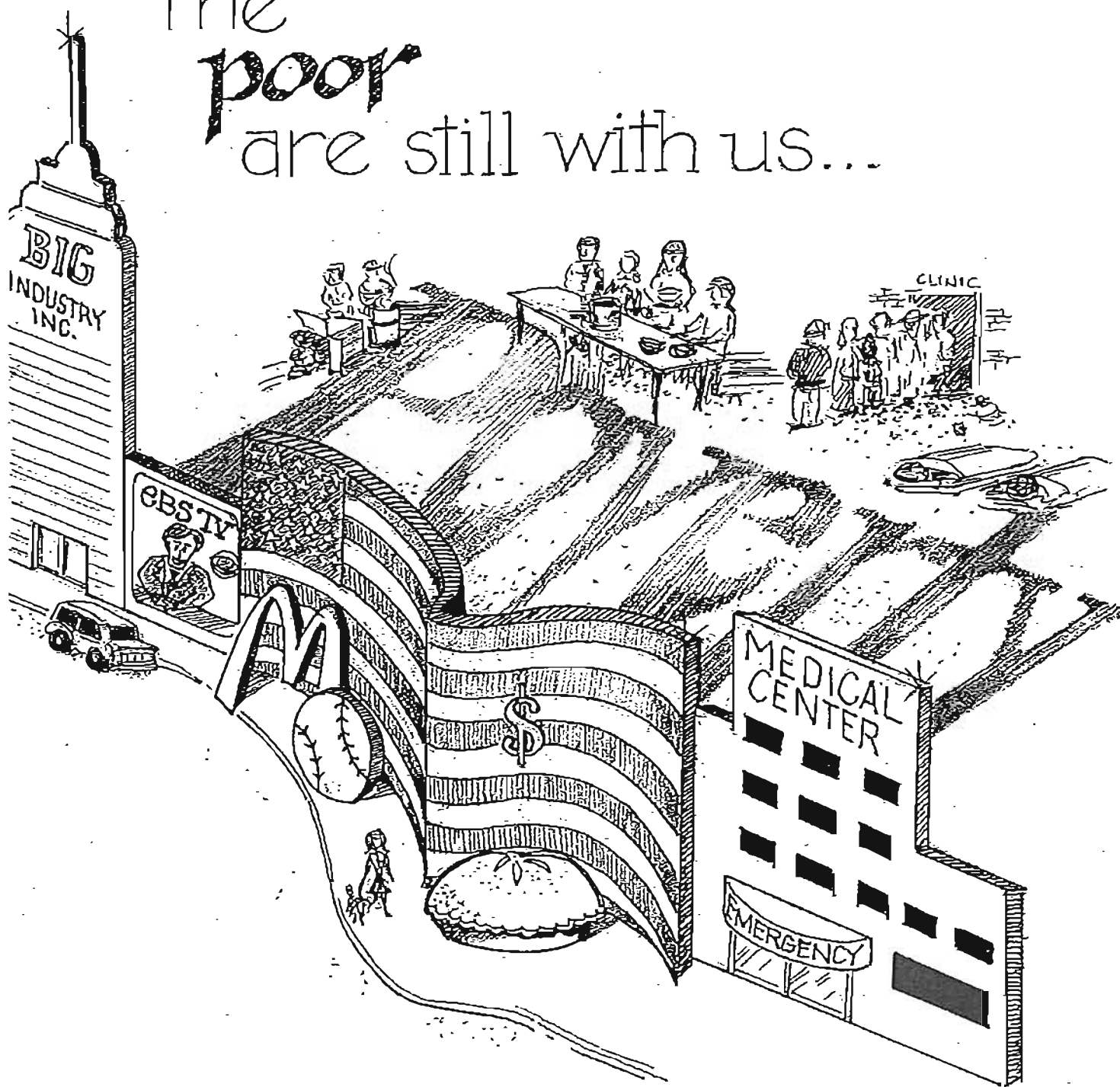


THE Round Table

Winter
2005

"...a path from where we are to where we should be." --Peter Maurin

The
poor
are still with us...



Why This Issue?

I watched about 20 minutes of the third Presidential debate before fleeing in despair. The title of the demonstration at the St. Louis debate mirrored my thoughts, "Where's the Debate?" In the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth, increasing millions are without access to health care, safe housing, and decent education. The whole of the debate however, both publicly and presidentially, seemed confined to only a few issues. The most obvious issue seemed to be not *whether* it was a good idea to keep waging war on the world, but over *who* would do it better. Watching the acquiescent nightly news reports filled with terror alerts, health tips and sports, our community wondered if perhaps poverty had been alleviated.

Meanwhile, here at Karen House, we still get 20-30 calls a day from women looking for shelter that we have to turn away. Like most shelters across the country, our food pantry is usually low and our beds (and often first and second couches) are always full. We've seen public services for the women who live at Karen House slashed. Due to funding cuts, the best course for initiating mental health care for a single, uninsured homeless woman is an expensive and wasteful ER visit, rather than with a primary care doctor. We see the need growing, the overcrowding increasing, and the despair spreading.

And so, dear reader, we bring you this issue on poverty as a collective reminder to ourselves that the poor are indeed still with us. Several of our articles paint a picture of poverty in the United States in 2004. We note that the dominant characteristic of poverty seems to be a stark lack of access- to decent education, to reasonable transportation, to healthy food, to financial opportunities.

Mary Ann McGivern writes about poverty's roots, including the unbridled capitalism and militarism that kills the poor. In the spirit of personalism, Marc Leonard interviews three Karen House guests who share their stories, while Melissa Brickey describes several friends who are making their way, with support and community, through the cycle of poverty. Our regular features of RoundTable Talk, From Karen House and From Abroad cover topics from the Palestine occupation, to community happenings, to animal abuse, while From Little House offers a manifesto of sorts on the subject of immigration.

The two-thirds of the world's people that live in poverty and the guests of Karen House don't need to be reminded of the maldistribution of the world's resources. It is we who have the (often unacknowledged) privilege of race, class, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation who require the loving but firm reminder of that privilege and its consequences. The poor, those without access, are still with us. It is up to us to transform our unsustainable lifestyles, to work for both justice and charity, and to decrease our unbridled resource consumption. It is up to us to indeed shift the debate itself.



-- Jenny Truax

Front cover by Jeff Finnegan

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"They Tie up Heavy Burdens. . ."

by Teka Childress

Over the years, members of the Karen House community have been asked to give a number of talks about the house, about homelessness, and about the struggles of the poor. I have often been touched by people's compassion when I have told stories about the lives of our guests. Every now and then, though, I will get a tough crowd. In my experience the most challenging questions, such as "Why don't they just get a job?" have come from high school students from the more privileged and elite schools.

I will never forget the time a number of years ago when I sat in the front room at Karen House confronted by this question from an indignant eighteen year-old woman. She reminded me of the rich young man of the Gospels. She had everything. She was one of the best and the brightest. She needed to make sense of what I was saying and from her experience could not imagine how someone could not simply go out and get work, and have plenty of money to get what they needed and wanted. I thought to myself, how can I possibly convey to her what some people are up against? I said to her, "Look at you, you are beautiful and beautifully dressed. You speak with confidence and poise. You have one of the finest educations available. Who wouldn't hire you?" I decided to tell her about my experience the previous day.

"Yesterday I took a young woman your age to go looking for her first job. She is no longer in school, having left before graduating from high school. She went to a school in the economically poorest part of the St. Louis area. Her high school was closed for losing its accreditation. When I took her to look for work she was wearing rather worn clothing. Her father had never been in her life or taken care of her, much less been there to give her guidance or a sense of what she is capable of. Her mother

was addicted to drugs for years—in fact, for most of the time she was growing up. Therefore she had lived with relatives, and in DFS custody, for many years. I took her to a fast-food shop, offering her a minimum-wage opportunity. If she got the job, the money she would make would not be used for extra spending cash but would be bringing in the biggest income for her family of five (her mother and three siblings.) She would have to take two buses to get there, a big chunk of that minimum-wage pay. She would have no health insurance. The job would likely be part-time. And, with all that, she still wanted it, but worst of all, she didn't get it, because when asking about the job she looked down at her feet and mumbled, 'You got a job?'"

Another time, giving a talk at a local private boys' school, I had a similar experience. I decided that it was time to add some information to my talks. In the future, whenever I spoke at a high school, I asked for ten volunteers. I would have them stand at the front of the room in a line. I would then hand out a total of ten dollars to them, divided according to the statistics of that time as to how household income in the United States was distributed, approximately eight dollars and seventy cents to the first person on down to pennies at the end of the line. I would say, "Imagine growing up in a household at the top end of this line? What goes with that? Trips and vacations, the best education, good healthcare opportunities, a clean safe home and neighborhood, food in the refrigerator, heat in the winter, air conditioning in the summer, easily obtained transportation, perhaps even access to a car. What goes with growing up on the other end of the line? Often a lack of good education, safe housing, maybe homelessness, per-

Teka Childress has been learning some construction skills working with the Downtown Teens (in spite of the fact that Virginia Druhe always hid the Karen House tools from her).

haps living in a dangerous neighborhood, no or rare family vacations, and never having extra money for anything. Growing up as one of those with the least resources could also involve knowing people very close to you who have been shot and killed (unfortunately very common among poor children that I know), or it could involve growing up in a house with peeling lead paint (fifty percent of the children in our zip code have high lead levels)."

