

FORGOTTEN VOICES: CONVERSATIONS WITH WOMEN ON WELFARE

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INTRODUCTION

In 1996, welfare as we knew it disappeared. When President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), the decades-old system of established minimum economic supports for poor women and their children, which we knew as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), vanished. It was replaced by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grants, a set of cash grants to the states to design and implement work-focused, time-limited programs. The new law also made major changes concerning child care, child support enforcement, the Food Stamp Program, disability benefits for children, and the eligibility of immigrants for federal, state, and local benefits. State governments have now assumed responsibility for designing and implementing programs addressing the needs of poor women and their children, with predictably mixed and variable results.

In 2002, Congress will consider reauthorizing TANF, along with other programs such as the Child Care and Development Block Grant and the Food Stamp Program. Since the sweeping changes of 1996, many individuals and organizations, in their efforts to conduct research, develop policy, and provide services, have been collecting the data necessary to understand the impact of TANF on poor women and their children. Though the jury is still out on some findings, it is clear that although welfare as we knew it has disappeared, poverty has not.

This collection is not a report; it is not intended to contribute data or statistics on the many critical issues currently being studied. Rather this collection of personal stories is an opportunity to meet a few of the people who have lived and are living day to day with poverty and more specifically, who depend on government assistance for survival. These are overwhelmingly poor single mothers who are struggling to raise their children alone. (According to Department of Health and Human Services statistics, poor women and their children make up roughly 95% of those receiving AFDC/TANF).

Each of the women featured here knows first-hand about fighting for survival and for a way out of poverty. They have volunteered to talk in personal terms about their lives, to share their struggles as well as their triumphs. They talk about the circumstances that left them poor, their relationships with family, and how it feels to be poor. They talk about their kids, about loving their kids, about trying to build

a better life for their families.

Based on their personal life experiences, they also offer recommendations -- to researchers, service providers, those developing public policy -- on how to create and implement a system that would do a better job of addressing poor women's needs and of helping them move out of poverty, once and for all.

With thanks to these amazing women, who have so generously shared their feelings, experiences, and ideas, we offer these Forgotten Voices.

THE VOICE OF JILLYNN

Jillynn lives in Salt Lake City, Utah. She is 42 years old, and she has one daughter, age 23, and one son, age 20. She received AFDC from 1981 through 1984.

***How old were you and your child(ren) when you first applied for AFDC?
What was your relationship with your child(ren)'s father at the time?***

I was 24 in 1981 when I first went on welfare while attending college at the University of Utah. My daughter was five and my son was two. My relationship with my ex-husband was strained.

What event(s) or situation caused you to apply for assistance?

My ex-husband was supposed to be paying me \$100 per month and making my car payment. I received the \$100 regularly. One day I went out to my car to go to an early morning class and my car was gone. Thinking it was stolen, I called the police who informed me that my car had been repossessed. I called my ex-husband who admitted he hadn't been making the payments because he "couldn't afford to." I lost it. After threatening him that he wouldn't see his children and screaming, he somehow came up with the money so that I could get my car back. In the space of one hour I learned how vulnerable my dreams and goals were. I simply could and would not depend on him again. Unwilling to compromise my education, I signed up for welfare that same week.

Describe your relationship with your Mom, Dad, and/or siblings.

I am the oldest of five and my parents still had two children at home when I was on welfare. I grew up in a working class family in rural Utah where you

were basically on your own after age 17 or 18. While our relationship was good, there was significant role reversal with my mother who suffered from severe depression and migraines after the first six years of life. As a result, I had a great deal of responsibility at home and took pains to protect my mother from emotional distress. My father was very hard working but spent little time at home. As is typical of that era, my mother carried the emotional burden for my father since he just wasn't available physically or emotionally. And it's fair to say that the emotional burden overwhelmed my mother; thus it was transferred to me. I was quite close to my sister two years younger but the other children viewed me as an authority figure since I was charged with their care and discipline so often. I would not have dreamed of asking my parents for financial help during the time I was on welfare. And aside: my mother's family was very poor, largely due to my grandfather's alcoholism. They were on state assistance off and on in the 30's, 40's and early 50's.

The relationship I have with my family is generally good. My father is both emotionally and physically available and my mother is more stable than she had been in a long time. My siblings each have a strong work ethic and none have been on assistance. I know that if I were in a bind now that I could ask my parents for help.

I have a different orientation, and probably a broader vision, of the world than my family. This often leaves me feeling like the odd woman out, kind of like being caught between two worlds. Being a liberal social worker and a feminist is not exactly a common combination in Utah.

Poverty is an often used word, but few understand its meaning. Can you provide an example of an event that made you feel poor?

