



THE POVERTY PUZZLE

Chattanooga Times Free Press

TIMESFREEPRESS.COM / POVERTYPUZZLE

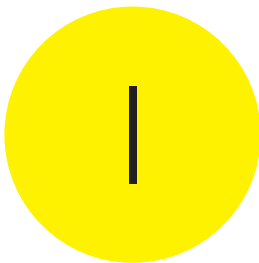
PUBLISHED MARCH 6, 2016



THE POVERTY PUZZLE



EDITOR'S NOTE



In 2015, the Chattanooga Times Free Press poured an unprecedented amount of time and energy into researching the roots of and solutions to Chattanooga's economic

reality; we made this investment as other regional news outlets were pulling back from long-term reporting projects.

Initially, the idea behind The Poverty Puzzle series was fairly cliché: the tale of two cities. Chattanooga had been getting a significant amount of positive attention nationally, but on the ground, our reporters saw another story unfolding.

After the Great Recession, poverty increased among all ethnic groups in the city, its outlying suburbs, the rural pockets of Hamilton County and the greater metro area. What our reporters learned after more than a year of reporting was that poverty had become a symptom of huge societal shifts, happening unnoticed by most, including us.

And that got us thinking. How many of us actually pay a lot of attention to the poverty in our city? Sure, we see it when we drive by someone sleeping on the sidewalk, a not-uncommon sight in Chattanooga. Or we notice it when we drive through a neighbor-

hood that has seen better times. And we see panhandlers with cardboard signs standing at intersections seeking a handout. But we quickly forget, lost in our own lives.

Truth is, poverty usually doesn't directly affect most of us unless someone we know (maybe us) is laid off and finds it hard to land another job. Or perhaps someone in our family is hard hit by medical expenses and faces not having enough money, too many bills and a genuine fear of losing our home. Suddenly, poverty becomes very real.

In our reporting, we discovered that our region, state and city are being crippled by powerful forces that aren't being discussed publicly. Chattanooga can certainly boast about its good numbers: lower unemployment, job growth in high-paying fields, low taxes and relatively low cost of living. But there are other numbers and cutting-edge research being ignored that will matter greatly to the area's residents in the years to come.

City boosters sell the tale of a downtrodden city that reclaimed its prominence, and the city's story is certainly impressive. But we found a new challenge barreling toward us and those paying attention knew what was coming. So The Poverty Puzzle expanded as we realized how complex the issue is.

A typical series on poverty focuses on the struggle of the poor, and you will find those diverse voices in the series. What

you also will find in this newspaper and online is a focus on the people and approaches focused on change. We worked with the Solutions Journalism Network, a New York-based nonprofit organization, to craft ways to tell stories that don't just present a societal problem but also offer a solution. Our reporters studied programs that actually work to help people climb out of poverty. Some of those programs are underway in our community.

We sought to not only offer human stories of hardship and triumph but also a collection of the most well-respected and nonpartisan thinking on the economic, social and cultural issues surrounding poverty. We talked with some of the brightest minds in academia and traveled out of state to talk with those facing similar challenges, hoping to bring home insights and share what we learned.

We understand that poverty is a politically sensitive topic and that who we interviewed for the series mattered. So we reached out and built relationships with people on all sides of the issues — rich, poor, conservative, liberal,

those who believe finding a solution to poverty is a societal obligation and those who think it's an individual's responsibility. We hope you will see balance and fairness in this series in the coming weeks.

You may think this series is not for you because, as we wrote, poverty may not affect you now. But there is a high likelihood that, in the coming decades, it will affect your community or neighbors. If nothing is done on a local level, even those who remain economically secure in this region will feel the effects of poverty — maybe they won't be able to find qualified employees for their business or they'll find their family zoned for a school with high poverty numbers and low test scores. So please read the series, but don't stop there. This is a problem that requires neighbor-to-neighbor conversations and neighbor-to-neighbor change.

As a newspaper, we can educate, moderate and hold people accountable. But the ideas, passion and execution must come from the community.

Alison Gerber is editor of the
Chattanooga Times Free Press.
Reach her at agerber@timesfreepress.com
or 423-757-6408 and @aligerb.



PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

05. / THE BIG PICTURE

- 11. Both Sides Now
- 15. The Growth Machine
- 18. The Politics of Poverty

23. / THE LONG SHADOW

- 26. Beginnings Matter
- 28. The Mother Lode
- 31. Drifting
- 35. Boots on the Ground

38. / WHEN HELPING HEALS

- 41. Morality vs. Grace
- 43. 'When Helping Hurts'
- 46. The Rich Man
- 48. 'Light Break Forth'

52. / A SCHOOL LIKE HOME

- 55. No Margin for Error
- 60. The Real Gap
- 63. In Loco Parentis
- 68. The Hard Way
- 70. Beyond Basics

72. / BLUE COLLAR BLUES

- 75. Roots of the Problem
- 78. The Lost Boys
- 82. The New Man
- 84. The Wallet
- 88. A Ray of Hope

90. / FULL CIRCLE

- 93. The Cliff Effect

97. / REWRITING MCDOWELL

- 100. The Great Divide
- 104. Signs of Life
- 107. The Governor's Wife
- 110. The Mountaineers
- 112. Change of Heart

115. / ABOUT THE REPORTING

116. / BUILDING THE PUZZLE

Visit timesfreepress.com/povertypuzzle for all citations and references.

CREDITS

REPORTING

Joan Garrett McClane
& Joy Lukachick Smith

PHOTOGRAPHY

Maura Friedman
& Doug Strickland

DESIGN, INFOGRAPHICS
& PUZZLE ILLUSTRATIONS
Matt McClane

EDITING & COPY EDITING

Mark Kennedy, Lisa Denton,
Joan Garrett McClane,
David Cooper & Alison Gerber

VIDEOGRAPHY

Maura Friedman
& Mary Helen
Montgomery

WEB DEVELOPMENT

Ellis Smith, Ken Barrett,
Maura Friedman,
Mary Helen Montgomery

WEB CONSULTANT

Winston Hearn

Chattanooga Times Free Press

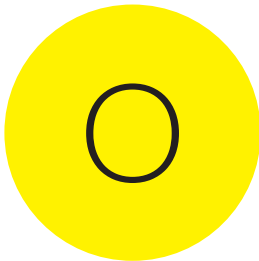
TIMESFREEPRESS.COM / POVERTYPUZZLE



CHAPTER 1

THE BIG PICTURE

BY JOAN GARRETT MCCLANE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DOUG STRICKLAND



IN SOME MORNINGS the line begins forming as early as 2 a.m.

Some ride wheelchairs paid for by Medicare for miles on bumpy city sidewalks, past condo construction and \$30-a-plate restaurants. Some beg neighbors for pocket change so they can catch a bus. Some drive their cars on fumes, wondering if they will have enough gas to get home. Some walk, sometimes for hours.

And when 8 a.m. arrives and the doors unlock at Metropolitan Ministries on McCallie Avenue, one of the last vestiges of emergency financial help for Chattanoogaans teetering on homelessness, 33 people shuffle in to take a number and a seat. “Just 33,” signs around the building read, reminders of the constant tension between mounting needs and limited resources.

Those who don’t make it to the line in time are sent home. Try another day, volunteers say.

Then, like clockwork, Anna Katharine Horne, a recent Covenant College graduate, will enter the room and explain the ground rules to those who made the cut.

“We can help with rent from the first of the month through the 15th. We can help with power bills from the 15th to the end of the month. There are food vouchers, but you can’t get a voucher if you get cash assistance. You can only choose one.”

“You matter,” she says at one point in her speech.

“Does anyone want to pray?” she asks, almost always finding a volunteer.

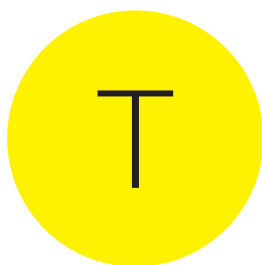
Those gathered bow their heads.

“Thank you for waking us up in the morning,” someone prays. “Thank you for getting us here.”

Horne tries not to draw attention to those who open their eyes and can’t hide the tears running down their cheeks.



Anna Katharine Horne, who goes by the nickname Anna Kat, greets the day's clients as they enter Metropolitan Ministries one morning in March 2015. As the stability navigator for MetMin, Horne helps match clients with programs available from other area providers when their needs fall outside the normal scope of MetMin's mission.



HERE IS A reason why Chattanooga is called the renaissance city of the South.

It was the comeback kid. The underdog. The American dream.

No one thought Chattanooga would be a tourism magnet after Walter Cronkite told the entire country on the nightly news that Chattanooga was the dirtiest city in the nation.

When Coca-Cola multimillionaire Jack Lupton promised his freshwater Tennessee Aquarium would be the cornerstone of a new downtown people laughed. "Jack's fish

tank," they called it.

Others doubted the city could compete for Volkswagen and Amazon or build and expand the fastest Internet in the Western Hemisphere to stake a claim in America's emerging technology sector.

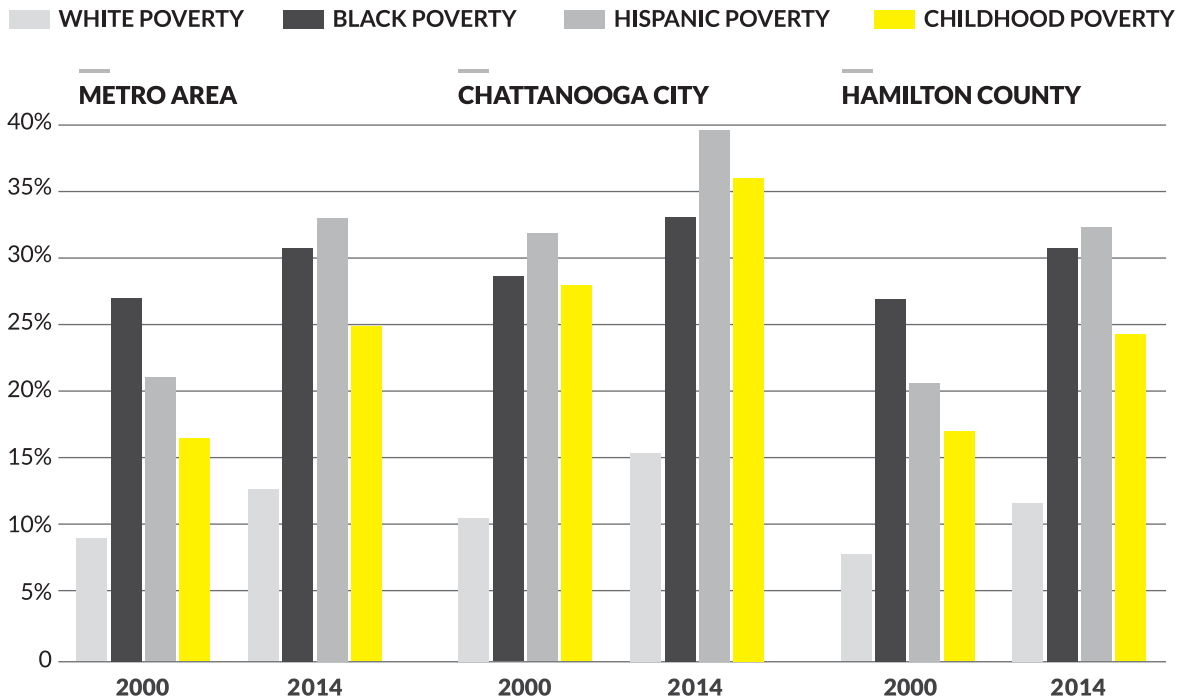
But those with ambition and money ignored the critics, and two decades later that transformational energy has a name: "The Chattanooga Way."

Even the president of the United States knows the shorthand of Chattanooga's narrative. It was just an old railroad town, Barack Obama said during a speech in January of last year. "That didn't stop them."

Yet, in the last few years — as national research has shed new light on poverty and

POVERTY: A STORM ON THE HORIZON

Poverty rates have increased among all segments of society as stagnant wages, rising costs, falling civic engagement, persistent economic segregation, consistently unsuccessful educational intervention and the growing decoupling of marriage from childrearing continue to shape the futures of children and families.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau and Social Explorer

on how states and cities stifle or support the upward mobility of disadvantaged children — local stakeholders fear the shine on the city’s success story is slowly wearing off.

“We have to be honest that there are people left out of the growing prosperity,” said Chattanooga Mayor Andy Berke at a downtown forum on diversity last fall. “Yes, even in the best town ever.”

The ranks of white, black and Hispanic poor and near poor have swollen as more middle-class families unhelped by the region’s economic recovery slip into poverty or hover near it and as the children of the poor and middle class continue to be knocked down by obstacles to bettering their lives.

Research also shows that the city is now counted among the country’s top 10 markets for income inequality with 21 low-income households for every one above \$200,000 a

year, much worse than the U.S. ratio of 8-to-1.

Economists predict job growth and a dip in poverty rates in the immediate future, but the city’s changing population and divergent earnings may threaten growth in the long run, they warn.

Thanks to a shaky economy and a slow but steady retreat from marriage — now considered a crisis among white and Hispanic families, as well as black — the share of children born into isolated and unstable environments has been on the rise. It’s a demographic shift that matters because social scientists and early childhood development experts can now say with confidence that many of those children will experience poverty, struggle to escape it and potentially remain stuck in an underclass that will swell and cement if Chattanooga’s stagnant wages continue to shrink the middle class and



Anna Katharine Horne, right, helps Gwenevere Cook fill out paperwork in early March of 2015. Cook came in looking for help paying her utility bill, but Metropolitan Ministries can assist with those requests only during the second half of the month.

nudge many more toward financial instability.

Many wonder why so many have remained poor all throughout the nation's War on Poverty. The answer, according to a decade of economic research, is this: Beginning a century ago, navigating out of poverty became a lot harder.

Since then, mobility rates across America have stalled and remained relatively unchanged, despite a larger safety net and a slight narrowing of racial achievement gaps, multiple research projects have shown.

The South, in particular, appears to be a dead zone for mobility. In fact, a lifetime in Hamilton County hurts poor and middle-class children, in terms of finding a spouse and earning a livable wage, more than it helps. A study published by Harvard University that used anonymous tax records to map economic mobility across the U.S. showed that almost the entire country — 91 percent of counties — did a better job of creating paths to high earnings for children born at the bottom than Hamilton County.

STAGNANT PAY, RISING RENT

In Chattanooga, wages are down, after being adjusted for inflation, yet the cost of housing continues to rise as the city attracts new residents.

MEDIAN EARNINGS

1999 › \$45,480 per year

2014 › \$39,683 per year

AVERAGE EARNINGS

1999 › \$65,308 per year

2014 › \$56,896 per year

AVERAGE GROSS RENT

1999 › \$669 per month

2014 › \$743 per month

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, wage and rent data for earlier years were adjusted for inflation by the U.S. Bureau of Labor



Rebecca Whelchel, MetMin's executive director, addresses clients on the final day that services were offered before the agency closed for the Christmas holiday in December 2015. Whelchel is a longtime veteran of Chattanooga's charity service providers.

And experts feel they are closer to understanding why so many children remain stifled. While America is often called a land of opportunity, researchers say there are too many differences between regions, states and cities to support that generality. In some Western states, more than 30 percent of poor children climb to a family income of \$70,000 per year by age 30 or \$100,000 by age 45. In Chattanooga, just 5.9 percent do.

And a child from a poor family in Cannon County, Tennessee, would grow up to make 9 percent, or \$2,440, more at age 26 than they would if they had grown up in the average American county. In Hamilton County, the opposite is true. A child growing up in a poor family in Hamilton County, would make 9 percent or \$2,470 less at age 26.

The reasons, according to the 2015 study published by Harvard professors Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren and University of

California-Berkeley professors Emmanuel Saez and Patrick Kline, may lie in five measures that many communities widely differ on.

› **Segregation.** “Areas with larger black populations tend to be more segregated by income and race, which could affect both white and black low-income individuals adversely.”

› **Inequality.** “Factors that erode the middle class hamper inter-generational mobility more than the factors that lead to income growth” among the wealthy.

› **Schools.** “Areas with higher test scores (controlled for income levels), lower drop-out rates and smaller class sizes have higher rates of upward mobility. In addition, areas with higher local tax rates, which are predominantly used to finance public schools, have higher rates of mobility.”

› **Social capital.** “High upward-mobility areas tend to have higher fractions of religious individuals and greater participation in local civic organizations.”

› **Family structure.** “The strongest

predictors of upward mobility are measures of family structure such as the fraction of single parents in the area.”

Left unaddressed, these factors undergirding poverty will only hurt Chattanooga as a whole, national researchers and local boosters insist.

“Chattanooga is on a risky trajectory,” leaders of a local coalition that includes some of the city’s influential foundations, the Hamilton County Board of Education and the Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce wrote last December. “Either we face this challenge or ... run the risk of creating two permanent Chattanooga’s.”

Right now, 41 percent of births in Hamilton County are to single mothers, whose median income, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, is between \$20,000 and \$24,000 a year. Meanwhile, research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology calculates that a single mother with just one child would have to earn \$41,625 a year to pay basic living costs in the county.

“Despite Chattanooga’s enormous economic potential, the region currently lacks the workforce required to sustain our success,” according to the coalition’s 2015 report, called “Chattanooga 2.0.” “In the coming years, more than 80 percent of jobs paying a living wage (\$35,000) in our area will require a post-secondary certificate or degree, but currently, just 35 percent of students in Hamilton County are likely to attain this required level of education.”

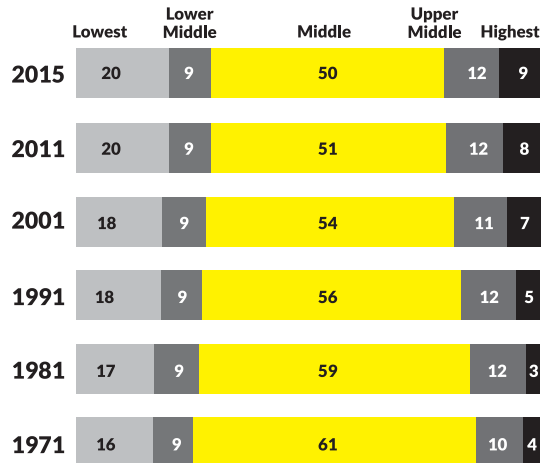
The NAACP, neighborhood associations and community activists caution, as well, that persistent achievement chasms between children with resources and children without could easily fuel tensions between races and classes that spill into public conflict that would hurt the city’s image.

