that, and the data says they got better," Thyne said.

FIRES THAT TORE ACROSS SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA IN JANUARY SEEPED INTO every corner of children's lives. Ash settled on textbooks, smoke curled into classrooms, and evacuation orders turned homework and recess into an afterthought.

Some children watched from car windows as flames consumed the only world they knew — their routines and sense of safety dissolving in smoke — and others lost the simple certainty of a safe place to sleep. The scent of burning brush will cling to their clothes long after flames died down.

That is trauma at its most basic.

"It's a great example of another ACE," Thyne said. "Kids do really well with routines and normalcy, and it's going to be a long time until they get to routines and normalcy. Kids are really influenced by the mental health of their caregivers, so for caregivers — even though it's not an ACE for an adult because ACEs are for kids — it is a lot when your parents experience something like this.

"We don't want to protect kids from the truth, but we also need to help them figure out how to feel safe."

Thyne emphasized that care isn't a one-size-fits-all. A UCLA student grappling with fears of air quality or an upcoming exam demands different support than a child in a small town who's been displaced from home and school.

UCAAN's mission in all of this is to reframe how we view trauma and offer support tailored to individuals based on their own experiences.

"As you can tell, I love my job. At the end of the day, one of my favorite things is just to sit on the floor in a patient room, watching a kid learn how to walk," Thyne said. "Those things are still super fun. But when you also say, 'Oh, I helped you get your wheelchair ramp for your mom, who has multiple sclerosis, and we helped get you better housing, and that's going to make everyone's mental health better.'

"Those things," she added, "are a huge part of it, too." ◤

DOUBLE DAMAGE

UCLA Team to Study Foster Youth Who Endured Firestorms

MONTHS AFTER THE JANUARY WILDFIRES WERE EXTINGUISHED, THE devastation remains widespread: There are families who lost a home or even a loved one; children whose school burned; business owners whose life's work literally went up in flames; workers whose income disappeared instantly.

Tyrone Howard recognizes the gravity of these and other losses. But the professor at the UCLA School of Education & Information Studies (SEIS) also sees the situation through another lens.

"In a lot of ways, that's a microcosm of what youth in foster care deal with on a regular basis," said Howard, who is also co-director of the Pritzker Center for Strengthening Children and Families.

That's not simply a pointed comparison — it's also the seed of a new project where Howard is the principal investigator. In March, he and a Pritzker Center team secured funding to examine the disaster's impact on those in the child welfare system. "The Aftermath of the Eaton Fire: Foster Care and Education Disrupted" is scheduled for completion in the fall.

Taylor Dudley, executive director of the Pritzker Center and a leader on the project, said there were a couple spurs: SEIS Dean Christina Christie issued a request for research proposals; and the UCLA Bunche Center published a brief examining the Eaton Fire's disproportionate impact on the Black population in Altadena (West Altadena in particular was a long-standing hub of African-American life in Southern California).

Dudley told *Blueprint* she approached Howard with a suggestion: "I think we should layer education issues on top of this. He said, 'Let's do it.'" They contacted leaders of the L.A. County Department of Children and Family Services, who agreed on the need for this kind of research.

South L.A. and the Antelope Valley have higher concentrations of youth in foster care, but according to the project proposal, the DCFS estimates that 500 families with active child welfare cases were affected by the fires. Dudley said two group homes in Altadena burned. Five schools were damaged or destroyed.

> **"These fires, their devastation, their displacement, are significant, and compound the trauma that our kids have already faced."**
> — Taylor Dudley, executive director of the Pritzker Center

The upheaval of these children's lives was now compounded by catastrophe.

"When a child is removed from their home and separated from their parents, or placed in the child welfare system, that's a separation and a trauma that we know impacts children for a lifetime," Dudley said. "We also know that these fires, their devastation, their displacement, are significant, and compound the trauma that our kids have already faced."

The project will involve components such as mapping and analyzing U.S. Census data. That, said Howard, will help researchers determine such things as the percentage of young people in the fire areas who were in foster care.

"The map will allow us to get some geographic patterns, trends, and really see if these young people who were already in care are at even more risk," he said, because of the fact that they don't have proximity to certain kinds of resources."

