



## An Investment Upstream

In 2014 the ACE Awareness Foundation (ACEAF) was founded to address adverse childhood experiences (ACE) documented from a landmark study implemented over 40 years ago by Vince Felitti, MD of Kaiser Permanente's Health Appraisal Clinic in San Diego, CA. and Robert Anda, MD of the Center for Disease Control. The watershed ACE Study was the largest investigation ever conducted to assess associations between childhood maltreatment and later-life health and well-being.

The original ACE Study revealed that when young children experience chronic exposure to adverse events, the resulting "toxic stress" literally changes the composition of their brain. Research and the ongoing ACE Study findings show these "adverse childhood experiences" often lead to violence, aggression, addiction, depression, incarceration and chronic adult disease. This knowledge was further documented in watershed books, ***GHOSTS FROM THE NURSERY*** by Robin Karr-Morse and the sequel, ***SCARED SICK***, by Robin Karr-Morse and Meredith Wiley, which validated the urgent need to find solutions to toxic stress in a traumatized community such as Greater Memphis.

In Tennessee alone, the social service model receives \$800 million annually from the Legislature, which historically results in modest results. Even though there were decades of dissemination of the scientific evidence in the original ACE Study, government dollars have never been utilized to fund a preventive model. According to Jim Henry, TN Deputy Governor and former head of the Dept. of Children Services, *"...millions of dollars going toward interventions later in life have not paid off."*

Deeply disturbed by the impact of toxic stress on the health and well-being of their community, the ACE Awareness Foundation implemented its own ACE Study in Shelby County in the summer of 2014 to validate root causes that impact toxic trauma. Fifteen hundred randomly selected homes in every zip code in Shelby County were surveyed through a phone interview. The findings were truly shocking. By example,

- 41% of adults surveyed had been bullied as a child
- 12% had shared a home with someone who had been incarcerated
- 20% reported having experienced childhood sexual abuse
- 37% revealed while growing up, they witnessed someone shot or stabbed
- 20% reported they did not feel safe in their neighborhood
- 60% shared they had witnessed a beating of someone while growing up



Armed with this scientific data, the ACE Awareness Foundation is determined to develop a social entrepreneurial change model. The result is the **UNIVERSAL PARENTING PLACE Initiative (UPP)**, which is a solution based approach designed to demonstrate how front-end, preventative health care, *not back-end social services*, can create a culture change that strengthens the physical, emotional and behavioral health of families. The goal is to provide families with professional guidance and experiential learning in order to prevent common childrearing challenges from becoming chronic problems.

**HOW UPP WORKS.** The ACEAF has opened five urban **UPP** sites in Greater Memphis and one in rural setting in the Mississippi Delta. In a “Starbucks like setting,” parents or caregivers are offered judgment-free zones where they can receive free professional counseling, personalized information on adverse childhood experiences and toxic stress, and offer long-term support to build skills needed to cope with the normal challenges of child-rearing or family-related issues, *no matter how large or small.*

Decades of neuroscience and trauma research indicate that anyone may be affected by trauma, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, educational attainment and other factors. By destigmatizing the need of ALL parents to ask for professional guidance, thereby universalizing access to parenting support, the **UPP** model is a preventable, long term approach that is helping to reduce the dangerous effects of adverse childhood experiences in families. Besides developing a new therapeutic model with their team using ACE factors for the licensed therapists, the **UPP** sites also use unprecedented therapy innovation through Playback Memphis (improvisational theatre through audience storytelling), Music for Aardvarks (parental activities with pre-school children), family drumming circles, mindful motion (yoga), Zumba and group parenting sessions.

Evaluation of the program and its impact on families and children is being provided by contracted evaluators.

**WHY UPP MATTERS-** In Memphis there is much talk about the importance of a quality workforce and the need to address poverty. There is much hand-wringing about the need to reduce crime to ensure a bright future for the city. So traditionally the city proposes more adult workforce training, more dollars reinvested in run-down neighborhoods and more money for police, prosecutions and prisons. Too often these proposed remedies are “too little, too late,” as they are “back end” solutions. The **UPP** sites are designed to face these Memphis challenges through “front end” approaches that help parents address toxic stress in their children, which is caused by chronic exposure to traumatic events– the root cause of many poor adult outcomes. The **UPP** sites are a first line of defense for battles in the home with addiction, poor health,



poverty and other hardships that directly affect the brain development of a child. The **UPP** sites are open to ALL parents who want to do better, and the plan is working.

The ACE Awareness Foundation sees the traumatized urban society differently – its leadership is determined to create a community which understands that the roots of violence, school failure, unprepared workforce, and that many chronic diseases are ingrained in the family and the environment, beginning in the earliest years. Their entrepreneurial way of attacking these social/emotional/ physical issues is unparalleled in Memphis, and throughout the country. The new paradigm is much like encouraging all parents to immunize children against physical diseases – now we have a way to help immunize against mental and emotional disease. The bottom line is that very few of us are prepared for the challenges of parenthood. We know this is true because the percentage of children feeding cycles of special education, school failure, pathologies like ADD and aggression, suicide and drug abuse, juvenile justice and ultimately the jails and prisons ----are skyrocketing. Limited resources in public schools and the growth of managed care in medicine have greatly reduced availability of professional help for family's and children's emotional challenges through schools and pediatricians. Often parents have neither the information nor training to deal effectively with the effects of common adverse childhood experiences and, in fact, may exacerbate trauma without understanding the impact. Currently, public resources are almost entirely remedial and only treat a problem as intervention after it is diagnosed, usually long after serious damage to the human psyche has already occurred. The few avenues for help are only available in extreme emergencies, treatment time is very limited and the outcomes can be worse than the basic cause. These ubiquitous situations transcend families of all classes, races, ages and ethnicities.

**The UPP Initiative** is breaking out of the old paradigm by making the connection with the public's understanding the devastating impact of ACE's - the first step is the need for access to ongoing support and constructive skills for parents – *who are children's best health insurance*. In addition, by incorporating the social determinants of health into a business model, the ACE Awareness Foundation intends to change the minds of insurance providers and legislators. Then the private and public sectors will be brought to realize that preventive models can and will have positive impacts on our community's children by focusing on the health and well-being of the family. Then policy and legislation reform will follow ultimately offering insurance reimbursements for "front end," proven solutions that exponentially reduce the financial support for "back-end" approaches.

**BY INVESTING UPSTREAM-** The ACE Awareness Foundation is committed to social entrepreneurship through its signature **UPP** Initiative. The foundation's vision is one day for **UPP** sites to be strongly dotted across Greater Memphis, the State of Tennessee and



throughout the country bringing meaningful, systemic change in culture through parental lifestyle decisions in trauma informed families. Ultimately we believe **UPP** will serve as a national model.

### **-EXAMPLES OF PARENTIAL SITUATIONS AT UPP-**

- A new baby is on the way and parents are nervous
- Parents have perceived a difference in their child's behavior in contracts to other children and want clarification on what's "normal"
- The child's temperament is in great contract to that of the mother and she is feeling impotent to know how to interpret or manage the child
- Child is acting out or troubled at school is diagnosed with learning problems
- "Helicopter Parents" are trying to detach from college bound student
- Parents don't agree on discipline due to their own differing family backgrounds
- Parents are separating, divorcing or fighting and want to minimize effects on their child/children
- A recent second marriage brought concern to the couple about "blended families"
- A teenager suddenly seems detached and sullen
- Grandparents are worried about how parents are handling a given child
- Grandmother is raising her daughter's three children
- Parent is concerned about influence of neighborhood on pre-teen child
- Dad wants to "re-enter" family