By the beginning of February, some of this was already surfacing.

Activists unexpectedly interrupted the

SHARE OF ADULTS LIVING IN MIDDLE-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS IS FALLING

% of adults in each income tier



Note: Adults are assigned to income tiers based on their size-adjusted household income in the calendar year prior to the survey year. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements

mayor at a lunch gathering in January and at a memorial march in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. because leaders said they wanted to stand in opposition to the city’s local economic policy and police practices, which they believe have worked to further promote racism and classism.

But those who see these forces on the horizon also see the beginnings of a convergence, linking scattered groups, at odds in the past, in a fresh approach to economic improvement that blends prescriptions for poverty from the right and the left. Together, these nascent efforts could become strands in a rope that offer a lifeline to struggling children and lift the city toward new levels of prosperity.

More than a year of study by the Times Free Press into these community-minded efforts to solve the poverty puzzle reveals there is growing reason for hope.

Both Sides Now



HORNE HAD A doe-eyed optimism when she accepted her first job after college at Metropolitan Ministries in 2014. For one thing, she brought with her an enlightened,

21st century take on poverty. As a Covenant College community-development graduate, she had been shaped by a curriculum that taught a new way of thinking about the poor and posed new solutions as well.

Historically, efforts to alleviate poverty focused more on the crisis of the moment, Horne said, recalling her Covenant education. Yet, few offered intensive programs that walked struggling individuals through the steps they needed to take to find stability. Person-to-person mentoring was expensive and inefficient, if considered from a business perspective, and few organizations could drum up the grant support needed to sustain the cost.

Still, the approach worked, research showed.

Before even meeting Horne, Rebecca Whelchel, the executive director of Metropolitan Ministries, had enlisted the Episcopal charity in the fight for sustainable stability, greatly expanding the temporary crisis relief it had always offered.

Whelchel had known for some time that there was no singular solution to any individual's poverty, and while there were terrific partnerships among agencies, turning those partnerships into launchpads for people to lead more stable and less chaotic lives was cumbersome, due in large part to agencies' disparate locations, differing



Horne opens the day with a group prayer with clients in the Metropolitan Ministries lobby. Known as MetMin, the Episcopal charity was started in 1979 with a core mission of providing immediate emergency assistance with past-due rent, utilities, food vouchers and groceries for seniors.

hours, differing funding sources and differing expertise. And every variable came to represent a barrier for the poor, she said.

Other agencies had begun to see the need for a more holistic model as well. The Partnership for Families, Children and Adults, for example, piloted Building Stable Lives, which used life coaches to help struggling families navigate the complex local system for aid. The program later was adopted and

expanded by the United Way of Greater Chattanooga. First Things First, another local nonprofit, began offering more intensive one-on-one guidance through classes such as Work Smart, Live Well and Dads Making a Difference.

At Metropolitan Ministries, Whelchel titled Horne's job "stability navigator." Volunteers who did client intakes asked those in line if they had ongoing concerns about their housing, their children's education or their health care, for example, and those who said yes were sent to Horne, who asked them how she could help them execute their long-term plan.

It was a job Horne felt ready for but quickly found daunting enough to make her think economic mobility had become more myth than reality.

For most of her life, Horne, who grew up solidly middle class in a Knoxville suburb, had little personal connection to poverty. Her father pastored a Presbyterian church, and she remembers praying for the poor. But aside from mission trips that sent her overseas for service projects and evangelism, she didn't know much about struggling Americans. When she did eventually meet them in her office at Metropolitan Ministries, heard their stories and met their young children, she was appalled by the adversity they described.

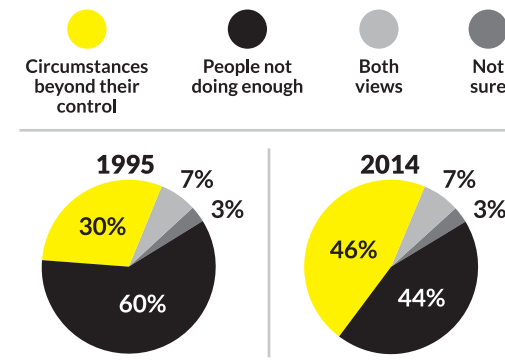
Many who stood in line at Metropolitan Ministries were working, doing what America had asked of them, but ends just wouldn't meet. They made too much money to qualify for government aid and too little to pay their bills. Horne saw single mothers in the Catch 22 of needing to work to provide for their children but having no money or family for child care. Others couldn't save or get ahead because the lion's share of their money went to help family members or to secure rides to jobs in the suburbs.

Then there were those who were severely mentally ill, who never learned to read and

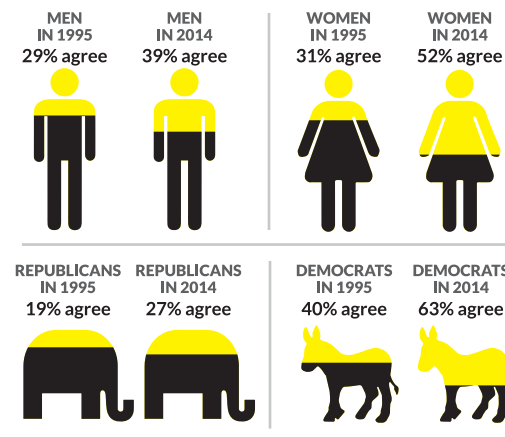
VIEWS ON POVERTY, THEN AND NOW

Western civilization has long debated the causes of poverty. In 1995, during the era of welfare reform, and again in 2014 an NBC News and Wall-Street Journal poll asked Americans what the main driver of poverty was and found a shift in national thinking in the years since the Great Recession.

QUESTION: What is the biggest cause of poverty today?



POVERTY CAUSED BY CIRCUMSTANCES



Source: NBC News and Wall Street Journal



Samuel L. Thurman sits with some of his belongings at his feet as he talks with a volunteer about getting a voucher for food in March 2015.

felt they had no option but to make a home in the woods and rely on the companionship of a stray dog. There were still others who were serious about furthering their education but couldn't pass the new and harder GED or succeed in their first classes at Chattanooga State Community College.

Among the "working poor" were those who flipped burgers at McDonald's or picked feathers off chickens at the Pilgrim's Pride plant for 40 hours a week but couldn't manage to keep their electricity on, no matter how careful they were about spending.

At the bottom also were those who seemed bent on self-destruction, she said, and, at least from a middle-class point of view, their choices made no sense.

Whelchel, who had headed Metropolitan

Ministries for nearly a decade, knew the dichotomy well.

While opinion polls still said that almost half of Americans blamed individuals for their own poverty, Whelchel felt most Americans could say that only because they had never studied the ins and outs of a life in poverty.

She hated what she saw as the cliché explanations of poverty, the oversimplifications that reduced poor people to victims or villains.

Poverty, she knew, was a complicated foe with roots in racism, classism, family instability, systemic ineptitude, political indifference, individual failure, mental illness, physical disability and the ever-changing economic winds.

More importantly, she knew the poor and struggling were more than symptoms of

societal ills. They were human beings. But, because they were thought to have nothing of value, they were dehumanized and forced to pay a higher price than everyone else for their errors, she told her staff.

Not long after Whelchel hired Horne, a homeless woman came to their building, rambling and lost, spewing racism. The scene left Horne frustrated and slightly sickened. Whelchel, however, was unfazed.

“Did you see how blue her eyes were?” she asked Horne, focusing on the positive rather than the ugliness the woman’s hardships had brought upon her that day.

It was a moment Horne returned to time after time throughout her rough-and-tumble entry into the world of social work and case management. The poor made bad decisions like everyone else, but she also learned their decisions weren’t made in a vacuum.

Poverty imparted certain outlooks and weaknesses easily misunderstood by people on the outside looking in, she said. Running late for an appointment could mean that a person didn’t care about rules and lacked concern for other people’s time, or it could mean they didn’t have access to a car and the bus had run late.

Teaching herself to consider their points of view became important when clients tested her patience, she said.

Last summer, Horne and Mark Williams, a caseworker at the Chattanooga Community Kitchen, grew close to a homeless man named Jimmy. A longtime member of the street community, Jimmy was known for a toothless grin until Horne found someone willing to help him purchase dentures.

It worried Horne, because Jimmy had cried the last time she talked with him on the phone. A man had mugged and beaten him under a downtown bridge, sending him

to the hospital. He told Horne he was tired and thought about giving up.

Days later, Williams called Horne to tell her Jimmy’s body had been found, surrounded by empty liquor bottles in a homeless camp built behind a convenience store on Main Street.

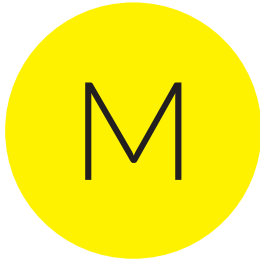
He is never going to sleep in a bed, she thought while she sat alone in her office sobbing.

When no one claimed his body and Jimmy’s family refused to travel from Connecticut to see him, Horne asked Whelchel if they could hold a public memorial in his honor.

“We put all these labels on people — homeless, not homeless,” said Horne, who months later still thinks about Jimmy. “But human to human, he was a person who added to the world, [and] there is not going to be another person like him again. Most people have advocates who tell them their life matters and all the things they should be celebrated for, but Jimmy didn’t.”

**“MOST PEOPLE HAVE
ADVOCATES WHO TELL
THEM THEIR LIFE MATTERS
AND ALL THE THINGS THEY
SHOULD BE CELEBRATED
FOR, BUT JIMMY DIDN’T.”**

The Growth Machine



MOST EFFORTS to improve this city over the past two decades have emphasized improving places, not lifting people.

After school desegregation and the decline of manufacturing in the mid- to late-20th century, the city's population dwindled. "Downtown had — like many other U.S. downtowns — become a ghost town," wrote David Eichenthal, former head of the Ochs Center for Metropolitan Studies who was tapped in 2008 to write a Brookings Institution case study explaining how the city had been among the few old industrial cities to carve out a new identity.

So public and private leaders sought a growth strategy to capture wealth downtown and lure developers, retailers, restaurants and national chains that required affluent customers. Those plans led to more than \$1 billion in riverfront redevelopment and resulted in the bustling, modern and walkable downtown being trumpeted today.

Earlier adopters of the downtown vision who smartly bought up property with an "if we build it, they will come" certainty, were perfectly poised to benefit from the real estate boom.

Some city boosters, such as Eichenthal, warned poverty would eventually threaten such ambitions. As head of the Ochs Center, he published report after report on troubled

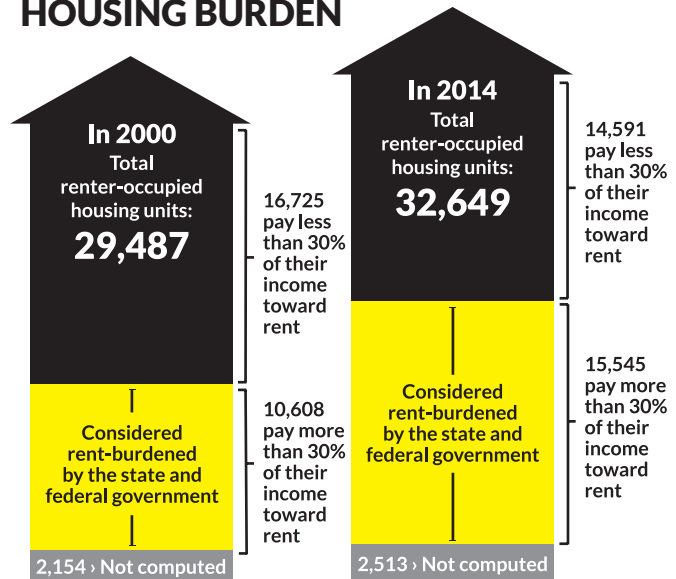
neighborhoods, youth violence and educational failings in areas that ring the central city.

But there was not the effort to unify around the problem of poverty as there had been to unify around downtown's decline. Nevertheless, modest efforts were made.

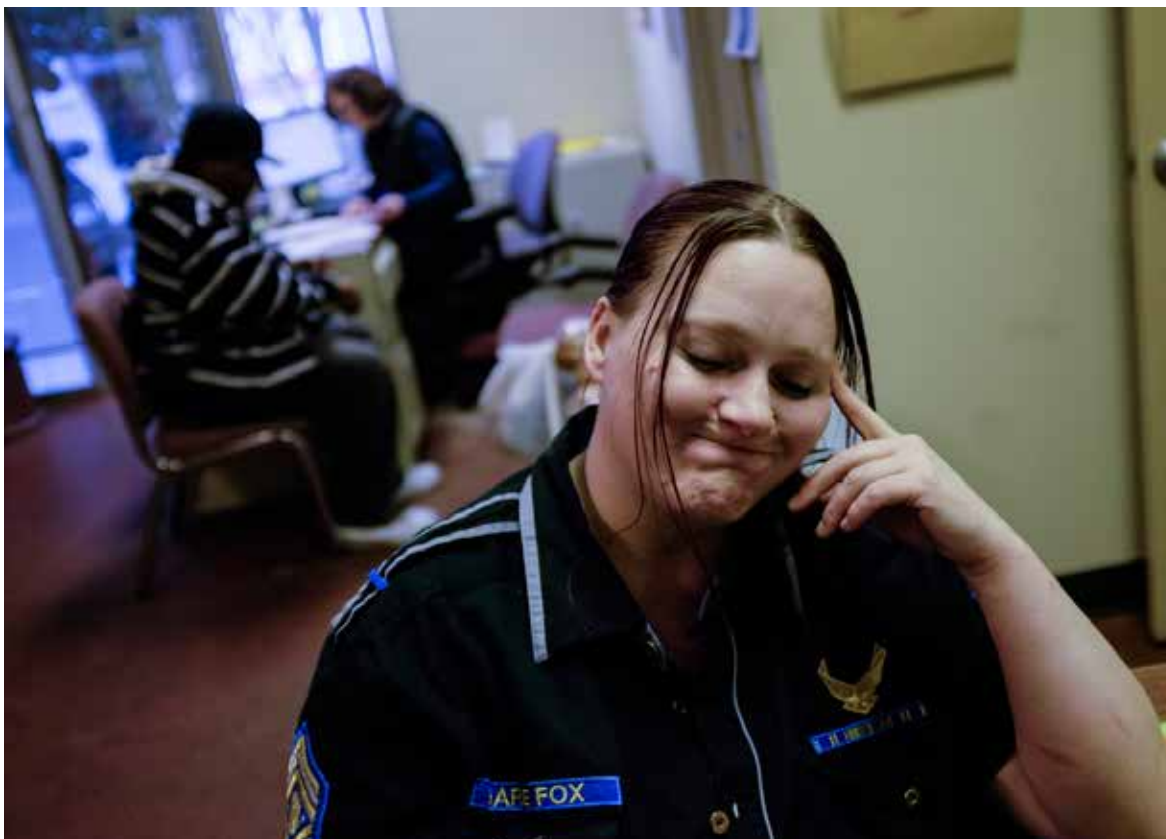
Nonprofits pumped millions into programs for low-income residents that put them in homes, revitalized blighted neighborhoods, fought crime, trained and incentivized teachers, offered college scholarships and educated residents about marriage and parenting.

Two mayors announced back-to-back wars on homelessness and laid out bold visions for addressing the most severe poverty in the city.

THE CHATTANOOGA HOUSING BURDEN



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, wage and rent data for earlier years were adjusted for inflation by the U.S. Bureau of Labor



Marylou Milliman talks with a volunteer about her living situation as she waits to get rent assistance in March 2015. Milliman, who lives in McDonald, Tenn., said she has to walk 10 miles to her job at Burger King because she has no car. She said a friend gave her a ride to MetMin.

And at the end of the 20th century, it seemed the investments were paying off. The city population grew, and surveys of residents revealed that negative attitudes about the city had changed, Eichenthal wrote in the Brookings case study. High-paying jobs in technology, insurance and finance flooded in, as well as lower-skilled jobs in tourism. Then, in the summer of 2008, big news broke.

A \$1 billion Volkswagen plant — the holy grail of automotive manufacturing — would make a home at Enterprise South, once the site of an Army ammunition plant, with suppliers in tow. To many, it was news that signaled Chattanooga had regained the economic prowess that once led to the nickname “Dynamo of Dixie.”

Even when the Great Recession hit, many Chattanooga leaders thought the city was well positioned to weather the worst downturn in generations.

But the opportunities many expected to trickle down largely did not, statistics reveal.

In the winter of 2009, a year after writing the Brookings case study, Eichenthal tried to explain this to a room full of business leaders at a Rotary Club meeting.

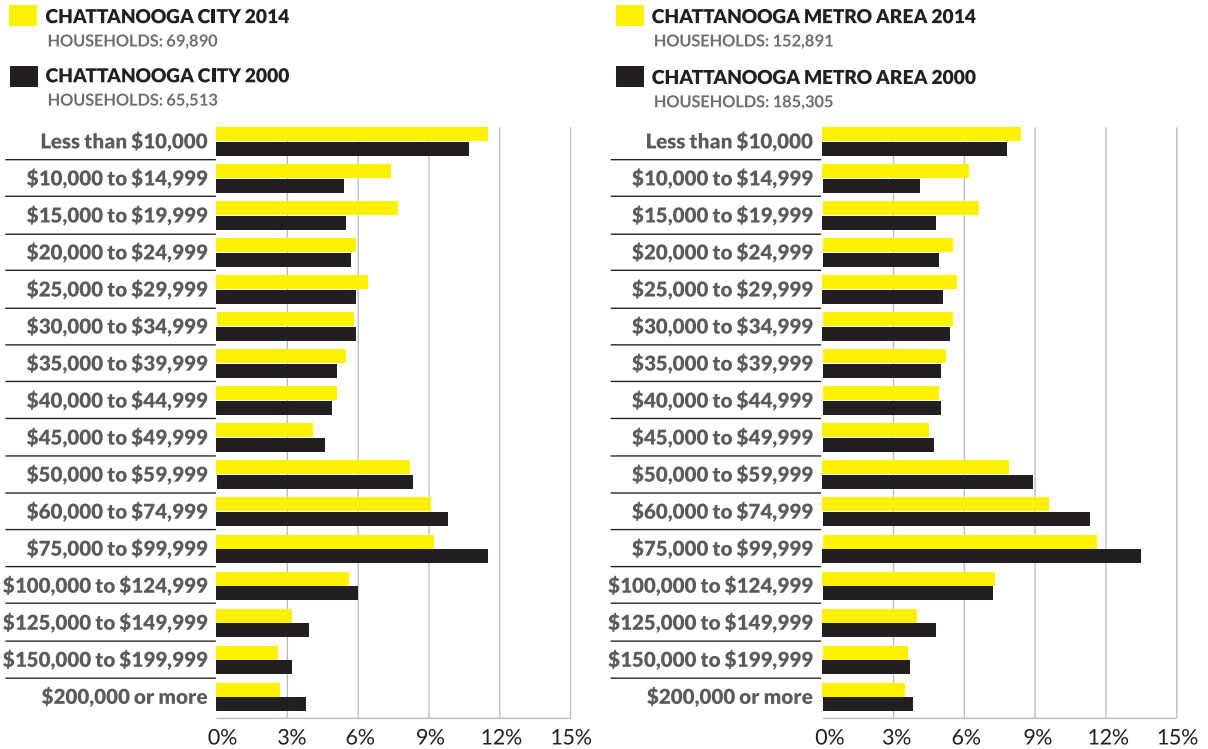
The city’s success had been remarkable, he said that day. Of 20 cities in decline across the United States, only Chattanooga had reversed its fortune.

