



Joyce N. Thomas

Celebrating 35 Years of Improving Society's Response to Abuse and Neglect of Children: An Interview with Joyce N. Thomas, Founding Member and Past President of APSAC

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Joyce N. Thomas, a founding member and third President of APSAC, has dedicated her career working to improve the lives of children. This article is based upon an interview with Ms. Thomas to learn more about her experiences as APSAC celebrates thirty-five years dedicated to providing access to the latest in child welfare research findings and best practices. An advanced pediatric nurse practitioner, Ms. Thomas has witnessed firsthand the challenges and impact of childhood victimization, especially in communities of color.

A historical lens of the child welfare system during the late 1970s shows that the system was plagued with many challenges. The number of child sexual abuse cases being reported exploded in America, as numerous victims began to disclose sexual abuse. The child welfare system was unprepared to effectively treat these victims. In 1976, Children's National Hospital in Washington, DC (CNH), applied to the Federal Department of Health and Human Services for funding to serve victims of child sexual abuse. The CNH received one of the first federal grants from the Department of Justice Law Enforcement Assistance Administration to treat sexually abused children. Ms. Thomas became the first director of a specialized unit within Children's National Hospital to examine pediatric child sexual abuse.

During the 1980s, the public child welfare system became overwhelmed by a crack cocaine epidemic that was ravaging communities, disproportionately affecting African Americans living in poverty in

inner-city communities. Many such neighborhoods experienced a high concentration of poverty after most middle-class black families had left the city and employment opportunities were scarce due to an economic recession. Manufacturing plants had moved away suburban areas, which restricted access for inner-city workers who did not have public transportation to work opportunities (Dunlap et al., 1996).

Because of its low cost and easy access, crack cocaine use spread within inner-city neighborhoods during the 1980s. Crack cocaine is highly addictive and devastated families when addicts focused on supporting their drug habits and failed to care for their children's needs. The child welfare system became overwhelmed by the demand for services required to care for the children of addicts (Edlin et al., 1994). Children born to mothers addicted to crack became common, as addicts often prostituted themselves to support their drug habit. Babies born addicted to crack cocaine were often medically needy and the crack cocaine epidemic also led to an increase in cases of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency (AIDS), with children sometimes born being HIV positive. The lack of effective HIV treatments at the time resulted in some parents dying from the AIDS, which left children with no parent to care for them.

In 1983, the need to improve child abuse investigative practices became evident nationwide, after several high-profile child abuse cases questioned the credibility of child protection workers' clinical

skills. National publicity surrounding the McMartin Preschool Abuse Trial led to concerns about how alleged child sexual abuse interviews were being conducted at the time. The McMartin preschool case “was one of the earliest and largest child sexual abuse cases in United States history that led to a wave of pre-school sexual abuse cases during the mid-1980s after the mother of a 2 1/2-year-old boy contacted police in August 1983, to report that her son had been sexually abused by staff in the McMartin pre-school (FRONTLINE, 1986). Highly publicized hearings of the case led to accusations that interviews with children in the pre-school were tainted by the interviewers’ suggestibility. Although none of those charged was convicted, the longest and costliest criminal prosecution in U.S. history lasted 28 months before the childcare staff members alleged to have perpetrated abuse on numerous children were acquitted (Mason, 1991). The national attention to the McMartin case brought child welfare services into a limelight that helped spark the founding APSAC leaders to seek a forum where clinicians and child welfare professionals could learn more effective ways to prevent, identify, and treat children and families involved in the child welfare system.

In 1984, no professional society focused on child sexual abuse, and practitioners felt isolated and lacked access to new information about ways to effectively treat victims. Ms. Thomas was part of a group of social service professionals looking for ways to enhance and encourage clinical and empirical studies to better document and understand the needs of abused and neglected children. A large portion of their efforts focused on sharing information about problems dogging the child welfare system.

Between 1981 and 1984, Ms. Thomas helped to organize an annual conference sponsored by Children’s National Hospital (CNH) in Washington, D.C., which was attended by professionals around the country. At the second conference in 1982, the guest speaker, Rod McKuen (a singer, songwriter, and actor), disclosed that he had been a victim of

child sexual abuse. The CNH conferences grew larger each year thereafter as the numbers of attendees increased and as the need for more specialized training for child welfare professionals became more evident.

Ms. Thomas acted as Chair for National Children’s Hospital Conferences. While speaking at the podium during the 1984 National Conference on Child Sexual Abuse, she told the audience of about 2,000 people from medical, mental health, legal, law enforcement, and social services fields that “No single discipline holds the key to confronting child abuse alone.” Responding to the audience’s reaction, she then asked the crowd of professionals if they felt it would be beneficial to establish a professional association to focus on ways to share clinical information about child sexual abuse. In response, nearly every hand in the audience was raised. About one hundred people put their chairs in a circle right there and made a commitment to form a professional society, which is how the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) was born.

