



Working for Pennies

The Plight of Baltimore's Urban Poor

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To AGM

for your never ending commitment to promoting social justice

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Preface + Acknowledgements

I WRITE THIS AFTER HAVING JUST RETURNED from a somewhat lavish seven-day Caribbean cruise. Prior to my departure, I had no idea that my summer vacation would be such an appropriate ending to my months of research. Much to my surprise, everything I learned over the course of this Kolvenbach endeavor was thrown in my face during the weeklong trip. I witnessed firsthand what happens when persons from the lower class share a ship with the upper class for a full week.

The juxtaposition was sharp. In one arena sat middle class America (literally) sipping expensive drinks, making visits to the spa, feasting daily on five-course meals, working out in the state-of-the-art gym, and being waited on hand and foot in every way you might imagine. In the other arena, low-wage workers hustled to be sure they exceeded guest expectations. Francisco, my stateroom steward, was at my cabin every morning to make my bed and scrub my bathroom. Twelve hours later, in the evening, Francisco was back yet again, this time to turn down my bed, straighten my room, rescrub the bathroom, and replenish my towels. I began to wonder when he found time to sleep.

The true revelation came for me on the second to last night of the cruise when one of the managers explained how important it was for us guests to fill out the comment cards. He encouraged us to mention specific staff members in the cards because it is through the positive remarks in the cards that he is able to request time off for his employees from upper management.

I don't know about you but when I accepted my job, I received benefits that included allotted vacation time, sick time, and personal time. Absolutely none of this time was dependent on what my clients or anyone else wrote about me on a comment card.

This summer of research has been an eye opening experience for me, to say the least. Father Kolvenbach's call for students to be a voice for those who do not possess the academic qualifications to promote and legitimate their rights could not fall more in line with the needs of low-wage workers. Maybe it is because our nation's working poor are so busy trying to make ends meet that they have attracted very little attention. They do not impinge upon the national conscience; they do not provoke political outrage in the way that welfare recipients do; they are not represented by organized labor, and few public figures take the time to dramatize their problems.¹ They themselves are too tired to take to the streets to demand a larger portion of the national pie. "As far as most Americans are concerned, the working poor are not a social problem."²

For the vast majority, it is difficult to grasp the idea that people can work regularly and still be materially poor. We label such workers as "low-skilled" and use this as a distancing device. It allows us to dismiss workers as undeserving and somehow flawed. "It allows us to justify how poorly their employers treat them. It makes it easier to blame them for their own economic plight."³ It's hard to acknowledge that once adjusted for inflation, the hourly wage of the average U.S. workers peaked in 1973 and then steadily declined for the next twenty-five years.⁴

Additionally, we tell ourselves that minimum wage positions are held by young people who are simply contributing to their working parents' income. On the contrary, only 36 percent of minimum-wage workers are teenagers; 42 percent are adults twenty-five years and older.⁵

The bottom line is that inner-city joblessness is a severe problem that is often overlooked or obscured when the focus is placed mainly on poverty and its consequences. What we're seeing today is a new kind of poverty. "A neighborhood in which people are poor but employed is different from a neighborhood in which people are poor and jobless."⁶ In our minds, it's easy to accept that people are poor because they are lazy. It's an entirely different thing to accept that people can be working and still be poor.

Father Kolvenbach urges us to enhance the diversity of race, gender, and cultural and socioeconomic realities, and to seek a solidarity with diverse peoples, all the while promoting justice. While I worked this summer to attain Father Kolvenbach's goals, I faced a great challenge. The group of persons with whom I wished to make connections often seemed invisible.

As Barbara Ehrenreich points out in her book, *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America*, the poor can see the affluent easily enough – on television, for example, or on the covers of magazines. "But the affluent rarely see the poor or, if they do catch sight of them in some public space, rarely know what they're seeing, since – thanks to consignment stores and, yes, Wal-Mart – the poor are usually able to disguise themselves as members of the more comfortable classes."⁷

Thankfully, Baltimore has advocates who are working to make sure we understand our duty to seek out the working poor, rather than to turn a blind eye. I had the privilege of speaking with a handful of these advocates this summer. In addition, I was able to interview some of the low-wage workers who help make our city run. These people gave so generously of their time. Without them, this project would not have been possible.

What follows is a collection of stories, facts, interviews and reflections. On behalf of Father Kolvenbach, I encourage you to read with an open mind. Perhaps you will find your own way to promote justice for those who need it most.

No business that depends for existence on paying less than living wages has any right to continue in this country... and by living wages I mean more than a bare subsistence level. I mean the wages of a decent living.

– President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, *Presidential Papers*, 1933

The "working poor," as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else

– Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*

Who Are the Working Poor?

They are nursing home workers and home health-care workers who care for our mothers and fathers, yet make so little income that many qualify for food stamps.

