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Hope Amid the Despair

Death of Baby Jasmine Reminds That We All Must Work Together for Change on Skid Row

by Gisselle Acevedo

For too long, we have read about and seen on television the depressing tales of hospital dumping, drug addiction, homelessness and crime on Skid Row. The recent death of Baby Jasmine reminds us, once again, that the smallest and weakest members of our society are among Skid Row's residents and victims.

Baby Jasmine was just seven weeks old when she starved to death on Aug. 10. Despite the fact that she had displayed signs of malnourishment when examined days prior by both the shelter in which she and her mother had been staying since June, and the county social workers assigned to her case, she slipped literally through their fingers and cracks in the system intended to protect her and other children on Skid Row.

That a tiny infant could starve to death while living at a crowded Downtown shelter and with social workers aware of her potential plight speaks to the challenges all of us face every day in dealing with the working poor and the homeless.

We need to ask, as a society raising these children, are we doing enough? As the president and chief executive officer of Para Los Niños, a nonprofit agency that has served low-income children and their working families for 27 years on Skid Row and beyond, I know there is hope amid the despair. But Baby Jasmine's death is a poignant reminder that we must be ever vigilant and committed to the change that is underway.

Change is occurring: Since Jasmine's death, Los Angeles County has pledged to put in place a new case assessment process, as well as ensure a greater presence of social workers in the Skid Row community. Public nurses will accompany social workers when emergency cases involve young children, and the children will be more closely examined when signs of malnutrition arise.

Beyond this, a small group of what I call "guardian angels" has quietly mobilized to protect and respect the approximately 300 children and youth in the heart of Skid Row. Over the years, the children, their families and our staff at the corner of Sixth and Gladys streets have been accosted, threatened and harassed. We regularly find human feces, soiled undergarments, used condoms and dirty needles in front of our buildings and on our playground (yes, a playground can be found on Skid Row).

These guardian angels - the officers from the Los Angeles Police Department's Safer Cities Initiative, the City Attorney's Neighborhood Prosecutor Program, the Central City East Association and the offices of City Council members José Huizar and Jan Perry - have been circling the wagons around the intersection of Sixth and Gladys in a collective and comprehensive effort to ensure the safety and well-being that every child deserves, regardless of economic status.

From the LAPD's rapid response to rampant drug use and dealing and other criminal activity, to the City Attorney's office leading the way for removal of a needle exchange program after used needles were being discarded onto the playground, these figures are working overtime to keep the sidewalks and street at Sixth and Gladys clean and clear of danger.

While some have criticized the enhanced crackdowns, we applaud the city and the LAPD for taking assertive action to ensure the safety of the children. We support the one-year-old Safer Cities Initiative because it has brought a greater police presence into our lives and the lives of the hardworking families who have jobs in industrial Downtown. This program needs to be a long-term investment in the future of this community.

But that only goes so far. Truly effecting change in Skid Row requires the participation of more than those who already live or work here. The public must get engaged in efforts to form a protective ring around the children by voicing support for more affordable family housing units in the Downtown area and throughout the region, so that fewer women and children end up living on the streets or in temporary shelters.

We also hope that our Downtown Los Angeles neighbors, business owners and new loft dwellers will get involved by mirroring and expanding the activism of the Central City East Association in such areas as helping us reclaim the drug-infested Gladys Park with city-sponsored recreational activities for children, joining community policing efforts and participating in the CCEA's neighborhood walks. Ultimately, all Downtown denizens should be shouting from their warehouses and rooftop gardens that this area can change.

When we think about a small, vulnerable baby like Jasmine, we should think of the potential that every child has in starting his or her life. Each child merits this much from society, if not more. Rather than a place of sadness and despair, perhaps we can make Skid Row a place of hope and new beginnings. The children and families who live, work or depend on the services here are working too hard and deserve nothing less.

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