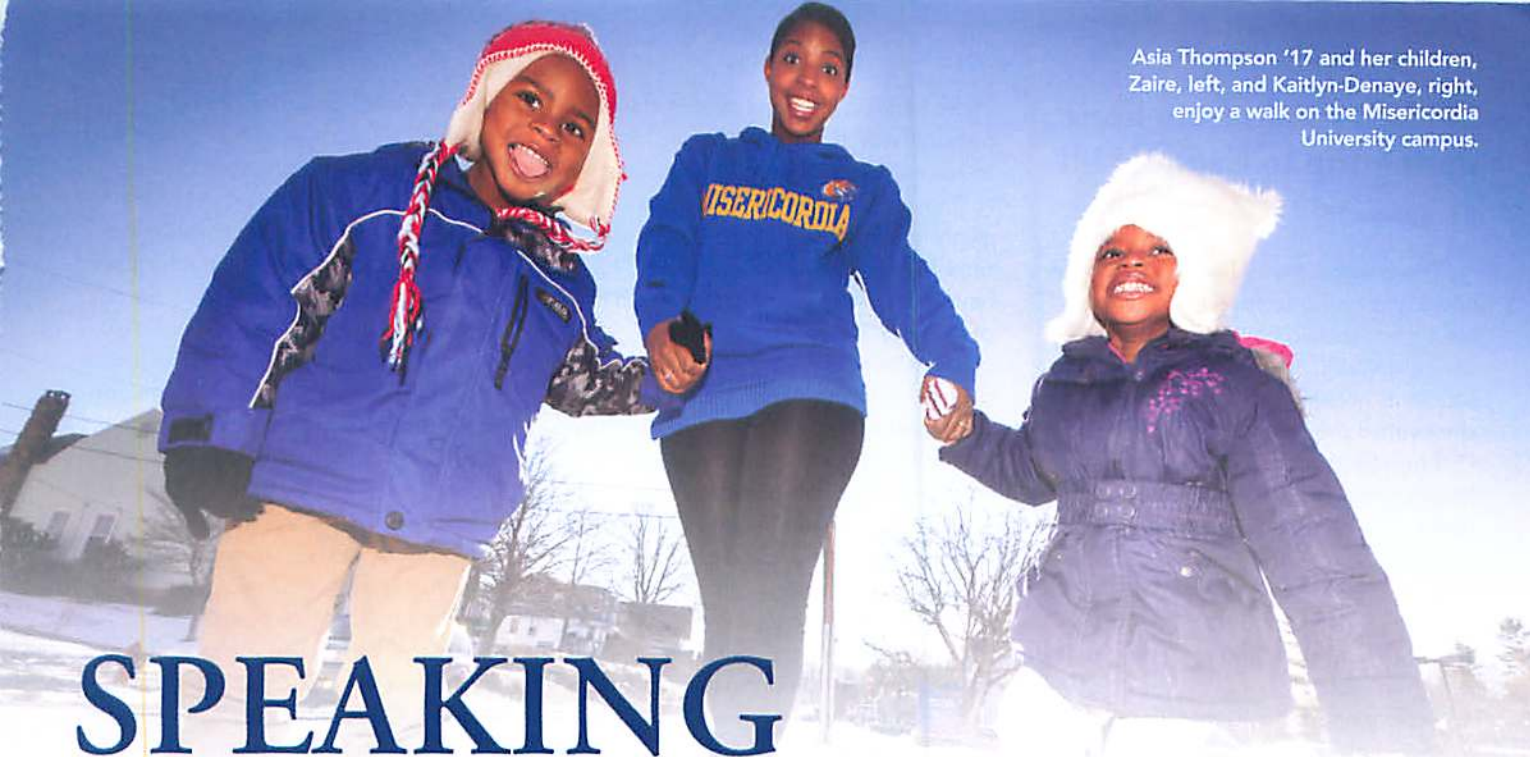


Asia Thompson '17 and her children, Zaire, left, and Kaitlyn-Denaye, right, enjoy a walk on the Misericordia University campus.



SPEAKING *from the* HEART

Student shares story of poverty and hunger on Capitol Hill

BY MARIANNE TUCKER PUHALLA

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The memories are painful, enough to make her cry. As a homeless 18-year-old and the mother of two infants, Asia Thompson '17 had no choice at the time but to sleep in her car with her children. At times, she faced the unconscionable decision of feeding herself or feeding them the only things she could afford – rice or pancakes.

Today, the 23-year-old English major is enrolled at Misericordia University through the Ruth Matthews Bourger Women with Children Program. Fueled by that pain and frustration, the New Jersey native is working to earn her college degree and, in turn, improve

their lives. Thompson also is choosing to share her story in the hopes that she can make a difference in the lives of the 15.5 million children in America – a staggering 21 percent – who faced hunger and poverty in 2014, according to Feeding America®, the nation's largest domestic hunger-relief organization.