There was work left to do, he urged.

“To continue our city’s unprecedented turnaround, we need to pay attention to

THE EARNINGS SHAKEDOWN

The number of households in poverty is growing within Chattanooga's city limits and across the metro area while the number of households near the top of the earnings ladder continues to shrink.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, amounts in 2014 and 1999 inflation-adjusted dollars

some numbers that frame our challenge and that, if left untended to, will make this singular success a passing one,” he warned.

One in five Chattanoogaans lived in poverty, he explained, and their lives were marked by struggle, pain, hunger and early death.

The city needed to unify again, he said, for a far more daunting task.

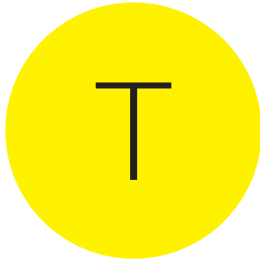
“Ten years ago, the challenge before this city and its leaders was, could this singular turnaround be sustained? And it was,” he

said that day. “Today, the question is, can all of us continue to work together to build a city — a community — where we can take on the tough challenges that I have discussed today and succeed.”

Those who remember being in the audience say Eichenthal finished to a standing ovation and cheers.

Years went by, however, before many saw the writing on the wall. By 2016, one in four Chattanoogaans were in poverty.

The Politics of Poverty



HERE IS A breathlessness to the hours before noon at Metropolitan Ministries.

In the front room, clients waiting to be seen fill out paperwork and talk with

staff until called to sit with one of many volunteers who help those in need make modest payments toward late rent and plead with landlords to delay eviction proceedings. But late rent is rarely the only need.

One minute Horne is calling around town to find bifocals for a day laborer who works for cash; the next she is paying an EPB bill for a man on oxygen who will die if his power gets turned off. One minute, she is gathering peanut butter and day-old bread for a grandmother who feeds several children out of her apartment in the projects; the next she is putting her hand on the shoulder of a woman sobbing because she has been to the state career center filling out applications but can't get a call back from an employer.

"There is nothing out there," the woman says.

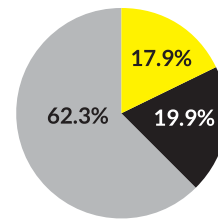
"Just keep trying," Horne tells her.

At lunch, sometimes Horne, Whelchel and their co-workers muse about "what ifs." What if there was a cottage industry that employed felons? What if someone built affordable housing options in every neighborhood? What if people gave time instead of money to those in need? What if the community embraced schools with the most-disadvantaged students? What if churches focused on poverty as much as they did on erecting bigger buildings?

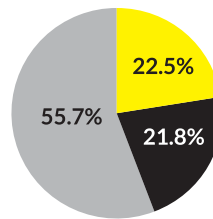
GROWING STRAIN OF LOCAL RESIDENTS

- Below poverty and doing very poorly
- Above poverty but struggling
- Doing OK

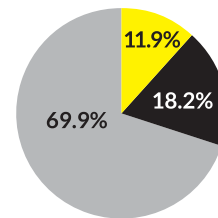
CHATTANOOGA CITY 2000



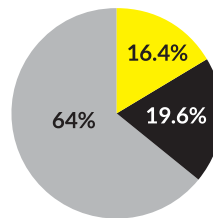
CHATTANOOGA CITY 2014



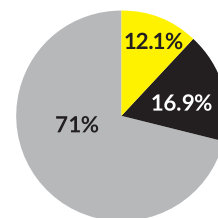
METRO AREA 2000



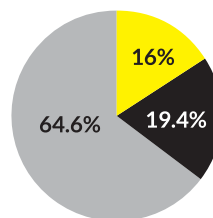
METRO AREA 2014



HAMILTON COUNTY 2000



HAMILTON COUNTY 2014



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, those classified as struggling include those whose incomes are 200 percent of the poverty line and below

Horne's education had challenged her to think in those terms and to move beyond Band-Aids for symptoms to dig deep and find poverty's roots. But doing more seemed impractical. She wondered if her professors realized how many daily crises the poor found themselves trapped in and how few residents were empathetic to their plight.

She also wondered if creating a connect-e city with open lanes to the "American dream" for everyone was even possible. The fight against poverty attracted heroes who often weren't good collaborators, she said. While it was easy to agree on the problem of poverty, discussing solutions, collaborations and partnerships was not.

Several years ago, Whelchel was on a task force to end homelessness called by then-Mayor Ron Littlefield that developed a plan saying the group should still be meeting today.

"The last meeting minutes I have are from 2010," Whelchel said, after looking at her notes.

The next mayor, Andy Berke, took office and wanted to test his own ideas.

And beginning in the fall of 2014, many other disconnected groups, with growing concern about race, class and poverty-related issues were hoping to push their agendas as well.

"The powers ruling Chattanooga (corporations, the state and the nonprofit industrial complex) are intensifying the city's trajectory toward becoming a model of neo-liberalism for mid-sized cities in the South," wrote local activists with Concerned Citizens for Justice in a paper titled "Chattanooga's Perfect Storm: A Tornado of Inequality," a tongue-in-cheek reference to Obama's description of the city as a "tornado of innovation." "This is an arrangement that is good for rich financiers and developers and bad for Chattanooga's working class and oppressed majority."

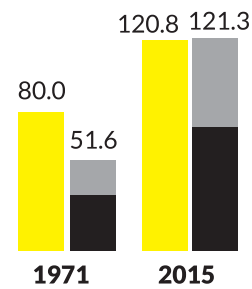
"The data tells a sobering story," wrote the Chattanooga 2.0 coalition just before Christmas in a paper lobbying for more education reform. "It also highlights a definitive

THE MIDDLE CLASS IS LOSING GROUND

■ MIDDLE ■ UPPER ■ LOWER

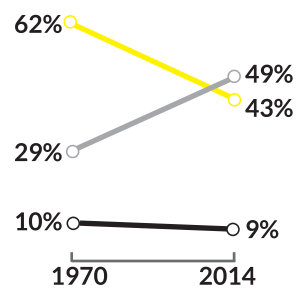
Middle-income Americans are no longer in the majority.

Adult population by income tier in millions



The share of aggregate income held by middle-income households has plunged

Percentage of U.S. aggregate household income



Note: The assignment to income tiers is based on size-adjusted household incomes in the year prior to the survey year. Shares may not add to 100% due to rounding. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1971 and 2015

moment in time where community partnerships, monetary resources and focused strategies can be rallied to propel Chattanooga forward."

"Given the right spark at the wrong time and Chattanooga could be on the national and international evening news like Baltimore, Ferguson and Cleveland," Tennessee State University professor Ken Chilton concluded in a report on the state of black Chattanooga he wrote for the local NAACP in the fall of 2015 calling for community-wide action. "It could happen in almost any city where multiple generations of people are socially isolated, economically marginalized and excluded from most policy decisions made on their behalf."



Horne, left, and Rebecca Whelchel, right, talk with client Terrol Johnson, who says he was wrongfully evicted from Patten Towers, in Horne's office in December 2015. Horne arranged for MetMin's attorney to look into Johnson's eviction.

“An excellent education should not be limited to an elite few,” wrote leaders of UnifiEd in a “Pact for Public Education.” Published last August, the report highlighted startling data on reading levels and college readiness and called for increased school funding as well as an effort to break up concentrated poverty.

“Chattanooga’s working families cannot find the affordable housing they need, and something must be done about it,” wrote leaders of Chattanooga Organized for Action in a report presented to the Chattanooga City Council last year that pleaded for an affordable housing plan. They called for leaders to address the fact that Chattanooga — long praised for low costs — was now seeing some of the fastest-rising rents in the country. The “crisis is now one of the key

social and economic challenges facing our city,” the report said.

Pete Cooper, an influential leader in Chattanooga’s philanthropic community and former head of the Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga, had a backstage pass to participate in much of the discussion and debate but couldn’t predict what would take shape.

He wondered whether the wider community could believe that their fate and the fate of the poor had become connected. He certainly had become convinced.

His grandchildren would likely graduate from prep schools and attend college with a hefty scholarship, as his children had. Yet he doubted they would find the same Chattanooga when they reached adulthood.

“Will they live in a community where



Joseph Woods points out some of the dental work he needs as he talks with Anna Katharine Horne in her office at Metropolitan Ministries in December 2015. Many clients are looking for conversation as much as assistance, and Woods spent more than half an hour telling Horne his history as a musician.

there is civil unrest?” he said, musing in his office one day last year. “Will they live in a community that has noncompetitive businesses because of the skill level of staff? Will they live in a community that can no longer support small businesses or business growth? Will they live in a community that remains segregated when whites are a minority? Will they live in a community overrun with crime because of growing economic desperation?”

It would be a hard sell, he thought, and the movement lacked a champion.

Wealthy businessmen such as Lupton had

been the cage rattlers to bring the rest of the city’s elite into line, Cooper said.

That was the real “Chattanooga Way.”

“Those people don’t exist anymore,” he said. “The world has become more complex, more democratic.”

Part of that was good for the city, he said. Unlike Chattanooga’s old names with old money, new leaders coming up are diverse, entrepreneurial and far more concerned with social issues. But part of that scares him, too.

Without a Lupton, how would a city of nonprofits and politicians competing for

relevance come together? Who has the clout to lead such a rally?

Another challenge is winning the trust of the struggling families so many want to help. Cooper and others, including Horne and Whelchel, know many are disillusioned with millionaire saviors and the agendas they cook up without the voice of those in troubled neighborhoods. Some, like those leading Concerned Citizens for Justice, Chattanooga Organized for Action and the local NAACP chapter, believe the poor are used by do-gooders to advance their careers or make money but who rarely stick around.

“While the city and rich people are debating what is best for people they have never lived with, we are building solutions that are created and implemented by those living that life on the ground,” said Ash-Lee Henderson, a CCJ organizer. “And they have always shared what they know with people in power, but they are not waiting for people with power and privilege to understand before they take action.”

A sense of community is harder to restore than the parks, bridges and buildings that connect communities, Horne and many others insist.

And moving Chattanooga beyond the politics of poverty seems the most insurmountable challenge, many say.

Poverty polarizes people, especially in Chattanooga, a gateway to the Deep South.

It flames debates related to politics, race, class, taxes, wages, economics, rights, morals, sex, marriage, childbearing and faith. But no single cut, hike, policy or political party is going to fix things. A survey of efforts across the country teaches that.

“There is no silver bullet,” said Horne, reflecting on more than a year of working to help people climb toward stability.

The research is clear. Opening escape hatches for the poor demands a time-intensive and expensive commitment of human compassion and cooperation. It demands real community bonds at a time when community was a wobbly concept, studies show.

And change, when or if it comes, could spring from a catalyst or a catastrophe, the experts seem to be saying.

This series is about the people who cling to the hope that a catastrophe can be avoided.

WITHOUT A LUPTON, HOW WOULD A CITY OF NONPROFITS AND POLITICIANS COMPETING FOR RELEVANCE COME TOGETHER? WHO HAS THE CLOUT TO LEAD SUCH A RALLY?



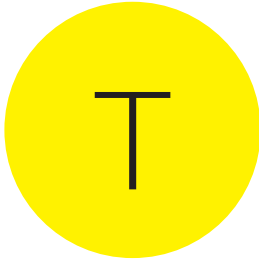
Tonya Rooks sits in her living room in January.

CHAPTER 2

THE LONG SHADOW

BY JOAN GARRETT MCCLANE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAURA FRIEDMAN

Communities shape families and families shape children, but in the fight to bring economic mobility to poor and middle-class children in Chattanooga, the first step is the hardest.



ONYA ROOKS TUGGED AT THE BOTTOM HEM

of her red sweater dress and carefully covered her bouncing right knee as she waited in the lobby of a homeless

shelter in Highland Park.

It was just before Christmas, and she expected a tough crowd that night. As she dabbed at the sweat on the back of her neck with a tissue, she prayed — in Jesus' name — for help.

In Hamilton County 43 percent of children were born to unwed mothers in 2013, and, nationally the share was roughly the same. The trend was driving poverty in places like Chattanooga, and Rooks was just one of many people working on the front lines to reverse it.

Her tack was different than most, though.

While nonprofits worried about fliers, food boxes, classes, health insurance, housing, education, birth control and the money to fund it all, Rooks worried about the ground game. Boots on the ground, she often said, was how the War on Poverty would be won.

It took elbow grease and a willingness to enter into the constellation of lower-income neighborhoods that were scattered throughout the city — the places most middle-class people were scared to go.

For some local nonprofits, Rooks stepped in to do the heavy lifting. Thanks to lessons learned from her own years living below the poverty line, she had a way with struggling people, many realized. So organizations paid her to deliver their messages, and one of those assignments had brought her to Chattanooga Room in the Inn.

But she rarely stuck to the script she was paid to deliver. Those who sat on the city's nonprofit boards couldn't understand why some services went unused, but Rooks did. A lot of people in the inner city didn't think

nonprofits helped at all, she said. Most who enrolled in classes to improve their employability left without the social connections to make their new skills worth the trouble, the poor explained to Rooks. Single, expectant mothers were offered free birth control, free prenatal care and free parenting classes, but received little support from nonprofits once their babies were born.

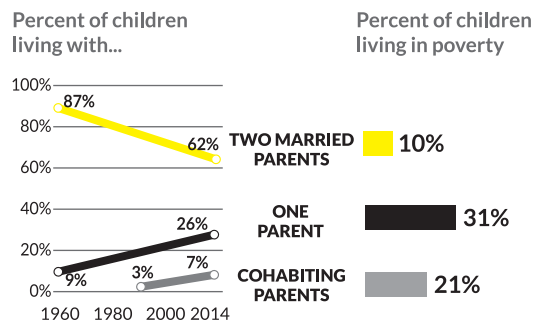
Chattanooga offered the poor a lot, but it almost never offered what the poor really needed, Rooks said.

As Rooks waited to speak to the women that night, she listened to a shelter staff member wind through a list of stern reminders: Too many women were going braless in dirty sweats for prolonged periods of time at the shelter, and that had to end, the staff member warned, talking over the sound of screaming children down the hall. Languishing in bed and asking children to

THE MARRIAGE-POVERTY LINK

As marriage rates in America have declined, poverty has risen, and experts believe it is because children from single-parent, low-income homes are experiencing the compounding effects of multiple disadvantages.

For U.S. children, there is a strong link between parents' marital status and the likelihood of living in poverty.



Note: The assignment to income tiers is based on size-adjusted household incomes in the year prior to the survey year. Shares may not add to 100% due to rounding. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1971 and 2015



Tonya Rooks talks to clients at Chattanooga Room in the Inn, a homeless shelter for women and children, about the benefits of family planning and the services offered by A Step Ahead, which provides long-term birth control for women who cannot afford it otherwise.

complete adult chores was also a no-no, the shelter staffer reminded them.

“Don’t smoke in the front (of the shelter),” the staff member added before explaining how some donors might object to helping single mothers who buy cigarettes when they can’t afford diapers.

When the poor seemed immovable, tough love was often the knee-jerk reaction, Rooks had come to learn.

The poor needed to make amends and prove themselves, many seemed to say. To Rooks, though, the poor were the ones who deserved a show of good faith, as well as a real hand up. Life wasn’t always fair, Rooks agreed, and choices had consequences. But tough love, she had discovered, rarely generated much momentum once despair had set in.

“I know what you are thinking,” she told the women after giving a talk about com-

munity services. “I remember sitting at a shelter, listening to people tell me I needed to do this and that, and thinking, ‘I don’t need this.’”

She knew what it was like to feel paralyzed, she explained. She knew what it was like to lose hope.

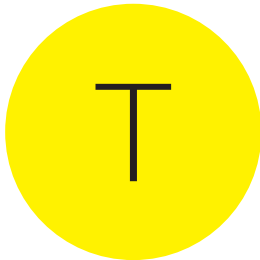
Chaotic and lonely childhoods cast long shadows and decades of isolation eroded community, families and trust, she said; and help, if it came at all, often arrived too late to do much good.

But even if their hard work had yet to translate to success, and even if the judgment poured out on the poor and their children felt cruel and seeded bitterness they couldn’t ignore, they had to keep rolling the dice, she told them.

“I rent a house now. I have a car. I have a job.”

Hope can come unexpectedly, she said, if eyes are open to see.

Beginnings Matter



THE PROMISE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM is upheld by a belief that there are no odds a good-hearted and hard-working child can't overcome.

Presidents rose from one-bedroom cabins, history teachers. High school dropouts, who began with nothing, sometimes died billionaires. Orphans and homeless people climbed to the top of industry.

"Luck is the dividend of sweat," said Ray Kroc, the son of Czech immigrants who bought the first McDonald's restaurant franchise and made it into a global fast-food company. "The more you sweat, the luckier you get."

But circumstances do matter, academics now know.

Parenting matters. Segregation matters. School quality matters. Community bonds matter. ZIP codes matter.

Children are shaped by families, but families are shaped by environments, research has proven.

