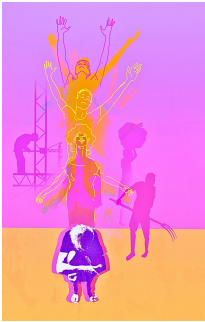




**INTERNATIONAL  
DAY for the  
ERADICATION  
of POVERTY**  
17 OCTOBER



## **“Decent Work and Social Protection Putting Dignity in practice for All”**

**Tuesday, 17th of October 2023**

**Statement by Meshell Whyte**

My name is Meshell Whyte. I am a grad student, a mother, and an advocate from Boston, MA. My seven-year-old is the most unique of all three of my children. He is the one who started my advocacy journey.

I had what is known as a “high risk” pregnancy. My son was born ten weeks early and has multiple disabilities. For the first six months of his life, he was in the hospital and didn’t see the outside. After he was released, the hospital he received care at had a revolving door. I would think, “oh, THAT revolving door,” because we were in and out of that hospital for the first three years of his life.

My son has a chronic lung disease and respiratory issues. Prior to the

pandemic, we were constantly in isolation because we really couldn't have that many people around us. He has mobility and balance issues, and doesn't walk. He has feeding issues, and doesn't eat by mouth. He has speech issues, and does not speak. He says mama, and that's as far as it goes.

Finding care for my son is like a puzzle or a maze. A pediatric nurse is something that's very, very rare because it's a very unique skill set. People get nervous when they have children with a lot of medical issues, tubing, and wires. A lot of the time, when the nurses come in to my home, I have to train them, because I know him.

I can never find adequate childcare, so I am his primary care giver. When you have a child who is disabled, he doesn't go to regular daycare, they need "specialty" daycares. When I applied to one, I was told he was too complex for them to care for him. So, there was only one option. Mom. And that was it.

I'm his teacher. I'm his physical therapist, occupational therapist, his speech therapist, and his gen. ed. teacher. I do everything for him.

All of this prevents me from working. I'm working, but I'm not doing "paid work." I'm doing the direct care work of paid train

professionals. I've been working for almost eight years unpaid.

I don't get cash assistance. I started to get cash assistance in January, but I've been cut off three times already. I'm getting recertification every 90 days. Something's wrong with the system - going through the process of having to prove that you need help; to prove that you need resources. There's too much red, blue, green and purple tape; you have to literally bend over backwards.

A lot of people like to say that they're behind the eight ball. For people in poverty, people who are underrepresented women of color, who are single parents, they're not even on the pool table. We've got to be at the table first to get behind the eight ball.

I remember someone saying to me you can get paid for taking care of your son, but you would have to sign custody over to the state in order to get paid. I said ABSOLUTELY NOT! A parent shouldn't have to put their child in the state system in order for a parent to care for their child.

Being my son's unpaid care and social worker indefinitely is a policy that needs to change. I think in order for it to change, policymakers need to spend a month in my life. They need to spend at least 30

days with limited resources, limited food, limited sleep; all while providing constant care - quality care.

If I made policy, I would create social protection for families who have children with limited abilities, regardless of what it is, to be able to receive funding payments and resources. Health care providers are aware of all of these challenges that families are having and should be the first line of protection.

My son is a blessing to me, because he opened up my eyes to disability and changed my lens. He changed my perspective, and my understanding of what the underrepresented population is dealing with. What women are dealing with. What people of color are dealing with. What people who are not fully able to - whether it's mentally, physically, or emotionally- are dealing with.

Covid gave me the opportunity to put that new perspective into action. When everything moved online, I was able to complete my bachelor's degree in psychology. I could never do it before because I couldn't find adequate childcare.

That propelled me into getting my master's in urban planning. I think a lot of people don't realize the importance of urban planning: which

focuses on a lot of public health issues. If you're in a building where you're limited and there are stairs, and there is no way for you to get out, it's a public health issue. When you have policies and no one challenges them, they continue to do as usual. I'm one who will challenge, because I continue to be challenged by multiple systems where social protections are not afforded to those in need.

I can't save the world, but I'm going to do something to save as many as I can.

The direction that I'm going now in my journey, it's all due to my son.