Mothering Many
Torrie Taj of Child Crisis Arizona

A child born into crisis has Torrie Taj on their side. They may not know it, but their protector is a tall, elegant mother of three who looks as though she understands the life of a Ladies Who Lunch rather than federal lunch programs. She is passionate about her work and it shows. But there is more to working in the harsh world of social service than just a big heart. Taj is one of the new nonprofit leaders who looks at her cause from the lens of efficiency, best practices and modern management.

And, as grim as her field of service can be, she needs more than compassion. Taj needs every tool available.

Arizona’s children born to parents with substance abuse, mental health issues, homelessness or neglect have a fierce and valiant advocate. “As a crisis shelter,” Taj admits, “we work 24/7 with the most vulnerable of our population. These children might be brought in by police, DCS or even their own families.” There is no time for judgement only immediate care which begins by assessing the situation.
“We are working with children who have been traumatized, who may not be old enough to talk or even know their name,” explains Taj. “Our staff, from medical professionals to social workers, determine how best to care for the child by offering safety first.” This is a daunting and harrowing task. “Every child is different, they have emotional needs, physical needs and more often than not, come to us with absolutely nothing.”

Imagine being taken from your home, without any clothes, a favorite toy or even a blanket to snuggle. Neglect, physical abuse, abject poverty – conditions that are astonishingly hard to navigate for adults are far more tragic for children. “We bring kids into our shelters and begin the process of healing and providing hope,” explains Taj. “What that looks like is different for each child.”

Originally founded in 1976 by Valley Physician Dr. Kipp Charlton, the organization remains the only emergency facility for infants and very young children in Maricopa County. There are now two Valley-based shelters where children are given a stable, safe and structured place to live. They are cared for by licensed staff, who range from medical professionals to teachers which number 280 strong. “Most children arrive with tremendous health issues on top of their living situations,”
adds Taj. “Most have never seen a doctor, dentist or even attended school.” The young age and number of infants is astounding. Babies and toddlers are the majority. The length of stay may be six months to a year.

The care and parenting of these special children may seem overwhelming, but Taj knows where to start. “Of course, we see to the immediate need,” affirms the CEO. “But, we are trying to work across the Valley with more agencies and social services to understand how to navigate the issues of child welfare and advocacy.” This means drawing attention to the root causes of the topic which for many is just too heartbreaking and devastating to tackle.

From parenting classes to foster care and adoption, Child Crisis Arizona has embraced the journey of a child, one that goes beyond emergency shelter. “There is this term we use in the foster care system of “disruption rate,” explains Taj. “It is the hard fact that more often than not, children in shelter bounce back or around the system.” In many cases, they are traumatized all over again,
A New Idea: The Need For New

“My own children, ages 13, 15 and 19, taught me one of my biggest lessons,” shares Torrie Taj. A few years ago, while getting her three teens ready for back to school, one of her kids asked why they had to give their school hand-me-downs away. “Mom,” her daughter challenged, “Why don’t we get these kids new things. Don’t they deserve new things for back to school?”

The flash of truth was a bright lightbulb indeed. Torrie began to challenge the old norm of giving cast offs to the less fortunate. “Where is the dignity in that?” she asked. Instead, Torrie adopted a new approach within her own leadership. “Let’s bring in new, packaged items such as clothing, socks, shoes and school supplies for the children of Child Crisis Arizona. We want to give our kids a feeling of worth, empowerment and stability.”

The change was not easy and it demanded a pivot in the process. “We began a strong partnership with Goodwill of Arizona and started to teach our supporters why we feel it is important to shift our thinking.” It turns out that Child Crisis Arizona supporters agreed. “While we don’t turn away donations,” explains Taj, “we want our donors to understand that this approach to bringing in new items for our programing is part of a key value. Our children deserve better than what they are getting when it comes to used items.”
never being reunited with family members or placed in stable homes. The national disruption rate is a shameful 10 percent. The Child Crisis Arizona rate is three percent.

While Child Crisis Arizona’s disruption rate is low, Taj concedes that it is unacceptable. This is why she is extremely committed to developing programs that strengthen families. “We need to move more towards educating children in our programs and not just warehousing them.” This means championing Head Start early education programs, striving for continuity of care and looking at the life of a child as they move through Child Crisis Arizona and beyond. “We want to get these kids into stable, loving homes that nurture them and create opportunities for success.”

One of Taj’s innovative approaches has been a reframing of service. In the past, parents who wanted to participate in classes or trainings had to make their way to the Child Crisis Arizona Mesa campus. Taj recounts the story of a parent who really wanted to get help and take court-mandated classes at Child Crisis Arizona, but the trip from the far West Valley to the East Valley involved a two-hour bus trip each way. “That parent, if everything went right, had to make three bus transfers just to get here.”

By flipping the old standard of teaching upside right, Taj and her team developed a distance learning program designed for our vast county. “We have a Family Resource program that actually travels. Instead of a parent trying to improve themselves and struggling to get across the city to our center, our staff have taken our programing into local communities which fosters trust and is easier to get buy in.” This innovation now involves 20 locations where facilitators go directly into the schools and community centers where the need is so great. “We can encourage parents to take classes and learn about parenting in the context of where they live and how they lead their lives.”

Taj walks through the campus of Child Crisis Arizona with an amazing mix of compassion and enthusiasm. Her mother’s view gives her warmth and a gentle touch. She stops to admire the cartoon themed slip-on shoes of a blonde, blue-eyed boy who is delighted in showing them off.
Despite being in a shelter, the little one seems happy and confident. He might be five or six years old. It is stunning to think of how much he has seen is such a short period of time.

Next, Taj greets a long standing volunteer working with a toddler, who is just learning to walk. Playing with soft blocks, the two are quietly engaged in what might seem like fun, but it is a moment of learning shapes, colors and how to share. “Parenting is a learned behavior,” she comments. “We have to start with some basic interactions since so many of these kids come to us without ever having had typical parenting.”

The veteran of the social service sector understands that compassion is at the core of her work, but that leadership and process will help achieve goals. “I went to ASU and majored in psychology, with a minor in Spanish. The issue of nonprofit management was never discussed.” Over the next 24 years Taj would serve on the front lines of an East Valley nonprofit where she worked with child abuse, homelessness, domestic violence and behavioral health issues. The broad brush and reach of working with such vulnerable populations served as Taj’s training ground.

“When I was coming up,” she marvels, “there was no such thing as higher education for nonprofit leaders.” From ASU Lodestar and Indiana University to Harvard, the discipline of nonprofit management is being studied and taught. Taj herself now teaches, sharing her hard-fought knowledge as an adjunct faculty member at the ASU School of Community Resources for undergrads majoring in Nonprofit Management.

Looking across the active campus, bustling with activity Taj reflects, “I live a life of purpose.” She is fierce in her determination to move forward and bring the topic into the light. “But in order to achieve my mission, vision and values I must be effective and operate this organization with sound business principles. We can’t move the needle with the community providing us in-kind donations, we must unite with our government, other agencies, philanthropists and funders.”

This involves advocacy, education and inclusion across so many people and organizations. “I look at this world with an eye towards the glass half full,” admits Taj. “At the end of the day, I know that I have stood up for what I believe, given a voice to the children who need it and mustered courage.”

Child Crisis Arizona
www.childcrisisaz.org