They are poultry processing workers who bone and package the chicken we eat for our dinner, yet are not allowed to leave the line to go to the bathroom.

They are retail store workers who help us in department stores, grocery stores and convenience stores, but can't get enough hours to support themselves without working at least two jobs.

They are hotel workers who ensure that the rooms we sleep in on our business trips and family vacations are clean, but who have no sick days or funeral leave or vacation time.

They are janitorial workers who empty our waste-baskets after dark but who have no childcare.

They are catfish workers who process the fish we enjoy, but must work with injured wrists from continuous motion on the line.

They are 1-800-call-center workers who answer our requests and take our orders while under constant management surveillance.

They are childcare workers who educate and care for our children while their own live in poverty.

Shulman, Beth. *The Betrayal of Work: How Low-Wage Jobs Fail 30 Million Americans*. New York, NY: The New Press, 2003.

“You can work full-time everyday and still be poor. It’s a hard concept for some people, especially business people, to grasp.”

Part 1

Self-Sufficiency + Wages



Alma Roberts

CENTER FOR POVERTY SOLUTIONS

The Center for Poverty Solutions is a statewide nonprofit organization that focuses on the eradication of poverty by fostering self-sufficiency for those living in poverty, including the working poor. The Center pursues its mission through advocacy, community mobilization, technical assistance and in collaboration with public and private partners. While much of its fundraising is accomplished through public and private partnerships and grants, the Center for Poverty Solutions also seeks support from the community at large through annual fundraising events.

THE LARGEST GROUP OF POOR PEOPLE in the United States is not those on welfare. “They are the working poor whose earnings are so meager that despite their best efforts, they cannot afford decent housing, diets, health care, or child care.” Indeed the debilitating conditions that impinge upon the working poor – inaccessible health care, substandard housing, crumbling schools – are hardly different from those that surround their nonworking counterparts.⁸

From the moment I sat down with Alma Roberts, it became obvious to me that she is passionate about this population, and especially about the wages they earn. President and CEO of the Center for Poverty Solutions, Roberts has spent years examining the plight of the working poor. We met at her Charles Street office early on a Wednesday morning and began by discussing the notion of self-sufficiency.

Self-sufficiency measures how much income is needed for a family to adequately meet its basic needs without public or private assistance. In other words, being self-sufficient means that families do not have to rely on food pantries, subsidized child care, Medicaid, or any other assistance. It means maintaining a decent standard of living and not having to choose between basic necessities – whether to meet one’s need for childcare but not for nutrition, or housing but not healthcare. “Self-sufficiency wages are family sustaining wages.”⁹

Because so many Maryland families do not earn self-sufficient wages, the Center for Poverty Solutions gets a lot of calls from people looking for help.

A mother of four kids called, was recently divorced and didn’t know where the father was – This was something that was beyond her control. And I knew she wanted to go somewhere in our conversation but she was embarrassed. She didn’t know what she needed. She said, ‘I can’t go home tonight because I can’t feed my kids. I’ve got to find some help.’ She finally got to it and then she just broke down crying, ‘I’ve never in my life been in this kind of situation. I get a paycheck. By the time I pay my rent, by the time I pay the phone bill, by the time I get some childcare, I just don’t have any money left for food.’ And she’s just crying her heart out ‘cause she’s feeling like she’s failing her kids. So we get that a lot.

We also get seniors on fixed incomes who, when they’re finished paying bills, food gets to be the last thing. Because they figure if they’re indoors and not on the street, nobody knows that they’re hungry and they’re poor. They’ll pay the rent, try to keep the lights on. The utilities tend to go second. So we hear from seniors a lot as well. It’s heartbreaking. These are people who have played by the rules, who are playing by the rules. They get up and go to work every day. These are not your drug addicts, your criminals, you know, that kind of thing. And they just aren’t earning enough.

The Center for Poverty Solutions also hears of problems faced by ex-offenders.

People go to jail. They pay their dues. And we make sure that when they come out, they’re persecuted for the rest of their lives. We don’t give them a chance to rehabilitate and go on to become productive citizens. They’re not eligible to vote. They’re not eligible for food stamps or any kind of federal or state assistance. They’re discriminated in jobs, housing and so, what do they do? They either revert to crime or they become homeless and mentally ill. So we create this. Our public policy supports the culture of poverty. It creates it.

The most significant failing of the federal poverty measure is that it is too low. There are many families with incomes above the federal poverty guideline who nonetheless lack sufficient resources to

adequately meet their basic needs. By the mid-1990s, about seventeen million workers worked for wages at or below the real value of the 1979 minimum wage.¹¹

We adopt a federal poverty guideline that has no relevance to today’s cost of living, and we refuse to do anything about it. Everybody in the federal government, in the state government, local government knows that the federal poverty guideline is antiquated. Nobody’s doing anything about it. The census still uses the federal poverty guideline to measure even though they know it’s outdated. Every few years between the formal census, they do a family update kind of thing. And they hear from people, ‘We can’t make it. We’re not earning enough.’ The workers in low-wage jobs have the spending power of workers in the 60s, forty years difference. Wages have been suppressed more than any index so, what do you expect? Sure productivity is going to be down.