One time, even after doing this exercise, a young man still challenged me and described how he thought a woman with three children could make a living on minimum wage. After he left the class, the instructor noted ironically, that while this young man was planning out the day-to-day struggle of the woman with a minimum wage job like it was a walk in the park, most of the students in the class I had just addressed barely managed to turn in their homework.

The crux of most questions about people living in poverty is, "Is it their fault?" This can be a legitimate question at times, showing the concern that it is important to have expectations and hopes for every person, to believe in their capabilities and ask them to do their best. But the question can also be like the question posed to Jesus: "Who is my neighbor?" This is a way to distance oneself from, and justify an acceptance of, the plight of the poor. For Dorothy Day, this question was somewhat a moot point. For one, she did not care whose fault it was. She believed in mercy and forgiveness and knew how greatly everyone needs these gifts bestowed upon them. But, also, when it was time to assign blame, she thought individual blame paled in comparison to the blame one could lay at the door of our "filthy rotten system."

Economic injustice has always been with us. When speaking to groups about who comes to Karen House, I will often discuss our guests' various situations and some of the things they share in common. But the thing they always share in common is that they have a lack of the things they need, and a lack of access to acquire many of the things they need.

Barriers to economic opportunity have always existed, even in this land, known for opportunity. There have been significant gaps between the rich and the poor. This gap, however, has been growing. Some argue that there are changes happening that are more significant than the market's natural ebb and flow. With the growth of globalization in the last couple of decades many changes have occurred. There is hardly a union worker who does not know the meaning of outsourcing

and the threat it is to their job security. Additionally, various policies have encouraged practices that accelerate the loss of certain kinds of jobs that are being replaced by low-paying service jobs. Donald L. Barlett and James R. Steele describe these policies in the book, *America, What Went Wrong*. New obstacles to opportunity have grown again during the Administration of George W. Bush, in large part, due to the tax cuts enacted since 2001. Those tax cuts were weighted heavily toward the wealthy (a 19 percent reduction in the tax rate for the top 1 percent this year). Those cuts, combined with the expenses of the war in Iraq, have left the United States with a \$422 billion dollar deficit in 2004. This has left a very tight budget that has caused a scaling back of programs that aid the poor, working and nonworking.



The Detroit News published a series of articles showing how the "Working poor suffer under Bush tax cuts." The thrust of this Special Report was that the Administration and Congress have cut back on programs to aid the poor in part to help pay for tax cuts that benefit primarily those who earn more than \$288,800 per year. The programs affected by the cutbacks include job training, housing, higher education, welfare to work, and help for low-income senior citizens such as meals on wheels.

To give a few examples of what this means: There are more than 139,000 senior citizens on waiting lists for Meals On Wheels. Federal money for the program

has remained flat for the past two years. In effect, in many major cities, a senior citizen would suddenly have to drop out of the program or die for another to move into the program. According to the report, adding those on the waiting list would cost \$181 million, an amount equal to 1 percent of the tax cuts on capital gains and dividends.

The articles also cite an instance in which a 28 year-old waitress who earns \$300 a week has to pay \$100 a week in day care expenses. She has been on a waiting list for two years to receive childcare assistance. The tax cut she received would provide her \$485.00, enough to cover only four and a half weeks of childcare.

Across the nation, people are having trouble paying for rising heating bills as gas and energy costs rise dramatically. Only one in every seven families, eligible and needing energy-assistance, is able to obtain it from available programs. In Wisconsin alone, 25,000 homes have had their power turned off this year and 55,000 more are threatened. These statistics are from the state that had the nationally showcased welfare-to-

work program.

To show the struggles for the working poor in terms of housing, the series relayed the story of Melissa Manning from New Bedford, Massachusetts, who brings home \$1000.00 per month and pays \$800.00 in rent for a three-bedroom apartment in a rather unsafe neighborhood. She has tried to get Section eight for 16 months, but there are 31,000 people on the waiting list. (*Detroit News*, Sept. 26 and Sept. 27, 2004, articles by Ronald Hansen and Melvin Claxton).

It does not seem very convincing that the tax cuts that President Bush insisted were for the benefit of the American people were much to the benefit of any other than those with huge incomes and investments. Any savings made by the wealthy don't seem to have trickled down yet. During his term, so far, unemployment has risen, as has the number of families living in poverty. This is the first time this is true of a president's term since the 1930's, during the Depression and President Hoover's Administration.

In his Oct. 8, 2004 Op-Ed in the *New York Times*, Bob Herbert responded to a study that was about to be released by the Annie E. Casey, Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. That study was expected to show that 9.2 million working families are barely able to survive financially. There are 20 million children in these low-income working families. One in five workers are in jobs that pay less than \$8.84 per hour, a poverty-level wage for a family of four.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development published a "tour" that can be taken on the internet at www.povertyusa.org that shows a family "budgeting for

poverty." It lists the expenses of a family of four making \$18,392, the top end of the poverty line, and it shows just how difficult the choices are for a family at this income level, not to mention those who are struggling below it.

So, my answer to the young students, "Why don't they get a job?" Many have and we must not be like the Pharisees, "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but will not lift a finger to move them..."

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Three Stories

by Marc Leonard

Autumn's stepfather was an alcoholic. He was also a heroin addict, and she had always told herself she'd never use the stuff. Ironically, it was her biological father, returning to her life when she was nineteen, who pushed the drug on her. Growing up in New Jersey and working part time in a department store, Autumn managed to graduate from high school, but narcotic addiction domi-

nated her life, and her dream of becoming a marine biologist receded in the wake of addiction, though she is still wistful. The birth of her second daughter, Abbi, helped Autumn make the transition from heroin to methadone eleven years ago, and she feels now that she is ready to make the final step toward true sobriety. In the years since quitting heroin, Autumn has worked as a waitress, a cash-

Marc Leonard is looking forward his daughter Jaden moving to Saint Louis.

ier, a bartender - all jobs she enjoyed, but Abbi was followed by Quinn, then Haille, and then Angel - naturally, parenting left her little time, and she went from one job to the next. The family moved from house to house, from car to car. Autumn has never felt financially secure and has always worried about money. In her own estimation, she owes upwards of \$12,000 dollars, much of it in unpaid medical bills. She can't afford to get glasses or dental work for her daughters. Her husband's wages are garnished (for unpaid utilities) and when the rent on their house went from \$850 to \$1,000, Autumn and the girls became homeless. They soon found themselves at the Karen Catholic Worker House. Her husband lives in a small room above the garage where he is employed, and visits the girls at the shelter as often as he can.

Autumn has an active spiritual life, and is genuinely polytheistic. She believes in God as the "main god," but also in goddesses and demigods, generally associated with natural phenomenon in the classical pagan sense. She wears a pentagram as a charm about her neck in much the same way many Christians wear crosses.

Autumn has very strong feelings about the government, and cannot be described as an overly patriotic person. "Don't get me started!" she said. She particularly feels the USA should do more for its own poor, especially regarding medical care and help for the elderly. She thinks money should go toward reconstruction of old houses before building new ones. For her children, she wishes education, and hopes they grow to be integrated adults finding stability in themselves without too much dependence on others. This experience may come sooner than she wishes: she faces looming court dates regarding a forgery charge, with a possible sentence of up to seven years.

Dorothy's first experience with racism was as a little girl, in 1963. She remembers watching her great-aunt, who raised her much of the time her mother was unable to, not make eye contact with a white employee at a Woolworths - black women making eye contact with whites just wasn't proper etiquette. It was a painful impression, reinforced by an era of segregated drinking foun-

tains and facilities, and by her own family's moderately difficult circumstances. Dorothy moved around somewhat as a girl, living at times in the Euclid-McPherson area of what is now the Central West End of Saint Louis, and in the town of Kinlock, near the airport, where there was still some taste of rural life in the late fifties and early sixties. People in Kinlock kept chickens, she recalls, but "it's a ghost-town now." She remembers medical care



photo by Marc Leonard

being hard to come by. Bad teeth were pulled at home, and broken bones reset by family in the living room. Emergency rooms turned away people without money, sometimes regardless of injury.

Dorothy's grandfather fought in Korea. Her uncle was forced to join the military by a judge who would otherwise not grant him custody of his children unless he did so, their mother being deceased. Dorothy's older son is in the military now, hoping to become a doctor. Dorothy prays he will not get sent to war.

