

Sheryl Brissett Chapman

Brissett Chapman, the 61-year-old executive director of the National Center for Children and Families in Bethesda, has spent 20 years bringing to light the plight of Montgomery County's poor and its victims of abuse. Her agency has provided them with shelters, counseling, adoptive homes and a respected voice. Brissett Chapman spoke with The Washington Examiner about her lifelong work on behalf of the underprivileged, and its foundation in her Christian faith.

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Do you consider yourself to be of a specific faith?

I am a Baptist Christian. I grew up in the faith — my great-grandfather was a Baptist preacher in South Carolina. As a young girl, my mother would drive around with him and he'd tell her, "You need to be real close to God, because it looks like colored women always seem to need him." So I grew up with a mother who always prayed for discernment, who had a strong personal relationship with God — she is a kind, devout, forgiving woman.

What compels you to a vocation where successes tend to be so incremental, and where the root problems never will be solved?

I think that's a myth created by people who cannot see the most profound democratic reality: But for the grace of God, it could be any of us. In Him, all things are really possible.

When I worked at the Children's National Medical Center, I saw 10,000 cases in nearly 10 years of abused children — babies with gonorrhea, children beat, boiled and burned, dead-on-arrivals. But here's what I've discovered: I've also seen the light come back into the eyes of people because you look them in the face and say, "I see you, and I care." When that light comes back on, they can change their lives, and they do.

The Bible offers some conflicting advice about how we should respond to sin and to sinners. In dealing with people who've been victims, but have also made some bad decisions, how does the Bible inform your approach?

My faith has taught me that God is a forgiving and a loving God. That doesn't mean we'll be liberated from the consequences of evil, but it does mean that we can go in relationship with God, and be forgiven. Because of that, I cannot be the judge of others. This idea that one sin is worse than another is a self-serving phenomenon. We all stumble.

What experience in your own life most challenged or changed your values regarding children and family?

The two youngest of my children came to me as an 8-month-old who had been abandoned in the hospital, and was very sick, and as an 8-year-old, after a really horrific psychological and physiological journey.

My biological children, I had nestled and fed — even now their bodies soften next to me, and I've never not been there for them. And then to have children who were viciously betrayed by death and drugs and parental abandonment — to grow to where they embrace me as a mother has been very humbling. We've gotten there, but it's been no joke. What's changed in me is that I truly have empathy for parents who have problems figuring it out, holding on, getting through, reaping the consequences of poor choices, not having a clue — I truly get that. There were days when I'd be in church and I couldn't leave, asking others to please pray with me because I wanted to get through the day. Now, they're beautiful and grown up, and they come home Sundays to eat with me.

Life is a film, not a snapshot. Parents are in films. And we've got to be empathetic about what it means to be responsible for another life — how awesome and overwhelming that is at the same time.

At your core, what is one of your defining beliefs?

I believe in the fundamental power of being childlike, because it allows us to be close to God, and because that's how God wants us to come. It's different than being childish and self-centered. It speaks to the wonderful ways that children can tell the truth, how they can trust, can love, can create and can play. It speaks to their ability to dream and to imagine — to connect with people by taking the risk to forgive and to put out a hand. When we're childlike, we can live a better life.

— Leah Fabel