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On Becoming a Mom in Central Florida

By Katie Philp
UCF Forum columnist
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‘As our region grapples with a growing population and an affordable housing crisis, we must ensure the stability of women.’



(Photo by Nicholas Githiri at Pexels)

I spend a lot of my spare time at a local youth center working with children and young adults. Earlier this year, several students from the same family lost their mother unexpectedly. “Jane,” the mother, and I had been getting to know each other better as we frequently discussed ways to support her children, and I like to think our relationship would have grown if given the chance. We were the same age, but our similarities mostly ended there.

The truth is that, on many levels, I can’t relate to the families I serve or to the women who often hold them together. I have not struggled or suffered in the same ways, nor do I face the same challenges. Most of these women live in poverty, and I do not.

In most of my memories of Jane, she is crying. Sometimes, she is in her work uniform, having come right from her job that didn’t quite pay enough for her family to get by. Other times, the challenges of being a parent got to her because, frankly, parenting is hard. Period. My final memory of Jane is putting my arm around her in comfort after a particularly upsetting incident with her child. As I said, I’m not sure we could have been more different, but I always heard in her voice the same love for her children that I have for my daughter.

In getting to know Jane, I began to realize that my experience of becoming a mom in Central Florida was far different than that of women living only a few miles away.

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Jane’s challenges are not uncommon; Florida ranks below average in all indicators tracked by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research in its Status of Women in the States. More than a quarter of employed women work in low-wage jobs, and the wage gap between men and women is not projected to close until 2038. Nearly two-thirds of working single mothers would receive a pay raise if they were paid the same as men. By some estimates, simply paying women doing the same work as men an equal wage would reduce poverty in this country by more than half. This wouldn’t just benefit children and families; the same analysis shows that equal pay would have injected an additional \$513 billion into the national 2016 economy. Equal pay benefits everyone.

Fans will likely recognize that I pulled the headline of this column from the Showtime series, *On Becoming a God in Central Florida*, a dark comedy involving a pyramid scheme that exploits those lured by the idea of fabulous wealth. While the show leans heavily on hyperbole to tell its story, elements of reality emerge around the protagonist, a struggling single mother faced with the challenges of caring for her daughter. Although the show is set in the 90s, circumstances for many women living in poverty have remained largely unchanged in our state.

As an educator, my focus has always been on children and teens, and my expertise lies in finding ways to provide them with the best possible educational experience. Certainly it is valuable and rewarding work, but I’ve realized it is not enough. We can do so much better. Vote for lawmakers who will enforce and strengthen fair labor standards. Join

the fight for a livable minimum wage. If you are in a position of power, reconsider hiring practices that unfairly base starting pay on salary history.

As our region grapples with a growing population and an affordable housing crisis, we must ensure the stability of women, especially those already struggling just to make ends meet. If we truly want a thriving economy in Central Florida, why not invest in over 50 percent of your residents?

Recently, Jane's two young daughters came to play with my daughter. I watched with a mixture of sadness and joy as the three of them ran through the playground, holding hands and laughing. I've been lucky to become a mom in Central Florida; while parenting is the hardest job I've ever had, I see how much harder it could be without access to the resources afforded me. I hope I can honor Jane's legacy by working to ensure that her daughters don't have to fight so hard for equality and a fair shot at success.

I hope you will consider doing the same. I think your mother would be proud.

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