Middle and upper-class parents believe in the brain's plasticity, and that genes, like clay, can be molded during early childhood and beyond. That is why so many pay for expensive day care, private schooling, tutoring and other things they deem enriching. That is why so many move their families into suburban neighborhoods with good schools. They want their children to be influenced by high achievers and leverage relationships. They also want their children to feel safe.

The big problem for Chattanooga, though, is that too many local children aren't grow-

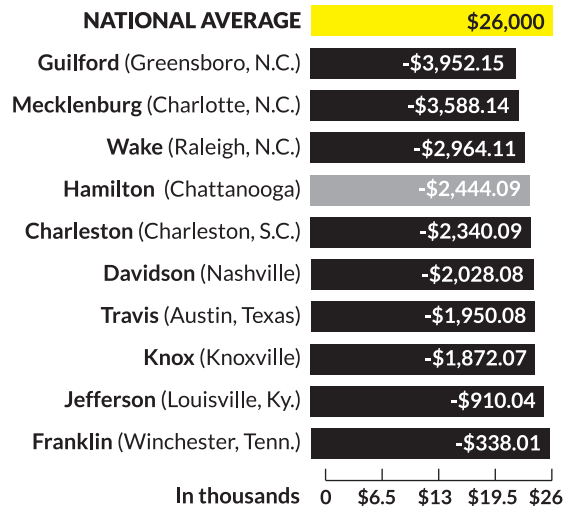
ing up to feel safe, nurtured, supported and connected, and their isolation is causing poverty to snowball, research showed.

Many frustrated with the poor want struggling parents to wise up, make better choices and whip their kids into shape, but it isn't that simple, research explained. Of course, strong parenting was one of the most powerful ways to right the course of a child's life, but strong parenting skills didn't materialize out of thin air, experts said.

THE LOSING GAME

The average level of household income at age 26 is \$26,000. This table shows the dollar loss in income for children in low-income families growing up in these Southern counties.

Children born in Hamilton County fare worse than most other counties in the country, including most of the counties used for comparison by the Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce.



Source: Equality of Opportunity Project by Harvard University, a data analysis by the Times Free Press.

Strong parents and strong families are the results of strong communities, according to a groundbreaking study published in 2015 by Harvard University. And, according to the study, Hamilton County doesn't really have a culture of supporting struggling families or bolstering disadvantaged children. In fact, poor children in Chattanooga would be better off financially as adults if they had been born in almost any other county in America, according to the study, which used decades' worth of anonymous tax data to show how a child's hometown can hurt or help their chances of making decent wages or getting married.

For example, if a poor child were to grow up in Hamilton County, instead of an average place, he or she would make \$2,444.09 less than their peers elsewhere in America at age 26. The loss for children in average-income families is around \$1,000. The average level of household income for Americans at that age is \$26,000.

Yet, the children of the rich gain \$364 by growing up in Hamilton County, compared with their peers in the average American county. A New York Times analysis of the data shows, as well, that Hamilton County is one of the best places in the country for the sons of the top 1 percent to grow up. By age 26, they earn \$2,740 more than the children of the very wealthy in the average place.

Race plays a role, the researchers said. However, communities that isolate blacks isolate poor whites and Hispanics, as well.

Many researchers predict some form of political, social or economic upheaval if Chattanooga's rich kept getting richer, its poor continued to multiply and the middle-class shrank even further.

The birth rate among poor, single women has grown, while the birth rate among more educated single women is down, data showed, and it meant that the local burden of childhood poverty wouldn't be going away any time soon.

Still, change won't come from Washington, D.C., or from the pundits who drive the 24-hour news cycle, experts say.

"When the stork drops a child into his or her new home, the location of that drop will affect fundamentally the child's risk of facing poverty or segregation or experiencing reduced opportunities for mobility," a 2015 Stanford University report on poverty and inequality states.

The economic mobility of local children is a local fight, they argue. It is a battle won or lost, in part, by the daily decisions of women just like the ones sitting around the table at the Room in the Inn that night in December.

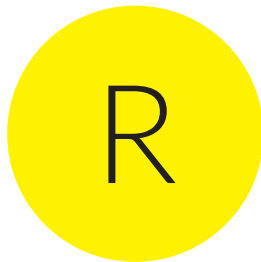
It is a battle won or lost by women just like Tonya Rooks.

**MANY RESEARCHERS
PREDICT SOME FORM OF
POLITICAL, SOCIAL OR
ECONOMIC UPHEAVAL IF
CHATTANOOGA'S RICH KEPT
GETTING RICHER, ITS POOR
CONTINUED TO MULTIPLY
AND THE MIDDLE-CLASS
SHRANK EVEN FURTHER.**



Tonya Rooks reads over a draft of a paper for one of her classes at Cleveland State Community College while her younger son, Terrance Marbury, gets a drink from the kitchen in December 2015. Rooks has gone back to school for her associate degree in social work.

The Mother Lode



ROOKS SPENT HER EARLY CHILDHOOD in a well-kept, predominantly white, middle-class neighborhood in Brainerd.

It was a middle-class life her single mother, Mary, scraped and clawed to get for her children. It was also a success story that defied the welfare-seeking mother narrative used by conservatives to argue against President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty for more than 50 years.

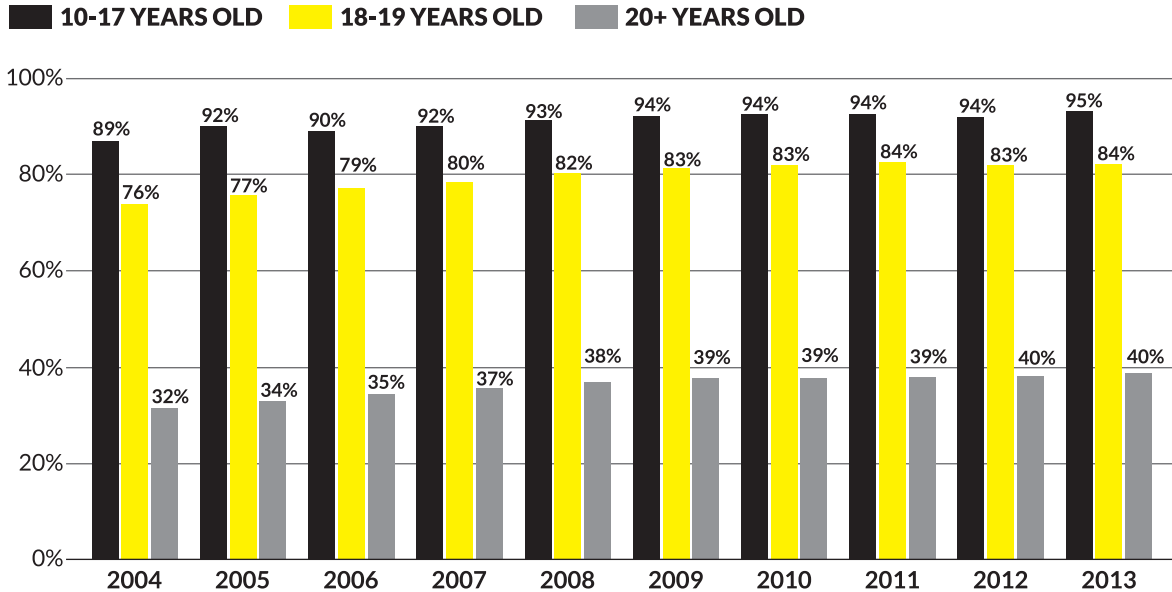
In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a sociologist later elected to the U.S. Senate, stirred controversy when he published his infamous report, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action."

He predicted African-American women, emboldened by welfare, would abandon marriage for their economic independence and that their children would suffer because of it. When Moynihan wrote the paper, the rising share of single black mothers had already coincided with some troubling statistics among black youth.

In response, some argued that African-Americans had been trampled on for

BIRTHS TO UNMARRIED MOTHERS

For 2004 through 2013 the highest percent of out-of-wedlock births was to mothers under 18 years of age. Those babies were at the greatest risk for negative social and economic consequences because of the fact that adolescent mothers very often lack education and job skills needed to succeed.



Source: Tennessee Department of Health, Division of Policy, Planning and Assessment.

centuries. Suggesting that black parents were to blame for their children's lower levels of achievement seemed a convenient excuse for the South, which had systematically denied African-Americans basic economic and educational rights, his opponents said. "Blaming the victim," a phrase often repeated throughout the culture wars, was coined by a social scientist who wrote a book in response to Moynihan.

But Moynihan gave voice to another fury, too.

Southerners, especially those who considered themselves evangelical, had come to resent academia. Many resented being told that their faith was fiction. Many who had fought to stay married and sacrificed to provide for their children didn't want to hear about sexual freedom and that it was fine to do whatever made them happy. Children needed married parents, they said.

In Chattanooga at least, reality was far more complicated.

Rooks' mother, Mary, hated the idea of staying on welfare and certainly didn't get pregnant because she wanted to be on the government dole. She had grown up in the public housing projects adjacent to Howard School in the 1960s, and all she ever thought about was getting out.

Rooks' grandparents, who had been denied rights as children and adults simply because they were black in the South, were not married. Her grandfather traveled with a gospel group, and her grandmother, who was often ill, died not long after Rooks' mother had her first baby at age 15.

Mary Rooks had nothing in terms of money, Tonya Rooks said, but she was smart.

Mary Rooks excelled in high school at Howard, and when she graduated she was

at the top of her class and college ready, her daughter said. By then, she also had three children — Tonya being the baby.

The single mother had her eye on working in the medical field, not a fairy-tale romance, Tonya Rooks said. Nursing was a surefire way to earn enough money to buy a house and make a modest living for her children in the new Chattanooga where blacks and whites were beginning to coexist in the same schools and neighborhoods. Financial stability and independence was her ultimate goal. She didn't have time to wait for a capable male breadwinner to come around. At the time, most black men in Chattanooga were still suffering from the scourge of racial discrimination.

But to provide materially, Mary Rooks couldn't give her children much of her time, either.

Working on her nursing degree, she would flit in and out, often leaving the children with neighbors willing to babysit. Mary Rooks didn't talk about her childhood or about how the rhetoric of feminism, free love and civil rights, which hit a fever pitch just as she was coming of age, shaped her thinking on marriage and family.

She always focused on moving forward, Tonya Rooks said.

After they left public housing and moved to Brainerd, which was still a collection of traditionally white neighborhoods, Mary Rooks held down a full-time job at Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute, along with a part-time job at the Vance Road Women's Clinic, just to make sure she could pay the bills.

So, when Tonya Rooks started her first menstrual period or was bullied at school, she leaned on her older sister, who fed her, tucked her into bed at night and made sure her hair and clothes were right for school every day.

2016 POVERTY GUIDELINES

For the 48 contiguous states

Family of 1	\$11,880
Family of 2	\$16,020
Family of 3	\$20,160
Family of 4	\$24,300
Family of 5	\$28,440
Family of 6	\$32,580
Family of 7	\$36,730
Family of 8	\$40,890

Source: Equality of Opportunity Project by Harvard University and University of California at Berkeley.

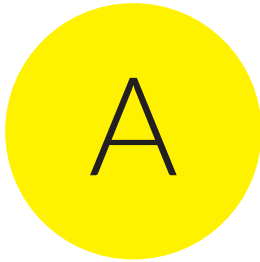
They lived a comfortable life, but an anxious one, too, Tonya Rooks said. Although their mother wasn't around much to monitor or guide them, she had high expectations. If they didn't look busy, Mary Rooks would often force the children to read the encyclopedia aloud and write reports on different entries. They certainly never dared to make a noise while she was sleeping, Rooks said.

"We read lips because we were so afraid," she said.

Rooks said tensions in the house came to a head once she reached adolescence. She started smoking cigarettes, she said, and began running away whenever she feared her mother's rebuke for a bad grade or minor misstep. Eventually, she missed so many school days that she was forced to take the GED to graduate with her class at Brainerd High School.

When she drove out of Chattanooga and toward Nashville to start her first year of college at Tennessee State University, she left not knowing how much her mother's independent spirit has grafted to her own heart.

Drifting



T COLLEGE, ROOKS DID WELL.

Like her mother, she easily blended into a middle-class professional world.

In her medical records administration class, she earned B's. At the state capitol, she took a work-study position helping state lawmakers craft a new seatbelt law.

Replacing her intrauterine device, a form

of long-term, reversible birth control known as an IUD, was on her to-do list. The device had expired and been removed before she left for college, but getting a new one was not a priority.

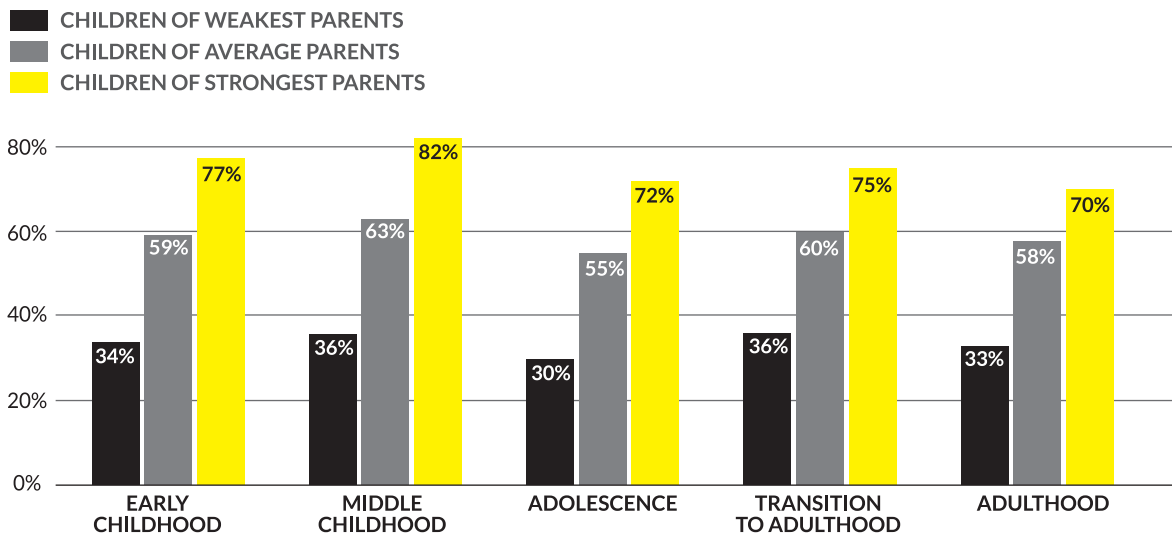
She hadn't expected to meet the nice guy she started dating her freshman year or to have sex with him. She hadn't expected the positive pregnancy test, or the severe sickness that washed over her during her first trimester and left her too ill to eat anything but canned corn, much less study and attend class.

Daughters of single mothers became

THE PARENTING GAP

Differences in parenting contribute to the opportunity gap, argued Richard Reeves and Kimberly Howard in a study published by the Brookings Institute. Using the most common parental assessment tool, Reeves and Howard compared parents' performance on the HOME scale with their income, marital status, education and race.

Percentage of children succeeding at each life stage by quality of their parents





Source: Brookings Institute

CARELESS SEX, RISING POVERTY?

Premarital sex has been the social norm for decades, and sexual activity rates among unmarried Americans do not vary along class lines. Lower-income individuals typically use contraception less frequently, and less successfully, than those with higher incomes.

PATHWAYS TO BIRTH FOR SINGLE WOMEN, AGES 15 TO 44, WHO ARE NOT TRYING TO HAVE A CHILD

Percent of Federal Poverty Guideline	Had sex in the last year	Percent of total population who had sex without protection	Percent of total population who got pregnant	Percent of pregnant women who got an abortion	Percent of pregnant population who carry to term	Birth rate	Births per 1,000 women
-100%	70%	16%	9%	9%	78%	7.2%	72.4%
100-200%	66%	15%	5%	8%	75%	3.9%	39.5%
200-300%	65%	10%	6%	16%	46%	2.8%	28.3%
300-400%	66%	10%	4%	8%	82%	3.7%	36.9%
400+%	71%	8%	3%	32%	52%	1.5%	15.4%
WHAT IF ALL WOMEN HAD CONTRACEPTION RATES COMPARABLE TO HIGH-INCOME WOMEN?							
-100%	70%	7.7%	4.4%	9%	78%	3.4%	34%
100-200%	66%	7.3%	2.6%	8%	75%	1.9%	19.2%
200-300%	65%	7.2%	4.2%	16%	46%	1.9%	19.3%
300-400%	66%	7.3%	3.3%	8%	82%	2.7%	27.1%
400+%	71%	7.9%	2.9%	32%	52%	1.5%	15.3%

Source: Brookings Institute, 2016 study of sex, birth control and poverty

single mothers at higher rates than women raised by married couples, statistics have shown, but researchers had struggled to understand why. What was clear, though, according to multiple studies, was that almost all women had sex before marriage. Women such as Rooks were just more likely to get pregnant from it. They were also more likely to keep their baby.

Hoping to rebound and stay in school, even with a newborn, Rooks stayed in her Nashville apartment until she became so thin and frail from sickness that she was forced to drop out of school and return home.

“I was heartbroken,” she said, remembering the drive back from Nashville.

Marriage, to Rooks, was a holy and beautiful institution, but she didn’t pursue a relationship with the father of her first child, whom she would name Jonathan. Neither of the college students knew each other well enough to commit to starting a life together, she reasoned. Instead, she returned to her mother’s austere independence. She buckled down.

Many women who came from either turbulent childhoods or poverty and found themselves faced with an unintended pregnancy



Tonya Rooks' oldest son, Jonathan, seated, has four children: Makia, Jamelia, Jaquez and Javari, clockwise from left.

felt much the same way, research had found.

After interviewing hundreds of low-income single mothers, Johns Hopkins University sociologist Kathryn Edin concluded that many struggling women she spoke with expressed similar feelings about marriage and children. Poor single mothers held marriage in high regard, she wrote in her book "Promises I Can Keep," but they viewed it as an unattainable goal. Marriage was for people with college degrees and home mortgages and enough money squirreled away for a modest wedding, they said.

It wasn't viewed as a pathway to stability for them and their children; it was considered their reward. And divorce, Edin wrote, was a greater transgression to them than having a child outside of marriage.

Yet, this flew in the face of what many believed about women like Rooks.

While she hadn't wanted to end up pregnant or poor, she played the cards she was dealt. She got a job at Brock Candy Co. and

scraped enough money together to get into a modest apartment in Chattanooga. Her goal was to return to college in Nashville.

But her success was, again, short-lived. clothes to wear and a solid education. But still she had been careless.

