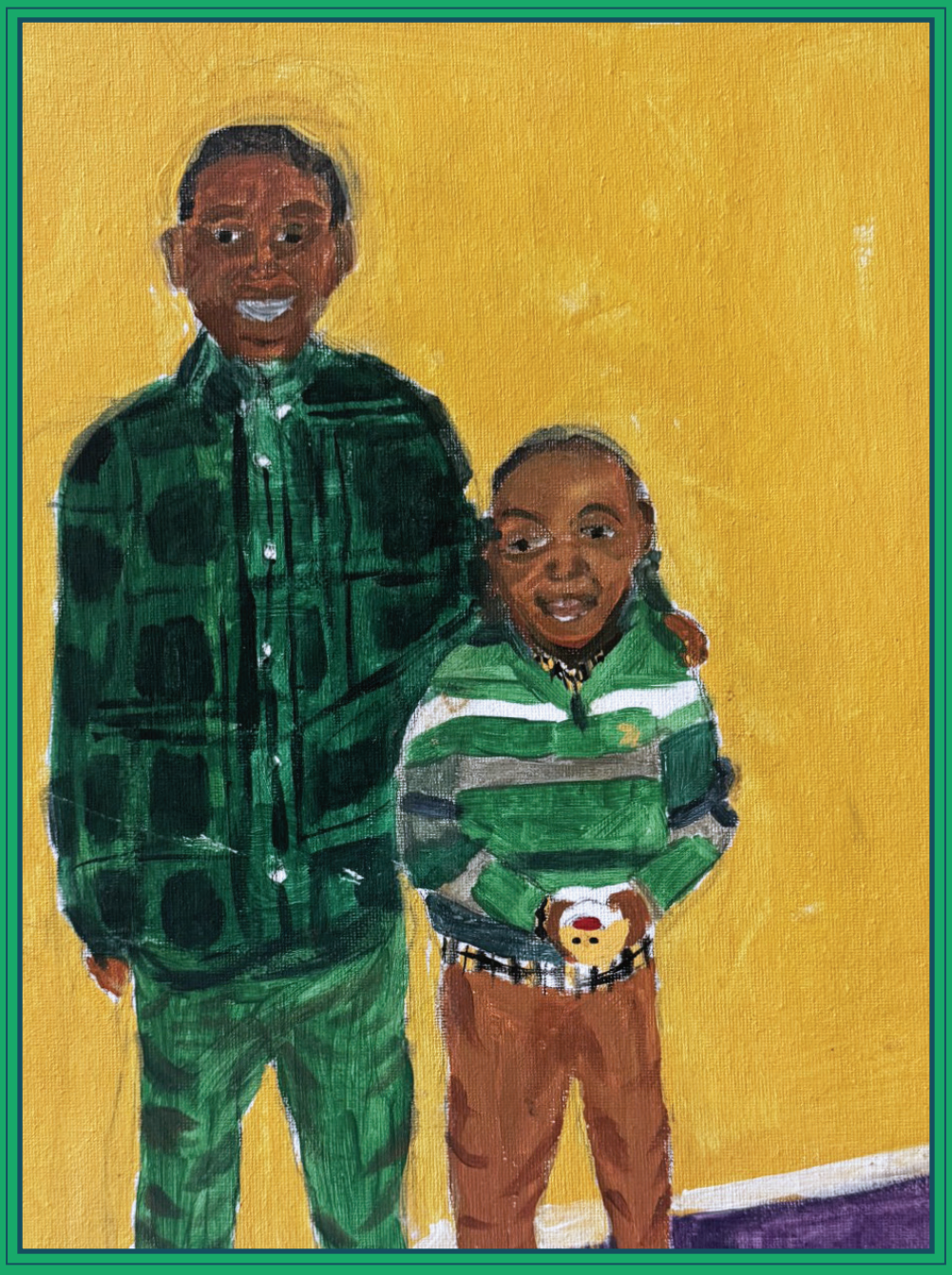
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OPPORTUNITIES TO DO GOOD

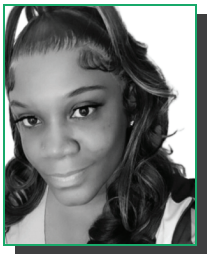
These Mothers Are Our Neighbors

How Mother's Outreach Network Pushes to Support, Rather Than Police Families



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Melody is the founder and Executive Director of Mothers Outreach Network and a Harvard Law School graduate. She has dedicated her career to public interest law, serving in roles such as Legislative Counsel in the US Senate and Counsel for Child Abuse and Neglect in the DC Superior Court. She is also a mother of three.