Dorothy's parents were divorced. Her mother had managed to complete high school, but her father did not, and at age fourteen, Dorothy herself left school and ran away from home. For a time she was living on the streets. Eventually she found employment as a domestic, and began her working life. Remembering her childhood, when medical care was beyond the reach of many in her neighborhoods, Dorothy went to school to learn medical

coding. Eventually she received her CMA and CMT certificates. During her medical career, health management organizations could make business decisions that cost nurses their jobs regardless of their performance, and the only time she felt secure was during a four year stint in Ohio, when she was able to work as a member of a union, though even then she felt unable to afford any luxuries. Still, she was able to make ends meet, including the ownership of automobiles and some sort of medical coverage, and eventually became a homeowner. She never had to rely on men to pay the bills, and was able to show them the door when they became abusive. Working as a nurse was Dorothy's favorite job, her calling, and she had hoped to become an RN, but her education was interrupted by motherhood. She could not afford to pay both the daycare costs and her own tuition. When she was able, she returned to work at Southwestern Bell, but job security was hard to find. Finances were often paycheck to paycheck.

Life took a turn for Dorothy in her early forties: she became pregnant again. At first she lived in denial, and then thought long days about terminating the pregnancy, but this was something she could not bring herself to do. Then, shortly after Keymani was born, Dorothy was diagnosed with cancer. Fortunately, Medicaid has covered the expenses associated with the disease, which is thankfully in remission. Between getting ill and raising her energetic young son, Dorothy was unable to work, and lost her house through foreclosure, owing \$3000 in property taxes. At the age of 47, she found herself, with four-year-old Keymani, at Karen House. Her family, she notes, had little interest in supporting her, though they were able.

She thinks housing loans or subsidized housing should be easier to obtain, as the overly-bureaucratic system doesn't consider the situations of applicants for assistance: those who are down on their luck are routed the same way as those who are addicted to drugs or are mentally ill, and that doesn't seem fair to her.

Raised a Baptist, Dorothy believes a faith life is very important, and has explored Christianity and Islam. Still, she doesn't consider herself a "devout anything," and believes spirituality is more important than religion. What she wants most for her children is that they are able to live life the way they are meant to, not to have to live lives centered around struggle. She wants them to help each other.

Raquel's father died of a heart attack on her mother's birthday, but mom never remarried, and raised the family as best she could. Raquel remembers her mother (now also deceased) as a hardworking woman who refused to go on welfare. Her rule was loving and strict, and while the family was never rich, they never lived in too small a space, and always stuck together. Raquel dropped out of high school in the twelfth grade, but eventually got her GED. She did fairly well for herself and her two sons, working full time and not having to share an apartment, though she did accumulate some debts. She stopped receiving AFDC in 1997, and worked as a cashier, a

telemarketer, and a housekeeper - the latter being a job she thoroughly enjoyed, and would gladly do again, though her fantasy job is simply that of secretary.

Like her mother, Raquel is a strong woman. She was once the victim of physical abuse after moving out on a man. He pushed her and hit her, and when Raquel managed to get a knife, he took it from her and cut her. Unfortunately, because Raquel had not pressed charges in a couple of earlier, unrelated incidents - such as when a young woman stole a money order from her - the police would not accept the charges she was pressing, and let the man go, without informing her of his release. At that time, Raquel had gone to the Weinman Center, a shelter for abused women. Still, like Dorothy, she has never put up with continual abuse, always leaving at the first incident on the rare occasions it has occurred.

Life took a turn for Raquel in 2002, when her mother died. Raquel fell into a deep depression, not wanting to live. She stopped working and got back on assistance, and her previously tight family turned her away. She received no treatment for depression or suicidal thoughts, and though she was on Section 8, her gas bill eventually came to \$3000. She got a grant for \$1500 and hoped to pay the rest in 30 days, but Laclede Gas would not bargain, and the Saint Patrick Center wouldn't help either, as her income was too low. Her debts began to mount and a car accident she was responsible for added to the burden. Hospital payments, ER visits, electric and the aforementioned gas all added up eventually to about \$17,000. When the utilities were cut off, Raquel found herself homeless with her two sons, Jermaine and Trevon, and came to Karen House.

Raquel firmly believes in God, and considers faith very important. She claims no denomination, says her prayers, and blesses her food. She refrains from pork. She says she doesn't understand much of the Bible, a refreshingly honest comment in an age of ill-educated fundamentalism.

Raquel thinks the government should do more for folks. The government taxed her plenty when she was working, but none of that is coming back when she needs it the most. Raquel is bothered that the government cuts welfare for single mothers, does next to nothing about "dead-beat dads," cuts funding for schools and teachers' salaries, and doesn't provide enough assistance for the poor.

She hopes for a better life for her sons, and prays they don't end up in gangs or dealing drugs, that they finish high school and don't follow the rough life of so many black men born in poverty. She's already afraid for Jermaine, who "hangs himself when given too much rope." She fears he doesn't care about consequences and is worried about his "attitude." There will be too much time, she apprehends, when she won't know where her sons are, or what they are doing.

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Over-junked and Undernourished

by Christen Parker

What does hunger look like today in the United States? It is a hunger no longer just to fill one's belly, but for access to nutrition and opportunities needed for wellness. For this reason, economic status is the greatest predictor of health and morbidity in the U.S.

Malnutrition in the U.S. today has taken another dimension – obesity. sixtyfive percent of people in the U.S. are overweight and thirty percent are obese. Nearly one in three children and teens is overweight. One in six is obese.¹ Many do not realize they or their children fall into these groups.² Though it is certainly socially uncomfortable to confront the issue, it cannot be ignored. Besides discrimination, obesity is associated with Type 2 diabetes, hypertension, gallbladder disease, heart disease, stroke, osteoarthritis, cancer, and high blood cholesterol. Obesity claims over 280,000 deaths each year. And, “far from being a random ‘genetic lottery,’ the burden of obesity and diabetes falls disproportionately on minorities and the poor.”³ This problem of over-fed undernourishment specifically and especially affects the most vulnerable – the poor.

So why are the poor more at risk for poor nutrition? If people want to eat healthy food they can, right? For people to make healthy choices, there must be healthy options. Unfortunately, there is unequal access to healthy food in our society. The World Health Organization reports: “Access to good, affordable food makes more difference to what people eat than health education. No amount of telling people to eat more fruits and vegetables will change their diet if they cannot easily buy such things.”⁴ When supermarkets close down in poor neighborhoods, as they have in ours and do in countless others, people are forced by proximity and lack of transportation to shop at convenience stores, fast food chains, and gas stations that feature high sugar and fat snacks, high

sugar sodas and drinks, and not nearly enough fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats. Popular “super-discount” stores noticeably lack these fresh options as well. What more, fats and sweets are often the lowest cost option available.⁵ Many families can avoid real hunger, but do not have enough money or the opportunity to buy the foods needed for a healthy, balanced diet. Cost of food is very often higher in low-income areas than in average middle-class suburbs.⁶

Add to that the fact that the poor lack access to quality health care which means less chance for prevention and nutrition counseling and less chance for early detection of the aforementioned problems. It is estimated that for every diagnosed diabetic there is one that goes undiagnosed. Undiagnosed diabetes alone can cause fatigue, loss of limb, heart disease, and blindness. Compounding this problem is a clear lack of safe places to exercise. Broken or missing sidewalks and unsafe areas to walk and play in the inner city show us this is not just a medical issue, but a much larger societal problem.

School lunch programs, which children from poor families rely on every school day for nutrition, are highly criticized for “fattening the poor” with empty calories.”⁷ And so for poor children, “the body is constantly starved for nutrients. The result is short tempers, irritability, fatigue, and aggression.”⁸ Physical education has also been cut from under-funded inner city schools, sometimes down to a half hour a week! Nutritious food and opportunities to exercise are crucial to education and overall well-being.

Television and video games frequently babysit poor children as Mom or Grandma works one to three jobs to make ends meet. These kids are not being driven to little league practice or gymnastics, nor can many safely play outside. In addition to inactivity, they are constantly cap-

Christen Parker heads to Haiti in January with Rodney Yarnel. Christen and Rodney will wed in March and then return shortly after to Karen House.



tive audiences to TV marketing. \$3 billion is spent annually on TV ads by fast food chains, and every month about 90% of children in the US between ages 3 and 9 visit a McDonald's.⁹ Advertisements for 44oz sodas and "king-sized" candy bars litter the screens and the streets, while convenience stores heavily stock them. The rise in the consumption of white sugar and white flour has followed the rise in TV commercials advertising these products.

Today's intake of sweeteners is an astounding 180 pounds per person per year, with teenagers consuming 300 to 400 pounds per year. Children are consuming alarming amounts of sugar, caffeine, artificial flavorings and colors, animal products, and the phosphoric acid.¹⁰ Americans drink about 56 gallons of soda per person per year – with an average of one teaspoon of sugar per 1oz of soda.¹¹ Around one fifth of our country's one and two year olds now drink soda, and a 1997 study found that a growing number of infants were fed soda in their bottles¹². All of this, while it is known that "excessive soda consumption in childhood can lead to calcium deficiencies and a greater likelihood of bone fractures,"¹³ not to mention the list of health problems when excess empty calories accumulate as fat in the body and increase throughout development. But soda and 0-2% juice (i.e. sugar water) are consistently cheaper, more heavily promoted, and more available than 100% juice, just as candy bars are over apples and grapes (and even one candy bar a day can add up to 24 pounds a year!)