One Christmas I simply had no money. I wasn't active in my church and Sub-for-Santa projects had not come to full fruition at the time. I really thought I had no where to turn. Finally, I swallowed my pride and went to the local church leader. He and his family provided my family with a nice Christmas that year. I can still feel the embarrassment and shame that I felt that day because it seemed so hypocritical to ask for church help when I wasn't interested in being more involved.

What were/are the biggest obstacles for you in trying to make a better life for you and your kids? What kinds of things helped?

The biggest obstacles I faced while trying to make a better life for myself

were systems, bureaucracies, and initially, my ex-husband. Getting through all the red tape to receive assistance, food stamps, and childcare was overwhelming. And then, for no apparent reason, and on more than one occasion, my grant would just get cancelled or my food stamps would stop coming. These problems were generally caused by human error at DFS. It was humiliating to have to meet with a caseworker and they kept us clients waiting for hours with tired and hungry children. Sometimes the red tape of applying for financial aid or just getting enrolled in college, and subsequently in classes, was very difficult. A person caught between two big systems such as these must have high motivation and tenacity. Interestingly enough, the things that caused me so many problems were also the greatest helps. Once the grants and Foodstamps came through, the financial aid was approved, and childcare was secured, it was manageable...exhausting but manageable. I could not have attended school without the help of welfare. I was fortunate to have good friends, great women's study classes and some brave mentors.

What has been the toughest thing you have had to face or deal with?

At the time, the toughest thing to deal with was my perceived value conflict between wanting to be a good mother and the need to provide for my family. I truly did not think I could do both well, so strongly embedded was the notion that the work and family ethics were in opposition. I know better now that I was buying into the male-defined version of reality situated within a capitalistic society that defines pretty much everything related to being a woman as having less value than a man.

Also, from the moment my car was repossessed, I have been terrified of becoming dependent. Realizing that no one else was going to take care of me when I fell was very painful. I came face-to-face with the hard reality that, like childbirth, *only* I could find the way out of poverty for my children and myself. And there were plenty of internal (self-esteem) and external (DFS, etc.) barriers to wear me down.

I can admit today that the very daily-ness of living on a survival level for so long had an impact on my ability to ever take success for granted or even from feeling too successful. It impacted my ability to be completely lighthearted or not think of something I "should" be doing even when it was a good time to relax or even play. Being on welfare has left me forever feeling insulted by politicians, the media, individuals, and groups of people ignorantly discussing poor people, especially women on welfare, in stereotypical terms that strip the non-abandoning parents of their humanity and loyalty.

What are you most proud of in your life?

I am both proud and humbled to be giving back some of the knowledge I have gained to welfare recipients attending college or hoping to attend college. I am working on my doctoral dissertation which involves a quantitative and qualitative study looking at barriers to education, factors that facilitate education, outcome factors such as employment and income, the impact of the mother's education on the children, and quality of life changes all with regard to mother-only families where the mother is concurrently receiving welfare and going to school. I am proud of my children and the knowledge that they are highly unlikely to have to depend on welfare at any time in their lives. And I am most proud of my new grandson!

What advice would you give to other women currently on TANF?

GO TO SCHOOL! It is the only means shown to provide the skills necessary for you to become employed, truly self-sufficient, have medical and other benefits, and to stop the cycle of poverty for you and your children. Know your rights as it relates to education and being on TANF. The caseworkers are often ignorant of the laws. Find an advocacy or support group. There are groups in nearly every state or they are available online to help you. And be strong because you will probably have to fight for your education. Just like delivering those babies, honey, you have to dig deep inside and realize that if your life is going to change for the better, if you are going to give birth to a new life, chances are you are the only one who can do it.

Suppose the welfare system was really designed to help women raising children alone get on their feet. What would it be like?

A truly helpful welfare system would honor the role of mothering in society and pay a living wage for the various forms of "domestic" labor involved in raising a family. The system would provide true opportunities to recipients such as equal access to all levels of education including financial assistance, childcare, medical benefits, food, transportation, and housing. Child support would be enforced and women threatened with violence would be assured physical safety. Disdain for welfare recipients would melt away as politicians, welfare workers, the media and others would understand and value the integrity of the non-abandoning parent who is willing to be

accountable for her family. A nationwide ownership of culpability in allowing poverty and hunger to permeate our society would ensue and there would be commitment to identifying and resolving the many causes of poverty.

THE VOICE OF MICHELLE

Michelle lives in Orono, Maine. She is 28 years old and has one daughter, age 6. She received AFDC from September 1993, until she was moved into Maine's Parents as Scholars program (PaS) around November 1997. In Maine, full-time college students receiving AFDC were automatically moved into the PaS program. She received TANF for a time but is not currently receiving public assistance.

