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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
WSJ.com

JANUARY 21, 2009

'Forgotten Children' See History Close Up

Religious Leader From Chicago's South Side Brings Three Wards of the State to the Swearing-In Ceremony

By **KEVIN HELLIKER**

WASHINGTON -- The Rev. Angela Hill visited the nation's capital Tuesday for the first time in her 47 years. "God told me to go," the Chicago minister said.

But unlike many at the inaugural, Ms. Hill isn't awestruck by President Barack Obama. His story is no more inspiring than her own: Forced onto the streets as a teenager, she went on to forge a legal career, a ministry and a marriage that's on its 26th year.

And Ms. Hill takes umbrage at those who call Mr. Obama's inauguration the fulfillment of Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream. "This isn't dream realized," she said Monday during the long drive to Washington.

As evidence of unfinished work, she brought along to the inauguration three casualties of the streets of the South Side of Chicago. "My babies," Ms. Hill called them, though their legal parent is the state of Illinois. Abandoned, neglected or abused by their biological parents, they have lived in a series of foster homes and institutions since age 3 or younger. Statistically, their risk of future homelessness or incarceration is astronomically higher than average.

But these three aren't statistics. They are the winners of an essay contest Ms. Hill sponsored among the 50 or so wards of the state to whom she ministers. "God called me to make this trip for the benefit of these babies," said Ms. Hill, a passionate Obama supporter.

"This election means to me no more excuses, we as a people can accomplish anything," wrote Brittany Hudson, 20, who on her birthday will face a legal milestone called emancipation -- the end of state support.

Winner Anthony Brown, 19, wrote that the inauguration of Mr. Obama "proves to every African American male that anything is possible instead of being in jail or selling drugs or killing each other."

The visit to Washington gave these three an almost unprecedented break from their lives in Chicago. It may also have diminished a sense of shame that is common among wards of the state. "Attending the inaugural is something nobody expects to happen to people like us," said winner Jasmine Williams, 19. "How we're seen is: Property of the State."

Their inaugural trip offers a glimpse into the lives of a particularly disenfranchised group -- children who suffer not only the loss of their families but also the indignity of failing to win adoption. Of the roughly half million children in state care at any given time, federal research suggests that 90% eventually win permanent placement via adoption, legal guardians or return to their families of origin. The other 10%, says Ms. Hill, are "America's forgotten children."

The inaugural trip also offers a different view of an institution that gained notoriety during the presidential campaign: Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ. Mr. Obama, a longtime member, distanced himself from that congregation following the release of statements by its former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, that were perceived by many as racist and hostile.

But that church and its controversial leader inspired Ms. Hill to commit herself to showering love upon a landscape of urban despair. With Trinity's help, she gained a masters degree in theology in her late 30s, and since then she has become one of the South Side's most visible ministers to prostitutes, gangs and abandoned children.

"Most of the religious leaders in the third ward go beyond the walls of the church," says Chicago Alderman Pat Dowell, who represents the third ward. "But Rev. Angela -- she's taken it further."

Soon after abuse and neglect put her on the street at age 16, Ms. Hill met her future husband, Curtis Hill, another homeless teenager. They found jobs, rented and then purchased a home and started a family. Ms. Hill became a paralegal, her husband an office-equipment technician. When their firstborn, Curtis II, was 9, Ms. Hill vowed to expose him to church.

Going to Trinity changed the family. "My parents had been known for their New Year's Eve party, freely flowing with libations," recalls Curtis II, now 27. "But the church turned them into different people."

Ms. Hill credits the sermons of Mr. Wright with instilling in her a sense of social responsibility. Following her daytime work at a law firm, she began attending graduate classes at a local seminary. Deciding that God was calling her to the street rather than the pulpit, she established In His Grip Ministries and opened her family's door to prostitutes, drug dealers and the homeless -- anyone seeking a warm meal, a break from the cold or a gift on Christmas Eve. When a local gang firebombed Ms. Hill's car, she put on its burnt shell a poster that said, "and God still loves you," a move that ultimately led the gang to befriend her.

Ms. Hill is committed in particular to wards of the state. To demonstrate the irrationality of the widespread reluctance to adopt kids beyond infancy, she and her husband adopted a 10-year-old girl about a decade ago. Then she devoted her ministry to kids failing to win adoption, especially those approaching emancipation. Illinois is one of few states to keep supporting such wards to age 21, a policy that federal research shows produces significantly better outcomes than showing them the door at age 18.

By contrast, most young Americans continue receiving parental financial support deep into their 20s, research shows. And the average American youth receives substantially deeper emotional support than do wards of the state. After Anthony Brown, the 19-year-old Illinois ward, won acceptance into a national academic club in high school, he says he was the only student at the induction ceremony with no loved ones in the audience.

Both ahead of and beyond emancipation, Ms. Hill's ministry provides career and life-skills counseling, along with material goods. In November, when Ms. Hill sponsored the essay contest to the 50 or so wards (a tiny fraction of the Cook County total) to whom she ministers, she knew she could afford to take only two. But she feared that none would apply. "These kids have experienced so much rejection that they run from any possibility of it," she says.

As it turned out, however, three wards entered the contest, providing well-written responses to the question of what this election had meant to them. All three, it turned out, had voted. As African-Americans, they took particular pride in seeing a member of their race win the presidency, as did Ms. Hill, who had first encountered the Obama family years ago in the pews of Trinity United.

Before deciding which two of the three entries would win, she told her employer, law firm Bryan Cave LLP, about her need to attend the inauguration. Mention of the contest prompted several lawyers at the firm to write checks to In His Grip Ministries, enabling her to include all three contestants and avoid placing the cost of a rental van on her American Express card.

"Angela is very humble about her work outside the firm, but those of us who are aware of it know that she is having a tremendous impact on the lives of others," says Derek S. Holland, a Bryan Cave lawyer.

On Monday morning, the three winners were told to arrive at Ms. Hill's house at 5:30. The first arrived at 4:50, the other two at 5:10. "I was too excited to sleep," said Ms. Hudson, the 20-year-old.

Write to Kevin Helliker at kevin.helliker@wsj.com

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