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has declared obesity an epidemic. "We live in a toxic environment... It's like trying to treat an alcoholic in a town where there's a bar every ten feet. Bad food is cheap, heavily promoted, and engineered to taste good. Healthy food is hard to get, not promoted, and expensive."¹⁴ With limited access to fresh food and low budgets that make cheap sugars and fats both attractive and often exclusive options, what are the poor to do? Capitalism dismisses this nutritional injustice as "personal choice" and ignores

our public responsibility to provide real options and just opportunities. How could change be made? One suggestion is to tax junk food and unhealthy foods such as chips, candy, white bread (which is "like a spoonful of sugar" to the body¹⁵) and sugar drinks and with the money earned, subsidize fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains and real juices, making it cheaper to eat healthily. States could also ban ads promoting unhealthy foods. Policies could be made in government to get junk foods and high sugar and fat foods out of school lunches as well as ban chips, sugar drinks, and candy in vending machines – this has been done in the Oakland, CA school district!¹⁶

Government dietary recommendations and programs should also include lactose free options for the majority of minorities who are lactose intolerant¹⁷. Cities could subsidize quality supermarkets and farmers' markets in poor areas. Neighborhoods could have free community fitness centers – it has been done, and works. Doesn't everyone deserve equal opportunity to be healthy?

Good food should not be a luxury, but a basic human right – and we must uphold, that to really "serve up" a preferential option for the poor. How can we achieve such? We can provide the opportunity for access to whole foods, fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, 100% juices, and alternatives to packaged foods and sweet desserts. We can donate healthy food to local shelters and soup kitchens. We can support public gardens and food cooperatives in poor communities. And more widely, we can advocate for public policy that places the health of our most vulnerable in the forefront. We can demand the best for the poor.



1 St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Sept. 26, 2004 "Our Overweight Kids"

2 A physician would calculate Body Mass Index (BMI) which is weight divided by inches of height squared, then that times 703. Examples: for a twelve year-old girl, overweight is a BMI of 21.7-25, obese is a BMI of 25 plus, for an eighteen year-old boy, overweight is a BMI of 25.5-29, and obese 29 plus (CDC).

3 "Fat and Sugar: An Economic Analysis" Adam Drewnowski Center for Public Health Nutrition, Univ. of Washington, Seattle, WA *American Society for Nutritional Sciences* 2003.

4 "Access to Food—Restricted!" Kristin Salsberry *The Change Agent* Issue 14.

5 "Fat and Sugar: An Economic Analysis"

6 "Access to Food—Restricted!"

7 "Poverty and obesity: the role of energy density and energy costs" Adam Drewnowski and SE Specter. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 2004.

8 "Unhooking a 'Junk-Food Junkie'" *naturalovens.com*

9 Schlosser, Eric. *Fast Food Nation* p.47.

10 "Unhooking a 'Junk-Food Junkie'"

11 *Fast Food Nation* p.53.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

14 Kelly Brownwell quoted in *National Geographics* August 2004.

15 Registered dietician Elizabeth Cowie quoted in the St. Louis Post Dispatch, September 26, 2004 "Our Overweight Kids"

16 John Robbin, "Racism, Food and Health"

17 *Ibid.*

The Cycle of Poverty and Economic Policy

by Mary Ann McGivern, SL

We can't solve our problems at the level of thinking where they were created.

--Albert Einstein

Albert Einstein, of course, had his own burden, having done the math that was used to create nuclear weapons but there are plenty of other problems for us to solve.

Wal-Mart is an excellent illustration. The problems Sam Walton created with his concept of Wal-Mart: cheap foreign-made goods, low cost lead items, high volume, low wages, no benefits; can't be solved by one person. Employee compensation, competition with small business, and free trade practice have all been changed by Wal-Mart's scale of retail. Sam Walton, the epitome of American Capitalism, has made working people poorer around the world.

We don't know the name of the person who first moved a non-profit health service (probably nursing care) into the free market. Or the person within General Motors who had the bright idea to buy up local trolley lines and force cities into dependence on GM buses. Or the first employee to throw industrial waste into the river.

But sadly the corporate world abounds with clever practices that make a few men richer while impoverishing the rest of us. Correcting the damage that these ideas have done takes public policy. Figuring out that we need public policy demands new ways of communal thinking. The problems we face today can only be overcome by collective commitment to behave differently.

Corporate system analyst Frank Dixon says: "We reduce systems to the human mind, not seeing total global dependence, not holding corporations accountable for what they really do."

And once again, business-funded think tanks are

ahead of us. The Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, American Enterprise Institute, Hoover Foundation and others have been publishing and distributing the ideas for years that privatization is better than government operation, that free trade is better than fair trade, that wealth trickles down.

In 1989, Jack Nelson-Palmeyer wrote a book, "The War Against the Poor" about military action in Central America, a proxy war of the United States. The title was shocking, rightly so, forcing many of us to think differently about poverty and see more readily the ways that the rich are waging war against the poor.

I've taken a look below and some of the economic policies, shaped by U.S. public (read government) policy to protect and defend the capitalist system. This essay is more global than most in this *Round Table* issue because U.S. policy has shaped a global practice that transfers wealth from the poor to the rich at home as well as abroad. And along with the analysis of how our policies turn poverty into destitution, I offer some strategies for us to begin both developing new solutions and applying the old, tried and true practices of economic justice.

Privatization

One of the economic mantras is that government can't compete with private industry. The solution is to privatize. There is some truth to the economic benefits of competition. A couple of companies that manufacture tractors, automobiles, big metal presses or televisions, competing with each other, ought to and often do produce better, cheaper goods. But monopoly capital - the big three auto companies, the big two breakfast cereal manufacturers, the two fighter plane makers - drives prices up, not down, and quality is often indistinguishable.

Mary Ann McGivern, SL has been recruiting tutors for one of the children in the Dorothy Day Co-housing Community of which she is a member.

A further caveat is that when governments subsidize private enterprise, as the U.S. subsidizes agriculture, pharmaceuticals and textiles, the benefits of global competition are lost. Mexico can't sell tomatoes here at a profit and Social Security can't negotiate with the drug companies for lower prices.

The United States has always considered mineral rights, including oil, to be the private property of the surface land owners. Water, however, belongs to us all - so far - and unless it's bottled or contained on private land. However, in many other countries, from Mexico south to



Chile and around the world to Iraq, Libya and Nigeria, tin, copper, diamonds, water and oil belong to the state. But that is changing; for decades the U.S. has pressured countries to privatize their minerals. Coca Cola has bought up a lot of the water in the draught stricken state of Bengali, India. The Iraqi provisional government, under Paul Bremmer, auctioned off some mineral rights. It's a work in progress; we don't know the outcome yet. Two years ago, Bolivia tried to privatize water, including rainfall. There, indigenous residents of Cochabamba revolted and halted the process - at the cost of six human lives and 175 wounded.

Nonetheless, privatization marches forward. In St. Louis last year, the city school board privatized (or outsourced) school lunches, school maintenance, and management of payroll and health insurance. Workers lost jobs or had pay and benefits reduced; quality of work is noticeably down; and contract fees to the firms are rising already.

Action

If you are interested in private property, privatization, and capital creation, a Peruvian think tank headed by economist Hernando de Soto has done some very interesting work. They've looked at how individuals in the developed north use private property to leverage capital, receive a good education, and get utility services. For instance, De Soto recounts the very interesting legal history of private property in the United States in his book *The Mystery of Capital*.

How can we counter privatization policies? I suggest starting by objecting to local and state practices like tax increment financing that allows sales tax to pay for shopping malls that pay workers minimum wage with no benefits. After all, one of local government's jobs is to protect its citizens, more of whom are poor than rich.

Fair Trade and the Market Economy

Markets are at the heart of capitalism. The model is the ancient farmers' and artisans' street outlets, where shoppers choose among varieties of beans, carrots, and clay pots, selecting for taste, color, craft, innovation, and low prices. The farmer who selects the best seed, rotates his crops to get big yields, and plants and harvests efficiently is rewarded at the market.

The playing field at the local market is pretty fair. One farm might be bigger and better irrigated; another farmer might have hard-working sons; but generally innovations will be slight and improvements slow but steady, quickly adopted by the competition.

Alas, the global economy turns local market theory on its ear. Corporations can flood the region with cheaper imports and drive out local products, be they corn, automobiles, or entertainment. Franchises drive out local restaurants; movies drive out local theater; and U.S. News Today drives out local papers. Some jobs are inevitably lost in this process, but more importantly, capital flees the local economy. Little money or industry is left to compete against big business.