During face-to-face meetings on Capitol Hill on Oct. 8 with U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsak and U.S. Sen. Bob Casey Jr., D-Pa., her message was simple: "When is it OK for kids to go hungry?" Thompson was one of eight storytellers brought to Washington, D.C., from across the country as part of the grassroots Day of Action, "Community Voices: Why Nutrition Assistance Matters," by The Center for American Progress (CAP), a Washington, D.C.-based think tank and public policy research and advocacy organization dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans.

At the time, Congress was embroiled in a budget stalemate that Vilsak admitted might threaten funding of subsidy programs such as the

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, better known as the SNAP and WIC programs.

Thompson brought others in the room and herself to tears as she told Vilsak of the struggles she faced after escaping an abusive relationship and how nutritional subsidies helped her bridge the gap from being homeless to being a successful Misericordia student. She emphasized that those subsidies are equally critical now to help her cross the next bridge in her life – from being a student to a successful professional.

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Asia Thompson '17, center, nutritionist Clancy Cash Harrison, left, and Katherine Pohlidal, director of the Bourger Women with Children Program, advocated for nutritional subsidy programs during a day of meetings on Capitol Hill.

Student speaks from heart during trip to Capitol Hill

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"There were days when I didn't know how I was going to feed my children. No parent should have to face that," she told Vilsak. "Getting help from the subsidies allowed me to survive until I discovered the Bourger Women with Children Program. I found a home at Misericordia and the help I needed to get my life on track. The difference is amazing. My children, now 4 and 5, are no longer just surviving. They are living a healthy lifestyle and thriving – they are more energetic and are doing really well in school."

Vilsak opened the 40-minute meeting by saying his department has worked to improve access to and quality of school

These issues impact real people in a really personal way. It is important for Congress to have these stories in front of them.

"I understand better than you might think," added Vilsak, who spent time in an orphanage as a child. "I have personally seen the many sides of poverty."

Sen. Casey was equally supportive during his face-to-face meeting with Thompson. "No child should ever have to live that way (in poverty). Asia, thank you, for being so brave and using your own life as a way to inspire others," he stated. He expressed an interest in meeting with the mothers in the Bourger Women with Children Program. Misericordia's Office of Government and Foundation Relations is working to arrange the visit.

"Subsidies such as SNAP and WIC are crucial components in the Bourger

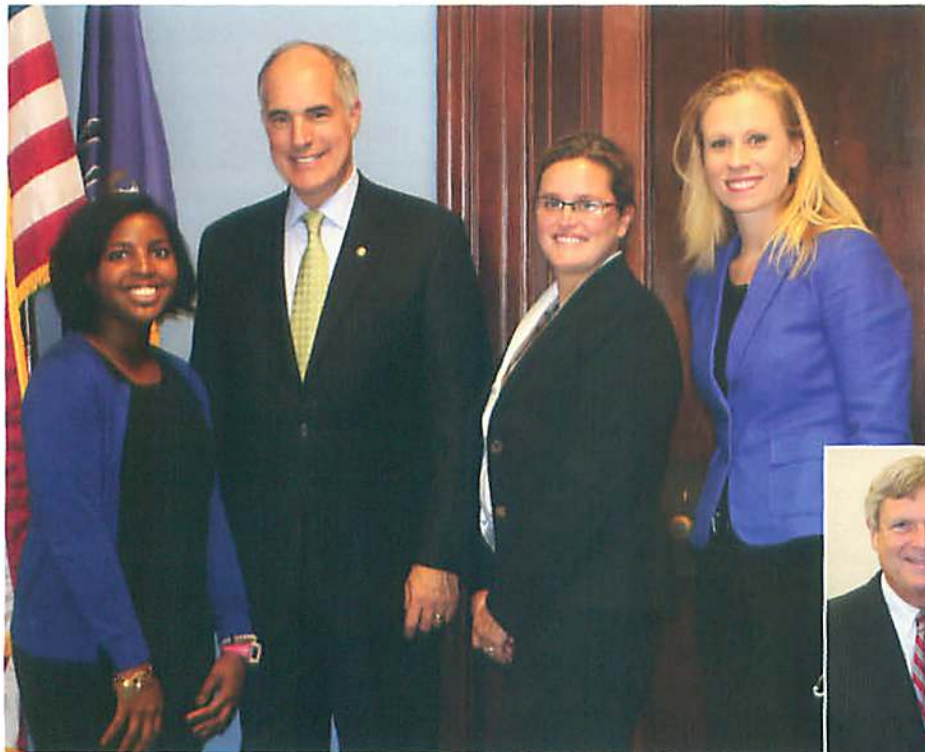
Women with Children Program," Program Director Katherine Pohlidal told the senator. "Misericordia relies on donations and grants to provide tuition assistance and housing for the women and their children, but we would not be able to provide funding for food. Each mother is required to work as a part of the program. With all they have to juggle – their full-time studies, work and raising their children – it would be nearly impossible for them to work additional hours to pay more for food. In the end, it is likely that a cut in the subsidies would prevent most women from participating in our highly successful program."

While in the nation's capital, Thompson and Pohlidal also met with key staffers for U.S. Sen. Patrick Toomey, R-Pa., and U.S. Rep. Lou Barletta, R-Pa., who promised to share what they heard with their legislators.