How old were you and your child(ren) when you first applied for AFDC? What was your relationship with your child(ren)'s father at the time?

Rowan, my daughter, was just born when I first applied in another state, but only received AFDC there for two months, then went back home to Maine. My relationship with her father was strained.

What event(s) or situation caused you to apply for assistance?

I applied for assistance when I realized that Rowan's father, who had said in the beginning of my pregnancy that he would be there with me, that he loved me and that he would support whatever decision I made, was not going to be there to support us after all, and I knew that I only had the skills to earn, at best, just barely above minimum wage, and knowing that full time child care would cost nearly all of my weekly paycheck, I became very despondent and knew then that welfare was my only option.

Describe your relationship with your Mom, Dad, and/or siblings.

I have one sister, younger, our relationship was and is good, my relationship with my mother was ok, she has been quite absent from my life, however, as she got married and moved away when I was 16. For four years prior to that she suffered from extreme depression and alcoholism after her divorce from my father. We received AFDC then, which has contributed to my shame about it today, as I was sent to the store to do the weekly grocery shopping with food stamps, and was looked upon with disdain by cashiers, and I, although young, was acutely aware that something was "wrong" with me because I had this "special money." I didn't see my dad much during those

years. Once my mother left I did live with him and his mother, then with him and my stepmother once they were married and bought a house. My dad was of the opinion that his obligation to me stopped at age 18. Today our relationship is better, but sometimes I think of him as a fair weather parent, who is only happy to talk and have a relationship with me as long as I don't need anything, i.e., money.

Poverty is an often used word, but few understand its meaning. Can you provide an example of an event that made you feel poor?

There are so many, which one to pick!? Well I will tell you that when I was hitchhiking to get to work, I had a part time job as a respite worker in a respite apartment for people with mental illness. I constantly tried to hide the fact that I was hitchhiking to get there, as I believed that it did not set an appropriate example of what this kind of employee should be like. I felt very poor and ashamed.

What were/are the biggest obstacles for you in trying to make a better life for you and your kids? What kinds of things helped?

The biggest obstacles for me were: a) trying to secure financial support for childcare—I was on a waiting list for child care support (in Maine's ASPIRE program) for nearly a year and a half; b) trying to patch together enough money from AFDC and part time work to pay my bills, if not in full at least enough to keep the shut off notices at bay; c) trying to have a running car so I didn't have to hitchhike, but I always ended up having to; and finally, d) trying to keep from falling apart and having a nervous breakdown under the immense pressure of juggling full-time college, part time work, and parenting.

The kinds of things that helped me were: a) loving friends and family members; b) support from the ASPIRE/PaS program, without which I could have never finished school and shudder to think where I might be now if that program didn't exist; c) having time to myself to socialize with friends; d) having good, solid organizational skills; e) having excellent day care; f) having free childcare for 8 months while I waited for ASPIRE support services, without which, as I said above, I shudder to think what would have happened; g) wonderful service providers at my local community action program; and h) AFDC/food stamps.

What has been the toughest thing you have had to face or deal with?

The realization that Rowan's father was not going to be supportive and that

I would have to go on welfare to survive, which at that point in time I had no home, no money, no job, no car, and all our stuff in garbage bags. That was truly the worst time of my life.

What are you most proud of in your life?

I am proud of myself! I was able to complete my education, obtain a wonderful middle class income paying job, and leave welfare permanently, through extreme hard work, dedication, and the help of many people and programs.

What advice would you give to other women currently on TANF?

I would tell women on TANF today to not give up, and not give in to what a caseworker tells you you have to do or be. I remember once I was told to be a CNA, for example—while a noble and compassionate profession, it is also one that is extremely difficult and does not pay wages that raise families out of poverty. I knew this to be true, I had two friends who tried it and were totally disappointed, they both ended up quitting. Ironically I was told to be one by a career counselor, and at that time I had already enrolled in college on my own with a plan to become a social worker. (I explained to him, thank you very much, I know you think that's a good thing to do, but not for me.)

Above all I would say to remember that you are a good person, a worthy person, and that you are not "less than" just because you receive TANF. Nor are your children "less than."

Suppose the welfare system was really designed to help women raising children alone get on their feet. What would it be like?