The concern is high. Dudley pointed to research conducted after the 2018 Camp Fire in Paradise, Calif., showing high educational impacts for children facing social vulnerabilities.

The Pritzker Center project expects to produce a report that will include recommendations on how to serve area children in foster care and protect their educational success. Plans call for a public event including DCFS staff and county leaders.

Howard also sees the potential for a longer-term impact, one recognizing that fires and other disasters will likely occur more frequently.

"There are close to 30,000 people in foster care in Los Angeles County, and those placements are always very precarious," he said. "All it takes is the slightest sort of occurrence that can cause a major disruption in a child's life once again."

That, he adds, is why project leaders want to hear from the families impacted by the Eaton Fire, and to learn what they need most. Is it emotional support, he asked. Academic or psychological support?

"We want to get a picture firsthand of what's going on," Howard said, "and then hear from those most affected by what they need at this point, so it can inform us for future unfortunate tragedies."

WRITTEN BY
JON REGARDIE


NOMA BAR

BLUEPRINT
SPECIAL
REPORT
A Closer Look

Special Report: The Case of CASA

On Race and Justice in the Foster Care System

WRITTEN BY
ROBERT GREENE

A JUVENILE COURT JUDGE IN Seattle had a sinking feeling that he never had enough information to support his daily life-altering decisions about children and their families. So one day in 1977 he asked his bailiff to gather some community leaders to recruit volunteers to spend time with the kids and their parents, report facts that the lawyers and social workers might have missed and recommend whether the court ought to remove the kids from their homes and send them to foster care.

That was the birth of the CASA movement — CASA for Court-Appointed Special Advocates, referring (confusingly) both to the now more than 1,000 programs across the nation that train and supervise volunteer child advocates, and to the approximately 80,000 volunteers themselves.

CASA programs are loved and disparaged, respected and reviled.

Advocates (unpaid in Los Angeles and most other jurisdictions, but compensated in a few) believe they have an opportunity to make a real difference in a child's life. Numerous books have been written about dangers kids faced from their parents, or judges, or the entire child welfare system, until dedicated advocates averted disaster by standing up in court for their young charges.

Critics paint well-meaning volunteers as clueless amateurs, generally White and well-to-do, who blunder into strangers' personal lives with little understanding of the structural racism that makes state and local child protection agencies far more likely to investigate and break up Black and Native American families than others, and far more likely to see loving parents as abusive or neglectful because their poverty leaves them with inadequate housing, nutrition, medical care and mental healthcare.

Put another way, critics charge that CASA volunteers do exactly what the rest of the system does: police and punish families for being poor and Black or Native American, instead of providing the services needed to keep families together.

BLACK KIDS MAKE UP ONLY about 7% of Los Angeles County's children but nearly a quarter of all foster youths. One 2021 study estimated that 58% of the county's Black children will be reported or investigated for suspected parental abuse or neglect by their 18th birthday.

Charity Chandler-Cole did not need a study to alert her to the injustices of the child welfare system. She wrote a book about her experience as a Black teenager growing up in Los Angeles in the early 2000s, about a lawyer unwilling to fight for her, a judge uninterested in helping her, becoming a "dual status youth" in both foster care and the juvenile justice system, being groomed and sex-trafficked by adults at her group foster home, leaving the system only to live in a storage unit, on couches and on a park bench.

She entitled her book "Stranger Danger" to describe all of the supposedly responsible adults who ought to have encouraged and protected her, but who instead exploited and abused her.

"I wish I would have had a CASA," Chandler-Cole told about 20 people gathered at the Edmund D. Edelman Courthouse in Monterey Park on a rainy February day, just before they took their oaths as members of the latest class of CASA/Los Angeles volunteers.

"Would I have been taken out of my group home in the middle of the night if my CASA would be checking on me tomorrow?" she asked. "Would I have

↑ Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer Estephanie (right) with the young person she supports, Yianina (left). (Photo by Peter Valli)

fallen behind in my education, had to do 12th grade over because no one was keeping track of my educational records, no one was keeping track of my medical records, my health?"

But back in 2021, amid the "racial reckoning" that followed the police murder of George Floyd, when the CEO of CASA asked her to consider leading the organization, Chandler-Cole's response at first was "Hell, no."