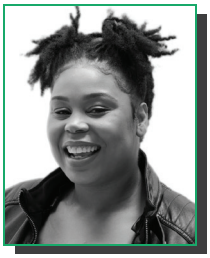
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Akua Danqua is a mother of three children, ages 16, 14, and 5, and a founding member of Mother's Outreach Network Mother Up Pilot Program Community Advisory Board.



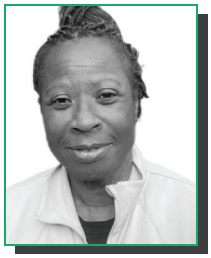
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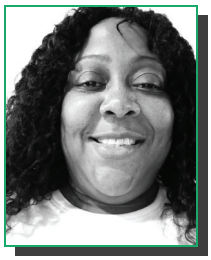
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Linda is a founding member of the Mother Up Community Advisory Board and a Moms Empower Advocacy Fellow. She is also the mother of an adult daughter with a disability.



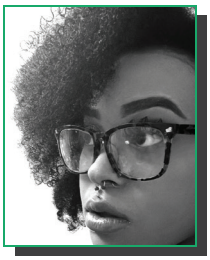
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Ditesha is a mom of three and a grandmother of one. She is an Advocacy Fellow for the Mother's Outreach Network.



MORGAN HICKS

Morgan is a mother of twins and a member of the Mother's Outreach Network Moms Empower Speaker's Bureau.

"Mother's Outreach is dear to my heart. It gives me the chance to lift up other moms. To know I'm not alone. To be able to be together in community" – Linda

When asked what Mother's Outreach Network (MON) meant to them, participants in the program talked a lot about community. As Akua said, "There is a power behind the affirmation of shared struggles." Yesmine agreed, calling MON "a sisterhood for mothers" that allows participants the opportunity to reach out to each other for support. Linda said MON reminded her of how she grew up—being in community and knowing her neighbors.

And who are our neighbors? The story of the Good Samaritan poses this question. In Washington DC, Mother's Outreach Network defines our neighbors as the mothers who are overwhelmingly Black and who much of society ignores. They are the moms who live in the city's socioeconomically marginalized communities. They are the moms who are framed by negative tropes, such as moms who are not focused on their own children, or "welfare queens", which impacts Black moms most heavily. And these women are the moms disproportionately involved with child welfare investigations, surveillance, and the removal of children from their families for poverty-related reasons (Gupta-Kagan, J. (2024). Distinguishing family poverty from child neglect. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 1602. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4449089). The United States fails to incorporate these moms into our society, which inhibits the goals of inclusion that are the basis of both our democracy and most faith traditions. In contrast, MON strives to involve these moms in our community socially, economically, and politically.

And how should we treat our neighbors? MON bases our relationships and work around a framework of four core values. While we are not a faith-based organization, our core beliefs are rooted in religious tenets, as well as principles of participatory democracy. We strive to: (1) treat the moms who are the least among us as our neighbors; (2) to build joy with them through community; (3) to invest earnestly and deeply in mothers and their families; and (4) we encourage a faith in moms without evidence for granting it.

Treat them as our neighbors. When people face adversity and marginalization, we believe in the value of encouraging and lifting them up. There is a moral mandate for MON's work.

In Washington, DC where we are located, more than 80 percent of the children in the family policing and child welfare system are Black, when just over 50 percent of the city's children are; and between 80 and 90 percent of the cases involve neglect, versus physical or sexual abuse (nationally the number hovers around 70 percent) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. Page 49. (2025). *Child maltreatment 2023*. Available from here). Because the child welfare/family policing system disproportionately impacts poor and families of color, its tentacles can be inescapable. This is the basis for MON's bedrock approach that we treat our participants with support, fueled by notions of justice, rather than condemnation. We work alongside these moms, some of whom live in the same neighborhood as our staff. Ditesha, one of the moms in the program, recognizes the difference that this approach makes when she describes how MON does not just provide a list of resources but instead does the work right alongside their participants, walking with them to secure assistance. Akua adds that MON is a program that is truly for mothers because it actually serves them, and that "being a part of an organization that consistently shows up for moms and the community feels good and hopeful."