The Center for Poverty Solutions focuses heavily on trying to get public policy changed.

We do a lot of public education. We’ve got to get the word out. We need to mobilize the whole group. They don’t want to consider themselves poor so we have to come up with new language – not poor, but not self-sufficient. This group is the infrastructure for our society and they go unrecognized as needing help. So the aim would be to get legislation passed, starting with maybe just the state contracts. Require that state contracts have to pay a self-sufficient wage. And then maybe get the state to pay all of its low-income employees a self-sufficient wage – set the example – and then hope it spirals up to all employers.

We try to build a grassroots or a constituent effort – writing, lobbying, that kind of thing. We sit and talk to all the constituents, and we just do an information campaign. Try to get all the key stakeholders – business, government, general public – informed. And we try to do research. Get them the data. Get the stakeholders some hardcore data.

Proponents for a living wage often will argue that when workers receive a higher wage, a firm benefits in many ways, including reduced labor turnover, better quality of work, better cooperation with management, more flexibility in the operation of a business, and higher overall morale.¹² When asked about the opposition to raising wages, Roberts spoke of how some opponents don’t look at the whole picture.

They’ll talk about the price tag of giving these increases in a time of fiscal crisis but nobody’s doing the, ‘if this [state and federal assistance] goes away when you give people this [a self-sufficient wage]’ – Nobody’s doing that kind of analysis. They’re just looking at how you increase wages. But there are so many dollars to be saved when people make self-sufficient wages. So, we’re trying to do that research and have it ready for this legislative session.

They’ll say it’ll hurt small employers. Well, small employers are hurt when employees are not productive, when their absenteeism is high, when they don’t have childcare, when they have to recruit again, when they have to retrain, all of that – So, this is a way where I think the cost will actually have less of an impact on small employers.

Dispelling Myths

Most people who think of low-wage workers think of them as being ignorant, lazy and relatively uneducated. Now the uneducated piece might be true. They may only be high school graduates but they certainly have the intellectual capacity to advance. People think that they somehow contribute to their condition. But these people get up every day and go to work. If they're absent from work – not everybody now, but I would say the majority – it probably has something to do with a life-threatening problem where they're trying to take care of their basic needs – childcare, they've been sat out on the street, or whatever. So I think these are the myths we have to dispel. Some of these people have been in jobs for 30 years and just have not been able to earn enough money.

The Restaurant Industry

Although the restaurant industry is one of America's largest private employers, it pays some of the lowest wages. "An estimated one out of every eight workers in the United States has at some point been employed by McDonald's."¹³ Thanks to new technologies and the industrialization of the restaurant kitchen, fast food chains are able to rely upon a low-paid and unskilled workforce. Though a handful of workers manage to rise up the cor-

porate ladder, the vast majority lack full-time employment, receive no benefits, exercise little control over their workplace, learn few skills, quit after a few months, and float from job to job. "The roughly 3.5 million fast food workers are by far the largest group of minimum wage earners in the United States. The only Americans who consistently earn a lower hourly wage are migrant farm workers."¹⁴

Part 2

Day Labor + Temporary Work



Todd Cherkis

UNITED WORKERS ASSOCIATION

The United Workers Association (UWA) is a local non-profit that seeks to organize low-wage workers in an effort to fight for better wages and working conditions. The group consists almost entirely of low-wage and temporary workers - many who are homeless - who wish to stand up for their rights by speaking out against day labor practices. Weekly meetings at local shelters help bring consistency to the group. The UWA website refers to Baltimore as "Sweatshop City" and states, "Through day labor contracts, Baltimore has become a city of sweatshops, with poverty-level wages, no job security and worker abuses."

UPON MEETING WITH TODD CHERKIS, the UWA's principal organizer, I quickly realized how much I had to learn. The world of day labor was something that I did not know existed in Maryland. It should be noted that I am a person who tries to keep up to date on issues faced by people living in poverty. If I was unaware of the day labor agencies scattered throughout Baltimore City, I was certain that most of my peers were as well.

The day labor industry is one of the fastest growing in the United States with three million people a year working as temporary or day laborers. Many of these people are homeless or at risk of becoming so. They work in an industry that is characterized by low wages, no benefits, long hours, and many violations of civil and workers rights.¹⁵

Through day labor, contractors are able to minimize or even avoid the cost of workers compensation, income and payroll tax withholding, unemployment compensation taxes, health insurance and livable wages.¹⁶

Focusing on advocacy efforts, the UWA hopes to bring publicity to the plight of local day laborers. In April 2004, the organization garnered media attention for an Opening Day protest it organized at Camden Yards. According to the UWA, roughly 65 to 100 day laborers, about 40 percent of whom are homeless men, clean the stadium before and after baseball games for poverty-level wages and endure sweatshop conditions.