Infants and toddlers need far more than the basics for healthy cognitive and social development, pediatricians argue. In fact, experts know infant and early childhood stress play a role in adulthood financial stability, as well as mental health, educational achievement, addiction, criminality, pregnancy and marriage.

Children who spent their first five years in poverty had a mean income of just \$17,900 between the ages of 30 and 37, showed a study published in *Child Development* in 2010. Among those same children, 50 percent of girls grew up to face an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Yet, girls who spent their first years in families with incomes more than twice the poverty line saw mean



Tonya Rooks greets her older son, Jonathan, right, and his children as they stop by for a visit in January.

earnings of \$39,700 and a nonmarital birth rate of just 9 percent.

Some single mothers were strong parents with stable finances and a wealth of social connections they relied on for help. Many others, though, were not, a long-term study of family structure published by Princeton University showed.

Balancing breadwinning and parenting was a parental struggle that often made children's lives chaotic.

Odd work hours and inflexible schedules at low-wage jobs made many women unable to nurse, hold or talk to their young children. And their absence meddled with infants' neurological development and dopamine levels. The result, according to pediatricians and child psychologists, was often a chemical imbalance that manifested as attention deficit disorder, a lack of self-regulation, poor

planning and organizational skills, as well as a tendency toward addiction.

Single-parent families were often the heads of fragile families, the groundbreaking Princeton study found, and their fragility was caused by the stress and trauma imparted by their poverty and the isolated environment they found themselves trapped in.

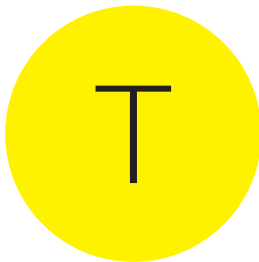
"Little children, they need stability," said Sara McLanahan, a Princeton sociologist widely considered one of the nation's leading experts on families and children and one of the authors of the study. "They need to know what to expect. ... But there is a lot of emotional upheaval. Most of these children are experiencing chaos."

So while the effects were subtle and would play out, sometimes quietly, over a lifetime, women such as Rooks rarely sailed through adulthood unscathed.



Tonya Rooks, left, gets a hug from Denise Tillison in Tillison's living room in February. Tillison credits Rooks with her success in completing a "Work Smart, Live Well" program and applying for a Housing Choice voucher to get her home. Rooks says she's motivated by Tillison's success. "She's what keeps me moving," Rooks says. "It lets me know my work is not in vain."

Boots on the Ground



**WO THINGS
EVENTUALLY
SETTLED** Rooks' lingering questions about poverty: an author named Ruby K. Payne and her return to public housing as an adult.

Payne, an educator, became internationally famous when she published a book in 1995 called "A Framework for Understanding Poverty," which argued that the middle-class viewpoint of those working to alleviate poverty were often ill-suited for

connecting with the poor.

She also argued, with research behind her, that class-based stereotypes that separated the poor and middle class were often built on mistaken assumptions of laziness and immorality that had no grounding in science.

The poor often appeared disorganized, forgetful and late, but that made sense, experts explained. Scarcity of resources forced a focus on daily crisis and allowed no room for long-term planning, research had shown.

The low aims of the poor were also a concern, but science explained that, too. A lifetime in poverty often robbed people of the ability to believe they could accomplish

what they set out to accomplish — an internal motivator psychologists referred to as self-efficacy.

Middle-class children were able to develop self-efficacy, experts argued, because their paths were mowed for them. They often entered school prepared, had homework help and a safety net after graduation. Poor children's first experiences, however, were often cloaked in failure. At every turn, it seemed, they heard messages that convinced them the game was rigged. So they just decided not to play, the research showed.

And they were rarely exposed to any models that could have steered them down a different path, Rooks said she noticed once she arrived in the Westside.

By the time children of fragile families reached college, it was no surprise, then, researchers said, that women such as Rooks fumbled their use of birth control. Studies had clearly linked low levels of self-efficacy with higher rates of unplanned pregnancy.

Reading Payne while living in the Westside helped Rooks understand that poverty wasn't always what it seemed. Still, living beside struggling people taught her even more.

Whenever she found herself down over the years, she had grabbed the hand of a middle-class friend or family member and was able to climb her way out. That was what most middle- and upper-class people did when hard times hit, she said.

But while living in the Westside she learned that many among the poor didn't get a hand up because people were too busy worrying about it becoming a hand out.

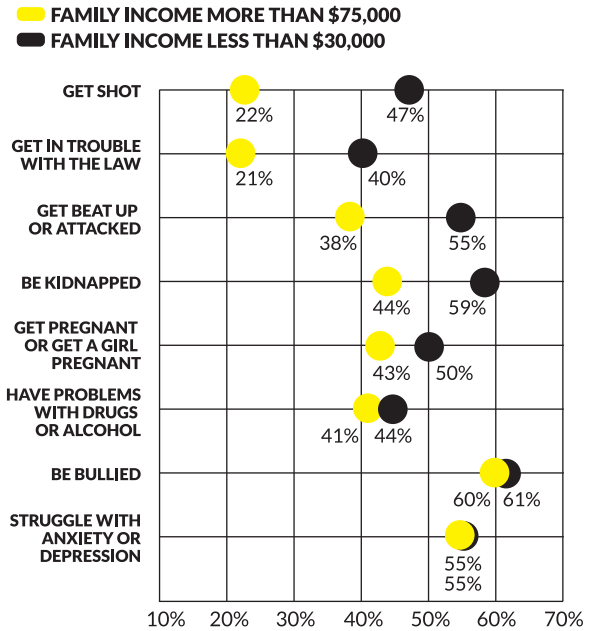
People will always slip in and out of situational poverty, experts note. Generational poverty, though, thrives because of community inaction, not a lack of personal initiative, Rooks came to believe. Sure, the poor had bad guys and moochers among them, but so did every social class, she said.

While living in the Westside, she met a lot of nonprofit workers who had big ideas

LESS MONEY, MORE WORRY

Low-income parents have to worry far more about their children's safety and their children's involvement with police, than higher-income families.

Percent saying they worry that each of these might happen to their child / one of their children



Source: Pew Research Center, 2015 Parenting in America

about how to address poverty. Some told her they envisioned a high-quality day care and prekindergarten solution. If more poor children could have an early childhood education, the numbers would turn, they argued. And while some recent research had poked some holes in that, they were right to point out the need, research showed.

Others she met wanted to campaign around marriage and parenting. Healing families had to be the top priority, they said. If poor parents had relationship-building skills and better parenting skills, the tide would turn, they impressed on her. And those methods did help low-income African-American families, research had shown, although few experts saw a real return to

marriage in the cards.

And years later, once she had found middle-class stability and re-entered college to complete her degree, this time in social work, some were advocating for a birth control solution to poverty, as well. A recent study in Colorado showed that making long-term, reversible birth control available to poor women had a real impact on poverty.

They were all decent ideas, Rooks thought. Still, they all missed the real fix.

Strangers with good ideas didn't rescue people from poverty, she said. Neighbors who built trust, however, did.

Of course single mothers in poverty needed better access to child care, kindergarten, birth control and training in marriage and parenting. But even with all that and better schools, Chattanooga wouldn't solve the poverty puzzle, Rooks knew.

It might sound silly to argue that killing poverty was as simple as building trust and sowing hope, but Rooks believed it to the very bottom of her soul.

She had lived it.

When she ended up returning to the Westside after being laid off in 2010, she had given up on everything, she said. It was a low that crippled her ability to see anything good in her future. At times, she was tempted to believe that she deserved to be where she had landed.

But she woke up from the bad dream one day, she said, when an office worker with the Chattanooga Housing Authority asked her to run for president of the project's resident council. The woman told Rooks she had been watching her and had seen something special in the way she carried herself.

"You think I can run for president?" Rooks said, resisting at first. "The people are not going to vote for me."

"I think you will be good," the women told her, unfazed by Rooks' insecurity. "You have



Tonya Rooks works with clients at Chattanooga Room in the Inn, a homeless shelter for women and children.

to campaign, like you are campaigning for president of the United States."

It took time before she could leverage the trust of Westside residents and help some launch out of the projects for good. "You make one step. I will make the other," she promised.

It took time before she found a job at a nonprofit doing work she came to love.

And it took time before she was able to leave the Westside herself, move into a small house off Amnicola Highway and return to her dreams of a college degree and a white-collar career.

Most of all, it took time for her to forgive herself for how her choices hurt her sons.

But she shook free of poverty long before she finally made it back to the middle class, she said.

She left poverty, she now believes, the moment she decided to run for president of the Westside council.

Because what she saw in her encourager's eyes wasn't pity or paternalism, it was hope.



A woman raises her hands in worship during a church service at New City East Lake in January. Members of New City Fellowship helped plant the church in 2008. In the last few years, more than 20 middle-class families have moved into the East Lake community to help rebuild the neighborhood and establish the cross-cultural church.

CHAPTER 3

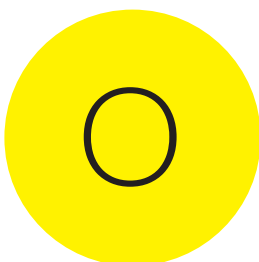
WHEN HELPING HEALS

BY JOY LUKACHICK SMITH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAURA FRIEDMAN

A nascent movement coming out of Chattanooga is challenging American evangelicals and their long-held stance on poverty. Jesus came to restore the weak, a local disruptor with a growing celebrity status among Protestant churches, warns. At stake, he says, is the heart of the local church.



Brian Fikkert goes over grades in his office at Covenant College in December. Fikkert teaches economic and community development classes at the college in the department he helped create.



ON AUG. 28, 1995, Brian Fikkert gathered the courage to send a letter detailing why he thought the modern evangelical church was broken and had forgotten a key piece of the gospel.

It was a revelation that began in his teenage years just as the cultural wars were raging. He read a book by theologian Ron Sider, one of the few people in the late 1970s calling for evangelical Christians to stand up to systemic injustice and implement policies to care for the poor. But Fikkert had witnessed the backlash as some evangelicals called Sider a left-wing socialist, discounting his message as political propaganda.

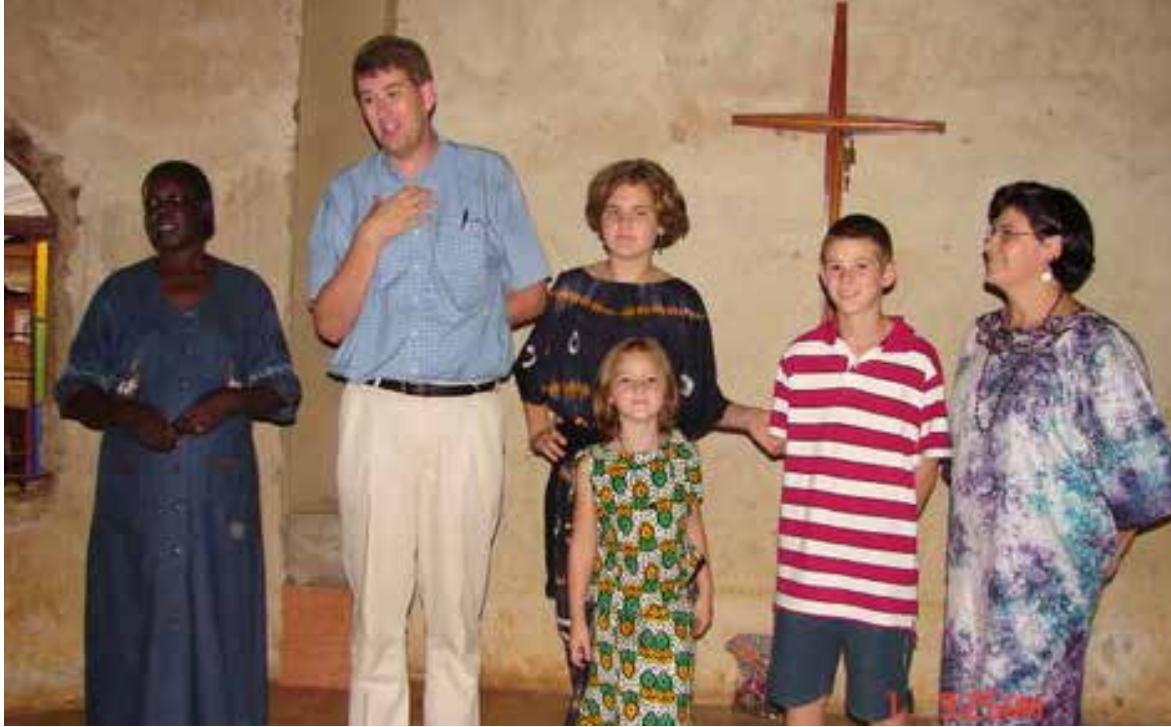
But his words stuck with Fikkert, who chose to study economics instead of going to

seminary because he wanted to learn how to alleviate poverty.

After earning his doctorate in economics at Yale in 1994, he began to teach and do research at the University of Maryland. But he became discouraged by how poverty was reduced to math equations and statistical analysis. On Sundays at his Presbyterian church, he grew weary with how Christians approached the poor.

Turn to Jesus, the deacons told the single mother who came knocking on the door asking for help to pay her light bill. They would help her, yes, but then they acted as if she only needed a spiritual cure to solve her problems.

This attitude struck Fikkert as a tainted view of the gospel. To him, Christians were acting like they were closer to God because they had been blessed with comfortable lives and stable families. They appeared to feel as if they had earned what they received;



Brian Fikkert, second from left, addresses a crowd in a church in Kampala during a mission trip with his family to Uganda in 2006. With him are, from left, Helen Oneka, his children Jessica, Anna and Joshua, and his wife, Jill.

and the poor, meanwhile, were dirty and broken and must be far from God.

Fikkert volunteered to teach a Sunday school class focused on teaching the purpose of the church. This led him to study the life of Christ to see how the church should follow in his footsteps. In the Bible, Fikkert read how Jesus healed the blind and healed their souls. He read how Jesus commanded a lame man to walk and forgave his sins.

“The kingdom of heaven is at hand,” Jesus said in Matthew 10:7.

Fikkert began to see how Jesus had given the answer 2,000 years prior: Grace precedes salvation.

In Fikkert’s understanding of the Bible, Jesus came to Earth to restore the earthly world as well as the life to come. But evangelicals were fixated on the second part of his message. They were waiting for heaven but not trying to restore the brokenness on Earth as Christ had done, Fikkert reasoned. And in the process, they had forgotten their

own brokenness and ignored Bible passages in which God warned he would close his ears to the prayers of the righteous when they ignored the cries of the hurting and poor, Fikkert thought.

This wasn’t a political argument, conservative vs. liberal, he concluded. This was the central message of the Bible. Wanting to share what he was thinking, he typed a letter to a friend who worked at a Christian college 600 miles away in Chattanooga to discuss what could be done to help Christians change their hearts about the poor.

“We are good at preaching grace, but we are lousy at demonstrating it,” he wrote.

“I dream about developing a course/program/institute at a Christian college which would explore both the spiritual and economic dimensions of poverty and lay the theological foundations for ministries of mercy to the needy.”

Little could he have imagined how his vision would unfold.

Morality vs. Grace



WHEN THE LETTER was stamped in 1995 to Covenant College, it was at the beginning of a precipitous decline in the American church.

Over the next 20 years, church attendance shrank 9 percentage points, according to Barna Group, a Christian polling firm. Meanwhile, Sunday school attendance plummeted, and volunteering at church drastically dropped, too. Fewer born-again Christians read the Bible, Barna found, and by 2011 only 43 percent of Christians said they had strong belief in the Bible anymore.

The retreat from Christianity wasn't happening in a bubble, wrote Robert Putnam, a Harvard political scientist, in his book "American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us." Americans were becoming disconnected

and didn't trust their foundational institutions anymore, including the church.

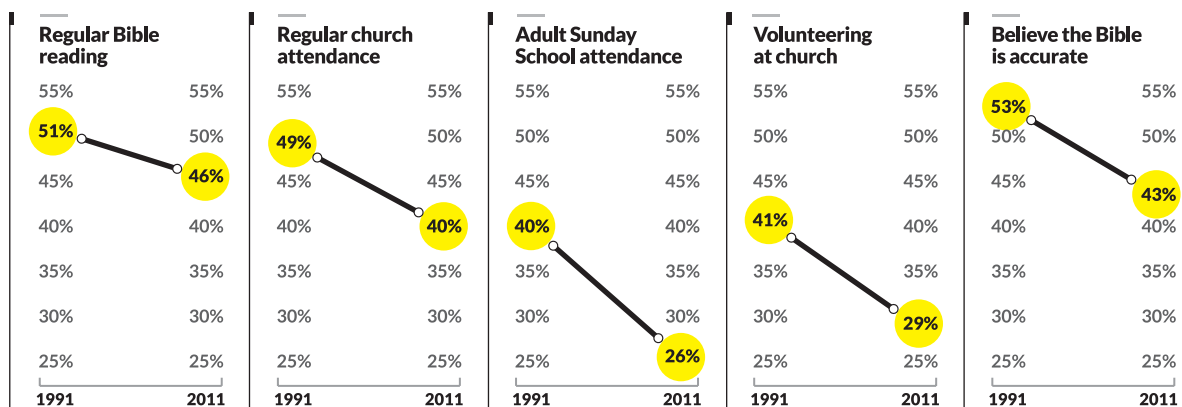
But young people's rejection of faith went deeper, Putnam argued. The evangelical church was more focused on fighting for morality than compassion, he believed. While churches gave away turkeys at Thanksgiving, organized toy drives at Christmas and helped fund missionaries across the globe to spread the salvation message, the message didn't translate into grace for the suffering in their own backyards.

Among the growing number of skeptics in America, Barna found the majority thought church members weren't connected to one another in life-changing ways, did little to add any value to their communities and were led by people who didn't show love for one another.

Yet when Fikkert began to study the history of the church in America, he realized evangelical Christians had once been beacons of hope in their communities and

TWO DECADES OF DECLINE

A diagnosis of the state of religion in America from 1991 to 2011 shows a drop in involvement.



Source: Barna Group

HOW MILLENNIALS VIEW CHRISTIANITY

The majority of millennials who don't go to church say they see Christians as:

Judgmental	87%
Hypocritical	85%
Anti-homosexual	91%
Insensitive to others	70%

When asked how millennials viewed present-day Christianity:



Viewed church as a place that actively helps other people



Viewed local church as a place to reach out to their communities

Source: Barna Group

championed the fight for the poor, believing it was at the heart of the salvation message.