MON's parent-centered works are channeled through community-building activities, as well as policy advocacy, legal representation, and education. Supporting the self-determination, leadership and well-being of these mothers centers our work and is a crucial part of our mission.

Invest with abundance. The result of treating our participants as our neighbors is that they feel that they belong to the program and the program belongs to them. MON's mom leaders talk about how MON allows you to just be yourself. Yesmine talked about how much she appreciates that her children are always included and welcomed



within the MON community. Participants shared how this sense of community allows mothers to be vulnerable and reach out to get support when they need it. And the moms take a deep interest in the organization; they give, even as they receive key decision-making roles, pouring into the organization their time, their hopes, and their own vision for tackling problems in the community. They take on activities as leaders, including paid fellowships, that bring benefit to self and others.

Joy Through Community. As an antidote to the adversity that moms are facing, we strive to build joy. For these moms, escaping poverty through low-wage jobs is a distant possibility. For them, as scripture tells us, joy would come "in the morning", but we believe that joy should not be delayed. Instead, we believe in assisting them to achieve joy with one another, by building relationships. Moms meet frequently in settings exclusively for mothers, as well as in settings with professional advocates. They provide input, help shape advanced policy analysis, and some also speak on panels. Joy may be achieved through peer-led wellness discussions and workshops facilitated by mom entrepreneurs from their community, as well as by mom activists from across the country, sharing their stories of triumph. We believe we must build a strong community of moms who, through interactions with one another, learn that their stories are shared, if not entirely, at least in part with moms in similar circumstances. We also explicitly create opportunities to meet around social events, for example, an annual policy summit, which includes a picnic. This builds a bond that increases confidence and a sense of solidarity.

Joy to us is knowing our participants do not feel alone, which they need to feel even when they are not physically together. This means communicating with each other and sharing stories with each other. It means leading activities, including conversations around wellness. It means informal mentorship, with moms talking with one another outside of the program and sharing tips about caring for new babies, or nursing. MON's mom leaders talk explicitly about the joy that the MON community brings them, a feeling of belonging rather than being ignored, along with the bond with other moms and the joy in being able to lift each other up.

At present, authoritarianism threatens to crush our spirits and our institutions. The idea of equanimity or even joy under circumstances of terror is almost unfathomable. But these moms have experienced judgment of their parenting, their demeanor, and their life choices—intense persecution—and they are still standing. From them, we know that not only is it possible for us to build community around joy, it is necessary as a form of resistance. As Audre Lorde explained, sharing joy forms a bridge. It permits the moms to bask in sunlight best enjoyed with others, even during intense suffering.

Our organizational goals are ambitious, and are being sought in an innately hostile policy climate. What makes advocacy even more challenging is that our moms' plight is not viewed as sympathetic. Fighting these harmful narratives is essential to our work: warding off the weight of judgments by mainstream media and policymakers, and their systems. Building joy through community furthers this goal.

Faith without evidence. We are often asked whether the mothers to whom we provide unconditional money use it to fund a substance use disorder. Studies actually demonstrate that people in impoverished circumstances use extra cash to pay for basic needs (Bartik, A. W., Rhodes, E., Broockman, D. E., Krause, P. K., Miller, S., & Vivalt, E. (2024). *The impact of unconditional cash transfers on consumption and household balance sheets: Experimental evidence from two US states.* National Bureau of Economic Research). And for each mom in our program, we choose to believe they are worthy of investment without any proof that it is warranted.

In fact, it is the moms and their family members who have reason to distrust people who offer them programs: nonprofit organizations and government entities. The openly racialized welfare programs that opened up to Black mothers in the 1960s brought intrusive Child Protection System social workers into their families, causing family policing to skyrocket, resulting in children torn away from parents. And this is to their disadvantage—whether from lack of inclusion in policy making or losing out on refundable credits. It is vital then that we mobilize moms, to address those demobilizing government practices.

It is we who must build trust in our advocacy programs and in government programs, including those that provide tax credit benefits. To encourage moms to file for tax credits to which they are entitled, we must earn their confidence. Our programming is grounded in principles of inclusion, so we engage the moms to lead tables at community fairs, and to share legal programs and know your rights information with other parents. As representatives of our organization, they can bear witness to our mission. Maria notes that she appreciates that MON gives her opportunities to meet people and to speak, especially for those who may not be able to speak for themselves. We must be more inclusive and incorporate into our social programs and policymaking moms and all individuals impacted by poverty.