"I didn't want to be aligned with a 'White savior' organization that wanted to save these poor little Black and brown kids from their 'awful, predatory parents,'" she said.

She reconsidered, and is now the first Black person and the first former foster child to lead CASA/LA as its chief executive officer.

So is Chandler-Cole, 38, now one of the CASA fans, because of an advocate's purported ability to make sure the system works in the child's favor? Or still one of the critics, because CASA is part of a racist, exploitive and cruelly hypocritical child welfare system?

She's both. She proudly describes the organization she leads as the "rebel child" of the national network of CASAs because of its own racial reckoning and consequently its work to diminish the disproportionate impact on Black and Native American families and reduce the total number of child removals.

But the era of racial reckoning suddenly feels like ancient history. President Trump has branded diversity, equity and inclusion as "tyranny" and "discrimination." Foster care is generally run at the state level, and in California is largely run by counties, but now-threatened federal funding plays an essential role, according to Taylor Dudley, executive director of the UCLA Pritzker Center for Strengthening Children and Families.

"Federal funding flows through healthcare, mental health, social services," Dudley said. "It is fundamental to families living in poverty," and whose children consequently are vulnerable to investigation and removal due to alleged neglect.

Pritzker Co-Director Tyrone C. Howard noted that changes in federal policy could jeopardize collection of race data. "It's possible that we won't know who is over- or under-represented in the child welfare system," he said, making it difficult to identify and correct problems.

"'I DIDN'T WANT TO BE ALIGNED WITH A 'WHITE SAVIOR' ORGANIZATION THAT WANTED TO SAVE THESE POOR LITTLE BLACK AND BROWN KIDS FROM THEIR 'AWFUL, PREDATORY PARENTS.'"
—Charity Chandler-Cole, CEO of CASA/LA

↑ Charity Chandler-Cole, CEO of CASA/LA in downtown Los Angeles. (Photo by Leroy Hamilton)

CASA/LA WAS ONCE FUNDED BY the Superior Court but is now independent and privately funded, operating in cooperation with the court under a memorandum of understanding. It is affiliated, somewhat loosely, with other CASAs around the state and nation.

Wendelyn Julien became CASA/LA's CEO in 2017 and brought with her an antiracist, social-justice ethic that began to change the organization. She sat on the Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families alongside Chandler-Cole, who was serving as national director of contracts administration with the AIDS Healthcare Foundation and was the founder and chief executive of a consulting firm. Julien's commission colleague was also a Black former foster child, and all of that together, along with Chandler-Cole's questioning nature and fighting spirit, made Julien believe she was the right person to succeed her.

Not everyone was happy when Chandler-Cole got the job and began a series of monthly virtual fireside chats at which she talked about race and racism, immigration, and the particular needs of — and structural discrimination against — LGBTQ-plus kids and parents. Some volunteers and board members told her that her approach was scaring people. Some

quit. One said she was triggered every time the new CEO used the words "social justice" or "racial justice." Some chafed at her insistence that, despite the typical CASA job description, they weren't actually there to advocate for abused kids — because 88% of kids in the system were not abused but rather suffered what was interpreted by social workers or judges as neglect because of their parents' poverty.

The larger child welfare system in California was undergoing a similar self-examination. State laws and protocols now promote family reunification and prefer housing children with families — their parents, when possible, or extended family if not, and individual foster families as a last resort — rather than institutions.

Brandon Nichols, director of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, said the organization had discussions of racial disproportionality going back 15 years.

Nichols also noted that the child welfare system has historically been bad at sharing power, which created tension between social workers and CASA volunteers. He said it didn't help that much of the stereotype about volunteers rang true: "retirees looking to do some service, but who didn't have the skill set and were not professional in this world."

Chandler-Cole instilled not just a better understanding of the role of race in the child welfare system, Nichols said, but also a level of professionalism.

But Chandler-Cole is wary of merely creating a more professional CASA that is absorbed into and sustains the child welfare system. She described herself and her organization as a check on a system that shouldn't even exist.

"I am an abolitionist," she said.

There is an obvious tension. Chandler-Cole is, herself, a CASA advocate, fiercely championing a young "dual-status" woman caught up in the system, as she herself once was, making sure the woman has an apartment to move to after juvenile hall, making sure she has what she needs to graduate on time.