Before the 20th century, evangelicals were on the front lines fighting to improve working conditions for industrial workers, wrote David Moberg in his book, "The Great Reversal." They created orphanages, set up schools for immigrants, fought for laws to end child labor and founded rescue organizations such as The Salvation Army.

But in the 1920s, disagreement over salvation caused the predecessors of modern evangelical Christianity to shrink from helping the poor out of fear that the social gospel — which focused on helping the poor but not the need for salvation — would spread, Fikkert read in historian George Marsden's book "Fundamentalism and American Culture."

An important setback for conservative Christian beliefs played out in Tennessee when all eyes were on the small town of Dayton during the Scopes Trial in 1925. The trial, Marsden argued, represented the great clash between rural, less-educated Christians and the emerging sophisticated intellectuals who had outgrown God. Even though William Jennings Bryan, the conservative prosecutor, prevailed in his argument against evolution in the trial, the public and the press concluded that science had trumped the Bible.

Conservative Christianity stayed in the shadows until it re-emerged with a Southern accent, Marsden argued. In the late 1950s, North Carolina evangelist Billy Graham packed sports arenas nationwide as he preached the New Testament gospel. In the Deep South, Martin Luther King Jr. emerged preaching that God had created all men equal. But Southern pastors focused on the evils of alcohol, gambling, drugs and sexual immorality — even while their African-American brothers were lynched in the streets.

It was Southern Baptist televangelist Jerry Falwell and Conservative media mogul Pat Robertson who mobilized the evangelical church to enter the political arena in the 1970s, as the country experienced a dramatic change in standards of family and sexuality, to fight for what they termed "family values." And in the movement, the message of forgiveness and grace was often lost, Fikkert said.

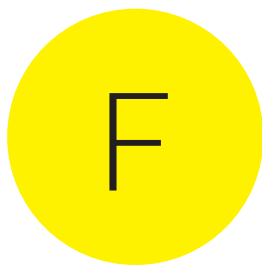
When Fikkert examined Jesus' life, he didn't see morality and love as being in conflict. He read how piety and worship of God must lead to people who act justly and love mercifully.

It was for those reasons that Fikkert believed the evangelical church needed a wake-up call. Still, when Covenant College leaders offered to give him a platform in Chattanooga, he found himself at a crossroads.



Brian Fikkert talks to his wife, Jill, in the kitchen of their St. Elmo home in January. With Jill's encouragement, Brian moved the family to Chattanooga in 1997 to accept a job offer at Covenant College, where he founded the Chalmers Center and helped create the Department of Economics and Community Development on campus.

'When Helping Hurts'



From the most influential city in America, he consulted the World Bank on its foreign policies. The thought of moving to Southeast Tennessee

FIKKERT WANTED the church to change, but he didn't know if he wanted to be the one to deliver the message.

He was content at his prestigious research univer-

to teach at a small Christian college sounded like the end of his career.

Covenant College had offered him the chance to develop his own curriculum to teach students the principles of economics through a biblical lens, encouraging them to do good works in their communities. And he would be able to split his time developing a nonprofit that would train churches to care for the poor.

Fikkert's wife, Jill, made the decision for him. It was the chance of a lifetime, she told him.



Brian Fikkert teaches his final economics class of the fall semester at Covenant College. Fikkert splits his time between teaching, traveling for speaking events for the Chalmers Center and writing books.

In 1997, he moved his family to an early 1900s Victorian-style home in St. Elmo where his street embodied the divide within the city. In his backyard, he played catch with his kids near a long row of trees that separated his up-and-coming neighborhood from Alton Park, one of the poorest communities in Chattanooga. He envisioned the door to his home welcoming both communities.

As Fikkert began the daily commute up Lookout Mountain to Covenant College, he realized he had no idea how to live out what he was learning. He began to meet with community leaders to raise support to open a center that would help churches create Bible-minded programs centered on economic development to help the poor.

Financed with private funds, the facility

opened on the Covenant campus in 1999. Fikkert named it the Chalmers Center after 19th-century Scottish preacher Thomas Chalmers. Also an economist and mathematician, Chalmers eradicated poverty in his parish when he asked the government to withdraw and let the church step in.

Like the Scotsman, Fikkert didn't create the Chalmers Center to increase dependency for the poor but to find ways to help them help themselves.

Internationally, the Chalmers Center's message was well-received in churches and ministries from India to the Andes. Fikkert and his staff created a savings-based program to help people in Third World countries learn a trade or business skill and learn how to save.

But in America, Fikkert's message was

harder to sell. When he traveled to conferences, only a handful of people sat in the audience. While churches could justify helping the poor starving children in other countries, they didn't think there was a problem in America.

"What was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah?" Fikkert would ask, knowing his audience would think it was their sexual sins. He would then read from Ezekiel 16:49.

"Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy."

But a few years into the new millennium, Fikkert saw a change in evangelical churches' posture.

He saw what he could only describe as God moving in authors and pastors across the country as Christians began to realize they had moved away from the message of the gospel.

"The Holy Spirit was moving," Fikkert recalled. A number of authors and people were saying the same thing: "If I'm a follower of Jesus, I have to care about poor people."

God's heart was for the poor, argued authors such as John Perkins, a Baptist minister.

Others, such as evangelist Ralph Winter, who 30 years prior had mobilized churches to send more missionaries to groups of unreached people across the world, wrote how he was afraid the church had become greedy and self-absorbed. "Evangelicals fritter away more money per year than Bill Gates gives away," Winter wrote in 2008, a year before his death. "They have been buying boats and second houses and adding on to their homes ... It seems like everyone is thinking about demolishing world problems — except the church."

In response, Fikkert and his staff developed an online course to teach churches poverty alleviation tactics. When requests for material flooded in, they wrote a book.

Fikkert and colleague Steve Corbett, who had been at Covenant College since 2001 helping him develop the student curriculum, began to outline what they had learned about the gospel and caring for the poor.

"We are excited about the renewed interest in helping low-income people ... but our excitement about these developments is seriously tempered by two convictions," Fikkert and Corbett wrote in the preface of "When Helping Hurts."

"First, North American Christians are simply not doing enough. We are the richest people ever to walk the face of the Earth. Period," they wrote. "Second, many observers, including Steve and I, believe that when North American Christians do attempt to alleviate poverty, the methods often do considerable harm to both the materially poor and the materially non-poor."

Poverty was about brokenness in the world, but everyone was broken. The gospel message is that Christ came to redeem brokenness and restore people's relationships with God and each other, Fikkert and Corbett wrote.

Their goal was to sell 10,000 copies, and then Fikkert planned to focus on his research again and pursue global poverty alleviation projects. The week the book went to store shelves in 2009, he took his family to the beach. His assistant called halfway through the week.

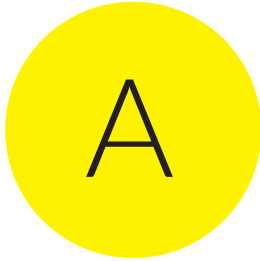
"It's sold 5,000 copies," he told him.

For the next few months, sales soared past 100,000 copies, then 200,000, then on to become a national best-seller. Churches from Dallas to Ohio began to call by the dozens. It was toward the end of the Great Recession, and families within the church were suffering and more people from the community were banging on their doors crying for help.

What do we do now?, they were asking.

Fikkert didn't have the staff in place to offer much help.

The Rich Man



THE CHALMERS

Center grew into a research and training arm for churches to tackle poverty alleviation, Fikkert and his staff wanted to model a program in Chattanooga for

churches to copy across the country.

Backed with funding from the Maclellan Foundation, they hired additional staff in 2010, including Jerilyn Sanders, who at the time was heading a local inner-city outreach program. Sanders began looking for a bank that could be their financial partner for churches to implement a matched savings account program.

The idea was for the church to help people in poverty save money toward a goal, such as going back to school or buying a car. If they met their goal, the church would match the amount. The goal was to help people to become self-sufficient while building relationships between the middle class and the poor.

As Sanders met with church leaders to try to sell the idea, she often got blank stares. Leaders were confused by the message of giving more of their time and less of their traditional giving, small cash assistance to the poor. Sanders remembers several pastors saying they could recruit their members to give cans of food and toys and sign up for volunteer work. But asking members for a three-year commitment with people in poverty that required training, large financial commitments from the church and a significant amount of time seemed implausible.

They realized the principles were great in

theory but much harder to put into practice.

But Jesus never said it would be easy to follow him, and Christians have long debated what it means to follow in his footsteps with regard to money, wrote David Miller, director of the Princeton University Faith & Work Initiative, in a 2007 paper on wealth creation. Many verses, such as the story of the rich man who asked Jesus what he must do to enter the kingdom of heaven, suggest Jesus calls for his followers to give up everything material to

BORN AGAIN CHRISTIANS

According to a Barna Group poll, Chattanooga ranks second in residents who have converted or committed to Christianity.

1. Birmingham, Ala.	70%
2. Chattanooga	66%
3. Tri-Cities, Tenn. / Va.	66%
4. Montgomery / Selma, Ala.	66%
5. Little Rock-Pine Bluff, Ark.	64%
6. Lexington, Ky.	64%
7. Huntsville / Florence, Ala.	64%
8. Knoxville	63%
9. Baton Rouge, La.	61%
10. Nashville	60%
11. Charleston-Huntington, W.Va.	59%
12. Shreveport, La.	59%
13. Louisville, Ky.	56%
14. Jackson, Miss.	56%
15. Mobile, Ala.	55%
16. Memphis	52%
17. New Orleans, La.	48%
18. Fort Smith / Fayetteville / Springdale / Rogers, Ark.	45%

Source: Barna Group



Jerilyn Sanders, director of U.S. training for the Chalmers Center, addresses a group of church members and nonprofit leaders at a Faith & Finances Ministry gathering at the Bethlehem Center in January. Sanders was hired in 2010 initially to run a finance program in Chattanooga that didn't get off the ground.

follow him.

“Sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me,” Jesus told the rich man.

But other verses, Miller found, suggest Jesus condemns laziness and wasting God's resources on idleness and that wealth is a blessing from God. But like Fikkert believed, Miller concluded that wealth is not an obstacle or an offense to faith. Instead, money should be integrated with faith and be seen as a tool like everything else Christians possess, to be used to serve God and others.

Officials at the Chalmers Center decided they needed to get people to understand the basics of money and faith first. So they scrapped their original programs and created a financial class they believed could grow into a movement to help the poor toward upward mobility.

Many churches were already teaching financial freedom classes popularized by

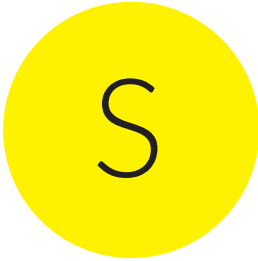
financial guru Dave Ramsey, but Sanders found those programs set goals that assumed two-income households and were geared toward the middle class.

Sanders and her team began to write a faith-and-finance curriculum that set realistic goals for single mothers and low-income families. The classes would be for both the material poor and the middle class. Together, they would learn healthy financial principles, discover what God said about money and develop relationships recognizing where each group could teach the other.

Faced with a lack of interest in Chattanooga, they began planning a training event. It would be held at Calvary Chapel on South Broad Street but be open to any church in the country. They had room for about 40 participants but planned for about two dozen.

By the summer of 2012, Sanders' email account was flooded with requests. Seventy people from across the country wanted to attend.

'Light Break Forth'



IX YEARS after “When Helping Hurts” was published, Fikkert doesn’t have to convince evangelical churches when he travels that God’s heart is for the poor.

The question has become: How can we do it better?

Across the South, evangelical churches are asking how they can engage in race reconciliation and help their neighbors in need, said Stephen Haynes, a religious professor at Rhodes College in Memphis who has studied the history of religion and racism in churches.

Last June, Fikkert spoke by invitation at the Southern Baptist Convention’s annual conference, where the theme centered on how the church could engage in social justice at home.

The Chalmers Center has witnessed stories of churches shifting millions of dollars to help transform the lives of the poor in their neighborhoods. Since 2012, the staff has trained 232 churches and 144 nonprofit organizations from mega churches to 70-member congregations from coast to coast to use their faith-and-finance class.

They’ve heard many stories similar to North Avenue Presbyterian Church in midtown Atlanta whose 950 members revamped their benevolence giving, then looked within their own congregation and found dozens of members homeless. Church leaders offered the faith-and-finance class. After 10 people graduated, they set up a matched-savings

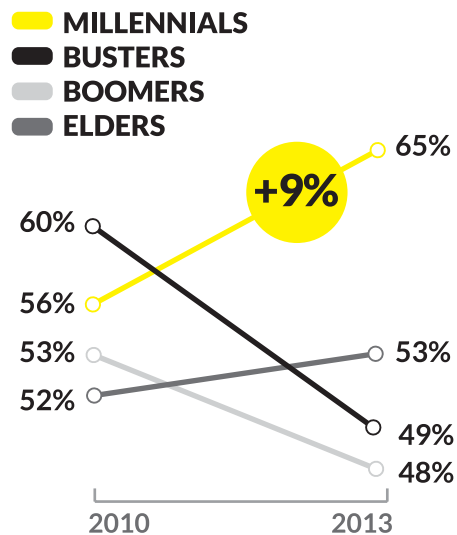
account to help with purchases for goals to get better jobs or to go back to school.

While North Avenue has helped fewer people since revamping its ministry, Matt Seadore, director of the church’s mission programs, said the changes are more meaningful and bring hope to their community.

In many cases, the change in communities across the South is coming from the age group least expected. Barna Group found while more people in America are leaving their faith and say they now identify as atheists, the only generation to increase

DO AMERICANS STILL EVANGELIZE?

Evangelism is in sharp decline among boomer and buster generations. Millennials show the highest increase.



Source: Barna Group



Jim Terney greets Carlos Bautista and his son, Vladimir, during a church service at New City East Lake in January. Members of New City Fellowship helped plant the church in 2008. In the last few years, more than 20 middle-class families have moved into the East Lake community to help rebuild the neighborhood and establish the cross-cultural church.

their evangelism significantly has been millennials, those born after 1980. And a third of young people surveyed in 2015 who said they were engaged in their local church also said they wanted to live out their faith by actively reaching their communities.

These stories excite Fikkert, who has many such stories of graduates of his community development program who have gone on to be part of this movement.

But when he reads the headlines about Chattanooga, he gets discouraged and then angry.

He sees the growing gang violence in his own community and how kids in some countries have a better chance of escaping poverty than the kids born behind his house in Alton Park. Yet Barna Group called Chattanooga one of the most Bible-minded cities

in the South.

He asks: How can those two truths exist?

“It would be one thing if Chattanooga were in a place where the church was not present,” Fikkert told a crowd at a banquet several years ago. “But the two Chattanoogas that exist here exist in the heart of the Bible Belt. Our churches are packed on Sunday morning. Do you realize that what is at stake here is not just the children of this city, but the very integrity of the gospel itself is at stake?”

Yet when he questions the churches in Chattanooga, he has to look internally and question his own life.

He never made friends with people in poverty or invited his nearby neighbors to dinner at his house. While his wife, Jill, helps run a health clinic for uninsured



Chalmers Center curriculum specialist John Mark Bowers speaks to a luncheon attendee as Nathaniel Bankhead, the center's U.S. research and training coordinator, listens from the doorway. The gathering held at the Bethlehem Center in January was to encourage local church members and nonprofit leaders who are using the Chalmers Center's Faith & Finances curriculum.

children, his own children, who went to the nearby Christian school, didn't get to know the poor growing up. And while his family worshiped at New City Fellowship, an interracial church, they went their separate ways after the service, keeping up with their busy schedules filled with soccer and basketball practice, teaching and grading papers.

People are busy, Barna found. It's hard to get to know your neighbor in the modern era with cellphones, smart screens and social media.

But in Fikkert's office at the Chalmers Center, he sees something that gives him hope. He sees people who have transcended their whole lives, in part, because of his and others like his thinking.

In 2009, John Mark Bowers moved his family to East Lake, one of the most dangerous parts of the city.

Bowers, who writes the Chalmers Center's curriculum, moved along with about 20 other families who attended New City Fellowship and wanted to build a church where they lived among the people.

They followed the principles of John Perkins, who created a community development movement after he relocated near his Mississippi hometown in the 1960s and helped to rebuild the town by starting a church, day-care center, youth program, cooperative farm and health center. The purpose of relocation is to unite with the local community and then to share resources and rebuild the neighborhood together. It's a movement growing in Memphis and Birmingham and across the country, as about 400 churches and nonprofits have moved into low-income neighborhoods.

In East Lake, the families are learning together how to rebuild a community.

Some church members purchased rental properties to help create fair housing access. Others have advocated for local leaders to care for the neighborhood and build sidewalks and shelters at bus stops.

When they wanted to get city leaders to fix 12th Avenue, they wrote a song for the children's choir the church helped create. "There's a hole in my street," the children sang. "There's a hole in my street, and it makes the cars go boom."

After the video was uploaded to YouTube, the road got fixed.

But the men and women who grew up in East Lake have taught Bowers and the other middle-class residents much more about their own spiritual state.

After living in East Lake, Bowers said he began to see how he, like others in the middle class, worshiped control and how his faith in God was limited. But his neighbors knew the meaning of trusting God to provide for their needs. He saw how Jesus was right when he taught that the places of physical comfort and safety can often be spiritually deadly.

Not everyone will be called by God to live in East Lake, Fikkert admits, but the same attitude of humility and grace has to exist within churches if widespread change is going to come to Chattanooga and the rest of the country as well.

To remind himself, he often returns to a cluster of verses in Isaiah. In the passage, the Israelites go to their prophet to ask why God hadn't heard them or answered their call. They had done all the Lord wanted, they told Isaiah. They were moral. They made good choices. They followed the rules.

"Will you call this a fast, and a day ac-

CHURCH ATTENDANCE

According to a Barna Group poll, Chattanooga ranks highest in weekly church attendance.

