



November 7, 2018

Dear friends,

I would never have predicted that I would gain new insights about justice work in Tennessee while on Whidbey Island in Puget Sound. But, then, TJC's amazing, funky story has never been predictable.

TJC never rests, but after nearly a quarter century of this incredible work, I needed to. I've been genuinely blessed to be a part of countless legislative fights, prayer vigils, and days in court (sometimes with a baby on my hip or my clothes on inside out!), but I needed to step back a bit, look at the big picture, and recharge body and spirit for the challenges ahead. I took a much-needed sabbatical this summer. I, my sainted spouse, three boys and three-legged dog headed west on The Great American Road Trip. Our rental on Whidbey Island turned out to be next to one of the last old growth forests in Washington State. Most every day, we ran among trees older than our country. Puget Sound and Mount Baker made for a gorgeous backdrop, but the trees were what took our breath away with their beauty – and their resilience. Through hurricane-force winds, flood and fire, they have adapted and persevered.

In Hoypus Forest, I saw TJC's story of resilience with new eyes. The ancient trees, swaying in the breeze, creaked lessons of hope and strength. They stand tall and strong, a striking emblem of a rich web of interdependence. So, too, with TJC. **Our high-profile court cases and policy campaigns, impactful as they are, account for only part of what is accomplished by the remarkable community of staff, volunteers, donors and clients in TJC's magical "forest."**

One of the extraordinary people in TJC's forest this year was Danielle Alaimo, a courageous single mother with a life-threatening neurological condition. Her son, Malcolm, has medical problems that require constant attention from Danielle. In March, Tennessee legislators kicked off their election campaigns with a cynical bill to cut Medicaid by reinforcing a myth about parents who rely on Medicaid. ("We'll put these mothers to work!") Of course, the overwhelming majority of Medicaid parents already work at low-wage jobs that most politicians would never dream of doing. Danielle came forward with a mighty message for those in power: she and other parents of children with special needs would love nothing better than a job with a paycheck, but their first duty is to their children's wellbeing. Speaking to the media with her shaved head bearing the scars of a recent surgery, she explained that if she loses Medicaid because she can't meet work requirements, it puts her life – and Malcolm's future – in peril.

TJC came out strongly against the work requirements bill. We saw it for what it was, and we knew the real damage it would cause for families like Danielle's. But before her courageous intervention, we were losing – both with the public and with legislators. Danielle changed everything. Embarrassed lawmakers hastened to promise Danielle that she would be exempted, but she wasn't interested in a separate peace for herself and Malcolm. She continued to defend other families as politely, but fiercely, as she defended her own.

The story isn't over. After appearing to kill the bill, legislators quietly passed it in the waning hours of the session, leaving out any promised exemptions for moms like Danielle. State officials are now working with the Trump Administration to cut those vulnerable parents from Medicaid. That means that if a home health aide loses her job, she will also lose her insulin, making it almost impossible to work or care for her children. The plan is both out of touch with the daily realities of regular Tennesseans and a breathtakingly expensive bureaucratic boondoggle, putting health care at risk for hundreds of thousands of Tennesseans.

Yet, in that darkness, Danielle's tenacious goodness made a difference. She transformed the bill from an election year stunt into a political liability for its sponsors. Beyond this fight – which we will ultimately take to court and win – is the broader issue of how politicians and the media depict vulnerable Tennesseans. It was Danielle's powerful example that demolished false narratives of “lazy welfare/Medicaid cheats.” **As so often happens, it was a brave parent, supported by TJC, who did the most to advance our work for justice.**

I thought, too, of the intricate web of relationships which enables TJC to soar. Like the former TJC staffer who, at the height of last year's dramatic fight to defend the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid, donated from her retirement savings to defend coverage for people like Danielle and Malcolm. I thought about the legions of student interns, rockstar retirees, health professionals and attorneys who have donated tens of millions in professional services to TJC's clients. Thousands of such unsung s/heroes make up TJC's forest. In the current era of divisive soundbites, it gives me hope to join every day with Tennesseans from all backgrounds and political persuasions to work for a Tennessee that honors dignity and opportunity for all. Regardless of what happens in Washington or at the state legislature, TJC's forest stands strong.

In our 23rd year, TJC will fight to expand Medicaid to cover the working poor, improve long term care for seniors, promote policies to protect kids from adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and advance practical reforms to help students and seniors have enough food. We'll fight initiatives like Medicaid work requirements that punish those who need help, policies that intimidate immigrants and refugees and other destructive foolishness that makes life harder for those who work the hardest and have the least. And, of course, all of our work will be grounded in the lived experience of the thousand families, like Danielle's, whom we are honored to serve and who join us to fight for a state that honors *all* families.

During this season of thanksgiving and togetherness, may you, too, feel the strength of righteous community. Thank you for being part of TJC's forest. You are the life-giving force that inspires and sustains TJC's work for justice.

Warm regards,



Michele Johnson
Executive Director

P.S. Your gift today will make a real difference in our fight for families. Please join us.