The Day of Action concluded with a Congressional Senate briefing where Thompson was one of four speakers to share their stories of nutritional struggles with more than 50 legislative aids and other Capitol Hill staffers, including a representative of the National Parent Teacher Association. The moderator was Ellen Teller, director of government affairs for the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), who directs FRAC's legislative agenda.

Thompson's story and that of others in the Bourger Women with Children Program came to the attention of CAP through nutritionist Clancy Cash Harrison, a registered dietitian who is employed by Misericordia to provide nutritional education to the women and children in the program. She was among the voices heard during the Capitol Hill visit.

Working with Jennifer Folliard, director of the Academy for Nutrition and Dietetics, Harrison arranged for Thompson and other Bourger program mothers to be interviewed for National Public Radio's StoryCorps series. The mission of StoryCorps projects is to honor and celebrate the lives of



meals and efforts are underway to eliminate abuse of the programs. He told the group he fully supports renewal of the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act, but others on Capitol Hill need convincing. "When President Obama hired me, my instructions were to help feed the kids," Vilsak said to his guests. After listening to Thompson and three others speak, he added, "Yours are stories that policymakers need to hear."

Asia Thompson '17, above left, with nutritionist Clancy Cash Harrison and Katherine Pohlidal, director of the Bourger Women with Children Program, advocated for nutritional subsidy programs during a meeting with Sen. Bob Casey.

Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsak, at right, with Asia Thompson '17 promised to give President Obama a copy of the Center for American Progress book featuring the stories of two Bourger Women with Children students.

everyday Americans by recording their stories. CAP representatives heard the stories and asked Thompson and Harrison if they would participate in the Day of Action, sponsored by the Food Research and Action Center, Witnesses to Hunger, Feeding America, the Coalition of Human Needs, and the Academy for Nutrition and Dietetics, the world's largest organization of food and nutrition professionals.

Catherine St. Louis on Oct. 24 and in a related story on Forex Report Daily, a news site that provides up-to-the-minute foreign trading stories from around the world.

Taking what he had heard from speakers during the Day of Action, U.S. Rep. James P. McGovern, D-Mass., spoke about the Community Voices campaign on the floor of the House of Representatives on Oct. 21.

“Thanks to the government and Misericordia – I’m that story.”

— *Asia Thompson '17*

“Even as a dietician, I found that I had my own misconceptions about poverty,” said Harrison, who provides nutritional counseling, helps manage an on-campus garden and offers cooking lessons for the mothers and the children in the Bourger program. “There is a need to debunk the stigma attached to subsidy programs. By coming together to speak out, we are able to shed light on these critical issues.”

News and social media coverage of the Day of Action went viral with the hash tags #Voices4Nutrition, #EndHungerNow, #MUtoCapitolHill and #MisericordiaProud. In addition to local television, magazine and newspaper stories, Thompson was featured on the websites TheNation.com and TalkPovery.org, and in the story, *Four Mothers School Bill O’Reilly on Child Hunger*, after the conservative pundit claimed stories of childhood hunger in America have been fabricated. Founded in 1865, The Nation is considered America’s oldest weekly magazine. Thompson also appeared in a video recapping the Day of Action produced by CAP and posted on the organization’s Facebook page.

Thompson provided statements for stories about the Day of Action on FirstFocus.org and the Coalition of Human Needs website, and subsequently was asked by the New York Times to comment when the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended pediatricians routinely screen for nutritional deficiencies. She was featured in the story by reporter

His speech can be viewed on YouTube. Links to the related articles and videos are posted at www.misericordia.edu/MUtoCapitolHill.

What is next for the newly energized Thompson and her children, Zaire, 5, and Kaitlyn-Denaye, 4? With a 3.5 GPA, the English major has plans to attend a study abroad program in Ireland in March. She is also on track to participate in a yearlong Master’s of English Literature program at the University of Reading, in Reading, England, following her graduation from Misericordia in 2017. The children will go along, of course.

Although her current long-range goal is to earn a Ph.D. in literature, her day of advocacy on Capitol Hill may already be influencing her future plans. “I am hoping to go back to D.C. and advocate on other issues and policies, such as domestic abuse. We need more truth-tellers to educate the public and the policymakers,” she said.

“This whole process has made me realize just how much people don’t understand about hunger. We really need to get people to talk about the issues that impact so many,” she added in retrospect. “I hope this effort raises awareness that not everyone receiving benefits is abusing the system. The stigma attached to subsidy programs is unfair – there are families who need help to reach their goals and get their children out of poverty.

“Thanks to the government and Misericordia – I’m that story,” Thompson adds.

The Bourger Women with Children Program at Misericordia University is one of only eight programs of its kind in the country. It provides free housing to as many as 10 single mothers at the poverty level and their children on campus. The women also receive academic support and social services to help them while they earn their bachelor’s degree in four years. The program is designed as a two-generation model, first helping the mothers receive a degree, and then preparing them to educate their children. There are currently 10 women and 12 children living in two homes on campus. To date, 55 women, including one from as far away as Utah, have participated. Efforts are underway to expand the program and a third house will be added this fall.