CASAs are the only people with court-ordered access to the social workers, the parents, the child's attorney, teachers, doctors and nurses, to allow them to advocate for the youth. The CASA's fundamental role has always been advising judges whether to remove children from their families. That puts them in the center of the system that Chandler-Cole said she wants to abolish.

Journalist and author Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition of Child Protection Reform, is a harsh critic of CASAs, as he is of the entire American child welfare system, which he and many other abolitionists call "the family police."

But he said CASA/LA might be different — perhaps — because of Chandler-Cole, her personal experience and her abolitionist approach.

The test, he said, is in the data.

"What we need to ask is this," he said. "In what percentage of cases where DCFS wanted to remove a child from the home, prolong foster care or terminate parental rights did the CASA disagree? Conversely, in what percentage of cases when DCFS wanted to keep a child in her or his own home, or reunify the family, did the CASA disagree? And after the change in leadership, did those percentages change? And if so, in what direction?"

Put another way, Wexler would measure the value of a CASA program by whether it interrupts family separation. The test is not merely in whether families are affected in a racially disproportionate ways, but whether families are affected at all.

Chandler-Cole does not disagree, but the organization's data collection efforts have not, so far, reached the question. Nor has Pritzker yet studied CASA/LA, although Howard noted that Chandler-Cole's approach melds well with DCFS, which has sharply reduced child removals.

Asked how she likes the work, Chandler-Cole delivered a surprising response: She hates it. It's like climbing a mountain, she said, and sometimes restarting the climb each day. It takes small steps — a lot of them — to reach the top.

"ABOLITION ... MEANS PEOPLE STAYING TOGETHER. IT MEANS FAMILY. IT MEANS HAVING A SYSTEM THAT ... ACTUALLY HELPS CHILDREN THAT ARE BEING ABUSED."
—Charity Chandler-Cole, CEO of CASA/LA

And what does the top look like to her?

"Oh, abolition," she said. "It means people staying together. It means family. It means having a system that does exist that actually helps children that are being abused, that actually helps families that need support, that includes families in the decision making."

Supervisor Lindsey Horvath settles into office and faces a trial of fire

Taking Action

LINDSEY HORVATH SURPRISED MUCH OF the political establishment in 2022 when she beat Bob Hertzberg, the former majority leader of the California State Senate, to win a seat on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. Horvath, a member of the West Hollywood City Council, was significantly outspent, but she prioritized fighting homelessness and protecting reproductive rights to overcome Hertzberg's lead coming out of the first round. Her time in office was roiled in January when the Palisades fire tore through her district. In the weeks since, Horvath has jumped to the fore, establishing a blue ribbon commission to study and make recommendations on rebuilding the area, and occasionally clashing with Mayor Karen Bass. That friction, which came to light when the *Los Angeles Times* published a text exchange between the two, has since been put to rest, Horvath said in this interview.

She recently spoke with *Blueprint* editor-in-chief Jim Newton at her offices in the County Hall of Administration. They were accompanied by Horvath's sprightly golden doodle, Winston, who enthusiastically bounded about as Horvath reflected on her time in office, her duties and some of the challenges facing Los Angeles County.


WE THE PEOPL
LINDS
Horvath
THIRD DIS
IRIS SCHNEIDER

BLUEPRINT: Were you surprised that you won your race for this office in 2022? Or did you expect it?

LINDSEY HORVATH: We definitely saw a path from the beginning. Otherwise, I wouldn't have gotten into it, but I think people are making choices in politics now to meet the moment. Senator Hertzberg had demonstrated the kind of leadership that people had known for many years. In this particular moment — and as we're seeing in our politics, continue to play out — people are looking for something a little bit different, for whatever their reasons.

We offered that "something different" for people. Not everybody really understands the role of a county supervisor ...

BP: Agreed.

LH: So one advantage we had was coming from local government, having that connection to someone who understands what it means to be on the ground, being hands-on. At the time, the crisis that people were focused on was homelessness. I had done a lot of work on that in West Hollywood.

And now, of course, with the fires, we're seeing how knowing the way to do emergency preparedness and get people connected to resources and information, that's what people are looking for in this moment. And I'm grateful to have the opportunity to do it.