Today indigenous Mexican communities are resisting Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), a wide road and railroad across southern Mexico to by-pass the Panama Canal (since the U.S. no longer controls it), and ship goods around the world. If it is built, PPP will destroy farm land and local communities. It will draw labor to low-wage assembly plants and sweat shops, and it will serve as an effective border, preventing immigrants from traveling up through Mexico to the United States in search of better jobs.

Meanwhile, in the United States, the market is Wal-Mart, K-Mart, and food marts where low-paid "associ-

ates" shelve goods produced in China, Indonesia, India, Haiti, and all the rest of the poorest nations. Their children forgo school and childhood itself that we might wear new tennis shoes.

Action

Buy fair trade coffee. Your coffee purchase alone won't change the system. But the practice changes us, teaches us to be more alert to trade issues and links us in a common action that might sustain new community solutions.

The Labor Market

Firms prefer capital-intensive production to labor-intensive because, after the initial investment of machinery, it's cheaper. Look at the McCormick reaper and the cotton gin. Both agribusiness and the military-industrial complex prefer not to pay health insurance, pensions and vacation pay, much less weekly wages.

Labor is always in a battle against management. But now the global labor market drives down wages well below workers' capacity to form unions. There's not enough work for everyone, and hungry people will always work for less. They dig in unsafe mines. They spray and are sprayed with pesticides. They assemble televisions, sew blue jeans, and dive too deep for pearls. Despite the militarization of our borders, men and women and even children risk their lives every day to get to the United States and harvest our food. They view themselves as the lucky ones.

Action

Right now the AFL-CIO is locked in a battle about whether to put \$25 million a year of union dues into new drives to organize retail clerks, health care and fast food workers, temps, receptionists and all the rest of the working poor. If you belong to a union, tell your leadership you want part of your dues to go to this new organizing drive. Support farm workers by boycotting Taco Bell (tomato pickers in Imokolee, FL) and eat Mount Olive pickles and Tillamook cheese.

Financial System

When the price of oil skyrocketed in the '70s, the oil-producing nations couldn't spend all their profit. They put the money in banks. The banks had to earn interest, so they loaned the money to U.S. farmers and to poor nations - or rather, they loaned the money mostly to the dictators of poor nations. These dictators stole about a third of the money, sending it to off-shore banks, investing on Wall Street, building American shopping malls, etc. They spent another third of the money shoring up their armies, buying a wide variety of weapons. They invested roughly the remaining third in their countries, half in hydro-electric projects, four-lane highways, and airports that proved at best useless for the poor and at worst destructive of the land and local infrastructure. Most of

the remaining sixth of all that money, billions upon billions, did go to local education, animal husbandry, housing and health care. The working poor made some brief gains.

Then the loans had to be repaid, at a moment when interest rates rose sky-high. The farmers simply went bankrupt and lost their land. The World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), lender nations, and private banks demanded that the poor nations meet regular interest payments. Most of these countries have since repaid the debt amount in interest, without making a dent in the capital. The penalties for interest non-payment would be loss of access to pharmaceuticals, heavy machinery, trade



outlets - all the tools of development.

The lenders have insisted that odious debt, debt incurred by dictators, be repaid. The United States is insisting today that debts incurred by Saddam Hussein are legal debts; lenders are being asked by the U.S. to forgive payment - but that's seen as an act of generosity, not of justice.

In order to meet interest payments, countries have had to borrow more money. The IMF stipulated structural adjustment that constricted the flow of money and services. Debtor nations had to reduce health and education programs (the very few benefits all that loan money had made possible), open their markets to foreign investors, pay their interest debts in U.S. dollars, and pay the interest first, before spending anything on behalf of their citizens.

And yet, the IMF has not banned military spending or capital flight, in those circumstances where the borrower was or is a notorious dictator. It does not insist on budget transparency or challenge corruption. In a UN

speech, Nobel Peace Prize winner and former president of Costa Rica Oscar Arias said that the simple act of requiring budget transparency would be a giant step because it would separate those countries impoverished by debt and drought from those countries impoverished by debt, military spending, and graft.

Action

Join the campaign to forgive the debt of developing nations. Write Congress. Write the United Nations. Join Jubilee. Join the effort to end corruption by insisting that lenders track the stolen loot of Nigeria's Abacha family and other despots the same way they track Al Qaida funds.

Deregulation

When Adam Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations*, he understood the need for regulation as a restraint to bridle greed. Economic liberal contemporaries of Smith wanted laissez faire government. That's what today's neo-liberals want, an end to regulation. (Economic liberals are not the same as bleeding-heart liberals.)

Minimum wage, progressive taxation, environmental protection, the right to unionize and anti-trust /anti-monopoly legislation are modest examples of government regulation as seen in the United States. Controls in Europe are more extensive and include job protection, universal health care, and vacation benefits.

Where the United States has influence around the world, it discourages government regulation. But when companies have no established limits, competition forces them to do what's cheapest or die, no matter how much the CEO and directors might wish to do what's right. Lack of accountability drives bad behavior.

Action

Again government regulation is not the bad guy here. We need more government protection against unbridled greed, not less. One strategy suggested by corporate analyst Frank Dixon is that investors select companies that are the best in class across the board: not just productive, equal opportunities employers without consumer or environmental protection lawsuits and complaints; but firms that seek the best technology, maintain transparent books, lobby for regulation enforcement, invest in foreign governments that have rid themselves of corruption. By rewarding the companies that are planning long-term sustainable success, investors can help drive out corporate chicanery and develop systems of accountability.

Other Ways We Wage War Against the Poor

Prison sentencing is yet another element of this war. Though violent crime has decreased 16% over the past ten years, the prison population rose 2.1% last year alone. Ten per cent of African American men between 24 and 29 are in prison. The total number of those in prison, including local jails and juvenile detention as of December 31, 2003, was 2,214,475. Imprisonment has economic con-

sequences. Inmates are costly to house and, in economic terms, unproductive. In human terms, their lives are deliberately wasted by public policy.

The lack of health care access - prevention, treatment of chronic illness, prenatal care, prescription drugs, AIDS treatment around the world, malaria research - kills millions of poor people every year and maims many more. We only talk about health care in terms of how much it costs. But the economic benefit of a healthy society is greater productivity. It's obvious that a vaccinated populace is an economic good. So is a tuberculosis-free public. Less obvious are the links between poor health and depression and violence.

Action

Feeding a hungry person, sheltering a homeless family, fighting for exoneration for a single prisoner attacks the taproot of injustice. Writing letters for single-payer health care and prison reform put effective pressure on unjust systems. Only by working together, continually reframing our case and presenting it in new venues, can we discover more effective strategies.

Militarization

The neoliberals (no regulation) and newer neoconservatives (focused on military development) within the Bush administration hold that the only role for government should be defense of the nation. They press continually for military spending because they see the best defense to be a good offense (and they want to spend down our wealth so it isn't squandered on the poor). They want to encircle China (that's why the military bases in Iraq and Afghanistan). They want to militarize space in order to protect our satellite communication system and be in the position to destroy other governments' communication. Thus they embrace the doctrine of pre-emptive strike.

The militarization of our borders, the militarization of the war on drugs, and the militarization of the effort to halt terrorism are all elements of the war against the poor. Deployment of troops and design and manufacture of weapons redirects our resources, including young men and women, away from the kind of job creation that could alleviate both the causes of terrorism and immigration and the resulting dislocation.

People often argue that military spending is good for the economy, that it creates jobs. It is true that World War II jump-started an already recovering economy, but at great cost in human life, to the environment, and to our souls. Korea and Vietnam took a greater economic



Savage Inequalities



HOUSING

New development in the neighborhood is a mixed blessing—many of our neighbors have been pushed out as property values skyrocket, and many of the beautiful old buildings rot next to rows of identical house priced at \$140,000 and above. Decent, safe, and affordable housing for people with lower-incomes is increasingly scarce in St. Louis.



One of the three St. Louis grocery stores within a one-mile radius of each other in the county



"No amount of telling people to eat more fruits and vegetables will change their diet if they cannot easily buy such things."
The World Health Organization

As with many other retail stores, the major grocery chains have largely fled the city, while building multiple new facilities in the suburbs of St. Louis.

NUTRITION



TRANSPORTATION

To get her children to school from Karen House (a 3 mile distance and 10 minute drive by car) using public transportation, our guest Tammy has to ride two buses and the Metrolink (about an hour each way). In St. Louis, the number of bus routes was again cut in 2003 due to "lack of funds."



What serves as the primary grocery store for many in our neighborhood



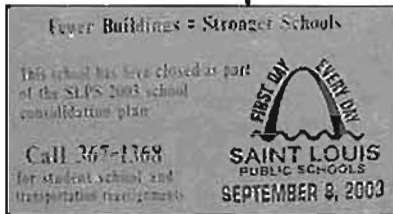
Indeed

Yes, the poor will always be with us, and there will always be a need for our sharing, our stripping of ourselves to help others... But I am sure that God did not intend that there be so many poor. The class struggle is of our making and by our consent, not God's, and we must do what we can to change it.