It would be totally funded, i.e., TANF benefits would be enough to survive on, as in pay rent, electricity, etc. Women could choose if they wanted to stay home or work outside the home, if they worked outside the home they would have quality child care services available and money to pay for it. They would have adequate health insurance, that they would get to keep even when they were working, and if their employer offered health insurance at a rate they could afford, they could then choose that or have a buy-in option with Medicaid. Ideally, welfare would be transformed into an income support program accessible to everyone, not just single parents, thereby removing the stigma and shame that is currently attached to it.

On the importance of understanding and addressing the impact of poverty on the mental health of poor women:

I experienced intense shame being on welfare, to the point of not being able to pay for groceries with food stamps once when there was someone in line behind me. I told the cashier I had forgotten my check book and would need to go back home to get it, what an awful day that was...but not unique to me, a friend of mine did the same thing....

One of the ways in which welfare intersects with the field of psychology is through the mental distress experienced by women on welfare. I know that I was extremely depressed for a long time, and that I still deal with those feelings of shame and low self-worth to this day—only now I have comprehensive insurance through work that will enable me to go to therapy for it—and that it is likely that many, many women on welfare suffer from depression and related illnesses. Other issues that come to mind: Medicaid and managed care, Medicaid and mental health service delivery—how to get more therapists on board with accepting Medicaid and/or utilizing a sliding fee scale, etc.

THE VOICE OF CHERYL

Cheryl lives in Washington, DC. She is 34 years old, and she has three kids, Michael, age 16, Brittany, age 9, and April, age 4. She cares also for her father, who was disabled by a stroke 3 years ago. She received AFDC for 1 year and has received TANF for 3 years.

How old were you and your child(ren) when you first applied for AFDC? What was your relationship with your child(ren)'s father at the time?

I was on AFDC—off and then back on. The first time was when I was 18 and Michael was a newborn. His father and I were boyfriend and girlfriend for 8 years. I was still in high school when I got pregnant, and I hid my pregnancy for 7 months. Because I was pregnant, I had to drop out before graduating.

What event(s) or situation caused you to apply for assistance?

I was still in school and I wasn't financially stable.

Describe your relationship with your Mom, Dad, and/or siblings.

We were very close. I was especially close to my mother, and it was very hard when she died.

Poverty is an often used word, but few understand its meaning. Can you provide an example of an event that made you feel poor?

Not having the money to do the things that I would like to do for my child. I had to limit myself. Having my children see something and want it badly and I couldn't give it to them was very hard. When Michael wanted to go to Duke Ellington School, he needed a good portfolio to display his artwork. And I didn't have the money to get him a nice one, for his application.

What were/are the biggest obstacles for you in trying to make a better life for you and your kids? What kinds of things helped?

My biggest obstacle is my inability to be employed because I am taking care of my father who is bedridden. Also, I didn't have anyone to care for my youngest daughter. But now my four-year-old will start school and I can get help for my father while I seek employment. And there's a nurse who comes in now to take care of my father.

What has been the toughest thing you have had to face or deal with?

The death of my mother and the sickness of my father.

What are you most proud of in your life?

My health, strength, and ability to take care of my children. My children are a blessing.

What advice would you give to other women currently on TANF?

If they can get a job, do it—because it is hard being on TANF.

Suppose the welfare system was really designed to help women raising children alone get on their feet. What would it be like?

It would be helpful to have social workers willing to help more, willing to give more advice to lead you in the right direction. An attitude adjustment—stop acting like they are the ones that pay, acting like we are getting on their nerves. They make you feel like you are begging.

THE VOICE OF JULIE ANN

Julie Ann lives in Fremont, Ohio. She is 39 years old and has two children, ages 6 and 16. She received AFDC off and on for 10 years and TANF for 2 years.

How old were you and your child(ren) when you first applied for AFDC? What was your relationship with your child(ren)'s father at the time?

I was 22 when I first applied and had just moved back to Ohio from California. I had had 2 bad marriages without a child and wanted a child without a husband. Someone I was staying with out in California was willing to help me out with no strings attached. My son was planned.

What event(s) or situation caused you to apply for assistance?

Like I said I was 22, had just moved back, was pregnant and had no job.

Describe your relationship with your Mom, Dad, and/or siblings.

I disowned my natural father in my early teens. He was very physically and emotionally abusive. I was very close to my mother. My stepfather was an alcoholic who died in 1995 15 years sober. I was privileged to really get to know him in the last year of his life and loved him dearly. Our family was very close and envied by all until my stepfather died and the family fell apart.

Poverty is an often used word, but few understand its meaning. Can you provide an example of an event that made you feel poor?