BP: How has the experience of being in office compared to what you thought it would be? Any surprises?

LH: People talk about the combination of the executive and the legislative authority in this role, but to experience it in practice, it's unlike anything I've ever experienced. And I don't think there's anything quite like it.

I guess I don't know exactly what I expected it to be. It was more just about being ready to show up for whatever came our way. We knew the bigness of the district and also the responsibilities that this role comes with.

We have more than 30 departments. We are the social safety net. We have more than 2 million people in my district and 10 million in the county. ... I don't know that I was terribly surprised, but I'm always learning new things about the role.

BP: How do you imagine things changing now that Measu re G has passed, and the board will expand, as well as adding an elected countywide chief executive?

LH: For those who are engaged already, we had departmental budget hearings, which is the first time it's ever happened in Los Angeles County. ...

The next phase of rolling out Measure G is that, by the end of next year, we have to establish the Ethics Commission. ... We've seen that there are ethics commissions or some type of entity at other levels of government, so that experience will help inform what it is, or isn't, for Los Angeles County, because people haven't gotten savvy. It's not just that it exists, but what authority does it have, and how will it change the way we do business as a county?

My hope, my big dream, is that Measure G will engage more people into the work of the county. I heard pretty consistently as I was running that people didn't know what the county did. ... This process hopefully will help people understand what the county is actually responsible for, and how it should be showing up differently for them.

BP: So, let's talk about the fires. First of all, are you OK? Were you or a loved one affected by the fires?

LH: Thank you. I'm fine. And you? You live in Pasadena?

BP: Yes, thank you. We're fine, too, though it was a little touch and go there for a bit.

LH: Yeah, I live in West Hollywood, and the Sunset Fire was sort of in that area. I called our chief and said, "I just got an alert," which I never thought I would get where I live. He said, "We're just letting people know because we saw the slow evacuation for people who were impacted." And so they expanded it quickly just to encourage people to move. He had advised that if it got down to Hollywood Boulevard, it was going to move pretty quickly into our area.

And so I looked around my house, thinking "What am I going to take?" What memories do you leave behind? The fact that anyone had to make a choice like that is just awful.

BP: What do you consider your responsibility in this moment? I mean, we don't really hold elected officials responsible for disasters. We don't look back and say [Mayor] Dick Riordan was responsible for the Northridge Earthquake. But we do expect things of elected officials in the face of disasters. What do you expect of yourself?

LH: Our responsibility is to make sure plans are in place. ... Making sure that people know what we have invested in, in terms of communication systems, in terms of emergency response. How they should plan for evacuation routes. ... We've done emergency preparedness training throughout the district.

We try to do that outreach so that people aren't entirely caught flat-footed. Of course, we know not everybody does emergency preparedness, so sometimes it's then that we're judged by [this instead]: In that moment, how did you show up and help people evacuate?

So it's making sure that [people] know how to respond, that we have the expertise on the ground so that, when they start getting those notifications, we stage appropriately, call in the appropriate resources, and communicate about what we all need to be responsible for. No one person is responsible for the totality, but as the elected for the region, my responsibility is to be sure that we've been having those conversations, and that we put our best foot forward in terms of being prepared to respond.

BP: And it's safe to say that there's going to be some friction in all of that. I know that you and Mayor Bass have not always seen eye to eye in all of this. How are your relations with the mayor and the mayor's office?

LH: We're fine. There are moments of frustration, I would say, in any sort of major disaster. You don't want to see them on display as they were made. I think it's also important to communicate and to do better going forward.

When we had the chance to speak about all of that, which was long before it was revealed to the public, I just said: "Here's how it landed with me and why it was so difficult to navigate." And she acknowledged that, and we both acknowledged that there was a better way to coordinate. ... That has changed. There's [now] even more intentional coordination between city and county.

BP: It feels like there are almost opposite demands on people in your position. On the one hand, there are some who want you to be a strong leader and grab a bull by the horns and ignore all the noise and plunge forward, and on the other hand, there's the obligation to be multi-institutional and make sure there's good communication, etc. I'm not sure whether the public has one point of view on this, or whether it has many expectations, some of which are just destined to not be fulfilled.