Dorothy Day



Montell, (*name changed*) a friend in our neighborhood, attends a local high school with a high drop out rate, safety issues, poorly paid teachers, and little funding for extra curricular activities. Twenty miles west, one private school gave every student a laptop computer for school work. Education, viewed by many as a "way out of poverty," reflects the growing gap between 'have' and 'have-nots' in the U.S.



For several weeks, this sign on our closed neighborhood school had the added information: "More military spending = Less money for education"



EDUCATION

HEALTH CARE



The St. Mary's Health Center on Clayton Rd.

The U.S. is the only industrialized country that does not provide universal health care, while over 24% of every health care dollar spent here goes to administrative costs, CEO salaries, shareholder profits, and advertising costs. (votenoder.org)

Without insurance, one will wait 2-4 months for a new dental appointment, 1-2 months for a primary care appointment, and several months for specialty care like orthopedics, oncology or gastrointestinal appointments.



The Grace Hill Neighborhood Health Center on North Grand

toll and showed little benefit. Iraq too is expensive and seems to carry to economic benefit at all.

The benefit these and all the smaller invasions and proxy wars the U.S. has fought the past 75 years is the protection of corporations and capitalism. The neocons would argue that winning in Iraq will set the stage for global capitalism.

I disagree. I see militarization as a value choice to shift skilled labor, capital (both money and machinery), and high-tech process and product from productive work that improves our economic well-being to non-productive work. At best, weapons will rust out; at worst they will destroy economic structures, the environment, and life.

Another clear example of the value choice to shift labor, capital and technology away from the economic good was the medieval building of the cathedrals - a waste from any sober economic perspective. Militarism and the cathedrals: the same and yet not the same.

The United States is making a value choice to spend about \$550 billion this year on the military, not counting veterans' benefits or interest on the federal debt. This spending is not good for either our economy or for the world. As Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart is also."

Action

The War Resisters League has an excellent pie chart and explanation of the federal budget, and Buckminster Fuller designed a chart with a 800 squares representing \$800 billion in military spending. He overlaid a quarter of it with spending on vaccinations, clean water, development of clean energy; redirecting a quarter of our mili-

tary spending could heal the world in ten years.

These are worth our study time as we struggle to grasp that the purpose of the military is merely to defend capitalism. It is the policies of capitalism, at home and abroad, that kill the poor.

We can stand against militarization by refusing to pay the federal telephone tax, by offering sanctuary to undocumented immigrants who cross our armed borders, by calling for drug treatment instead of a war on drugs. We need to understand and reject the costs of war. Then we can go on to envision a peace economy.

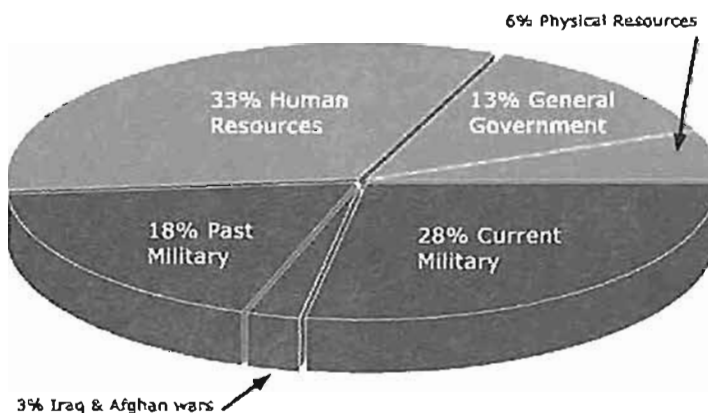
The Washington Consensus

Washington Consensus has become the shorthand in the developing world for the worst of global capitalism, the constellation of policies that are the weapons of the economic war against the poor. People in developing nations understand better than we do the impact of these policies. They have branded our government - Clinton and Bush, Reagan, Carter, Ford, Nixon, Kennedy. From their perspective, it doesn't matter who the president is. They recognize that there is a consensus among politicians, generals, diplomats, and CEOs that privatization, monopoly, and debt are good business. Dorothy Day has called this set of economic elements the "dirty rotten capitalist system".

The United States has driven the global economy into a ditch. But the car radio is playing and we don't even know yet that we are on fire. Our task is not just to shout "fire" but to put out the fire and find a new driver to replace the Washington Consensus, a driver who does not wage war but stands in solidarity with the poor.



WHERE YOUR INCOME TAX The United States Federal Budget for Fiscal Year 2005 MONEY REALLY GOES



www.warresisters.org/piechart.htm

Hope in Poverty

by Melissa Brickey

"One thing children certainly accomplish . . . they love and wonder at the people and the universe around them. They live in the midst of squalor and confusion and see it not. They see people at the moment and love them and admire them. They forgive and they go on loving."

—Dorothy Day, *Selected Writings*

In the 3-rd years I have lived in my north St. Louis city neighborhood, I have felt utter despair and indescribable hope. Sometimes I bounce from despair to hope as I move in and out of my day. Sometimes it changes even less fluidly – with a phone call or a siren or a comment from a desperate mother. One constant I have come to appreciate, though, is the hopefulness I can feel after spending time with any of the children in my life. Simply put, in the innocence of a child, there is hope, regardless of the harsh experience that may be that child's life.

The children interviewed below are siblings, and have shared poverty, and the harshness that accompanies it, with each other throughout their lives. They have each experienced the pains of homelessness, separation from each other, instability and violence. Their lives certainly are defined by their past, to an extent; but here, the focus is on their futures and how their past positively shapes that future.

Lavelle is a 14 year-old eighth grader at De La Salle Middle School in the Ville neighborhood, one of the poorest areas in North St. Louis City. The school targets at-risk students and offers small class sizes with a focus on mathematics, language arts, and personal responsibility and accountability.

RT: How do you define hope?

L: A light at the end of the tunnel; the thing that strengthens you in despair.

RT: What are things in your life that are good or that make you happy?

L: The love and care I get from my family.

RT: What people influence your life positively? What do these people teach you or role model for you?

L: My mom teaches me to respect people and always do the right thing.

RT: Has your life – poverty, violence, and instability – taught you life lessons?

L: Yes, it has taught me to do the best I can and to believe in God.

RT: Are you loved? Who loves you and why do they love you?

L: I hope so! My family and friends love me and they love me because they have good hearts and good taste.

RT: Does anyone in your life challenge you to be a better person? How do they challenge you?

L: My teachers. They talk, push, and talk some more about my future.

RT: What do you want for your future?

L: That I will be helping and serving people till the end.

Sharday, age 16, is a freshman at Cardinal Ritter College Prep, an urban Catholic high school. She graduated from De La Salle Middle School in 2004, winning the school's Service Award.

RT: How do you define hope?

S: To me hope is having a desire or strongly wanting something to happen.

RT: What are you hopeful for?

S: I am hopeful for a lot of things but the main two things are that my family stays together and that I be successful in life.

RT: What are things in your life that make you happy?

S: My big family...they always keep me happy and excited.

RT: What people influence your life positively? Why?

S: My family and friends because they show and tell

Melissa Brickey drives half the children in our neighborhood to school.

me how I should act towards not only others but myself as a young black female.

RT: What are your best attributes or character traits?

S: Responsibility because if I say I will do something I will.

RT: Has your life made you a better person?

S: Yes, living in these ways has made me a stronger person and has taught me not to take things for granted.

RT: Are you loved? Who loves you and why do they love you?

S: Yes, my family and friends because I am always willing to help them no matter what.

RT: Does anyone in your life challenge you to be a better person? How do they challenge you?

S: Yes, my sister – she always taught me to be who I am and not change for anybody else, as long as I know it's for the best.

RT: What do you want for your future?

S: I want to have a big family (like mine) and be an early childhood teacher and maybe own my own day care.

RT: What do you want for your siblings' future?

S: I just want them to be happy and healthy.

Nineteen year-old Ravay attends Missouri College, with hopes of becoming a Certified Nursing Assistant in June, 2005. She graduated from Lafayette High School in May, 2004 with honors including being inducted in the National Honor Society. She also is proud to say that she graduated from anger management (although some say she could use a refresher course).

RT: How do you define hope?

R: To me hope is like a wish, you "hope" or you "wish" this turns out right, you "hope" or you "wish" this don't happen but you have hope for a better life. You hope you will succeed at everything you do.

RT: What are you hopeful for?

R: I am hopeful for EVERYTHING – especially life.

RT: What are things in your life that are good/that make you happy?

R: Me knowing my past can't take over anymore. Me having the ability to really succeed at everything probably thinking it wasn't possible. Me currently going through college thinking I wasn't ever going to make it out of high school. Also, the knowledge that I do have the ability to change as a person.

RT: What people influence your life positively? How?

R: Jane - I met her a few years ago at Karen House; immediately I felt I could tell her anything. She was quick to tell me what was wrong in the situation for the best of me. But, never once did she judge me. She taught me that if I really wanted it, I could get it. Also, to never give up 'cause "quitters never win." And to always keep a positive attitude. This is the same advice my high school teacher Mrs. Williams gave me – I knew her for about four years. Both of these beautiful people really inspired me truly.

