

2021 NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Human and Civil Rights Award Winner

■ CHILDREN OF SMITHFIELD



Iconic labor activist César Chávez created the blueprint for workers' rights advocacy. Maira Mendez-Rodriguez and the Children of Smithfield adapted Chavez' blueprint for the Age of Corona, and proved that advocacy for justice is a family affair.

When Covid-19 as a global health crisis became an unfortunate reality, the safety of medical professionals and front line responders were the focus, but the plight of Nebraska meat packing workers was sadly overlooked.

In the early stages of the pandemic, the Smithfield Foods processing plant in Crete, Nebraska was identified as a "hotspot" for coronavirus transmission, due to inadequate social distancing measures and personal protection equipment.

For many of the low-wage, but essential employees put at risk, not working to feed their families wasn't an option, and with a workforce comprised of immigrant communities speaking 80 different languages, nor was the ability to freely speak up for themselves.

Enter Maira Mendez-Rodriguez, high school instructor, member of the Nebraska State Education Association, and child of workers at the plant. Realizing their dilemma, she sprung into direct action, forming the "Children of Smithfield", an alliance of the children of workers at the meat packing plant who organized and advocated, to give voice to their often voiceless parents. Their mission? Educating and empowering these workers to become their own best advocates.

Children of Smithfield accomplished said mission through community-coalition building, increasing public awareness of the unsafe and unhealthy conditions for the plant workers, sponsoring rallies in Lincoln, the state capitol, and lobbying public officials to call for improvement of work conditions. The Children of Smithfield adopted the same non-violent philosophy in their advocacy as César Chávez, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other historical icons. Most importantly, the Children of Smithfield helped implant in workers' minds the notion that they were entitled to a fundamental, basic right: a safe place to earn a living.

In an environment where many corporations would appear to put profit over people during a health crisis, Children of Smithfield was driven to demand accountability. The political became personal, and an advocacy group comprised of family and friends of those impacted was both logical and novel at the same time, and highly effective.

Due to their efforts, these brave workers, who provide sustenance to us all, are no longer seen as disposable. In partnership with Nebraska State Senator Tony Vargas, Children of Smithfield has required plants to mandate six-foot social distancing, provide face shields, disinfect work spaces, and offer paid sick leave for those who test positive for the virus.

Silence can too often equal death. Thanks to Maira Mendez-Rodriguez and the Children of Smithfield, workers' needs, in the tradition of César Chávez, are being heard loud and clear.