I guess for me it's not so much the lack of money that has made me feel poor. We have gotten used to living on very little. I think there is a difference between being poor and being in poverty. Sure being poor is a monetary

thing but being impoverished takes in so much more. The best example I can think of was just over 2 years ago and it is the incident that got me involved in welfare activism. I was going to college full time and working 8 workforce hours per week. That was bad enough but it could have been worse. I went in for a reapplication and at that time I was as in the dark as everyone else where "reform" was concerned. After I finished with my caseworker, I had to go talk to the JOBS caseworker to sign my new contract. I was completely floored when she told me I had to start working 20 hours per week for them! I had no idea it was coming. I was DEVASTATED! I was carrying 4 classes and I knew I couldn't work 20 hours per week and go to school full time! I couldn't believe she was serious! I told her there was no way I could do it. She told me "Your school is not important. What is important is that you work 20 hours a week for us." Those were her exact words and I can still hear her saying them.

I was poverty stricken at that point. I was no longer in control of my own life or the lives of my children. I was under that woman's thumb and she made it a point to let me know it. Poverty is being treated like a child, being treated like you're stupid and having to sit there and take it because you have no choice. Poverty is being stripped of your self-esteem, being looked down on or looked at with pity or people thinking you're a charity case. Poverty is having to fear for your child's safety because you have to leave her in tears with someone you don't even know just to go do busy work because the law says you're supposed to. That's poverty!

What were/are the biggest obstacles for you in trying to make a better life for you and your kids? What kinds of things helped?

I am a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. I have been clean and sober for over 9 years now but it was a big obstacle for a long time. The lack of marketable skills was a problem too. The biggest problem though is still self-esteem. Practicing alcoholics and drug addicts have no self-esteem only self-loathing. That has gotten much better in recovery but we never really believe that we are actually as good at anything as we really are. The thing that has helped the most oddly enough was the thing that hurt the worst. When I became involved in fighting welfare reform it was empowering. I was always so afraid of everything. I never had an opinion on anything because I might sound stupid (the self-esteem thing). Now I have finally given myself the right to have an opinion and I voice it on a regular basis. Someone once told me that activism changes you and you'll never be the same and she was right.

What has been the toughest thing you have had to face or deal with?

The constant emotional strain. The constant fear that I might miss getting a piece of paper in on time and get sanctioned. The fear of losing my children if I push these people too far and they can find an excuse to take them. The toughest thing is the constant fear.

What are you most proud of in your life?

My children. They are wonderful kids. They are both so smart and I think believe in me more than I do.

What advice would you give to other women currently on TANF?

Organize and work together for everyone's' good. Protect yourself by knowing your rights and standing up for them. Get an education then help other women do the same.

Suppose the welfare system was really designed to help women raising children alone get on their feet. What would it be like?

People would be treated with respect and kindness. They would honestly be asked what they need to get them off public assistance and every reasonable effort would be made to provide those things. A national health care system would be in place so mothers wouldn't have to worry about getting medical care for their children.

THE VOICE OF VALERIE ANN

Valerie lives in Oak Park, Illinois. She is 41, and she has three children, ages 19, 21, and 23. She received AFDC for 3 years.

How old were you and your child(ren) when you first applied for AFDC? What was your relationship with your child(ren)'s father at the time?

I was 27 years old when I first applied for AFDC. My children were 8, 6 and 4 years old. Their father, who had never consistently paid child support, had stopped altogether about 9 months before I applied. He also made no effort to see the children.

What event(s) or situation caused you to apply for assistance?

I had decided to go back to school because I wasn't able to command a salary that could support myself and the children without an education beyond a GED. When I went back to school full-time I was working about 10 hours a week doing promotional work and 10 hours working at a university office doing work study, but that, with my student aid, was not enough. My financial advisor told me to apply for public aid, which I did and was qualified for.

Describe your relationship with your Mom, Dad, and/or siblings.

My father died when I was young. My mom helped me with childcare when my children were young and I was working and going to school. She was angry with me for a few years when I moved from Illinois to California to do graduate work. I think her anger was mostly because she missed my children. Now that I moved back to Illinois we purchased a building together and my husband and I built my mom an apartment on the second floor.

I have two sisters that do not speak to me. They both feel that I did not have the right to go back to college and on to graduate school. They are angry that during my undergraduate studies I received welfare for three of those years and are also angry that I received financial aid, and that my children are receiving some financial aid while in college. My older sister provided no support of any kind to myself or my children during the many years I parented them alone. When my children would come to Chicago for visits they would visit at my younger sister's home for a few days every summer. She informed me upon my relocating back from California that she only allowed them to visit because she pitied us and it had nothing to do with loving them or me. Both sisters hate their jobs, both complain, complain, complain...while they dye their hair blond every six weeks and cry at every birthday because they hate getting old. Jealousy comes in all shapes and sizes. I'm glad I never bought into the middle class, All-American dream. My younger brother is a very good friend who has been a wonderful support. He is amazed at my many accomplishments and how wonderful all my children are.