RT: What are your best attributes or character traits?

R: "My sweet little attitude" (some people don't agree though), my caring for all, my beauty and just me really.

RT: Has your life made you a better person?

R: My life was very hard growing up. Starting probably at the age of seven, now I'm 19. Because of my life and past, I had trouble in school. In the fifth grade, I was told I had a behavior problem, and needed to attend anger management. It's funny because if they only knew: all I wanted was some attention. But look at me now – I'm going through college holding a 3.8 GPA and expected to graduate in June of 2005. So I'd say yes, it did make me a better person.

RT: Are you loved? Who loves you and why do they love you?

R: I believe I'm loved. Really I hope I'm loved. "Um to think about it, am I loved?" Yes I'm loved. Who loves me? Well...my birth family, my family who I'm currently staying with, Mrs. Williams, and "Mr. Conceited." They love me because I'm me. I'm friendly, sweet, considerate, helpful, thoughtful and all the above.

RT: Does anyone in your life challenge you to be a better person? How do they challenge you?

R: Sharday, "Mr. Conceited," and Jaron challenge me. I say them because they will never let me work on them as a nurse because I may hit a vein, artery, nerve, or something dramatic. It's funny to me because it's actually helping me to work harder and show them I will and can be capable of taking care of them. They're challenging me to be a better person, I believe.

RT: What do you want for your future?

R: For my future all I want is to be all I can and to be the best at whatever I do. Also to grow up successfully on a straight path helping people the way I like to do...and wishing the best for my siblings.

RT: What do you want for your siblings' future?

R: All I want is for my siblings to grow up successfully, and basically just keep striving for the best. Also making sure we all stick together no matter what. And that FAILING is not in our vocabulary. Also that they know working hard will make them feel like they have the whole world. Finally, all I want for all seven of them is to know even though I've moved out of the house I haven't moved out of their lives and I do and I will always love them. Also to stay strong for the sake of all eight of us....

Although no longer living at Karen House, Lavelle Sharday and Ravay visit Karen House often. Sometimes their mother needs some flour...sometimes they want to borrow the computer...sometimes they come to help out...and sometimes (well, usually) they come to love and to be loved. There is hope in poverty. And, truthfully, it's not very hard to find. Look for love – an easy thing to find with children around. ✦

The Matthew Effect

by Dan Costillo

The single greatest predictor of a child's academic performance during primary and secondary school is her or his family's economic status. More than race, ethnicity, parental marital status, native language, number of siblings, or any other categorization, it is a family's income that most accurately indicates whether their child will excel or struggle within the confines of the school system. To state it more precisely, if you are wealthy your child will stand a disproportionately high chance of succeeding in school, whereas if you live in poverty your child will likely fall behind and fail at rates exceeding the norm.

Why do poor children so often struggle and fail in school? To be sure, there are competing accounts given to explain this phenomenon. In the story of the "talented servants" the absentee landowner calls the servant who failed to enrich his estate "wicked and lazy." According to this line of reasoning, the poor are solely to blame for the fate that has befallen them. They are slothful, immoral human beings who, in the context of this article, are unwilling to learn in a classroom setting and at the same time are willfully detrimental to those who would. When asked about the growing homeless population during his presidency, Ronald Reagan stated, "Those people *want* to live on the streets." Blaming the poor is still a common rationalization the rich and powerful use to explain social ills. From this point of view, just as the poor are the cause of homelessness, they are also solely culpable for their failures in school. Like Pilate, everyone else can wash her or his hands of responsibility.

That the poor are to blame for their poverty is, of course, not the perspective of the Gospels. So again we

must ask, if indeed the poor are not "lazy and wicked" then why does the learning gap between the wealthy and the impoverished hold true? Not surprisingly, the answers lie within the complex social realities that children from differing economic statuses experience. Children born in poverty are less likely to receive adequate nutrition in their formative years than children born into middle-class or wealthy households. Malnutrition can stunt a child's physical and cognitive development and lead to increased hardship in oncoming years of school.

As children begin to speak, a new hurdle for a child from low economic status becomes apparent. Numerous studies have shown that children living in poverty are spoken to less and are exposed to fewer vocabulary words than children in professional households. By the age of three, more than two years before a child will even set foot in kindergarten, a middle-class or well-to-do child will have accumulated a vocabulary that is approximately twice the size of that of a child in a family on welfare. One longitudinal study estimates that by the age of three a child from a professional family will have heard 30 million more utterances than a child from a family dependent on welfare. Before children hear the ring of their first classroom bell they can find themselves almost hopelessly behind in the educational process. It only gets worse. Research shows that while reading, a child must have a familiarity with 95% of the words in a text in order to comprehend it. The child is then able to garnish the meaning of the unfamiliar words by their context, thereby increasing their vocabulary. A child who does not have the requisite 95% text familiarity quickly grows disheartened, confused, and lost. Educators call this phenomenon the

Dan Castillo, a former member of the Karen House Community, taught at the Vincent Grey Alternative High School in East St. Louis.

"Matthew effect" because, as Jesus notes in Matthew's Gospel, "to those who have more will be given, while to those who do not have, even that will be taken away." It thus becomes unsurprising to find that the learning gap increases tremendously beginning in fourth grade, the year that the curriculum begins to heavily rely on written text. The gap widens with each successive year.

One also must note that all schools are not created equal. Nearly every public school in the United States receives the largest portion of its funding from local property taxes. Schools in the poorest districts, that have the most acute need of resources, receive the least amount of funding by virtue of their location. It has become increasingly commonplace to find schools in low-income neighborhoods shut down altogether because of a lack of funding. This leads to the consolidation of schools, which in turn creates massive overcrowding and a hostile learn-



ing environment for students. Conversely, schools in high-income neighborhoods reap a windfall in property tax revenue, which allows them to afford new technologies and diverse curricular and extracurricular programs.

It is also far more common to have strong parental involvement in high-income schools. As a result, low quality teachers are often forced out of high-income schools and then land in low-income schools, where parental involvement is low. This is not to suggest that all teachers in low-income schools are inept. Many gifted teachers seek out the schools that need them the most. It does however hold true that teachers are able to get by with less effort and competence in a school with minimal parental involvement.

After just a cursory glance at the socio-educational landscape, what emerges is a frightful picture of disparity. Impoverished children are placed behind the "learning eight ball" before they even begin school. What awaits them in their schools is too often the shame and frustration of not being able to do the work that is expected of

them in overcrowded, under-funded, run-down schools.

The trend in U.S. educational policy is exacerbating the crushing burden placed on children from low-income families. Programs such as Head Start that are geared toward reducing the learning gap before kindergarten are having their funding slashed while at the same time the "No-Child Left Behind" program, which applies national testing standards to children around the country, is being instituted. The federal government is in effect cutting the legs out from under the poor and then telling them to jump over the hurdles that it has erected. When children are not able to make it over the bar, not only do they fail, but they are also held responsible for their school's failure. Of course, all of this frustration and failure creates a climate of hostility towards education that, in turn, leads to higher dropout rates among the poor. It is here that we see this vicious cycle near its completion, for students who drop out of high school are more likely to live in poverty and their children will face the same obstacles that burdened their parents. Indeed, even impoverished children who do complete high school find too often that they have not been adequately prepared for life beyond school by an industrial educational system that appears to care less about educating students than it does for meeting its pass/fail quotas.

The words of the Gospels are not impartial. When Jesus noted that "those who have much are given even more while those who have little are denied even that," he was not endorsing unjust economic policies. Rather, Jesus' teachings furiously critiqued social systems that tied heavy loads upon its poor while leaving the rich unburdened—a system that takes from those who have little while it heaps riches upon the wealthy. Our educational system is analogous to the absentee landowner. It gives the poor little and then when they fail to be "productive" and multiply their master's gold, they are pushed to the fringes of society, "into the darkness outside." If we are to stem the crippling tide of the Matthew effect within our educational system, we must ask: What would a preferential option for the poor look like for our children? We must answer this question and then put those answers into action. For it is there, "in the darkness outside," that we will find the collective face of Christ too often gnashing and grinding their teeth burdened with the frustration of failure, a failure that our educational system has fostered.



- "Overcoming the Language Gap" by E.D. Hirsch Jr. and "Overcoming the Language Gap: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3" by Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley were referenced in this article.
- For further study of the parable of the 'talented servants' go to: <http://www.thecotherside.org/archive-may-jun99/myers2.html>
- For further study of the conditions of our impoverished schools *Savage Inequalities* by Jonathan Kozol is recommended.

Predatory Lending

by Shirley Hochhausen

Getting credit has historically been a problem for qualified minority and low-wealth homeowners. In the 1990's a new kind of lender appeared, offering "sub-prime" loans and the promise of cash to many who had low credit scores or lived in communities without traditional banking services. These loans cost more, but they offered under-served communities an "opportunity". It turned out all too often that the only opportunity was the chance for a sub-prime lender to sell a predatory loan to a financially naïve borrower and to charge them unconscionable and undisclosed fees stripping them of their home equity. Sub-prime loans opened the door to lending abuses that now cost homeowners billions of dollars in unnecessary fees and often result in the loss of a home.

