

**FAMILY  
VALUES  
@ WORK**

# *Faces of the Paid Leave Movement*



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	ii
Maria Hernandez, Racine, Wisconsin	1
Fidel Hernandez, Racine, Wisconsin	2
Staci Lowry, Detroit, Michigan	3
Marianne Bellesorte, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	4
Erika Clemons-Dean, Atlanta, Georgia	5
Sandy Courmier, Wareham, Massachusetts	6
Shenell "Magik" Sowers, Las Vegas, Nevada	7
Anne-Marie Pearson, West Chester, Pennsylvania	9
Al-nisa Smith, Newark, New Jersey	9
Emily Yates-Pollard, Portland, Oregon	10
Nija Phelps, Milford, Connecticut	11
Tammy Hall, Springfield, Massachusetts	12
Kaitlyn Shake, Stratford, Connecticut	13
Timeline of Paid Leave Wins	14
Acknowledgements	

# *Faces of the Paid Leave Movement*

## *Faces of the Paid Leave Movement*

The people in this booklet are the faces of paid leave. Each of them or a loved one faced an unexpected injury or illness, as most of us do at some point. And like us, they just want to take care of themselves and their loved ones without falling off an economic cliff.

It would be very difficult to cure or prevent all the ailments described in this booklet. It should not be difficult to reach bipartisan agreement on a paid leave plan that is accessible for all kinds of care and affordable to every family.

*Each of these individuals is a leader in one of the state coalitions that make up Family Values @ Work.*

### **Maria Hernandez**

Racine, Wisconsin

**M**aria, age 65, cleans the buildings at Amazon's fulfillment center in Kenosha, Wisconsin. She's employed through a subcontractor and lives with her adult son, who is employed by Amazon. When Maria had a medical emergency and collapsed at work, she learned her company doesn't pay for leave. They also denied her use of vacation time because she was on leave. Her son could get only unpaid time, which the two couldn't afford. Maria calls it "the most heartbreaking time of my life." She went back to work even though she's still not 100%:

***"If I don't work, I can't pay rent, lights, gas nor eat the daily diet requirements. My medication is costly. I thank God for keeping me alive to pursue the need for paid leave."***



## Faces of the Paid Leave Movement

### Fidel Onofre Hernandez

Racine, Wisconsin

Fidel works in Amazon's fulfillment center in Kenosha, Wisconsin. When his mother needed care, he asked for leave but was told he could have only unpaid time. He had to keep working to cover their living expenses.



***“It [was painful] that I could not be there for my mom who has held my hand through all of my life’s fears as a child who could not hear,”***

Fidel said. “I would drive home after working 10 hours, driving through construction traffic, and all I could think about is, ‘Is my mom ok, God please take care of my mom.’ For five months we had to eat from food pantries. We should not have to worry about anything but focusing on our loved one’s recovery.”

## Faces of the Paid Leave Movement

### Staci Lowry

Detroit, Michigan

In December 2014, Staci’s daughter, Bailee, had a stroke. She was four years old. Staci was working for a large company and going through a divorce. “This was my baby and I wasn’t going to leave her side, but I also needed my job,” Staci said. Despite being at the company for four years, she had no paid leave. Staying with Bailee cost Staci her job and her home. She ended up cashing in her 401K to survive.



***“I was in the middle of a cataclysmic meltdown. I wound up on public assistance for a while. The firing ended my health insurance. With paid family leave, I would have accrued time that could have prevented my firing and still let me care for my daughter.”***

## *Faces of the Paid Leave Movement*

### **Marianne Bellesorte**

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

When she entered the third trimester of her pregnancy, Marianne's doctors diagnosed her with an advanced form of breast cancer. The disease required immediate medical attention, including chemotherapy and surgery after the birth. "My mind flooded with questions," Marianne said.

***"But thankfully, because I work for an organization that provides paid sick days and access to short-term disability, I never had to ask: Can I afford to take the time for treatment without fear of losing my job or my paycheck?"***

Paid time meant I never had chemotherapy without a family member by my side. When chemotherapy demolished my immune system, I didn't have to worry about coworkers bringing their illness to the office." Nearly five years later, Marianne and her child remain healthy.



## *Faces of the Paid Leave Movement*

### **Erica Clemonns**

Atlanta, Georgia

When Erica's dad in Ohio fell ill, she was a full-time employee in Atlanta. She transferred to Ohio, but lost her full-time status, seniority, pay rate – and any paid time off or FMLA eligibility. Erica wound up with two part-time jobs and no paid leave. "I cared for my dad and young daughter during the day and worked in the evening and overnight," Erica said. After falling into a coma, her dad went to intensive care. Erica spent as much time with him as possible those final three weeks. "I was devastated and heartbroken," she said.

***"I had gone five weeks without pay, with a small child, part-time employment and no benefits. It has taken a long time to catch up from the debt."***



## Faces of the Paid Leave Movement

### Sandy Courmier

Wareham, Massachusetts

**M**y mom is a 92-year-old widow with seven children. Until recently, despite being blind and hard of hearing, she pretty much took care of herself. Then she developed a health issue that needed some care. I had only unpaid leave. My siblings and I live week-to-week on our pay and can't afford to go without income. The oldest daughter who works the fewest hours took on her care. My mom rebounded. Then she developed kidney disease. My company was restructuring and offered a retirement package to those over 55.