Poverty is an often used word, but few understand its meaning. Can you provide an example of an event that made you feel poor?

I feel overwhelmed as I walk into the Illinois Department of Human Services Englewood office located on 63rd Street and Western Avenue in the Southwest area of Chicago. To my right the waiting area is bulging with families and disabled adults. All the seats are filled, some being shared by two people, while for the rest it is standing room only. The line leading to the one employee that is sitting behind the admission desk stretches back three-quarters of the way through the waiting area. As this employee yells out every two minutes or so, "One line folks," people attempt to bring some semblance of order to what is a very chaotic and bleak moment, a moment that for them will last some two or more hours.

In an effort to avoid the long wait promised by this ongoing line, I push my way through the crowd with the hope that I will circumvent the waiting experience if I can explain to one of the guards that I am a researcher from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) here to interview a caseworker. Without looking up, the guard points to the end of the line and tells me to join the crowd. I turn to again look at the exhausting hour I will have if I stand in line and, in this realization, I am reminded of what it means to live in poverty and to have to depend on government assistance programs in order to survive. With a gasp I turn back to the guard and this time, with a firm voice, I again explain who I am, that I am here to see a caseworker not as a recipient of services, but as a researcher. Only then does the guard stop reading the paper, look at me, and after a moment of visual critiquing says, "Oh, I thought you were a client lying to me so you could see your caseworker without getting a number like the rest of the folks here have to."

Am I surprised by dreary conditions, the frustration and anger that hangs in the stagnant air of this IDHS office, or the less than polite treatment? No. The only thing in this office that has changed over the past 17 years is how the seating is arranged. Yes, it was some 17 years ago that I stepped into this office, three small children in hand, asking if we were eligible for some assistance and being made to feel guilty, ashamed and a burden to state.

What were/are the biggest obstacles for you in trying to make a better life for you and your kids? What kinds of things helped?

Finding affordable housing was always a problem. Having the majority, at times 75% of my net income going to pay rent was not unusual. And we never lived in places with more than two bedrooms. Affording a reliable car was also difficult. We lived without a car for quite a few years, which meant walking to work, school, using huge backpacks when I went grocery shopping, etc. After school and summer programs for the kids were really expensive so I always did a lot of shopping around to see what the

community was offering and then piecing the kids' days together. This usually meant spending my work lunch hours picking them up from one program to transport them to another. Better funding for after school, summer, and community sports programs would have helped. Housing and transportation assistance would have helped. Having siblings that were emotionally supportive would have helped.

What has been the toughest thing you have had to face or deal with?

As exhausting as it was to have all the responsibilities of parenting three children alone my most difficult struggle has been learning how to let go of the pain I have felt over how much my two sisters dislike me. I think it has been especially difficult for me because my studies and professional work have all focused on the struggles faced by women raising children alone. My life is all about loving women and helping them find the strength and self-love they need to take care of themselves and their children. I love my women friends who are so important to me and yet I have two sisters who have completely rejected me and speak to others about me like I am evil incarnate. At one time my sadness felt unbearable. While that is no longer the case there will always be a hurt that I will endure.

What are you most proud of in your life?

I am most proud of how wonderful my three children are. My oldest just graduated with honors from University of California Santa Cruz. My second child will graduate from Loyola University next year and is planning on continuing to do graduate work in his major, Mathematical Science. My youngest just completed his first year of college. They are all kind, honest, interesting people with big dreams.

What advice would you give to other women currently on TANF?

1. To always remember that the work they do as a parent is the most important work any human being can do, nurturing the next generation. 2. That they need to have relationships with people who give them emotional support and encouragement. That they need to make sure they themselves are being nurtured so they have the strength to then nurture their children.

Suppose the welfare system was really designed to help women raising children alone get on their feet. What would it be like?

The stigma and shame associated with receiving welfare would no longer exist. Continuing education, childcare, counseling and health care would be available at one center within each community. Improvements in public transportation to ensure availability at a reasonable cost. Women and infants would be given the support needed during the first two years of life for healthy bonding. Basically society needs to recognize the real monetary cost of providing quality parenting and if a real wage is not going to be given for this work, structural supports need to be available.

THE VOICES OF MAGGIE AND HER MOM

Maggie lives in Washington, DC. She is 30 years old. She, her Mom, and her brother received AFDC off and on for about 10 years while living on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. She and her Mom talk here about what that time was like.

How old were you and your child(ren) when you first applied for AFDC?