After many meetings, much gathering of information, and the setting up of a structure for the professional society envisioned by these child advocates, APSAC became a reality when it was incorporated in 1987. Advocating to address numerous problems that were traumatizing children nationwide, Ms. Thomas and other founding members formed the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC).

APSAC sought to address the training needs of an overwhelmed child welfare system facing increasingly higher incidences of child fatalities, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, child neglect, and crack-affected infants and children neglected by addicted parents. Much of the early work of the founding members involved developing vision and mission statements and by-laws as well as planning ways to hold meetings with other professionals devoted to improving child welfare practices across the nation. In its early days, APSAC offered a series of conferences, or *colloquiums*, which focused on inviting attendees to be *students*, those who were learning about trending research.

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APSAC's goal was to disseminate quality information related to child abuse by sharing best practices for interdisciplinary professionals involved with the child welfare system. Looking for ways to assess children's needs more effectively, particularly in understanding child behavioral issues, APSAC focused on bringing training to improve practitioners' skills and knowledge. Over time, APSAC has worked to improve connections and coordination between professionals from many disciplines to promote the best response to child maltreatment, based upon scientific research findings. In deciding which topics to address, APSAC focused on the issues that were current in the field to provide relevant information to those working in the child welfare system. APSAC has grown into a national nonprofit organization focused on meeting the needs of professionals engaged in services for maltreated children and their families, including sharing information on state-of-the-art practice in all professional disciplines related to child abuse and neglect (APSAC, 2022).

Early Career and Current Work

Ms. Thomas served as the third president for APSAC and was also the first female and first African American to head the organization, and the only person of color on the original Board of Directors. Ms. Thomas' distinguished career as a public health specialist in maternal and child health and trauma-informed care led her to be a pioneer in forming APSAC. She has continued to be an active, contributing member of APSAC since its formation.

Her journey in child advocacy started when she graduated with a bachelor of science degree from Holy University in Oakland, California, and a master's degree in public health from the University of California, Berkeley. She earned her pediatric nurse practitioner certificate from Temple University School of Medicine in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1978, she was hired at National Children's Hospital as Director of the Child Protection Special Unit, which focused on the treatment and intervention of sexually abused children. In 1981, she was

appointed as Director of Child Protection Center at Children's Hospital. Under her leadership, this Child Protection Unit received the Exemplary Project Award from the U.S. Department of Justice. In 1987, Ms. Thomas co-founded the Center for Child Protection and Family Support (CCPFS), Inc., which is located in Washington, D.C. From 1988 to 1989, she took a brief leave from CCPFS and was a presidential appointee in the Reagan administration. She served as Staff Director of Substance Abuse Prevention.

In late 1989, she returned to CCPFS as president for that organization. In 1991, she served as President of APSAC. In 1990, Ms. Thomas received the first federal grant from the Department of Health and Human Service to examine cultural issues in the child welfare system, Ms. Thomas was instrumental in ensuring that APSAC included diversity, equity, and inclusion to improve the child welfare system. She established the People of Color Leadership Institute that provided technical assistance to child welfare agencies on definitions and various issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Ms. Thomas' legacy in APSAC leadership has ensured that the ongoing Colloquium gatherings focus on cultural diversity and inclusion training. During her interview, Ms. Thomas recalled working with APSAC and many other national organizations to address the problem of overrepresentation of African American and Native American children in the child welfare system. She commented on how unfortunate it is that "racial disparities continue to be a problem to this day, with no clear answer of what to do about it." There continues to be a gap between the race and ethnicity of leadership in child welfare organizations compared with the diversity of clients served. Providing diversity and inclusion training is essential to help practitioners learn more about cultural differences that affect practice.

During her impressive career, Ms. Thomas has been the invited guest of the President of the United States, Attorney General of the United States, and Surgeon General of the United States to provide critical input for policy development on a host of topics related to the victimization of, the protection of, and promoting

safety for children and families. As a premier nurse leader and scholar in the fields of child abuse, drug abuse, and domestic violence, she has testified in court as an expert witness in numerous criminal child maltreatment cases. She has shared her expertise as a panel member for the Cultural and Linguistic Competency Study as part of the National Evaluation of the Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families. She served as an expert panel member on violence for the American Academy of Nursing (AAN) and is a member of the Edge Runners National Advisory Council also with AAN. Ms. Thomas has served on the Board of Directors of the National Partnership to End Interpersonal Violence and was co-chair of the Public Policy Action Team. She also served on the Steering Committee of the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community (ISVAAC). She is currently on the Steering Committee on Futures Without Violence's National Conference on Domestic Violence and Health. She has been an invited guest and lecturer in Heika, Finland; Istanbul, Turkey; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Paris, France; Leningrad, Russia; and Zurich, Switzerland.