***I am not mentally or financially able to retire, but I took the offer to help my mom. I don't know whether I'll find another job at the same pay or be able to keep my home.***



## Faces of the Paid Leave Movement

### Shenell "Magik" Sowers

Las Vegas, Nevada

**S**henell, who goes by "Magik," worked for a residential youth organization that serves children with autism, but could not take time to care for herself when her asthma became severe. She found herself in a cycle: The job stress would make her asthma act up. She'd take a sick day and worry about retaliation from her employer. Eventually her health worsened, causing a longer absence that cost her the job.

***"I let my health go because I was afraid to lose my job and, in the end, I lost my health and my job," she said. "[Then] I made an agreement to myself that I would be the change I want to see in the world."***



## Faces of the Paid Leave Movement

### Anne-Marie Pearson

West Chester, Pennsylvania

When Anne-Marie's sister, Joanne, was unexpectedly diagnosed with terminal cancer and needed around-the-clock care, Anne-Marie immediately applied for family leave. "I was denied since Joanne was a sibling and not considered family under the definition in the FMLA," she said. Anne-Marie had to leave her job of 17 years to help care for her sister until she passed away.

***"I often think, Who would have taken care of Joanne if I did not sacrifice my livelihood and my job?" Anne-Marie has been working for years, with support from cancer groups and the Disability Rights Legal Center, to change Pennsylvania's family leave law to expand the definition of family. The bill is named "Joanne's Law."***

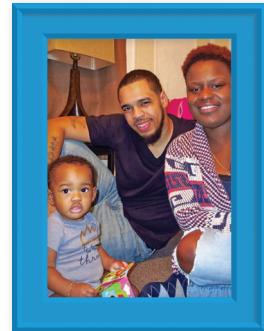


## Faces of the Paid Leave Movement

### Al-nisa Smith

Newark, New Jersey

Al-nisa is a school paraprofessional; her husband, Gabriel, is a hospital security guard. When their infant daughter was born, neither job offered paid family leave to help with recovering from a C-section, bonding with the baby and dealing with their 5-year-old son, who has autism. But because they live in New Jersey, which has both statewide medical and family leave insurance, Al-nisa had 14 weeks and Gabriel 6 weeks with pay. Gabriel was able to help his wife and bond with the baby. A bonus: Their son blossomed from the extra time with his parents, gaining new social skills. "We even see the difference in his classroom," Al-nisa said.



***"The difference between a calm spirit and stress means everything with a child with autism."***

## Faces of the Paid Leave Movement

### Emily Yates-Pollard

Portland, Oregon

In 2014, my wife and I welcomed our son into the world. I was fortunate to have 12 weeks of fully paid leave. My wife had none. She took seven unpaid days and returned to work, leaving me home to recover and care for a newborn. It was hard for both of us, but we couldn't afford her losing her job or having a smaller paycheck. While we were far from our family of origin, we did – and do – have a family in Oregon. Our two best friends are very involved in our son's life and are the closest family ties he knows.

***Since they are not related to us by blood or marriage, they were unable to take any leave to help us.***



## Faces of the Paid Leave Movement

### Nija Phelps

Milford, Connecticut

In 2014, Nija was living with her husband in Indiana, where he was getting his doctorate and working part time at Panera. She had a job at the university. When her mother-in-law in Michigan needed surgery—high blood sugar had damaged her heart and she faced a long recovery—Nija and her husband offered to move there to help. "That's what you do for family," Nija said. She and her husband quit their jobs and had trouble finding new ones in Michigan.



***"If we'd each been able to take paid leave for 12 weeks, we could have kept our jobs. It was six months of not knowing what the future would be like. I was grateful for Obamacare—otherwise we would have had nothing."***

## Faces of the Paid Leave Movement

### Tammy Hall

Springfield, Massachusetts

I'm a proud PCA and leader with 1199SEIU. About three years ago, I had major surgery that caused me to miss work and eventually lose my job due to the time taken to heal and recover. As a result, I lost everything. I lost my home, I lost my car, and I could barely feed my family at that time. Today I am in need of another surgery. Due to my past experience, I am afraid to take time off work, because I will not have an income to supplement and take care of my responsibilities while out on medical leave.

***I'm excited that Massachusetts will soon have paid family and medical leave, so people can take care of their health and those they love.***



## Faces of the Paid Leave Movement

### Kaitlyn Shake

Stratford, Connecticut

Kaitlyn has been a nurse for nearly a decade. She sees family members' stress as they try to be present for their loved one while juggling a job and other responsibilities. Recently she cared for a new mother who had to return to work within two weeks. The patient's partner also had no paid time. "It was heartbreaking to see how much stress was in that room," Kaitlyn said. Last year her own mother became seriously ill and developed a hematoma after surgery. Kaitlyn became the caregiver while working full-time.

***"I see how difficult it is for me as a health care practitioner to navigate the system and can only imagine how hard it is for people without that experience. We all need paid leave."***





Family Values @ Work is a national network of coalitions in 27 states working for – and winning – policies like family and medical leave insurance.

To learn more and see how you can speak up for paid leave, go to [www.familyvaluesatwork.org](http://www.familyvaluesatwork.org).

Thank you for help with this booklet:  
Coalition for Social Justice, Massachusetts

Connecticut Women's Education  
and Legal Fund

Family Forward Oregon

Georgia 9to5

Make It Work Nevada

Mothering Justice

New Jersey Time to Care Coalition

PathwaysPA

Wisconsin 9to5

Ellen Bravo

Suzette Gardner

Jennifer Morales

Alexis Standifer

Design by Mikko Design



[familyvalues@work.org](mailto:familyvalues@work.org)