My mother was 28, I was 8, and my brother was 10.

What was your relationship with your child(ren)'s father at the time?

Separated and divorce was finalized 5 years later.

What event(s) or situation caused you to apply for assistance?

Maggie: My mother didn't have work and couldn't care for children at the same time. My father was not mentally fit to hold a steady job, would drink a lot, and couldn't provide for the family. Consequently, we were evicted, and moved from rental to rental numerous times before receiving housing assistance and settling in one home, after their separation.

Mother: We had no car and were dislocated; we had been living with my sister and mother and father for a summer and they were supporting us all. My mother and father gave us the \$ to return to the East Coast. The children's father and I separated before we moved back to the East Coast, where we then applied for welfare because I had no car, job, or place to live (we stayed with friends at first).

Describe your relationship with your Mom, Dad, and/or siblings.

Maggie: My mother is my best friend and my most revered figure. Although I used to speak with or write to my father once or twice a year during my teenage and adult years (unlike my brother who refuses contact with him), I have not been able to maintain a relationship with him because he would get defensive, speak badly of my mother (saying she kicked him out for no reason) and not be able to hold a conversation without twisting my words (of normal conversation) in a defensive manner that made me cry. My brother and I don't speak a whole lot but that's because we live on opposite shores of the country. However, we have an understood love and admiration for each other. However, it was only until more recent years (the last 8 or so), when I began concentrating my work on poverty policy, that we began talking about communicating frankly about growing up poor.

Poverty is an often used word, but few understand its meaning. Can you provide an example of an event that made you feel poor?

Maggie: When I was in fifth grade, a weeklong field trip to a camp was planned, as was done each year. There was a charge for the trip, and my mother said we couldn't afford it. Since the area in which we lived was predominantly wealthy, the vast majority of the pupils were wealthy and money was not an issue. It was presumed that the children's families could afford it. I thought I wouldn't be able to go, but my teacher arranged a scholarship of sorts, so that I could go—and I did.

The second major event that made me feel poor was in fourth grade, getting a ride home from a ballet lesson I had just begun (where my mother and I both cleaned the ballet center in exchange for my free lessons). After directing her to the driveway before my family's cottage, the mother of my companion dancer pulled in the driveway which was used for our landlord's cars (the landlords lived next door—it was their summer house and about 6 times the size of our cottage). The driver exclaimed, "What a beautiful house! I've always wondered who lived here!" I politely thanked her for the ride and didn't correct her misunderstanding. This sort of thing happened with nearly every new chaperone thereafter.

Mother: Checking the mail, eagerly, when the welfare check was expected, to see if it came on time, since we had run out of the previous month's money. Not having car to get around in to do the necessary tasks of grocery shopping and laundry.

What were/are the biggest obstacles for you in trying to make a better life for you and your kids? What kinds of things helped?

Mother: Obstacles I faced in making a better life for my children included: Not being able to get around in a car—or, when we did have a car it was used and that brought another set of obstacles including not having enough \$ to make repairs on car and worrying that the old car was an unsafe vehicle for my children. Not knowing if we were going to have \$ the next day, hoping the monthly AFDC check would come on the exact day expected, since the prior month's AFDC check was already fully spent. Not being able to give my children things like musical instruments; having to pay for more expensive items on layaway, but not being able to get things for children where layaway was not accepted. Working under the table with no breaks—no lunch breaks (even though it was illegal, I couldn't challenge it because it was under the table work). Not having adequate heat in house (wood stove) for a warm house in morning when my children were getting ready for school in the winter. Not having enough wood for wood stove; fear of fires since we heated the house by wood stove only.

What has been the toughest thing you have had to face or deal with?

Maggie: One of the toughest things was probably trying to find a job (as a teenager and during summers when I lived with my mother back at home) that was within walking or biking distance to our home. Because we lived in a rural area with no public transportation, my job prospects were confined to a specific geographic area where opportunities were limited.

The next major difficult thing was having to mediate between my father and mother as they were in the process of getting divorced, and even after they were legally divorced. My father would ask me to do things (such as 'sneak' him things that he said belonged to him but that my mother said were ours). My mother never blamed me, of course, since I was a child and innocently trusted my father. Later, when I grew older, I was the only one in the family who forgave him and who would make efforts to communicate with my father, and I had to make personal decisions as to what I thought was right and what was wrong about my father. I would give him the benefit of the doubt and this was difficult since his mental state would often cause him to react cruelly to my efforts by saying mean things and making me feel guilty for things I didn't do. I guess the bottom line of all this is that the most difficult thing I had to deal with was making the decision to no longer communicate with my father since he would only upset me. In the long run, it made me a tougher person, and good judge of character, and perhaps I should credit

him for that, since, if it weren't for his strength in logic which I inherited, I wouldn't have made such a decision.