Top Four Largest Day Labor Agencies in Baltimore

- Labor Ready
- TOPS
- Ready Staffing
- Just Temps

This list is based solely on the testimony of workers and is not intended to be complete.²⁰

Ready Staffing Contracts Include

- Streuver Brothers, Eccles and Rouse
- Allen Family Foods
- Johns Hopkins University
- Roland Park Country School
- Baltimore School for the Arts
- Johns Hopkins Hospital
- Ryland Homes
- Taylor Technologies
- Ryan Homes
- Harkins Concrete Construction
- Sheppard Pratt
- Pimlico and Laurel Racetracks
- Baltimore Arena

Todd Cherkis

I started organizing workers back in 1995 when the summer Olympics were coming to Atlanta. The labor pool industry has really grown since then. At the time, I didn't know anything about it. I learned that labor pools were being used as a mechanism for outsourcing and cheap labor during construction for the Olympics. A lot of guys have horror stories of going out and working for minimum wage, which was \$4.25 at the time, and then being charged for safety equipment, for the lunch that they were provided, for the ride back and forth. So, people were coming home with way below minimum wage.

I went and worked for a labor pool in Atlanta and I think I made about \$20 or \$25 for ten hours. So we decided to have a meeting about it, and a big group of workers came together and we decided to form an organization to focus on those issues. Now we're doing the same thing in Baltimore.

The labor pools are basically really bad temp services. Most of them pay daily. As an industry, it's really the only industry I know of that actively tries to recruit homeless people. And I would consider that the main product they produce is homelessness. They make an awful lot of money on people having no money. A lot of the things that they do are very intentional to produce that effect. People aren't paid enough to get out of poverty. They're not paid enough to even get out of the shelters.

There are fees everywhere. At Labor Ready, they charge \$2.50 one way on the van and \$2.50 on the way back, so that's \$5.00 taken out of your check for getting out of the van. They have a cash machine that cashes the Labor Ready vouchers that takes out a dollar to two dollars every day. And then if you want gloves because you're going to a construction site and you need gloves, they charge you for that. You know, raincoats if it's raining. There are a lot of little things like that.

Most jobs are minimum wage at the labor pools. The labor pool often gets \$10 to \$12 an hour for each person; sometimes more. They even charge the company to transport the workers, and then the workers get charged as well, so all those fees really add up.

Your paycheck might be enough to eat and maybe enough to pay to stay in a shelter that night, but it certainly isn't enough money to pay rent, provide healthcare for your family or provide anything for your family at all.

Companies 15 years ago weren't using labor pools. Nowadays they are much more common as companies try to cut costs. They don't have to pay workmen's comp or give overtime or provide health insurance to day laborers.

The major strength of the labor pools is that they're invisible. People don't know about them. It's easy for them to move around. They don't rely on their image because they don't have an image. And they have a huge workforce to pick from because, unfortunately, there's an attitude out there that any kind of work is better than no work. Poverty isn't going away so they have plenty of places to draw from. Getting a few workers to go on strike won't work. Because it's difficult to sue day labor agencies, the goal of the UWA is to continue promoting awareness.

A Fair Day's Pay for a Fair Day's Work: Sweating Day Laborers in Baltimore

A Fair Day's Pay for a Fair Day's Work: Sweating Day Laborers in Baltimore is a comprehensive report that was put together through the combined efforts of the Homeless Persons Representation Project and CASA of Baltimore. The two agencies interviewed well over a hundred day laborers in an effort to hear the real story behind these workers' lives. Though not yet published, the report presents a vivid picture of what it means to be a day laborer in Baltimore City.

Some barriers facing low-wage workers include lack of transportation, language barriers, criminal records, immigration status and unfamiliarity with workplace rights. It should be noted that almost three of out every four job opportunities in the Baltimore region occur in the counties surrounding Baltimore City.¹⁷ This naturally presents a problem since most materially poor persons do not have a reliable means of transportation. The day labor agencies are able to take advantage of this situation by providing transportation to and from distant work sites, and then charging for it accordingly.

