

Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg remarks for the Hands Around the Courthouse event held on April 5, 2017.

Good afternoon! My name is the Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg and I'm also a foster parent. I'm glad to be here as we link hands around the courthouse. Our action today can only be a symbol of our concerns about children's safety and happiness, but symbols are powerful indeed. At their best they remind us and encourage us in our deepest commitments.

My own commitment to addressing child abuse grew when my spouse Amy and I became foster parents to two brothers, five and two years old. When they arrived, they held hands all the time, even while brushing their teeth. A few months later, their three and four year old sisters joined our family. You would not believe how many knockoff brand Cheerios we go through. In the almost two years since becoming a licensed foster parent, my eyes have been opened to how much early childhood trauma (including neglect, violence, poverty and discrimination) permanently impact the cognitive and emotional development of those who experience it. I'm still learning how many resources children in care need to even approach a level playing field.

One of the most important resources is caring people. I think with gratitude of so many! First, there are the social workers and other professionals. Also, the members of the congregation I serve who brought us food when we were settling in. Add in my parents, who fly in when Amy travels for work. And I would be remiss in not giving a shout out to Pete's Auto on Meade St, who sold us a minivan really quickly and really cheaply after we first agreed to take the whole sibling set, going from two to four kids...and then realized we didn't own a vehicle that could even fit four car seats. I had no idea how many people it takes to intervene in situation of abuse. Raising awareness, one of the goals of this event, is how caring people are gathered.

Yet awareness alone is limited. I hope and believe that we link hands today because we are committed to addressing root causes so that someday we won't need to raise awareness about child abuse.

If you're interested in getting involved in fostering as a way to stop the cycles of abuse in which children can so easily get caught, I hope that you'll talk to me. I'm parenting multiple toddlers so most of my stories fall in the horror genre but I'd also like to thank you for considering how you could help, and share with you how meaningful I find this role. Maybe you too could be a fulltime foster parent or maybe you could see yourself providing occasional respite care for families who are maintaining fulltime placements.

Or you might feel inspired to get involved in another way that better fits your life. Be kind to the kids you already know. Ask those who care for them what support they need. Think about which children and youth are most vulnerable in our society—transgender, immigrant, black, disabled, unfortunately this is not a short or small list—and start talking with people you know about what you can do to encourage those who are most often at risk.

Remember that, like linking hands, this is a task that cannot be completed by an individual—not even by a caring hearted one. You can wander down here to the

courthouse by yourself and hold your hands out all you want, but you alone will not be able to encircle this or any other building.

To really make a difference we will have to join hands with each other (and those not here today) and work together on projects for the common good, so that our schools are equipped to serve kids who live with trauma and its aftermath. So that voters understand how crucial it is to adequately fund lifespan mental health services. So that families can access resources before they are in trouble. So that there is widespread support for the laws and social norms that will protect children from abuses occasional and constant, private and visible, interpersonal and systemic.

Let this month be a time for you to make a new commitment to this work and then, after April ends, remember your commitment. Thank you for taking part in this important event today.