

# Sooner Nation

BY ANDREW FAUGHT

## OU alumna lends voice-and cameras-to America's hungry

**A**S PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES WRANGLE OVER THE FUTURE OF THE COUNTRY, UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA ALUMNA MARIANA CHILTON POINTS TO A REALITY THAT OFTEN DOESN'T MAKE THE HEADLINES: EVERY DAY, 48 MILLION AMERICANS – OR 15 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION – GO HUNGRY.

"I've been talking about this as a major crisis for years, but it's too uncomfortable to think about children not eating," says Chilton, founding director of the Center for Hunger-Free Communities at Drexel University in Philadelphia, where she is an associate professor at the Dornsife School of Public Health. "We don't talk about poverty in the media in a way that's meaningful and understandable, so it's easy for people with wealth and a modicum of comfort to turn it off.

"And yet," she adds, "people are experiencing food insecurity all around us."

Chilton, who earned her master's in epidemiology at OU's College of Public Health in 1999, is working to incite dialogue in a dramatic way. Since 2008, she's distributed 100 cameras to residents in Philadelphia; Boston; Baltimore; Camden, N.J.; and New Haven, Conn., as part of her Witnesses to Hunger program. Participants are charged with capturing images that tell the story of food deprivation in the United States. Photos aren't just of empty refrigerators. They are pictures of poverty, including snapshots of broken kitchen appliances and boarded-up row houses.

Hunger, which Chilton says, "is not an eyeball diagnosis," is explained through other unstinting apertures. One witness turned her lens on community violence, clicking a picture of pooled blood on a city sidewalk.

"Hunger magnifies other problems across the country," Chilton says. "Families don't go hungry in a vacuum."

Since launching Witnesses for Hunger, Chilton, joined by witnesses and their photos, has testified three times before Congress on the need for such programs as the Farm Bill to support health and nutrition. Children are at highest risk. A healthy baby's brain grows by 700 neurons a second, less if it is

undernourished, according to research.

"Hunger affects math and reading scores," Chilton says. "Children are more likely to repeat a grade and less likely to complete high school. It's not just about food. It starts to spiral down into other social and emotional problems. Basically, food insecurity is driving up health care costs and causing an enormous amount of social and emotional pain among a huge swath of the American people."

Witness photos have been featured in exhibits and have been highlighted in the media, including CBS News and *The Washington Post*.

"The photographs are an attempt to break down the barriers for people who don't want to know about food insecurity and for those who are afraid to ask questions about it," Chilton says. "We also want people to break out of the stigma of hiding in shame."

The conversation is incrementally gaining traction. In 2014, Chilton was appointed to serve on the bipartisan National Commission on Hunger, of which she is co-chair. The group released its findings in November 2015 to Congress and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which administers the national food stamp program, known as SNAP, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Some of the commission's major findings were the need for job-training and assistance programs to lift low-income Americans out of poverty, special attention to families with children and veterans who are

hungry, as well as adjustments to the SNAP program to allow families more time to stabilize after getting a job.

As hunger goes, Philadelphia ranks number one in food insecurity among the 10 largest American cities, according to Eva Gladstein, the executive director of the Mayor's Office of Community Engagement and Opportunity. Twenty-six percent of residents – nearly 400,000 people – live below the federal poverty line, she notes. Gladstein's office uses Chilton's data and hosts programs that give residents financial counseling and money management skills as one way to foster food security.

Gladstein praises Chilton as a "straight talker," but "I think her greatest value is that she understands and listens to other



Photo Provided

Lesha, a mother in Boston, took this photo of her son for the Witnesses to Hunger Project. She writes, "Looking back at this picture, I realized how much I hated to take the T, but my son always seemed to enjoy the ride. It's hard for me to do a lot with my son ... I'm telling myself it's only temporary."





MARIANA CHILTON

people's points of view and learns from them. She helps them speak for themselves and tell their own stories. Mariana is very creative in terms of being able to get those voices in front of people who can make decisions and affect policies."


For its part, the Drexel Center for Hungry-Free Communities hosts the Philadelphia site of Children's HealthWatch, the largest data set in the nation about food insecurity and its impact on children younger than 4, ages in which mild to moderate under-nutrition can have long-term consequences on brain development. Children's HealthWatch is headquartered at Boston Medical Center and collects data from clinics and emergency rooms in five cities, including Philadelphia.

Chilton is a familiar sight on Capitol Hill. Representatives from her office travel to Washington, D.C., every six weeks to meet with legislative staffs in hopes of advancing hunger as a policy concern. Chilton has provided data to lawmakers who are considering reauthorizing the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids

Act, which funds all federal child nutrition programs, including school breakfast and lunch programs.

Chilton first began to consider hunger in America while pursuing her master's of public health at OU. Working with the southern Cheyenne and Arapahoe tribes, "I realized the centrality of food in their lives," she recalls. "I learned about the sacredness of food, but I also saw how very deep poverty can really mess up the nutrition and health of people."

More than 15 years later, hunger continues to be her life's work. Chilton's language is blunt, her words easily mistaken for anger.

"What you're hearing is courage and fearlessness," she says. "What people need is more compassion, and in order to get that you have to be fearless and talk about what's real." 

---

*Andrew Faught is a freelance writer living in Fresno, California.*