Stories of incredibly low wages, ridiculous waiting periods to start a job, unpaid waiting time, placement fee contracts, and transportation charges run rampant in the day labor community. Steven, a day laborer quoted in the report, recalled a time that his van forgot to pick him up at the end of the workday. "I was out in Owings Mills working for Grayson Homes. I got off there at 2:30pm and normally the van would pick me up around 3:30, but what happened is that I wasn't picked up until 7:30pm. It's cold, rainy and I'm out there where, racewise, I was being questioned about why I was out there. By the time the van got out there it was about 7:30pm. That's ridiculous."¹⁸

Brian, another worker in the report, spoke about his daily routine. "I get up at 3am, catch three buses to get to the Labor Pool by 4:30am, wait an hour or hour and a half to get my work ticket, work my eight hours, and get back here around 4:30pm to get my check, and by the time I get home it's 7:00 or 8:00pm."¹⁹

"The labor pools are nothing but sweatshops and Baltimore's biggest corporations are all too willing to outsource to the labor pools. Imagine waking up at 5am to wait for a job, to wait for your name to be called among the hundreds sitting like you are. And at the end of the day, for all your time at the labor pool, you may get paid four bucks an hour once they charge you for transportation, safety equipment, and exclude the hours it took you to get to the job and back. Most of us work two or three jobs on top of whatever money we earn at the labor pools. We work restaurant jobs, home repair jobs, janitorial services, pretty much everything that makes Baltimore run."

Reflection from a day laborer, www.unitedworkers.org

Part 3

Push for Change



Ralph Moore

SAINT FRANCES COMMUNITY CENTER

Saint Frances Academy, established in 1828, is an independent Catholic high school with African American roots. The Academy provides the Johnston Square neighborhood and the City of Baltimore a relevant educational program which gives all members a sense of their cultural heritage and giftedness by helping students, particularly the poor, the neglected, and those with special needs, to recognize, develop and live as respectful, responsible, and just members of God's human family.

MY ARRIVAL AT SAINT FRANCES was greeted by a view of the penitentiary, which practically resides in St. Frances' backyard. I was struck by the juxtaposition of the hopeful school/outreach center and the overwhelmingly dreary prison. They shared such close quarters that I couldn't help but wonder what would happen if this type of zoning were suggested in Baltimore County.

Ralph Moore is no stranger to the plight of Baltimore's working poor. A Baltimore native, his background includes stints at the Maryland Food Committee, the Center for Poverty Solutions, Baltimore City's Human Services Division, and the Baltimore Housing Community. He currently serves as the director of the Saint Frances Community Center.

I was asked to put together a jobs program for men ages 16-25 years old who are greatly disinclined to leave the neighborhood, so there's a lot of handholding. There are no jobs in the neighborhood and they don't want to leave the neighborhood. I just think it's too comfortable here and they're afraid. It is possible for young people to be afraid of success, I guess because that means you have to keep doing it, and that's very uncertain.

Clearly in terms of legal jobs, there are very limited possibilities in this neighborhood, and we don't want people to do the illegal things. People know they can make more money on the streets. You do feel you're competing against this much bigger, better paying, very heavy recruiting industry. They actually go out and grab and recruit these young guys. And some of them force them to work. They say, 'You're going to start working for us or we're going to hurt you.' It can be pretty bad. It's true. That's reality.

People have to be encouraged and they have to be emboldened to leave the neighborhood, to get a bus or two to work. We hope that the work will be rewarding enough that they'll want to keep doing it.

My ideal jobs program would encourage people to become not just employees, but to become advocates for themselves and others who need work. And not just advocates for a job but for a job that paid decently. They would become informed about benefits. You're entitled to a nice healthcare package and you're entitled to a pension at some point. So people would be educated about these kinds of things and be equipped to fight for them and teach other people where they were working about this kind of stuff. Be educated about it. Otherwise people are left to their own devices to figure this kind of stuff out and many people never do.

Getting Out of Poverty

For many people, this is still about emergency services. You talk about poverty and what poor people need is a nice hot meal and a nice warm blanket and maybe they do, but that's not going to get them out of poverty. We're not going to be able to ladle soup out of poverty. We're not going to be able to get enough cots in church basements to find our way out of poverty. Getting out of poverty means creating income and assets for poor people.

Poverty in Baltimore

The poverty in Baltimore is structural. It's built in. It's by somebody's design. And everything points to it. You don't have to be a card-carrying Communist to look and see that the education system points to poverty. There's a disconnect between going to school and getting a job and being able to support yourself. There's a great disconnect. We've got a 76% dropout rate for African American males. That's no exaggeration. You can dropout at 16. Drives you nuts. Most important decision of

your life and you can say at 16 years of age, 'Mom, I'm not getting up. I'm not going,' and there's nothing she can do about it.

It used to be that you could go to school and find your way out of poverty. You could study your way out. Work your way out. And it's not the case anymore. There's got to be a path from school to a job that pays you a living wage. It's got to happen. Work has to work for people. And it doesn't for so many.

Society doesn't seem as if it owes you a job anymore. I think people used to grow up with the notion that you were expected to be able to find a job and to be able to support yourself and your family. It was an expectation. It was part of the promise of America. And now it's everybody for themselves.