LH: You're absolutely right. There are times where people are like, "Just decide already." And we don't want to get immobilized by indecision. But I also think that when you are leading in Los Angeles County, there are 88 cities, there are 200 water agencies, there are all kinds of public safety agencies. The Sheriff's Department serves 50 cities, but that means there are that many more police departments.

So when you're at a more regional level in terms of your leadership, you have a responsibility to make sure that when you are making those decisions, you are prepared for that ripple effect ...

It's fair to ask for both. And with each of our

↑ Horvath confers with Los Angeles County Fire Chief Anthony Marrone. (Photo courtesy of the office of Supervisor Horvath)

"WHEN IT'S ABOUT PEOPLE'S HEALTH AND SAFETY, YOU HAVE TO ACT SWIFTLY. AND THEN WE'RE GOING TO DO AN AFTER-ACTION TO SEE HOW WELL WE DID, WHAT COULD WE HAVE DONE BETTER, WHAT SHOULD WE CHANGE AS AN INSTITUTION."

decisions, we have to justify why we took one approach over another.

When it's about people's health and safety, you have to act swiftly. And then we're going to do an after-action to see how well we did, what could we have done better, what should we change as an institution.

BP: What are your hopes for the commission that you've created? What would you like to see come out of that group and that process?

LH: The Blue Ribbon Commission is comprised of experts in a variety of areas, not only in terms of how we rebuild in a green way and green building standards but also from the finance sector, from the insurance sector. As we think about what affordability is, going forward, a key component of that is going to be insurability.

Now that we are in this moment where there has been such severe devastation, how do we insure that we're not just racing to build back what is there — obviously moving with speed, but also with thoughtfulness about what we should be doing intentionally to build back better, with resiliency and fire safety in mind. That's really the focus and the charge of this commission.

BP: There's a lot of talk of "reimagining" these communities, but when I talk with homeowners, people who have lost a home, their response is, "I just want to rebuild. I'm not that interested in reimagining this place," whether it's the Palisades or Altadena.

LH: Yep.

BP: Are those things at odds with each other? Is it possible to do both?

LH: I think you have to do both. While people are saying they want to get back quickly, I don't know any person who hasn't considered whether they would get insurance going forward.

If we help ease the financial burden of some of these home-hardening and fire-hardening best practices, and we allow them to still move quickly — they are still going to get their virtually rubber-stamped permits if they bring that into the footprint of their rebuild. Will they do it? How can we incentivize that? ...

That's something we believe this Blue Ribbon Commission can illuminate for us — what that pathway ought to look like. We already heard, from the insurance perspective in the rebuild process, if something isn't codified in policy, they may not cover it in the rebuild. So we think we're being brilliant by "cutting through red tape" to make it easier to rebuild. But if we, say, take away the requirement to include solar panels in the rebuild, they may not cover it because it's not required.

How do we make sure that, in our efforts to move quickly, we don't do so thoughtlessly, and without intention around insurability? I heard from one of my residents in Malibu who lived through [the] Woolsey [Fire] and now volunteers in the community brigade, "I don't want to be doing this again in four years."

I appreciate the concept of building back quickly, ... but we have to do it intentionally, not only for our individual properties, but also for our whole community, because if we're just building back what we had, we might be putting ourselves at risk, putting our firefighters at risk, and so many other things.

I don't think anyone here is thinking about this as an academic exercise. ... We don't have time for that, but what we do have time for is taking the lessons we already know and expediting them into actionable policy. That's what I believe this Blue Ribbon Commission will do.

BP: What's the timeline? As you look forward, what's a reasonable hope or expectation for feeling like things are getting back to normal?

LH: Our focus on the schools has been critically important. For lots of families, having a school system that serves our families is almost as important as the homes they want to rebuild.

BP: I'm sure that's right.

LH: And I know that the mayor has, on the rebuild side, in the city, prioritized what the town center looks like. That's particularly important to not just the local economic engine but also the sense of community.

BP: It was the center of that place.

LH: I also hope there is a role for our faith leaders to play. They've come to the table and shared with us how they've been stewarding their congregations from a spiritual standpoint — and just trying to help people heal. ... They are crucial to how a community functions.

BP: One set of victims of these fires has been children, and I wonder if we could talk a bit about the county's role in protecting children, particularly those children in foster care.

LH: Sure.

