



Helping & Advocating For Young Children In Need

impressions of the children's knuckles in the door made her picture the image of a war being waged against poor children.

Now, Buchenholz is the executive director and founder of the Association to Benefit Children (ABC), a not-for-profit advocacy organization that creates model programs to respond to the needs of vulnerable children. She says about starting ABC, "I didn't have a vision. I didn't have a plan. I had this intense feeling. It started because I saw children in dire need and felt I needed to respond; not just to the individual child, but also to find some kind of response that included all children—a structural response." Her initial dual-action approach has become ABC's modus operandi—interlocking the immediate needs of children with the systemic problems that underserve them, and tackling both issues simultaneously.

ABC has evolved from soup kitchen status to a formidable organization that has won a number of class-action lawsuits in favor of children and their families. Buchenholz is most proud of breaking the silence on issues like the conditions of boarder babies in the late 1980s and fighting for the rights of homeless children to receive preventative education and treatment for asthma and her latest project, which advocates for mental health programs for children younger than 5 years old.

She cites confronting the haunting stories she must hear daily as her biggest challenge and says, "We deal with healing, and that means people are suffering—that's why we're healing." But it is the humor and resiliency of the children that she believes is the organization's greatest strength. "They are the people

who lead us to where we need to go. They are an honor to work with," she beams.

The thing that may surprise people about Buchenholz's job is that despite all the heart-wrenching situations that must be uncovered to help remedy the situation, she says, "ABC's locations are not sad; they are so filled with joy. I hope children get tenderness and love, filled with hope, a great education. If they're in pain, I hope that they find comfort and compassion and lots of joy in their lives."

—Eboni S. Cooper

In the 1980s, Gretchen Buchenholz recognized the suffering of people in poverty and did something about it. A former sociology teacher at Hunter College and a mother of two older children, she was seeking a diverse preschool with strong academics for her third child. Unable to find the right mix, this do-it-yourself-mom rented space in a local church and started a nursery school.

In the midst of pounding the pavement of New York City to continue developing her school, she inadvertently walked into a welfare office. At the stench of unclean bodies, she did not turn on her heels and quickly walk out. Instead, she stayed and witnessed a sight that would change her life and the lives of disadvantaged families and children forever. Adults and children slept on chairs and on the floor, and bare cribs confined soiled babies. She distinctly recalls small children continually banging against a door that separated the welfare families from the welfare administrators, the children pleading for food and juice. The