Share the Wealth

A quarter of the nation's children under the age of six now live in poverty, making the United States one of the worst offenders among the advanced nations of the world. "More than five million of these poor children live in families in which one or both parents worked all year, an increase of nearly 100% since 1989."²¹

You do begin to wonder what kind of country and what kind of world we're in when the wealth is out there and there's plenty to go around at a reasonable level and yet it is concentrated. It's very immature to me that we honor people who manage somehow to grab and grab and grab. The successful businessman is somebody who, despite the downpours, has achieved great success in terms of finances and all that kind of stuff. They've got big salaries and stock options. And they may have fired hundreds of people to increase the bottom line, but that's the stuff you do. That's how you be successful.

It's much harder to get people to share the wealth. You almost don't even want to think about how bad it is. And most people don't have a clue that two thirds of the world doesn't have clean drinking water. A billion people still don't have enough to eat. So there are things like abject poverty. And poverty of spirit in this country in many, many ways, as Mother Theresa pointed out. It's harder to get people focused. And what do we do with the economic system whose chief goal is maximization of profits? Parenthetically almost by any means necessary – firing people. No commitment.

There are a lot of crazy, screwed up notions that go into this economic system. There needs to be a new way of looking at some of this stuff.

The Reality

You can work full-time every day and still be poor. It's a hard concept for some people, especially business people, to grasp. Some people operate under the old notion that if you work every day, you're supposed to be able to manage. You're supposed to be able to make ends meet. What hasn't caught up in some people's minds is that there are some people who are working five days a week and still can't pay the bills. \$10 an hour equates to about \$20,000 a year. Now find an apartment, pay utilities, have a telephone, eat... and God forbid you want to go to a movie sometime.

The problem is that the cost of housing continues to go up. The cost of food continues to go up. The cost of healthcare is impossible. The cost of transportation to work goes up. All of these things add up to the cost of living. The cost of living goes up and the wages stay flat. The cost in general has not kept up with wages. That's reality.

Fight for Change

There's not so much fight in this town. And you just have to fight for change. Organize and push for change. And there is resistance to that. And some of it, I think, is the stereotypically old Southern town nature of Baltimore where everybody knows their place.

It can be pretty depressing, I think, and the only hope is to push and fight for more and better for people. We have to agitate for change. 'Agitate, agitate, agitate' is what Frederick Douglas said on his deathbed. And if you don't agitate, you don't fight, you don't demand change, it doesn't happen. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. That's so true. There's nothing truer to me. It's just sad. I'm not sure people are predisposed to fight as much as they should be."

It's hard to get stuff going. It really is. It's hard to get people to see the issues. It's hard to get people to figure out how to agitate for change. And it's harder to engage poor people now. It really is. Not just in advocacy efforts but in self-betterment issues. I think the oppression is just so omnipresent and so steady. It sags like a heavy load. If you want change, you've got to keep plugging away and pushing and agitating for it. Advocate, argue and work with people from both ends.

There's something about being American that says we're all equal but some have to be more equal than others. And we have to show that. We have to show bigger houses and more cars, boats. It's just crazy. It's really crazy. And I don't know if we'll ever get to some level of sanity about this. I don't know.

In William Wilson's book, "When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor," the author interviews numerous residents from impoverished areas of Chicago. He speaks of people who struggle against the odds at great individual sacrifice to live up to mainstream norms and ideas of acceptability. For example, a woman in one of the impoverished neighborhoods on the South Side described her husband's financial struggles:

My husband, he's worked in the community. He's 33. He's worked at One Stop since he was 15. And right now, he's one of the highest paid – he's a butcher – he's one of the highest paid butchers in One Stop. For the 15 – almost 18 – years that he's been there, he's only mak-

ing nine dollars an hour. And he's begged and fought and scrapped and sued and everything else for the low pay he gets. And he takes so much. Sometimes he come home and he'd sit home and he'd just cry. And he'd say, "If it weren't for my kids and my family, I'd quit." You know, it's bad, 'cuz he won't get into drugs, selling it, you know, he ain't into drug using. He's the kind of man, he want to work hard and feel good about that he came home. He say that it feels bad sometimes to see the 15-year-old boy drivin' down the street with a new car. He saying, "I can't even pay my car note. And I worry about them comin' to get my car."

Wilson, William. *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. Page 69.

Part 4

Job Training



Pat McLaughlin

CAROLINE CENTER

Sponsored by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Caroline Center is a learning/career center for the women of Baltimore City. Its mission is to enable unemployed and underemployed women to find work in a career with potential for growth and advancement, thus creating a future full of hope for themselves and their families. Ranked "Baltimore's Best Job Training Program for 2004" by Baltimore Magazine, Caroline Center is home to many success stories.

AS I WALKED THROUGH THE CAROLINE CENTER BUILDING to get to Sister Pat's office, I couldn't help but notice the motivational posters and positive quotes hung throughout the halls. This was a place that gave off a positive aura despite the grim neighborhood outside its front entrance.

