

# GIVING KIDS A FIGHTING CHANCE

Told by Robert Marra

**Judith Kurland** wasn't easily shaken, but this time she was furious. It was her first walk through the Boston City Hospital nurseries, and she was outraged by the conditions she found there. So many tiny, underdeveloped babies, much too small to live, and rows and rows of sick and injured children without the care and attention they needed. All of these little people deserved much more than what the hospital was providing.

When Judith met those children, she kept flashing back to the lavish conditions at some of the health-care facilities that served Boston's wealthier neighborhoods. Did somebody think these kids were disposable, just because they were born in the wrong place at the wrong time? The more she thought about it, the more enraged she became.

It was 1988, and the mayor of Boston had just appointed Judith health commissioner of Boston City Hospital and director of the city's public health department, the first woman to be given this job. To Judith, it seemed all the male leaders of the other thirteen Boston teaching hospitals were engaged in a "medical arms race" to see who could build the biggest and best buildings. Boston had already spent far more money on hospitals than any other city in the country.

Yet within sight of these well-equipped hospitals were "death zones" where, in the middle of Boston's harsh winters, poor families had to choose each day between food and heat. Babies here were getting sick

and dying at higher rates than in many third-world countries. Judith would change that if she could help it, and in her new position it seemed that maybe she could. “Given the wealth of this city,” she said, “there are enough resources to make sure that every child in Boston is given a fighting chance to live a happy, healthy, and productive life.” Every day for the next five years, Judith used her savvy, chutzpah, and clout in every way she could—regardless of the personal costs. She shared her vision with legislators, philanthropists, policy-makers, and foundations. She made history by actually getting them to donate money, and lots of it. Then she used that money to expand public-health programs that empowered mothers, their children, and others in need. And she built a new \$ 180-million hospital for Boston’s most desperate citizens—“a yardstick of excellence” against which to measure other hospitals’ services to the poor.

Still, Judith never believed that just “throwing money at a problem” was enough to make a lasting difference. In her earlier life as a working mother whose child was in a community day-care center, she’d seen mothers on welfare lose their already fragile self-esteem when a confused bureaucracy prevented them, willing and able people, from helping at the center.

“While visiting community health centers and public hospitals in South Africa, I had exactly the opposite experience,” says Judith. “There was little help from the government, and even the poorest of the poor were expected to help provide health education and health care for themselves and their families. They did so with remarkable creativity and enthusiasm—healing themselves in body and spirit as they helped

others.”

Judith determined that the considerable untapped human resources of Boston’s inner city would no longer go to waste. She’d tap these resources for solutions to the complex problems of infant mortality and urban poverty, with a unique mix of public and private support. She gathered 250 health and community development leaders from Boston and around the world. Their conclusion was straightforward: If you want to improve the health of a child, then you must raise the educational level of its mother.

Judith took the recommendation very seriously, and with it she mapped the highest goals as well as the bottom line of the new Healthy Boston initiative, which would involve people from all parts of the community to create good health out of good jobs, schools, housing, and medical care. Through Healthy Boston, people from Boston’s richest and poorest neighborhoods collaborated, some for the first time in their lives. Both groups were amazed to discover such goodness in people they’d been trained to distrust for as long as they could remember.

She was also determined to make Boston’s wealthy hospitals responsible. After three years of politely urging hospital leaders to share more of their wealth with the community, she decided they needed a push. She commissioned a report that the *Boston Globe* ran as a three-day front-page series. It contrasted the high infant mortality rate with the wealth of Boston’s hospitals. Finally, even the most recalcitrant hospital administrators loosened their grip on their wallets.

Challenging those powerful men made Judith a lot of powerful enemies. Many of the Boston bluebloods had no idea how to deal with a

small Jewish ball of fire transplanted from New Jersey. And being the outsider was not always easy for Judith. Fortunately, Judith had the strong support of her husband, Benny, the father of their three children. He would help her through the hard times by lovingly reminding her of why she had taken on this momentous work—in Gandhi’s words—“of making injustice visible.”

Tragically, without any warning, Benny had a fatal heart attack at age forty-six. Judith’s greatest friend, supporter, and partner was gone. She wrestled with how to go on—raising her children and finishing out her term. As a result of her persistence, health support for Boston’s children improved dramatically. During her tenure, black infant mortality and teenage pregnancy rates decreased significantly.

When people look at Judith’s accomplishments, they sometimes think she has conquered the unthinkable. As she sees it, she took those bold and brave steps only because it was unthinkable not to. Those of us who have worked with Judith say she reminds us of the Wizard of Oz. With tornado-like force and Glinda-like magic, she turned Boston upside-down and shook it mightily until rich and poor alike rediscovered the good within themselves.

Get your hospital and community organizations to work together to build a healthier community. To learn about the growing community movement across the nation, visit **The Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities** at their Web site, <https://www.healthycommunities.org>.