The above values inform our vision, which is implemented through several programs:

Community Engagement. Chief among our community efforts are outreach, recruitment and leadership training, and activities for mothers. Our Moms Empower group operationalizes this effort by gathering moms twice a month to share resources and build capacity and relationships. These prepare them as advocates to push the organization's mission. It prepares them for self-determination.

MON mom leaders talk about how much they appreciated that MON brings in different people to meet with them to teach them about different topics and to support them. Ditesha noted how much she had learned through MON. Linda talked about how much joy she receives in there always being something new to learn; the opportunity that MON provides to self-reflect and improve brings her joy.

Additionally, MON's research-based programming drives our effectiveness. We use participatory research methods that lets moms set the agenda for the organization. We use advisory boards that consist of mothers with experience in the issues on which we advocate. For mothers who have been alleged to neglect their children (neglect comprises 80% of the cases open at the DC Child and Family Services Agency), we have launched a cash payment pilot program—Mother Up Guaranteed Income Family Preservation Pilot—that we hope will evolve into a publicly-funded citywide program. Our pilot provides $500

monthly payments for three years to participants. This cash is provided with no conditions and is not tied to a government system. Our hypothesis is that the social, psychological, and other problems that the current system classifies under the legal term "neglect" stem frequently from an economic source: poverty.

When asked how they utilize these monthly cash payments, the moms in the program talked about how the money helped them with bills and household supplies; one mom also noted that she can save some money in case of an emergency. Moms talked about how they were able to use the funds for fun family outings, the chance to be together and have fun as a family. One mom talked about how she used the funds to pay a babysitter so she could take a much-needed break from being a single mom and to do something fun for herself, like go out to dinner.





Morgan noted that the funds will allow her kids to participate in extracurricular activities and all the moms agreed. One participant was able to buy a uniform so that her son could play football. Other children were also able to choose activities that they love, like swimming and dancing. One mom was able to afford the entry fees so that both of her kids could participate in a karate tournament where both received trophies that they proudly display in their home.

Legal Program and Know Your Rights. Our Legal Representation and Know Your Rights programs assist parents in defending against investigations and appeal wrongful placement on the Child Protection Register.

The information provided to moms by MON really levels the playing field for them, Akua notes. Once informed of their rights, moms are empowered and can use this information within their community to advocate on behalf of others. MON also provides representation to parents during CPS investigations and to contest wrongful placement on the Child Protection Register.

Policy Advocacy. MON's Policy Advocacy includes disruptive policies with audacious goals to reimagine systems that harm vulnerable parents and families. MON was born from the idea that we don't know the people nor the stories of the people we vilify, and if we did, we would not stand for hardship and stingy policies. Therefore, MON set about with an agenda to empower moms to tell their stories so they become embedded in policy-making. This grounds new policies in values of humility and empathy that promote democratic participation, including Black community agency and dignity. While negative stereotypes abound, MON pushes against these negative narratives to build an economic system that works for moms. We give them the respect of professionals, and we invest in them and in their communities through stipended training programming, honoraria for speaking engagements, and paid fellowships for longer-term training and leadership activities.

Many of the moms involved in the program talk about how much they love the opportunity to advocate and make needed changes. Akua noted that some organizations discourage advocacy, but that MON encourages it, allows her to practice her skills, and provides structured opportunities and empowerment to advocate. Yesmine talked about the joy of advocating, of seeing good legislation passing and of making change. Akua talked about how MON encourages her and strengthens her resolve to fight.

For many, our progress as a society is measured by the ease with which we can individually attain economic security. For marginalized moms, stability is so out of reach that the yardstick must be different. Linda explains that "Mother's Outreach Network meets this moment," by providing needed support when she feels under attack. "The support is there." Mother's Outreach Network holds that we can only advance as a nation through our commitment of heart, soul, mind, strength, and sincere devotion, to the inclusion of all moms and individuals in the pursuit of economic opportunity, security, and mobility.

Mother's Outreach
NETWORK



OPEN CALL FOR ART

The Family Justice Journal is honored to feature original artwork, poems, and other visual expressions that speak to the experiences of systems impacted individuals, community/public art projects, and artwork promoting social justice in every issue of the journal, including the front cover.

Compensation is offered for every piece accepted with artists retaining all rights to their work and attributions made.

To learn more or submit a piece for potential inclusion, please write to info@thefamilyjusticegroup.org