Sister Patricia McLaughlin, Executive Director of Caroline Center since 1996, has the kind of energy most would envy.

My energy comes from seeing the women succeed; I love to see them when they first come and then watch them grow in self-esteem and in an understanding of themselves as a working, professional woman. I also get energy from the staff and volunteers who bring so many gifts and talents to the Center. The memorable moments are the little moments – When a woman says on graduation day, “This is the first thing I’ve ever completed in my life.” Or when an alumna tells me she’s buying her own home, going to nursing school, etc.

Our typical profile of a woman who comes in is a single woman with pre-school age children, average age is about 28, African-American, about half have high-school diplomas or a GED and of that population, they’re probably reading at a 4th grade level. We try to help the women make career choices and establish employment readiness – computer skills, resumes, self-esteem building, what to wear, life skills.

The biggest obstacle faced by materially poor women seeking employment is the lack of childcare. Safe, affordable childcare is virtually impossible to find. Other big issues include the lack of transportation and the lack of help. So many of the children have asthma. When your child wakes up in the middle of the night with a severe asthma attack and you have to rush him to the emergency room, chances are you aren't going to make it to work the next day.

The lack of affordable housing in Baltimore is also a huge problem. I think we may be ranked the 16th most expensive city when it comes to housing. You need to earn \$36,000/year to be able to afford to live in Baltimore.

Caroline Center believes in giving women a certified skill that will qualify them for decent jobs. Otherwise they will wind up at McDonald's or cleaning toilets. We give women skills in various industries: nursing homes, certified nursing assistants, day care centers / Head Starts, pharmacy technicians, food service training, clerical / computer. The wages are all over the place but the vast majority are above minimum wage.

Baltimore needs more places like Caroline Center.

180 women signed up for this past session; there were only 60 slots. There is a great need for training. A recent report by the Job Opportunities Task Force stated: “Recently, almost 2/3 of the employers in Baltimore City and surrounding counties reported difficulty in finding skilled workers.” Unfortunately, the training dollars are drying up – recent proposals for the reauthorization of welfare are requiring recipients to “work first”.

Dispelling Myths

There's an idea out there that any job is better than no job. This couldn't be further from the truth.

Half of Baltimore City's Residents Are Unemployed

Baltimore Isn't Working Because Its People Don't, an article published in March 2004 by the Baltimore Sun, stated that half of the city's residents are not working. The city's small work force is a symptom of many problems – a tragic combination of individual missteps, poverty and unhelpful public policy. Some striking facts include:

- The average Baltimore resident makes roughly half as much as the average Marylander.
- Money for job training is shrinking rather than growing. Three federal training and placement programs now provide about \$28 million a year to help Baltimore residents find work. Within two years, however, two-thirds of that money will be gone as two programs expire, and funding for the third has been dropping.
- Tens of thousands of city residents have criminal records, and a single arrest can knock someone out of contention for a job.
- Nearly a third of city adults don't have a high school diploma or its equivalent. Almost half of the public high-school students drop out before finishing.
- One out of three city households has no vehicle. Meanwhile, lower-skill employment has swelled in the suburbs.
- Baltimore has shed nearly 80,000 jobs since 1990.
- In 2000, only one out of two city residents actually had a job. Since then, the city's labor force has dropped by an additional 2,000 people.
- Somewhere between one-half and three-quarters of the 18 to 35-year-olds in Baltimore have a criminal history.

Hopkins, Jamie Smith. *Baltimore Isn't Working Because its People Don't*. Baltimore, MD: Baltimore Sun, 2004.

Learning A Trade

The woman pictured on page 17 with Sister Pat is Gertrude Vaughn. She is 44-years-old, has two children, and spent most of her life in Virginia. When she came to Baltimore several years ago, she was eating at Beans & Bread (a local meal program / outreach center.) It was there that she saw the flyer advertising the program at Caroline Center. She had always wanted to do upholstery and was very excited when she learned she could learn the trade.

Reflection

WHAT I'VE PRESENTED HERE is merely a glimpse into the life of low-wage workers. Please bear in mind that I did not even touch on the struggles faced by immigrant and migrant workers for whom an entire report could be devoted.

I also did not elaborate on the soaring cost of housing. The median monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment in 2003 was \$791. In general, housing is considered affordable if a family pays no more than 30 percent of its income. This means that to afford such an apartment, a family would need an hourly wage of \$15.21.²² A recent study of 136 of the nation's largest housing markets found that in only 25 markets did both janitors and sales clerks make enough money to comfortably afford the rent if their families were relying on only one income.²³ As has been repeated numerous times, the cost of housing continues to rise while wages remain stagnant.