1. Chattanooga	63%
2. Baton Rouge, La.	62%
3. Birmingham, Ala.	60%
4. Montgomery / Selma, Ala.	55%
5. Louisville, Ky.	54%
6. New Orleans, La.	54%
7. Little Rock, Ark.	53%
8. Huntsville, Ala.	53%
9. Jackson, Miss.	52%
10. Nashville	51%
11. Tri-Cities, Tenn. / Va.	51%
12. Memphis	49%
13. Charleston, W.Va.	49%
14. Lexington, Ky.	48%
15. Shreveport, La.	47%
16. Fort Smith / Fayetteville / Springdale / Rogers, Ark.	46%
17. Mobile, Ala.	44%
18. Knoxville	44%

Source: Barna Group

ceptable to the Lord?" read Isaiah 58:5-8. "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house; and when you see the naked, to cover him?"

"Then shall your light break forth like the dawn."



CGLA Executive Director Elaine Swafford walks past the school's front office in November.

CHAPTER 4

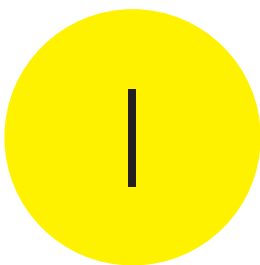
A SCHOOL LIKE HOME

BY JOAN GARRETT MCCLANE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAURA FRIEDMAN

We ask schools to teach children, not raise them. But one Chattanooga educator, who fears struggling public schools have long been misunderstood, is crossing the line and proving that when disadvantaged children are truly supported, the impossible comes into view.



Former CGLA student Kenyetta Brown sits on a picnic table next to her family's new apartment complex with her friend Brenton Adams in November. Kenyetta's family moved to this complex in September, and she now attends Ooltewah High School.



I T WAS THE LAST day of still hallways and strategizing, the last chance for Elaine Swafford, the executive director of Chattanooga Girls Leadership Academy, to prepare her

team of educators, who were mostly green and mostly middle class, for the task at hand.

After a week of training, some teachers were already exhausted. A pair fretted as they boarded an elevator, whispering concern about the year's goals.

But Swafford didn't notice.

"Let's go," she said, bursting through double doors and rushing past with a two-way radio in hand.

The bus was waiting, and she needed

everyone to move along. Now.

Some teachers asked where they were going. "It's all about cultural competency," Swafford said, walking briskly past them in a navy pantsuit.

"This is about getting to know where our kids come from," she added after boarding the bus.

Three miles later, the bus parked on the curb of the College Hill Courts housing project in Chattanooga's Westside neighborhood, a remnant of a Depression-era federal housing program intended to temporarily accommodate the poor.

"Let's go," she shouted, fliers in hand.

"What do we do?" one teacher asked another. "Where should we go?"

Swafford, a 56-year-old education veteran, left them behind, cutting through alleyways toward people perched on porches.

"We are here from Chattanooga Girls



CGLA Executive Director Elaine Swafford stands outside the school on the first day of the 2015-16 school year in August.

Leadership Academy,” she said as she approached.

“We just want to visit with our students and remind everyone that school is starting back,” she added before being interrupted by a tall, muscular girl, who bounded around a corner.

“Dr. Swafford,” the girl called out, embracing the school leader, who remained composed.

Swafford knew Kenyetta Brown, a sophomore at CGLA, and her story. Still, the 15-year-old used the moment for a testimonial.

She lost her father the year before and had wanted to give up on school, she re-

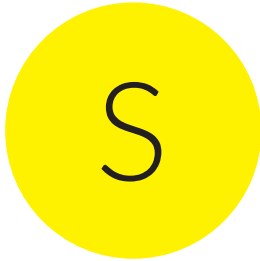
minded Swafford. But teachers convinced her to stick it out and take a stab at leadership roles and writing. Her report cards included A’s now, and she even had a poem published in a national collection of high school writing, she told Swafford.

“The teachers helped,” she said. “But I did it,” she added with a big grin.

“Well, get ready,” Swafford told her, knowing the rigors that lay ahead at the almost all-poor, all-minority girls charter school in Highland Park.

The message: Good progress, Kenyetta, but not good enough.

No Margin For Error



INCE THE GREAT

Recession the local public school student body has dramatically changed and not for the better.

Thanks to a growing birth rate among poor women and the increased number of financially unstable households throughout the Hamilton County, the ranks of poor children in the Hamilton County school system has swollen at a stunning rate.

While the overall school population has grown just 12 percent since 2007, the number of economically disadvantaged children counted by the Hamilton County school system is up 27 percent, and now, for the first time in history, the county is educating more disadvantaged children — over 60 percent— than not.

The county was already playing academic catch up with the state and other districts, and these enrollment shifts aren't helping school leaders move the needle, local educators say. Only 35 percent of students have been leaving local schools with the ability to compete for jobs that pay a living wage. So, for progress to occur, public schools not only have to bring delayed students up to basic comprehension but also push them up to the achievement levels of their more advantaged peers.

A significant share of the poor children entering public schools are being raised by strained and stressed single mothers who grew up in poverty but are trying to make ends meet with low-wage work, little edu-

cation and little help, data show. Their early exposure to isolated and concentrated poverty often has a toxic effect, research shows, and puts them far behind in basic literacy, the most important building block for their education.

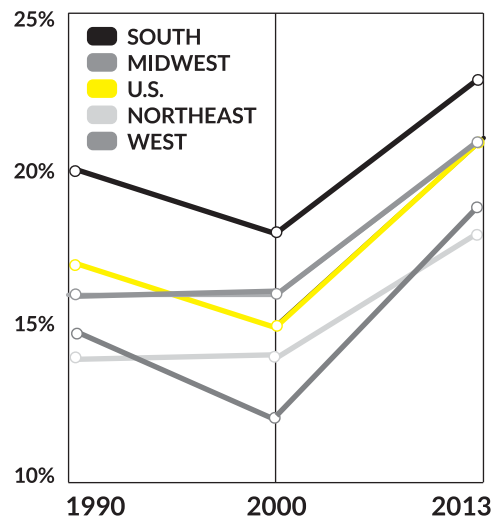
And addressing these deficits remains a daunting task, experts admit.

Decades ago, in the early years of education reform, many, like Washington, D.C., schools disruptor Michelle Rhee, criticized

THE RISE OF CHILDHOOD POVERTY

The percentage of school-age children in poverty has grown significantly, thanks to social and economic forces that have altered the landscape of childhood over the past decades.

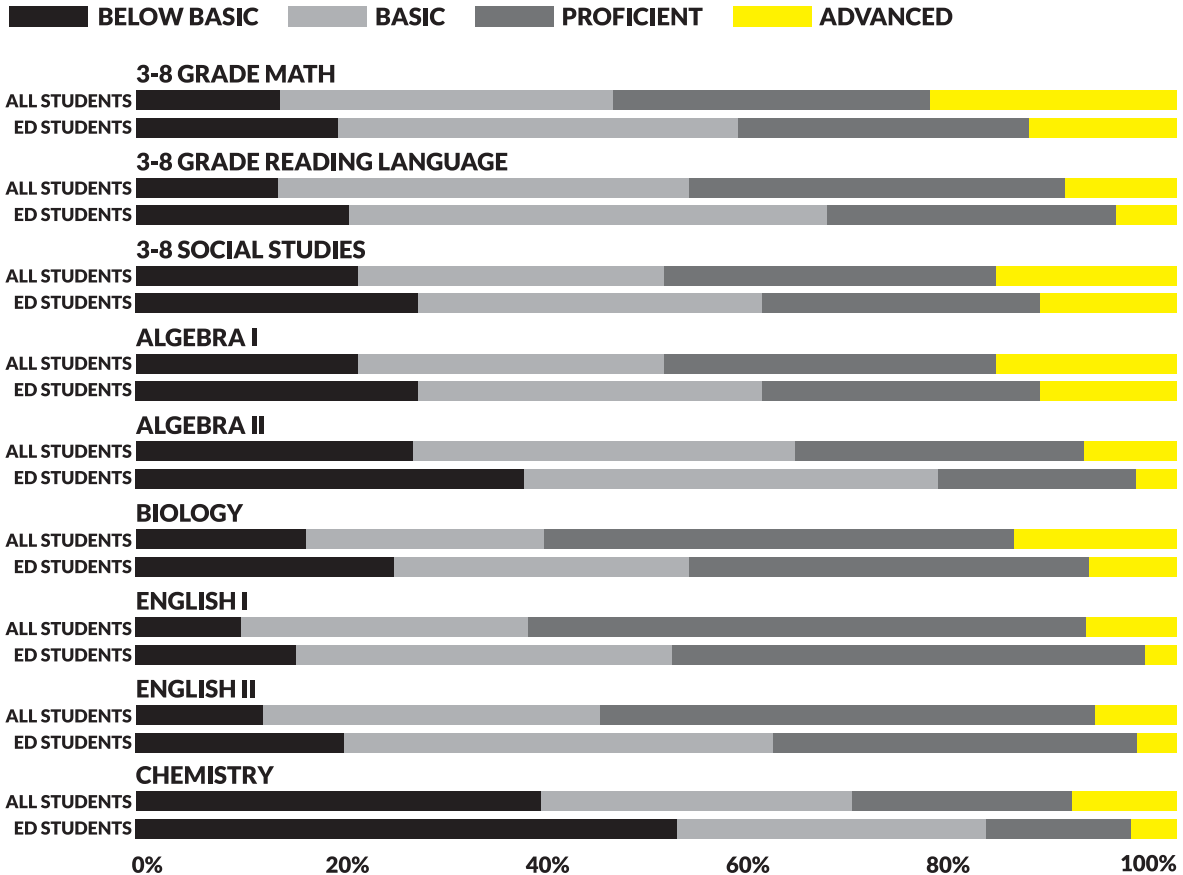
PREVALENCE OF CURRENT DEVELOPMENTAL DELAY in CHILDREN AGE 2 - 17 YEARS



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce. Includes the percent of 5- to 17-year-olds in families living in poverty.

BURDENED BY DISADVANTAGE

Economically disadvantaged (ED) students trail the average child in almost every subject, data from the Hamilton County school system show. All schools are now struggling to bring their disadvantaged students up to new and more rigorous TN-Ready testing standards, which will more than likely reveal even deeper local deficits between well-off and disadvantaged children, local educators say.



Source: Hamilton County Department of Education

public schools for using poverty as an excuse for low-classroom standards. But recent research has challenged that thinking.

Many within the reform movement now say, while good teachers are essential to helping poor children learn, exceptional classroom instruction is not enough to shrink the growing gap between rich and poor children in public education.

They argue that public education needs a new kind of overhaul, one that acknowledges the critical need for one-on-one attention

among children who grow up in poverty. This model has several names. Some call these models “wraparound schools.” Some call them “community-based schools.” But the idea is that public schools must begin to accept a role long left to the home front: child rearing.

And it’s an idea that has attracted attention as examples have popped up, been studied and shown to be a benefit to poor children, as well as a cost savings to school districts in the long run.



CGLA chorus teacher Charles Collins, center, talks to students Glendy Perez, left, and Carmen Gonzalez after chorus class at the school in November.

For Swafford, who came to CGLA after working as a teacher, principal, administrator and community college vice president, the approach was beautifully logical. It simply called on public schools to offer poor children the supports middle- and upper-class parents provide for their own children.

Sure, basic academic skills and a high school diploma could lead to a \$10- to \$12-an-hour job. But those aren't real family wages in 2016. The math doesn't work. It's not enough, and Swafford knows it.

Children with Kenyetta's background didn't arrive at adulthood with the safety net that children of the middle class take for granted. They weren't given laptop computers at graduation and hand-me-down cars at age 16.

Kenyetta's father, for example, had supported his family for 14 years with just a disability pension amounting to less than

\$15,000 a year. After being shot as a teenager in the Westside, he had been riddled with pain and used a wheelchair for decades until he died from medical complications related to the shooting, leaving Kenyetta and her younger sister with nothing. Her mother worked off and on over the years but had difficulty coping after the death of her longtime partner.

While many middle-class teenagers bank checks from part-time jobs that their parents hope will teach them the value of work, teenagers with earnings, like Kenyetta, have to help pay their parents' and siblings' bills.

So when it came time to grow up, get a car and move out, there would be no family money in reserve for down payments or deposits. Without parents or grandparents with good credit, finding a co-signer for a used car loan would be difficult, and high-interest,



CGLA Executive Director Elaine Swafford browses through emails on her phone at the school in November.

buy-here-pay-here car lots would be the only option.

With a full-time job making near minimum wage, Kenyetta wouldn't make enough to meet the income requirements of most apartment landlords, Swafford knew. For a rental costing just \$550 a month — a price on the low end of the market — her income would need to be \$1,650 a month, or three times rent. With a \$10-an-hour, full-time job, she would bring home only \$1,600 a month before taxes.

And those who found temporary financial stability often slipped. With no margin for error, a single misstep — a broken-down car or unexpected medical bill, for example — could foil any plan of escape.

Some who live in the Westside, where Kenyetta grew up, could tell stories of young adults who lost jobs because they didn't

have enough money to buy a car and the rides they did find were either too expensive or not reliable. Some can tell stories of young men who took undeserved criminal charges to protect a person they loved, even though they knew it would strip them of future opportunity. Some can tell stories of young women with professional ambitions who stumbled off their path after an unplanned pregnancy. Others know young adults who destroyed their credit by giving money to family members in need while keeping nothing to pay their own bills.

To the neighborhood, they were the smart kids, the good kids. But as adults they were boiled down to what databases knew of them — a credit score, a criminal record, an ACT test result.

And those facts haunted Swafford. She feared visiting the projects a decade from

now and finding Kenyetta still there because she hadn't pushed her beyond the basics of a high school diploma and passing grades.

Just before the bus left to return the staff to school, Swafford heard her name called again.

"You were my principal at Howard," said a woman dressed in pajamas and bouncing a baby on her knee.

Swafford squinted, unable to recall the woman's name.

"Yes ... I recognize you," Swafford said. "What are you doing?"

"I am just trying to find me a job," the woman answered, downcast. "Do you know of anything?"

"Not off the top of my head," Swafford said. "But call me, and I will see what I can do," she added, hoping to rally the woman's spirit.

Swafford was the proud product of a Tennessee public education. The daughter of working-class parents, she often credited a kind teacher in her rural hometown of Bakewell for noticing her talents and pushing her toward a state university even though it appeared to be financially out of reach. It was because of that attention that she chose to spend her career in Tennessee schools.

And she never stopped hoping the children she knew along the way had been left better off because of her efforts.

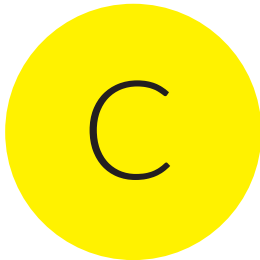
Swafford strained her face as she passed through the housing projects, passing lines covered with wet laundry snapping in the wind. Behind her, the woman with the baby became a speck in the distance.

Still, Swafford didn't look back. That past was a painful reminder of what was truly at stake.

She just kept moving, watching the grass pass under her feet.

**TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD,
THEY WERE THE SMART
KIDS, THE GOOD KIDS. BUT
AS ADULTS THEY WERE
BOILED DOWN TO WHAT
DATABASES KNEW OF
THEM — A CREDIT SCORE,
A CRIMINAL RECORD,
AN ACT TEST RESULT.**

The Real Gap



GLA DIDN'T start with Swafford.

The idea and the seed money came from Sue Anne Wells, a very private philanthropist and prominent alumna of one of the city's

three prestigious and high-dollar prep schools.

Wells, who had long run a nonprofit that rescued mustangs, wanted poor girls in Chattanooga to have the kinds of opportunities, connections and supports that local prep schools and public schools in higher-priced neighborhoods offered the children of the well-to-do.

But when its first local iteration failed to meet expectations, Wells brought Swafford in to help start from scratch.

In 2012, the charter school was on the brink of closure. In one year, though, under Swafford's leadership, the school came off the state's list of failing schools and was named one of Tennessee's most improved. The next year, CGLA received the state's highest recognition for progress again.

Test results for 2014 show students increased their math proficiency by 36 percent, their science proficiency by 30 percent, their Algebra II proficiency by 64 percent and their biology proficiency by 56 percent.

Enrollment jumped as well, from 75 students when the school opened in 2009 to almost 300 in 2014.

And the success brought recognition to the school. So throughout her tenure, Swafford offered tours for the curious.

To start, she took visitors to a room off

the front office and asked them to stare at a large, concrete wall covered in data. Magnets, stacked in rows, represented the academic status of individual CGLA students, Swafford explained, and their progress was updated, tracked, color-coded and studied by staff to develop individualized strategies for every girl.

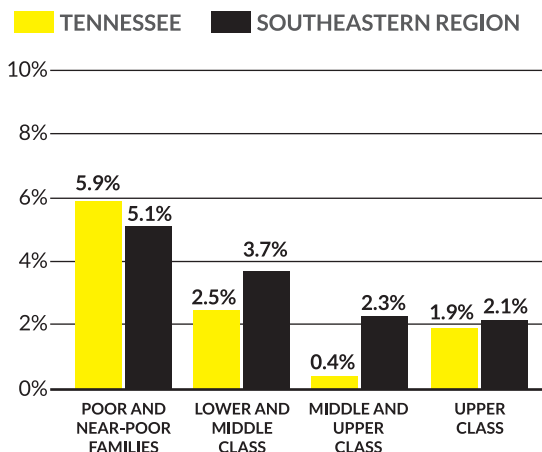
The data told amazing stories, she said.

Next, she routinely offered a sermon of sorts on data, accountability and a culture of no excuses, using the language of so many other hard-charging school reformers.

PAINFUL DELAYS

Children in poor families face enormous hurdles to achieving academic success, even when a school is run well. In Tennessee, those growing up in poverty or near-poverty have higher rates of developmental delays, compared with other states in our region and with other children from higher-income families, both in Tennessee and across the region.

PREVALENCE OF CURRENT DEVELOPMENTAL DELAY in CHILDREN AGE 2 - 17 YEARS



Source: National Survey of Children's Health



Student teacher Cara Cote helps Mecca Sales with an assignment next to Merli Ambrosio while teacher Katie Warwick continues to lead class in December at CGLA.

When she took over CGLA, she told the entire staff to reapply for their jobs, she explained to visitors. It was the best of the four options the state gave her to produce a turnaround, she said.

Fifty percent of the staff were hired back, she added, but only after they passed her one-question test.

“How much responsibility is it of yours that students at CGLA are academically successful?” she said she asked each candidate.

“I love to hear 100 percent, but I will accept a 90 percent or higher,” she told visitors. “I don’t hire people that say you can take a horse to water but you can’t make them drink.”