BP: This is going to sound terribly academic, but why is it that government should play a role at all in this? Why isn't the care of children a responsibility, first of nuclear families, and then extended families, or communities? How does it come to be a job for the government? Is this a good function for government to perform?

LH: I don't know the whole history of setting up the welfare system for young people, but this is something I was challenged to think about, as I was coming into this seat, by people who had given a lot more thought to it than I had, to be honest.

Can the goal be to help families stay a family unit, and keep young people supported in a family, if the family is safe but under-resourced? That's not necessarily a safety issue. That's a poverty issue. But when you treat it as a safety issue, you are often creating more harm than you are solving.

And yet, we know that there are young people who will have no safety net if the government doesn't play some sort of role. ... There's nobody who's going to take responsibility if we don't. ...

BP: When Mike Nash [presiding judge of the Juvenile Court] opened up proceedings for a while, I spent a lot of time attending hearings in the foster care system. And I must say, I was struck by mostly White judicial officers taking Black and Brown children out of their homes. I know that there's an explanation for every one of those cases, so I'm not trying to be accusatory, but there's something dispiriting about watching it happen over and over.

LH: Yeah, and it's a reflection of systemic racism, and how we've created structures that don't realize the disproportionate impact on those communities. We owe it to our communities to do better. ...

I co-authored a motion with Supervisor [Holly] Mitchell for the county to be thinking about the prevention system. We often get described as the social safety net for the region, but what happens if we could catch people ... and prevent them from falling?

That's how we're trying to think about that system of care that the county intends to provide, so it's not a form of punishment but truly a form of support.

BP: I know you've paid some special attention to young people who are emancipating out of the system. Do you have specific things in mind that might be especially helpful to young people as they're turning 18 or 19 and leaving foster care?

LH One of the things they've crystallized for us is ... they get these vouchers, or are supposed to have access to these vouchers, but the vouchers don't translate necessarily to housing. They might be allocated, but they don't know how to get them. And if they do get them, they don't get a lot of assistance in finding housing that is receptive to that.

"WE ARE THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET. WE HAVE MORE THAN 2 MILLION PEOPLE IN MY DISTRICT AND 10 MILLION IN THE COUNTY."

On paper, check, we've created a solution to that problem. But in practice, we haven't. So how do we go the extra mile with them to actually turn that into a housing solution? ... How do we just bake that into how we do our work?

BP: One last question: Trump. In the background of all of this, you have at best an unsupportive Washington. I worry that we're entering this period where officials such as yourself may have to make a choice between being candid about how really aberrant Washington is right now and risk losing funding or holding your tongue and compromising on your principles. Are you in a position — whether it's the fires or the Olympics, homelessness or foster care — to be able to be candid, or do you feel that you have to pull your punches?

LH: I think we're being mindful of how we interact with the federal government, specifically for fire recovery. And I think we've made a commitment as a county board that we're going to remain committed to the values that we've always had.

How we show up for people is what makes the difference.

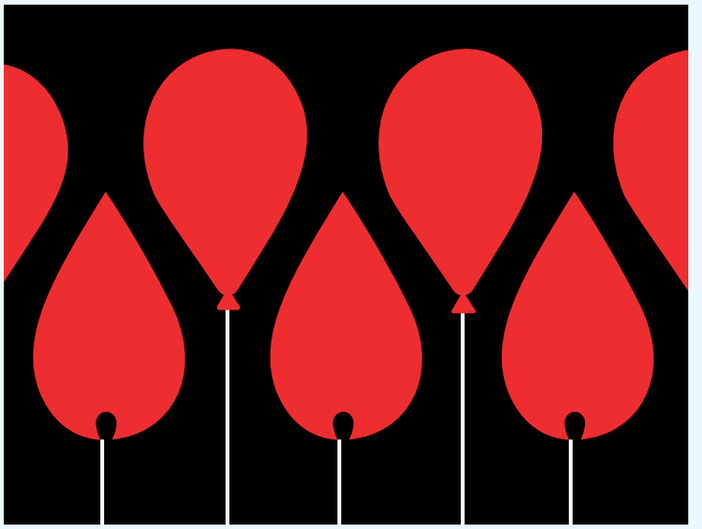
As we saw in the early announcements in perhaps changes in services, ... for gender-affirming care, our state leaders weighed in to say, "No, we've talked about this as a state, and here's what we're going to do." Maybe it doesn't become something that the federal government funds, but we as a county are going to continue to support this kind of care.