Throughout the course of my research, I talked with people who disagreed with my thoughts. Many argued that working at labor pools would build skills and help workers land permanent jobs. Much to my surprise, I discovered that many of the labor pools charge their clients a \$1,000 placement fee if they try to hire one of the temporary workers. I heard the heartbreaking story of a day laborer who had been working at a particular construction site for weeks. He was thrilled when the company, citing his good work ethic, offered to make him a full-time employee. He accepted the position. Days later, when word got back to the day labor agency, they contacted the construction firm and told them they would have to pay the \$1,000 placement fee. The man was consequently let go. This only reinforces the idea that the labor pools breed homelessness.

In so many ways, America's working poor are an invisible class of citizens, and fighting for something invisible takes an awful lot of energy. The reality is that until serious organizers return, or until a competitive non-profit labor pool is established, day laborers and low-wage workers will continue to suffer. Perhaps you will join in the fight in some concrete way. At the very least, I will ask, or rather *demand*, that you become aware.

You must make a conscious effort to be aware of the persons you interact with on a daily basis. The waitress in the restaurant, the janitor who cleans your office, the ticket-taker at the stadium, the staff person at your parents' nursing home, the maid at your hotel, the retail clerk in your favorite store, the construction worker you pass on the sidewalk.

These men and women work physically demanding jobs day after day and yet struggle continuously to make ends meet. This country was built on the ideal that anyone can succeed if they are willing to work hard. I assure you these people are working. They are working harder than some of us will ever work. And yet they lead lives of fear and despair. Something is wrong with our system when people get up and go to work every day and still cannot feed their children. Something is very wrong.

The bottom line is that when someone works for less pay than she can live on – when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently – then she has made a great sacrifice for you.²⁴ At the very least, we must recognize this and take the time to express gratitude.

Maybe you will speak up the next time you hear one of your associates reinforce one of the many stereotypes that plague the low-wage workforce. Maybe as you move up the corporate ladder, you will make an effort to learn what your janitors and cafeteria workers are being paid. Or maybe it will be as simple as writing a letter to your cruise line to explain what you think of people working 12 hour days for seven days straight without proper compensation.

Ways to Help

VOLUNTEER / COORDINATE / ADVOCATE

- The Center for Poverty Solutions can always use volunteers. While it is easy to find volunteers to assist with administrative work, it is difficult to find persons with the academic background to do actual research. Volunteers who know how to conduct analysis and who have some research expertise are much needed.
- The United Workers Association needs help getting the word out to day laborers and low-wage workers about their weekly meetings. In addition, they rely on volunteers for the upkeep of their website. Finally, volunteers (especially college students) may be of great help in assisting with future protests and demonstrations.
- The Saint Frances Community Outreach Center could benefit from volunteers to work directly with persons from the Johnston Square community. Whether it be mentoring a young person or assisting with GED classes, volunteers are welcome in all arenas.
- Caroline Center needs volunteers to help with the children in their after school program as well as volunteers to work in the classroom with the women. Caroline Center also hosts fundraisers throughout the year where persons are needed to serve on various committees.
- Care-A-Van, a weekly program sponsored by Loyola College, distributes sandwiches in front of City Hall. Many of the persons lining up to receive the sandwiches are local day laborers. Volunteers are needed to assist in preparation and distribution of the food.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Katherine Newman, No Shame In My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), xiv.
- ² Newman, xiv.
- ³ Beth Shulman, The Betrayal of Work: How Low-Wage Jobs Fail 30 Million Americans (New York: The New Press, 2003), 9.
- ⁴ Eric Schlosser, Fast Food Nation (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 4.
- ⁵ Newman, 41.
- ⁶ Robert Pollin and Stephanie Luce, The Living Wage: Building A Fair Economy (New York: The New Press, 1998), xiii.
- ⁷ Barbara Ehrenreich, Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 216.
- ⁸ Newman, 40.
- ⁹ Diana Pearce, The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Maryland (Baltimore: Advocates for Children and Youth, The Center for Poverty Solutions, Wider Opportunities for Women, 2001), 3.
- ¹⁰ Pearce, 2.
- ¹¹ Newman, 42.
- ¹² Pollin, 150.
- ¹³ Schlosser, 4.
- ¹⁴ Schlosser, 6.
- ¹⁵ "National Coalition for the Homeless." <<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/daylabor.html>>.
- ¹⁶ Peter Sabonis, editor, A Fair Day's Pay for a Fair Day's Work: Sweating Day Laborers in Baltimore (Baltimore: Homeless Persons Representation Project, 2004), 1.
- ¹⁷ Baltimore's Choice: Workers and Jobs for a Thriving Economy (Baltimore: Job Opportunities Task Force, 2003).
- ¹⁸ Sabonis, 49.
- ¹⁹ Sabonis, 39.
- ²⁰ Sabonis, 44.
- ²¹ Newman, xii.
- ²² Genaro Armas, "Housing Issues Worst for Those With Lower Incomes," The Baltimore Sun (July 20, 2004).
- ²³ Armas.
- ²⁴ Ehrenreich, 221.