Sub-prime, and among them predatory loans, are big business. In 2003 alone, sub-prime lenders generated \$375 billion in loans, up 60% from the year before. Sub-prime lenders are the darlings of Wall Street firms who raise capital for them and syndicate their loans as securities in real estate. "Mainstream" banks now own five of the leading sub-prime lenders because it is so lucrative.

Regrettably, these loans that drive big profits often deprive a generation of their hard-earned wealth by stripping home equity, the largest source of wealth for most people from low-income and financially underserved communities. Equity in a family home could be used to finance a college education, to start a small business or to buy a home for the coming generation. When unscrupulous lenders steal home equity, they also steal the possibility of a better future and consign low-income communities to another generation in poverty.

Homeowners, particularly elders, low-income, minority and the credit impaired should be very careful when refinancing their home. Abusive and deceptive lenders target these, the most vulnerable in our society, and use deceptive and unscrupulous lending practices to sell home loans.

Potential borrowers should look out for warning signs of a predatory loan:

- Were they *approached* to take out a loan against the equity in their home? Predatory lenders are aggressive in their marketing tactics. Solicitations may come by mail or someone knocking at the door.

- Were they encouraged to make home improvements? Predatory lenders often convince homeowners that they need new windows, a new roof or an upgraded kitchen and then overcharge for this service.
- Were they asked to refinance a first mortgage or consolidate credit card or other debt? Predatory lenders encourage borrowers to consolidate debt. People risk losing their home by consolidating their credit card or auto loan into their home loan.
- Is insurance included as part of the loan? Very often predatory loans include insurance such as credit, life or disability insurance. These policies are usually unnecessary and drive up the cost of a loan unnecessarily.
- Is there a pre-payment penalty or pre-payment privilege on the loan? Predatory lenders do not want people to pay off the expensive loan they were sold, so they make people pay for the privilege of getting rid of them. They make people pay a significant fee for escaping from their high interest rates.

If people need to refinance they should protect themselves from lending abuse and shop around for a loan. They should go to several lenders and compare rates and fees. A home loan is the biggest purchase most people will ever make.

People should be careful to not do the following things:

- They should NOT agree to a loan if they do not have the monthly income to make the monthly payments.
- They should NOT be pressured into signing anything. If the offer is legitimate, it will still be there after speaking to an attorney, a knowledgeable friend or family member.
- They should NOT sign any documents that contain blank spaces.

People should be careful to do the following things:

- They should ask for and keep copies of any documents they sign.
- They should ask questions about anything that seems unusual or too good to be true.
- They should consult a lawyer if they have been promised something that they did not get or have questions about the loans. (Local legal services providers or the Bar Association can be consulted if people cannot afford a lawyer.)



Shirley Hochhausen is a lawyer living in the Bay Area who is working for Episcopal Homes Foundation. She was instrumental in the establishment of Community Legal Services of East Palo Alto.

From Abroad

by Mark Chmiel



At the time of this writing, I have two friends who are working in Palestine with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). A year ago, six of us from Saint Louis traveled to the West Bank and Gaza Strip and participated in both accompanying Palestinians in their daily, often tormented lives, and engaging in nonviolent direct action and protests against the now 37-year old Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

My friends, Jennifer (a recent graduate of St. Louis University) and Keren, a Jewish woman in her fifties, are being transformed by their day to day immersion in an occupied country. You sometimes have to wonder: do you have to go over there to really "get it?"

It is crucial to read alternative news on the conflict, since U.S. media are so one-sided in their set of assumptions about Israel and Palestine. For example, you rarely learn from press, TV, or radio that the Israelis are, in fact, militarily occupying another people's land, controlling the Palestinians in numerous, calculated ways, and expropriating the Palestinians' resources.

You can really learn quickly by "being on the ground." You see how the West Bank is cut up in little pieces, all the more so with the apartheid wall. You learn about curfews and closures and roadblocks. You see the illegal Israeli settlements on the hills surrounding Palestinian villages. You meet people who have had loved ones shot, beaten, humiliated, and jailed. You stand in the rubble that used to be a family's home, the results of an Israeli military incursion against terrorists. You see that it can take six hours to travel the distance that normally would take 45 minutes. You have to wait long stretches at one of the many checkpoints throughout the territories. You witness, as Angie and I did, Palestinians putting up with a lot of pressure and sometimes abuse from the Israeli soldiers. One recollection from one year ago: A stout, mustached middle-aged man coming from the Nablus area at the Huwara checkpoint noticed that we were internationals and he said with great tenderness,



photo from International Solidarity Movement

International Solidarity Movement activists try to tear down a gate, part of a separation fence built by Israel, during a demonstration against the construction of the fence near the northern West Bank village of Anin.

"Welcome, welcome to Palestine, we are happy you are here," - and then in an abrupt change of tone, almost an explosion, "and see, see how they treat us like animals." He pointed back to the checkpoint, where soldiers routinely shove back Palestinians with their rifle butts.

What people who work with ISM discover with their own eyes are the various modes of control of the Israeli occupiers: Palestinian land is seized to make room for the wall, supposedly for Israeli security. But it ends up isolating Palestinians from each other, in separated co-

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International Solidarity Movement activists tear down a gate, part of a fence between Israeli and Palestinian areas, during a demonstration against the construction of the fence, near the village of Anin in the northern West Bank Monday, July 28, 2003. Five protesters were wounded when Israeli soldiers fired rubber coated bullets and tear gas to disperse the group.



photo from International Solidarity Movement

claves, or ghettos. Land is also taken from families to make room for settler roads, which Palestinians are not allowed to travel on. And the Israeli settlers take over the land with the best water resources, while the far more numerous Palestinians get meager water rations.

Just last week, I received an email from Jennifer, who closed her update this way: "Tonight when I go to sleep I will pray for all the fathers who can't be with their daughters because they are detained or in prison. I will pray for all the young men and boys who can't be with their families because they are detained or in prison. I will pray for all the children who have seen their friends and their family shot in front of their eyes. I will pray for an end to the day to day humiliation of men in front of their families. I will pray for the women who have to do the work of 10 women...work, cook, clean the house, raise a family, suffer under occupation...they are so, so strong. I will pray for the boys in their twenties who are small in numbers because they are either in jail or dead...may they be safe from snipers and collaborators. I will pray for the dead and for a free Palestine."

It's an ugly situation, one so often papered over by our media, which primarily reduces the conflict to the mania of suicide bombers. But one of the breath-taking realizations you have on the ground is how asymmetrical the conflict is: Israel has nukes, F-16s, tanks, the latest weaponry, air force, and army, while the Palestinians have none of this.

As I write this on the eve of the U.S. election, both George W. Bush and John Kerry are on record for supporting Israel's illegality through the security fence, or apartheid wall. Moreover, they are both totally committed, they say, to Israel's security, which means for the Bush Administration (and there's no reason to think that Kerry would be any different on this issue) to support, whatever the rhetoric is, the ongoing dispossession of the Palestinians, to arming Israel, and to protecting Israel against condemnation in the U.N.

The New York Times reported back in February 2003 that there were two superpowers: The US military and global public opinion. For those of us who have been to Palestine, and been befriended by some of the most hospitable, decent people we've ever met, our task to deepen public opinion on this issue and build a movement that will affirm the humanity of not just Israeli Jews but also Palestinians, and that will modestly work for some justice, some peace, and some healing for both peoples.

If you know a group-church, school, civic association—who would be interested in learning more about this issue, please contact me.



Easy Essay

What is the difference between the two parties?
the difference between the two parties is that
The Republicans want to devour the entire earth
This very instant, and the Democrats
Want to make it last another couple of weeks.
Why does the Right hate the Democrats so?
It is because the Democrats want to give Big Business
Only 90 percent of what it wants
Unlike the Republicans, who want to give it
100 or 120 percent of what it wants.
So the Republicans call the Democrats
Anti-business and socialistic.
If wanting to give Big Business
Only 90 percent of what it wants
Makes you anti-business and socialistic,
What are we to make of people who want to give Big Business
Maybe only 60 or 70 percent of what it wants?
Or even less? Such people
Can't even be allowed into the debate,
Can't even be recognized to exist,
Since no one could possibly be that far off-base.
So if they can't be ignored
(like when they take to the streets and cause trouble)
They can be ridiculed and scorned
As lunatics and misfits and spoiled brats.
By denouncing the Democrats, who want to give Big Business
Only 90 percent of what it wants,

As anti-business and socialistic,
The Republicans can push the political spectrum
Ever further to the right and in favor of Big Business.
Keep it up until the Democrats reach 98 or 99 percent
Or until the planet dies—
Whichever comes first.

--David Stein, Chicago CW

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during the Christmas Season.

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The Round Table

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