

# Giving Voice to Mothers at the Margins



Photo courtesy of Jessica Stockton Clancy

## A Day in the Life of Malika Saada Saar

By Jessica Stockton Clancy

It's a busy Tuesday morning on Capitol Hill, with staffers, visitors and lawmakers rushing through the corridors. Amidst the chaos, a group of parents and children from Missouri and Iowa walk through the historic halls of Congress, their shoes echoing on the marble floors. Malika Saada Saar escorts them as they head to a Senate Finance Committee hearing. Though she is on the Hill daily laying the

groundwork for hearings like this one, today is different; Saada Saar feels for these families as they prepare to share private experiences in a very public forum.

### THE MISSION

Saada Saar is the founder and executive director of The Rebecca Project for Human Rights. Her work focuses on national policies that affect vulnerable mothers and fami-

lies, and she believes all parents have the right to raise their children with dignity. Saada Saar is often witness to the stereotypes projected onto those who struggle with poverty, addiction, legal issues and life amidst violence. "They are viewed as if they are not mothers equal to other mothers and children not equal to other children," she says. "These are mothers who everyone feels invited to judge." Her

mission, and that of the organization, is to give these women a voice and to break the cycle that leads entire families into a downward spiral. This 2006 hearing was the chance to shed light on the underlying issues of abuse and trauma that often lead to maternal addiction and on the increased need for family-based treatment centers. These centers comprise only 5 percent of drug treatment programs and allow

families to stay together instead of facing the alternatives: putting their children in foster care or being denied treatment entirely.

"No one plans to have the disease of addiction take over their lives," says a blonde-haired mother. Six senators and 150 audience members listen intently as she describes her methamphetamine addiction. This mother was first offered drugs at age 7 and was the victim of sexual abuse and violence. After incarceration, she couldn't get clean in single-adult treatment centers because the programs were short-term and offered no services for her children; a residential family program is why she is sober today.

## FEDERAL FUNDING FOR FAMILY TREATMENT

"It was amazing," says Saada Saar, referring to the applause that followed each testimony. "So often we don't allow their voices to be part of how policy is made," she says. "We reduce them to assumptions and statistics, and we don't really honor their humanity or their input." The outcome was \$145 million being made available to family-based treatment and the victory marked the first time federal child welfare funding was allowed to go toward family treatment.

Saada Saar is a District resident and mother to Sage, 5, and Jonah, 2. Her husband Chris is a physician at Washington Hospital Center and teaches at the Howard University College of Medicine. Raised in Philadelphia by her mother

and grandmother, Saada Saar says having three generations of women in the home taught her respect for the sacred ties between mother and child. Her passion for her work and for her role as mother are inherently intertwined. "There is a very deep gratitude I have for the chance to be with my children and give them what they need," says Saada Saar. "But in the shadows, there is always a recognition of how difficult it is to mother when you can't give them that."

## IN THE BEGINNING

After completing her undergraduate studies at Brown and earning a master's in education at Stanford, Saada Saar began her mission on behalf of vulnerable families. In 1994 she founded The Family Rights and Dignity Project in San Francisco, advocating for the rights of families who could not afford proper housing but were having their children taken from them solely due to marginal living conditions.

While advocating for more family-based shelters, Saada Saar wanted to help parents reclaim their dignity; many mothers she met were upset by their portrayal in the media as lazy and incompetent. Saada Saar organized writing workshops that brought them together with prestigious female activists, poets and professors from the Bay area. Under the guidance of these teachers, the mothers were empowered to write their own stories. "Those workshops really moved me," says Saada Saar, "and made me think that we don't

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use art enough in the way we do transformative work.”

As her advocacy work continued, Saada Saar felt hindered without a law degree. “As a woman of color I could not be taken as seriously,” she says. She applied to Georgetown University Law Center and contacted Professor Peter Edelman, who would become her mentor. Edelman was a former legislative assistant to Robert Kennedy and worked as a counselor to the Secretary of Health and Human Services under Bill Clinton. “I told him I wanted to come to law school and be his shadow,” says Saada Saar.

### WRITING THE WAY

In a small lounge at a family-based treatment center in Southeast D.C., Saada Saar and a group of mothers holding pens and journals sit on plastic folding chairs arranged in a circle. A young mother stands and says, “I claim my space,” a phrase the women use as a way of rising out of the shame that has been a recurring theme in their lives. She shares her poem that speaks of growing up in foster care, being forced to search for food in trash cans and turning to prostitution and eventually drugs to numb her pain. After prison time and the agony of losing her kids, she is now clean and her family reunited.