Mother: It was tough facing the people in society who stigmatized me as being lazy and not working (I worked under the table and this supplemental income still wasn't enough). For instance, it was tough facing certain doctors who treated us as welfare recipients; would make us wait a long time for medical care because he thought we had all the time in the world since we didn't work. This one doctor also intentionally scheduled appointments ex/ during school hours or other inconvenient times for the same reasons.

What are you most proud of in your life?

Maggie: I am most proud of being able to help my mother buy her first house 3 years ago. She was 47 and with me as a cosigner and assisting her financially, she is now able to have her own home with her first flower garden. I am also most proud of my mother's ability to shield my brother, and me when we were young, from the stigmas attached to poverty. With such a shield, I was given the self-confidence to pursue interests I wouldn't have if I had been made more a mockery of, had our poverty been more noticeable to our neighbors. I pursued college on my own and am now pursuing my doctorate. I was the only one of my grandmother's grandchildren to get a bachelor degree. (Not only that, but I'm the minority in my "hometown", where many of my peers there did not pursue higher education, and the majority did not pursue PhD's).

Mother: Most proud of her children and the way we turned out.

What advice would you give to other women currently on TANF?

Maggie: Shield your children, as best you can, from the stigmas and emotional effects poverty can have on your children. Like any mother should, regardless of their income, I believe women on TANF should not ever let their children think they are any less a good and worthy person than anyone else. Let your children believe they are normal and can achieve whatever they want in life, despite being "different" by nature of their poverty.

Mother: Take the time to pay a lot of attention to their kids. Don't be too proud to accept assistance such as Medicaid or food stamps simply out of embarrassment, because parents have a responsibility to their children to provide for them regardless of where the money comes from.

Suppose the welfare system was really designed to help women raising children alone get on their feet. What would it be like?

Maggie: After going on public assistance, since we lived in a rural area, without a car and with no public transportation, regular errands, (such as grocery shopping, going to the Laundromat, visiting welfare office) could take up an entire day as a result. A welfare system that truly provided enough assistance for those in need would include necessary transportation expenses, childcare, and enough to not just “get by”, but also to lift them out of poverty and progress, rather than constantly count pennies. Increased funding for education for welfare recipients and their children is critical, too. Without more education, it is next to impossible for a welfare mother to get a job that pays a living wage, that is interesting, that is within a realistic distance from her home, and that has potential for upward mobility and health and other insurance benefits.

Mother: There would be sustained food stamps—not piddling out food

RECOMMENDATIONS

So, we asked them, what should be done to improve the situation for people living in poverty and receiving assistance? The women had many suggestions, based not on scientific research, but on their own personal experiences. These recommendations therefore appear just as they were given--from their hearts and in their own words:

- ◆ "Welfare" should be an income support program accessible to everyone, so that everyone has the minimum income needed to survive.
- ◆ Affordable housing and transportation are minimum necessities.
- ◆ Ensure that TANF benefits are enough to cover rent, electricity, and other basics.
- ◆ Make sure women and their children have enough to eat.
- ◆ Provide quality child care now, not waiting lists for care.
- ◆ Value mothering as the critical work it is, and support the women who do it.
- ◆ Assure physical safety from violent partners and ex-partners.
- ◆ Provide education.

- ◆ Provide adequate health insurance, including mental health care -- the depression and conviction that one has no worth or value, common side-effects of poverty, are powerful barriers to positive action.
- ◆ More therapists are needed to serve poor and Medicaid clients.
- ◆ Caseworkers should treat clients with respect and kindness. They should ask clients what they need -- different individuals have different needs -- and provide it if at all possible.
- ◆ The social sciences should study, understand, and address the feelings of shame associated with being on welfare. We should take steps to remove the stigma -- poverty is not a poor woman's fault. Despite the powerful obstacles that shame and the stigma associated with welfare are to those who depend for survival on public assistance, very little social science research has studied this.

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The American Psychological Association also has several other publications available that address issues of poverty and welfare reform:

"Making Welfare to Work Really Work," is a briefing paper that outlines some common myths about welfare and poverty, explores the scientific research addressing these myths, and offers policy recommendations for addressing these problems. www.apa.org/pi/wpo/welftowork.html

The APA Resolution on Poverty and Socioeconomic Status, adopted in August 2000, describes existing conditions and the impact of poverty, documents some of the available scientific literature, and offers recommendations for research and public policy. www.apa.org/pi/urban/povres.html

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