Same thing with abortion care. I come from America's first pro-choice city, and making sure that we continue to remain an abortion safe haven in Los Angeles is something that's critically important to me and to our region. But it's only as safe as people actually have access to come here. So if someone feels at risk to use our Metro system to be transported ... then it's just words on paper, not in practice. ...

We need to express what we see as breaking down in our community, but we also need to take action. ... We need to be thoughtful and intentional about how we're doing this work. ◤

↓ Left to right: City Council President Marqueece Harris-Dawson, Horvath, Governor Gavin Newsom, L.A. County Fire Chief Anthony Marrone, and former L.A. City Fire Chief Kristin Crowley. (Photo courtesy of the office of Supervisor Horvath)

CLOSING NOTE:
HOW BEST TO HELP CHILDREN



NOMA BAR

IT IS DIFFICULT TO READ ABOUT SUFFERING CHILDREN, WHETHER victims of poverty, abuse, neglect or fire. Our sympathies naturally flow to those who are most defenseless. And yet, that suffering is widespread in this region: More than 30,000 young people are in foster care. Thousands more lost homes, schools or communities in the recent fires.

Importantly, not all suffering demands the same response. The child who is poor may lack resources but be enveloped in love. For this young person, family support — a monthly stipend, food stamps, health insurance — may be all that is needed to overcome the adversity of the moment. For the child who is abused or neglected, on the other hand, safety may demand more. And for the child who has lost a home or school to fire, rebuilding structures may be as important as supporting families.

Those are among the heart-wrenching conclusions of the work presented in this issue of *Blueprint*.

But heart-wrenching is not the same as despairing. These same articles suggest solutions, or at least steps toward solutions. The governments charged with caring for children — state and local — sometimes flail in response to problems, but they are innovating. Witness the work of Assemblymember Isaac Bryan, himself a product of the foster care system. He has secured passage of eight bills to expand and reconsider services for foster children and their families. Consider the blue ribbon commission that is helping to guide Los Angeles County back from fire.

Research helps shape this undertaking.

It also should, and does, highlight the mismanagement of resources intended to help children. Take, for instance, the account in this issue by *Blueprint* contributor Jon Regardie, who chronicles the efforts of researcher Lindsey Kunisaki to follow the money promised to children for arts programs. Kunisaki's report cites wide disparities in how school districts take advantage of that money. The report's recommendations may help bring the arts to children deprived of that learning.

Other researchers in related fields offer still more ways to protect and enrich children. Elizabeth Barnert has helped win passage of laws to guide police through the thicket of issues facing children who have been sexually exploited. Shannon Thyne is exploring the relationship between early childhood trauma and later damage to health.

And Reece Fong has translated his lifelong devotion to service into evidence-based conclusions that remind us of some human basics: Helping others brings children a sense of satisfaction and purpose. In this epoch of greed, self-interest and self-absorption, much of it radiating from the highest levels of American society, Fong's findings suggest a better way of life.

These projects and their conclusions will not save all children, certainly not overnight. But they suggest a package of ideas: Support children in poverty, help rebuild their homes and schools, nurture their creativity and intellects, encourage their compassion, deliver them safely into adulthood. The world can be unforgiving — some in Washington have elevated spite and grievance into virtues — but the children we raise today will determine whether the world of tomorrow might be more merciful.

This work and those who perform it call attention to the struggles of the moment. They also supply hope for the future.

— Jim Newton

UCLA BLUE PRINT

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Special thanks to Lisa Horowitz, the chief copy editor for Blueprint, whose sharp eye makes this magazine what it is. ***— Jim Newton***

DO YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY?

Blueprint's mission — to stimulate conversation about problems confronting Los Angeles and the rest of California — doesn't stop on publication day. We urge you to continue these conversations by contacting us or our contributors or by reaching out directly to the researchers whose work is featured here. We also hope you'll follow us on the web, where we showcase exclusives and link to ongoing debates in these fields. You can find us online at **blueprint.ucla.edu**

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