A major highlight of Joyce Thomas' career involved representing APSAC internationally at the People-to-People Institute in 1997. The People-to-People Program was established to enhance international understanding and friendship through educational, cultural, and humanitarian activities involving the exchange of ideas and experiences directly among peoples of different countries and diverse cultures. She served as the delegate leader of ten professionals from the United States and Puerto Rico. As the leader, she designed the program to visit various child protection agencies in South Africa. She had an opportunity to collaborate with other child welfare professionals from Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Cape Town. Since her visit occurred around the end of the Apartheid, the system of public policies that discriminated against blacks, was ending, Ms. Thomas arrival gathered a lot of attention, as a black female in a leadership role at that time was unheard of in South Africa. As a result of this visit,

she was able to develop a program in South Africa to study child maltreatment, which examined their child welfare system, law enforcement system, community-based treatment techniques, and other therapeutic treatment and prevention activities.

Her many awards include Outstanding Leader of a Child Welfare Agency by the Black Administrators of Child Welfare, the T. Barry Brazelton Lecture Award, Margery Fry Outstanding Services as Victim Assistance Practitioner, and Washington, D.C., Psychiatric Society's Community Achievement Award. She was named Outstanding Community-Based Practitioner from the Institute on Violence Abuse and Trauma by Alliant University in San Diego, California, in 2012, and given the Outstanding Prevention Award from the National Children's Advocacy Center in Huntsville, Alabama, in 2014. She has authored numerous professional articles, testified before Congress, and lectured to audiences internationally. She has served on the faculty of Trinity College in Washington, D.C., and been an adjunct faculty member at Johns Hopkins University, School of Nursing. She has lectured at Georgetown University, Howard University, Spellman College, University of Maryland, Southern Methodist University, and other institutions of higher learning.

Ms. Thomas currently lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, and is married to Dr. Jesse J. Harris. They have three adult children and five grandchildren. After a long, distinguished professional career, she continues her ongoing child advocacy as Fellow in the American Academy of Nursing (FAAN). She also continues to be active in advocating for the needs of the African American community and has served as a Steering Committee member for the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community.

The Future of APSAC

As her legacy suggests, Ms. Thomas continues to advocate for more attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. She believes that "*people need to be comfortable in their own skin*" (Thomas, 2022).

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In 2021, Ms. Thomas held a webinar based upon her research of African American pioneers in the field of maltreatment and presented on this topic at the 2022 APSAC Colloquium in New Orleans, Louisiana.

In discussing the future of APSAC, Ms. Thomas advocated that APSAC should focus on taking a more active role in supporting or recommending changes to public policies that impact child welfare practice. Members should be informed about APSAC's position regarding equity and inclusion and the influence that diversity has on children's involvement in the child welfare systems and their outcomes. Practitioners should understand how implicit biases may affect their practices, particularly when working with diverse populations, to understand the long-term impact of institutional racism over time. APSAC should encourage an examination of public policies to identify current examples of institutional racism to ensure that human diversity is encouraged and welcomed.

She recommended that APSAC leadership might explore ways to increase more minority representation among the organization's leadership and membership. A workgroup within APSAC, the Commission on Racism, might be a place to start exploring opportunities for research or training needs to address the disproportionality of children involved in the child welfare system, including the overrepresentation of Native American and children of color in the foster care system.

Finally, she suggested that APSAC should issue position statements that advocate for public policies focusing on prevention services. These would help to meet the needs of children and thus divert them from needing to become involved with the child welfare system. APSAC leadership and members should be encouraged to speak at public policy hearings to represent APSAC's recommendations. Further, the organization needs to continue providing educational briefings to educate its members and the public on policy issues that impact children and families. Additional training topics may include how to analyze public policies and how to better meet the needs of frontline workers and first responders.

Actions that might lead to more systemic changes would be (1) to examine current public policies to identify issues that negatively influence the child welfare system, (2) to gather more information to address current public policy issues, and (3) to advocate for more research, funding, training, or resources.

Reflections From an Aspiring Child Welfare Researcher

Interviewing Ms. Thomas was a fascinating educational experience in learning about all of the advocacy efforts she has completed throughout her impressive career. She serves as an excellent role model for new practitioners who could benefit from understanding that meaningful systemic change can start from the efforts of only a few committed persons.



About the Author

Bonnie Marsh, PhD, is an assistant professor at Slippery Rock University in Western Pennsylvania. She has worked in the child welfare system since 1980 as a child welfare caseworker, supervisor and administrator. Dr. Marsh earned her BSW from Pennsylvania State University, a MSW from University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work, and a DSW from Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. She continues to train new caseworkers for the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center (CWRC) and serves as a consultant for CWRC on various projects. Dr. Marsh teaches BSW and MSW-level classes for the Social Work Program at Slippery Rock University. Her research interests include an exploration of the after-care needs of youth who spent time in the foster care system. She is currently conducting research at Slippery Rock University to identify ways to support former foster care youth to succeed in completing their college education.

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