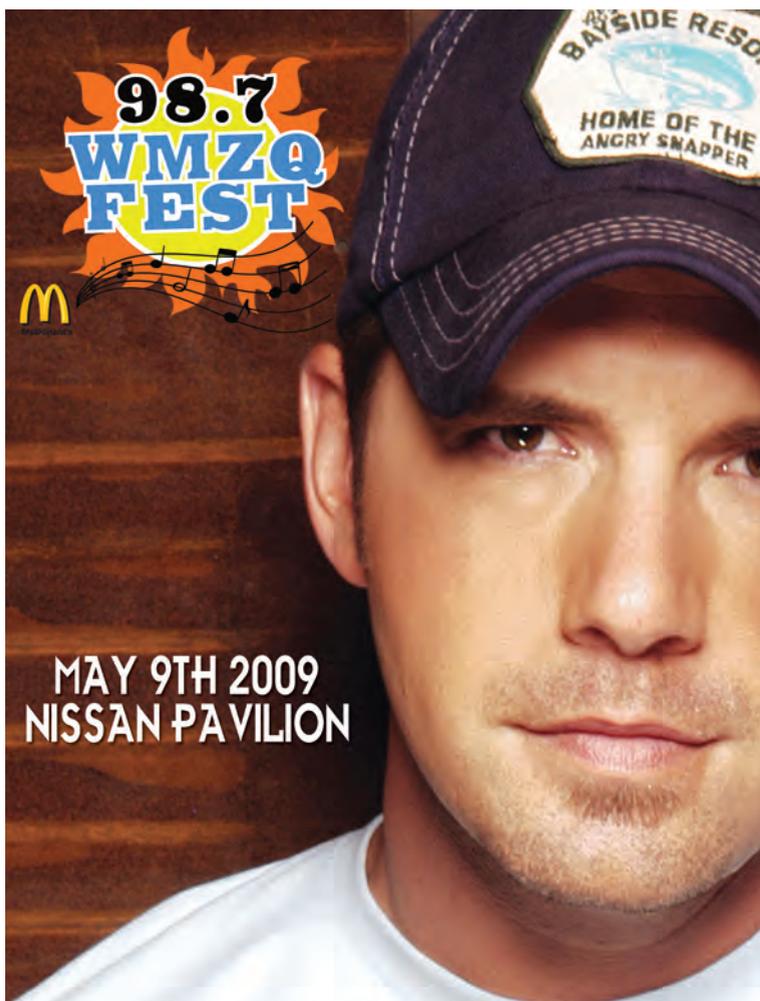
“I remember being stunned that that sort of transformation and grace were possible,” says Saada Saar. Inspired by the writing workshops she organized with the mothers in San Francisco, Saada Saar got funding to start Crossing The River, a spoken and written

word workshop to help District mothers in recovery “cross over” to the other side of their shame and discover their self-esteem through writing. “It connected me to these very fierce women,” she says. “They were fighting demons greater than my own to get to the other side, and their strength helped carry me over to the other side of law school.”

The first of these workshops introduced Saada Saar to several influential women, including Rebecca Rice. A D.C. artist and activist, Rice was one of the first instructors and believed deeply in the transformative power of art. Saada Saar describes her as “the creative muscle and spirit of Crossing The River.” One of the first to graduate from the program was Imani Walker, a mother in recovery who then founded Sacred Authority, helping fellow mothers become advocates for family-based treatment. In 2001, Saada Saar and Walker merged these programs with the intention of starting a national project. They won a \$25,000 Ford Foundation fellowship and two years later incorporated under the name The Rebecca Project, honoring Rice who had since passed away. The organization continues to focus on family-based treatment and has expanded into alternative sentencing for mothers, the issue of violence against women and girls and improved conditions of confinement for mothers behind bars.

### THROWING OFF THE SHACKLES

A young Florida woman is serving a four-year sentence for a probation violation relating



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to a drug charge. She is seven months pregnant, and during two separate transports, she is restrained with shackles though there is no security risk for a woman in her condition. During the birth at a nearby Tampa hospital, she is shackled throughout 16 hours of labor and is unable to move freely and relieve her discomfort due to the metal restraints. "I felt as if they were treating me like a murderer," she says.

Last year, by presenting the written testimony of previously incarcerated mothers, The Rebecca Project, with the support of Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL), successfully helped ban the use of shackles on women in federal prisons during labor, delivery and post-delivery. But with the exception of California, Illinois and Vermont, state prisons may still shackle pregnant offenders. "That work continues," says Saada Saar.

## BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY

As mother to a daughter, the organization's new focus on violence against girls brings with it an unexpected vulnerability. "I carry with me the narratives of these girls who have been so hurt," says Saada Saar. "I'm learning how to make that a quiet, emotional juggling act within myself." Though she has structured the organization to be supportive of family, like any mother, Saada Saar stills feels the challenge to appropriately balance time at work with time at home. "I really hold that mind-

fully," she says. "I don't want to fall into a trap of at the end of the day feeling like I haven't given my own family the same attention I have given other families."

Sitting on the front steps of her rowhouse, Saada Saar considers the work that lies ahead. Though The Rebecca Project is small and has limited funds, she has both optimism and a blueprint for how she wants to proceed; the lived experiences of mothers will remain at the heart of the organization's efforts. She has seen the power of their voices affect much more than policy. "To see mothers walk straighter and hold their heads higher," she says, "they feel a sense of purposefulness I don't think was there before."

Though she will continue to use the traditional methods of fact sheets, memos and white papers to persuade lawmakers, Saada Saar is most inspired by the potential for humanity to overturn misconceptions. "When lawmakers are able to bear witness to who these mothers really are, in all their truths and dimensions, and then thoughtfully reconsider policy," she explains, "that is a great thing to watch."

Jessica Stockton Clancy is a freelance writer and full-time mother. She grew up in New York City, lived in Detroit and Los Angeles while working in the film industry and now calls Washington home. She is currently launching the D.C. branch of The Momoir Project ([www.themomoirproject.com](http://www.themomoirproject.com)), a series of classes to inspire mothers to write their own first-person stories.

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