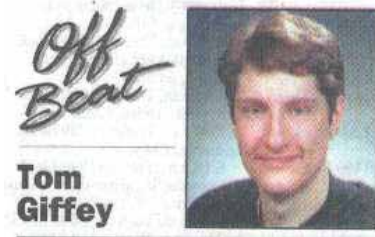


Leader Telegram
Thursday, June 3, '04
Poverty Stricken



Simulation shows problems of needy

Viewpoint

Things looked grim at the end of the month for my family.

The bank was on my back because I'd only been able to make a partial home loan payment. Our gas, electricity, and phone were about to be cut off because we couldn't afford to pay the bills. I was unemployed, and my job search had turned up nothing but frustration.

Then the buzzer rang, and all my problems disappeared.

Unfortunately, getting out of poverty isn't that simple for many of our neighbors.

My deliverance came at the end of an hour-long poverty simulation Wednesday sponsored by the Eau Claire County Hunger Prevention Coalition, an umbrella group including many charities and social-service organizations. I was one of 28 community members who gathered in the basement of The Salvation Army, 102 W. Grand Ave., to play roles in fictional low-income families.

The role-playing drew its inspiration from the old adage about walking a mile in another person's shoes. As you may have guessed, my family's walk was slow and sometimes in the wrong direction.

Poverty prompts emotions

We had to stretch our meager resources until the end of the "month" – each 15-minute period was a "week" – while dealing with costly transportation, bureaucratic confusion, and mounting bills.

The simulation is valuable because it evokes emotions such as anger, fear, and frustration that typically stem from poverty, said Nancy Coffey, who directed the exercise. Coffey is coordinator of the Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program for the Eau Claire County UW-Extension office and leads the anti-hunger coalition.

Through the simulation, Coffey said, participants "realize that low-income people are there and they're real."

The statistics prove her right. According to UW-Extension data, 11 percent of Eau Claire County residents live below the poverty line, and 8 percent receive food stamps, a number that grew 56 percent between 1999 and 2003.

My firsthand experience drove these numbers home. From the beginning my fake family of four was stymied by a frustrating string of bad luck and poor decisions. As the stimulation began, our "mother" left to get help from the human services department. (The room was ringed with tables serving as various agencies and businesses, such as a food pantry, a pawnshop and a bank.) Too late, we realized as she had taken all our

cash and transportation tickets with her. We were stranded at home, unable to go to school, pay bills, or shop for groceries.

Our “mistake” isn’t too far-fetched: 7 percent of county households don’t have a vehicle.

My family never recovered from our poor planning. By the time we were able to move around the room, it was too late to apply for emergency assistance, and we’d gone hungry for several “weeks.”

“I can’t even imagine trying to live like that,” observed Lisa Olson-Smiskey, a member of my simulated family. “After week one you couldn’t get ahead.”

In real life, Olson-Smiskey is a clerk for the Eau Claire school district’s food and nutrition program, where she processes applications for free and reduced-price lunches. She said the simulation helped her understand the scenarios that families applying for free lunches might be enduring.

I shared her frustration. After wasting a whole “week” filling out forms at the employment office, I found there was no work for me, and I returned home empty-handed.

Getting the runaround

Other participants expressed similar aggravation. Eau Claire City Council member Dallas Neville said he felt victimized and desperate after being shuffled from one agency to another as he sought help. Like most of the families in the simulation, Neville’s was worse off at the end of the exercise.

“It demonstrated how people living with limited means can be entrenched in poverty,” he said.

Neville said the simulation also showed the need for explaining to the needy people what resources are available to them. While the simulated agencies generally were helpful, he said, they often didn’t have advice on where else he could go for assistance. In the real world a comprehensive brochure listing public and private resources would be helpful, he said.

For me, the experience fostered feelings of empathy for those less fortunate. There’s nothing like walking in other people’s shoes – even for an afternoon – to understand the pitfalls they face.

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