After watching the reform agenda trickle down and whipsaw schools and chew up superintendents for 30 years, Swafford had come to believe children were leaving high schools and living in poverty not because

of terrible teachers but because America’s education ills had long been misdiagnosed.

It was true that the U.S. had fallen behind in international testing and that too many students were unable to translate their education into a good-paying skilled job or a ticket to higher education. But many, including Swafford, had begun questioning the widely accepted narrative that cast schools as incompetent poverty machines.

But ultimately, it was data, not a sympathy for educators, that became her guiding light.

In recent years, thorough study of national education data showed public schools were actually serving many students quite well. Federal data showed more students were graduating from high school than ever before and that all age groups had higher average test scores in reading and math than they did nearly 45 years ago. Public schools have made enormous strides in closing gaps



Teacher Katie Warwick gives student Lakahia Havis a little extra encouragement in December at CGLA.



Marciana Ramirez Francisco stands at the front of the line to get on a bus for a CGLA school trip to visit the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga campus in August.

between minority and white students as well.

But the gap research showed had widened, however, was the one between rich and poor students, of all races.

Previous generations of college graduates were waiting later to have children and were having fewer of them. With two incomes, more education and more time, these parents were heavily investing in developing their children and unwittingly setting a standard others could never reach, experts who studied the trend concluded.

Middle- and upper-class parents, most of whom lived outside the inner city, also invested in their children's public schools, while opposing property tax increases for schools overall.

Schools such as Signal Mountain Middle/High School and Normal Park Museum Magnet School, both educating small shares of poor and struggling students, had community foundations with money that filled the gaps the state couldn't cover financially.

The Mountain Education Fund, for example, raised a half million dollars a year through parent fundraising to support schools in Signal Mountain, one of the county's wealthiest communities. Yet, Hilary Smith, a longtime guidance counselor at

Howard High School, which was tasked with educating the most disadvantaged students in Hamilton County, said staff at Howard had to beg community nonprofits or individuals for donations of notebooks and pencils. Almost every student at the school came from a struggling household and often had few of the supplies they needed for their schooling, she said.

So the divergent outcomes of high poverty and low poverty schools were no surprise, experts said.

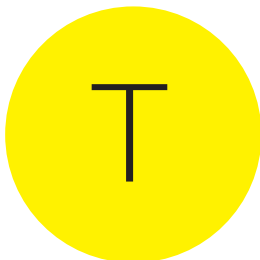
In the 1960s, poor children trailed rich children by about a year academically. By 2013, the gap was closer to four years, according to research by Sean Reardon, a national expert on education inequality and the author of a 2012 study that raised questions about the conventional wisdom of policymakers, politicians and educators.

Other research backed his findings.

So, in Swafford's mind, schools didn't create this achievement chasm between the middle class and poor. They inherited it.

Even at schools in more affluent districts, when you stripped away their middle- and upper-class performers, poorer students still struggled. In other words, a rising tide did not lift all ships.

In Loco Parentis



THE FALL OF 2015 was a turning point for Tennessee schools.

A new wave of state standards was coming, and a new test, called TNReady, would

measure students' logic and problem-solving skills, as well as their rote memorization of words, concepts and facts.

It was a concerted effort to once again bring Tennessee more in line with national standards, but it would strip any varnish left on the state's public education system. It would also be a major test for CGLA.

For two years, Swafford and her staff worked tirelessly to teach students to conquer the TCAP exams. She cared about the testing game, not because she wanted to sell a school turnaround story but because improving test scores meant she could keep the school open and convince supporters to provide and sustain resources that ensured her students could have what they needed for a real chance at college and higher-wage jobs.

Children in stable households, for the most part, had adults who looked after them and knew the prerequisites for success. So the adults at CGLA had to uncover gaps in learning, she told staff members.

If a student spoke with improper English, they had to correct it.

If a student used fists to resolve an argument, they had to explain a better approach.

If a student didn't have help with homework at home, they had to make sure they finished it with tutors at school.

If a student couldn't afford an extracurricular activity, they had to find the money.

If a student didn't have a ride home after school, they had to secure transportation.

If a student was sick and their parents couldn't afford medical care, they had to find someone to help get them treated.

"In loco parentis," Swafford would say, quoting a Latin phrase that meant "in place of a parent." "When students are in our building, we treat them like they are our kids," she said.

Asking her teachers and staff to cross the line into substitute parenting was hard. She knew it was a heavy burden because she experienced the late hours, weekend work and constant worry along with them.

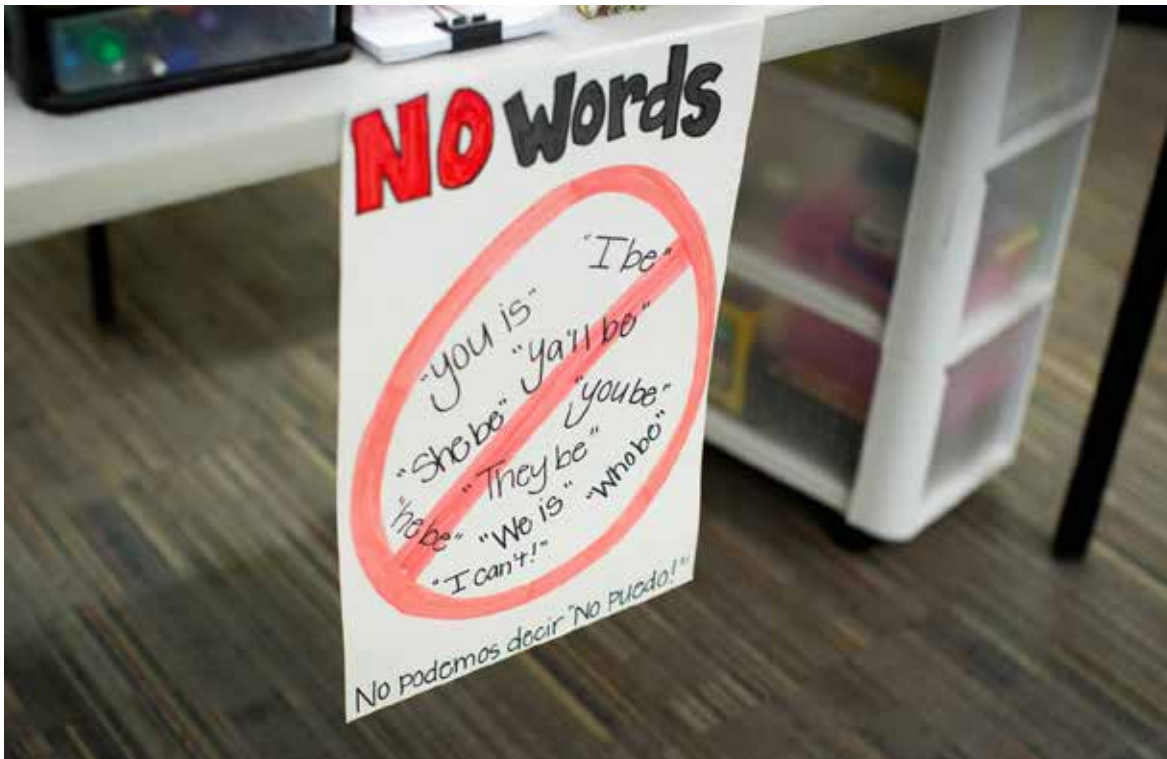
Still, she didn't expect the school to do it alone.

By Swafford's reckoning, it cost \$11,370 to educate each student each year at CGLA, a far cry from the \$7,600 per student allotment Swafford received from the state of Tennessee. So, from the minute she took over CGLA, she began asking people to give money that would bridge the gap between what she had and what she needed.

She and her staff wrote grants for uniforms, for gym remodeling, for travel, for curriculum coaches, for professional development and for before- and after-school transportation. If there was a need, a grant was written.

Last year, a student told Swafford she was behind in statistics class because she had no Internet at home and couldn't complete her homework.

"Internet access is no longer a nicety," Swafford told potential donors not long



A list of words and phrases CGLA students aren't allowed to say is displayed prominently in the chorus room of the school.

after. "It is a necessity."

Eventually, someone committed to rallying supporters to raise money for a program they would call "Backpacks for Success," which would offer students a backpack filled with \$1,500 worth of clothes, Internet cards, shoes, hygiene products and food cards.

Swafford welcomed speaking requests. She worked the luncheon circuit and made appointments with anyone she thought had something to offer her students. And if a person couldn't or didn't want to give money, that was fine. Swafford would just ask them to volunteer.

She decided every student at CGLA was going to have a mentor to meet with regularly. When she didn't have enough adults in her building for each girl, she called for adults on the outside to step up. Professionals were invited to come by the school to talk about their careers, to let students tour their

offices or shadow them at work.

"If you don't feed the human spirit, then how can you expect to drill down to Algebra I?" she asked, explaining why she insisted teachers and staff nurture "the home side of school," as she called it.

And she built the CGLA "wraparound" model because she wanted students to leave the school with more than a basic collection of facts they memorized and regurgitated for a timed test. She wanted them to love learning enough to pass it on to their children. She wanted them to face tough situations and maintain their grace and dignity. She wanted them to understand what it took to navigate an intimidating professional world that required a different skill set than their neighborhood survival instincts.

She wanted them to see jobs in engineering, math and computer science as realistic and attainable, and not just the domain of

wealthy children groomed for intelligence from birth.

In short, she wanted to send them into the world with the same tool kit middle-class children from affluent suburbs just miles down the road had when they left home.

Yet, it was a balancing act. While students needed life skills to plant themselves in the middle class, they needed better test scores as their seed corn.

So with the same vigor the staff mustered to attack TCAP, they began preparing for the first TNReady test, which students would be required to take only five months after starting school late last summer.

On the first day of school, Swafford sent students on tours of local colleges but also made them take a TNReady practice test to see how hard their climb would be. When she discussed results with students afterward, one voiced frustration with a question. She asked Swafford to explain the definition of a “round trip.”

“If you go somewhere and don’t come

back, what is that?” Swafford asked, looking for someone to chime in with the answer “one way.”

Instead, there was silence.

These children didn’t travel on airplanes. Many of their parents didn’t even have cars. Phrases like “one way” or “round trip” weren’t used in their worlds, she realized.

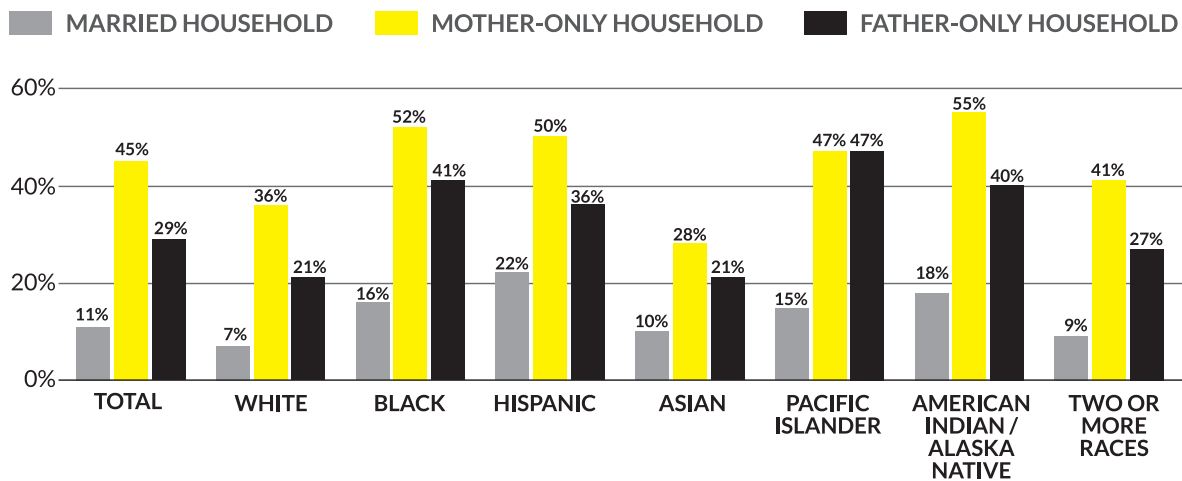
The moment ignited a strange mix of anger and resolve in Swafford. The education system thoughtlessly stacked disadvantages against certain children, but they would try their hardest to knock them down, she told her staff.

Teachers hung posters all across the school with definitions for commonly tested vocabulary words. They planned curriculum so that test concepts were woven into everything from labs to after-school activities.

“At CGLA, field trips are not in our vocabulary,” she told staff. “We do expeditionary learning. If you leave the building and you haven’t taken your (state testing) standards with you, don’t go.”

CHANGING FAMILIES AND GROWING POVERTY

Education reform experts have long argued that poverty is an excuse made by ineffective teachers. But some reformers now say poverty is the real threat to American education. Below is data that shows how poverty has swollen and how poverty rates are worse among the children of single mothers.

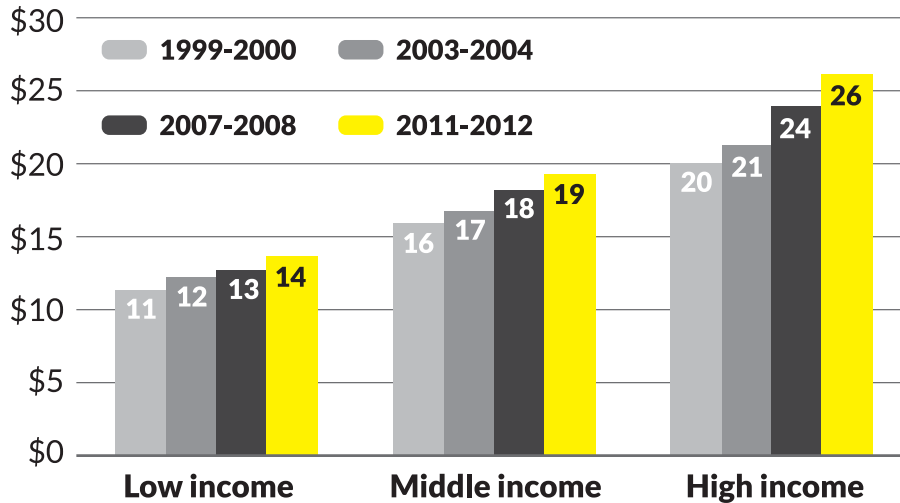


Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), 2013

COLLEGE COST INCREASE

Education reform experts have long argued that poverty is an excuse made by ineffective teachers. But some reformers now say poverty is the real threat to American education. Below is data that shows how poverty has swollen and how poverty rates are worse among the children of single mothers.

In thousands (in constant 2011-2012 dollars)



Source: Federal Interagency Forum and Family Statistics. America's Young Adults: Special Issue, 2014, from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study.

She told a local nonprofit she needed more help and got money to employ a data expert she called a “strategician,” who could comb through students’ test scores and drill down to find each student’s strengths and deficiencies. It would be easy to write off the first year of TNReady and let the year be a wash, but her students, barreling toward graduation, couldn’t afford the setback.

So Swafford pushed college prep even harder.

While learning to take TNReady, the girls at CGLA also took ACT prep courses and practice tests — both funded through grants — to help them secure the highest scores.

After school began, one student told Swafford she didn’t want to take the test a second time as a senior, but Swafford wouldn’t hear of it. She had recently calculated the financial gap the girl would face if she didn’t get a very sizable scholarship that covered housing and living costs as well as books and classes.

“She needs to take this test again,” she told the girl’s mother over the phone. “I need you to back me.”

At the entrance of the school, she arranged little white letters in a black box to read “25 and up club.” ACT administrators consider a score of 19 college ready, but Swafford knew they would need higher than that to get the financial support necessary to even sign up for college classes.

Very few urban schools in America can boast high scores on college prep tests. In fact, many charter schools or public schools that have earned recognition for state testing gains were often undone when ACT scores were released.

Behind closed doors, many in Chattanooga watching Swafford wondered if her experiment was doomed.

But she was sure she would see young women in the spring’s graduating class — the first group to spend ninth through 12th



Amir Williams hugs a friend during class change in December at CGLA.

grade at CGLA — earn merit-based scholarships or full rides.

And if she hadn't pushed them that high, then the school had failed, she believed.

One weekday in October, a woman with a local golfing nonprofit followed Swafford through the halls of CGLA.

After Swafford finished her data-soaked intro, she took the woman from classroom to classroom.

She assumed visitors expected dumb-down classes, broken equipment and harried teachers preoccupied with managing unruly behavior. But what they found instead was a well-oiled machine.

Designated classroom ambassadors, wearing crisp, navy blue blazers saw the school leader coming and jumped up, hurriedly composing themselves, tucking in shirts, smoothing flyaway hair.

At the door, they offered a professional

greeting and briefly explained the day's lesson, as if on cue.

"We are learning about Martin Luther and the Protestant reformation," one girl said.

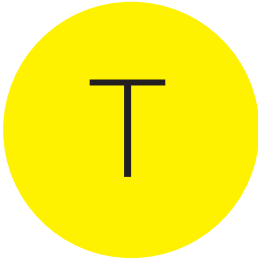
"We are making tennis shoes and talking about product development," another said in another classroom.

Before Swafford took the visitor to the next class, the girls locked eyes with Swafford, briefly searching for a sign of approval. She wasn't one for excessive praise because she knew the real world wouldn't accommodate insecurity. Still, she left them each with a hint, a wink or a nod, something to signal they had done their part.

"This is wonderful," the woman said before leaving. "Let me know what we can do to help."

"I will," Swafford said, knowing she had just made another ally for her girls, who needed all the help they could get.

The Hard Way



IN A DOWNTOWN diversity panel several months ago, Swafford was asked by a moderator what other schools needed to do to be as successful as CGLA.

“I don’t know what they should do,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “We are just trying to be the best all-girls charter school in Highland Park.”

It was a nuanced answer, for sure. It was also an answer that revealed her deep frustration with how ridiculously over-complicated the debate around urban schools had become. She assumed people wanted to hear that charter schools or single-gender schools or visionary leaders or accountable and incentivized teachers were the silver bullet. But she couldn’t.

Flexibility, leadership, business-like accountability and sound pedagogy were essential if schools were going to improve, but that would never be enough, she believed.

The fact is, students need love, encouragement, financial backup, transportation, food, clothing, shelter, peace of mind, a computer, Internet, forgiveness for their mistakes, inspiration, exposure, challenge, moral guidance and lessons in resilience, as well as solid classroom instruction.

It’s a list middle-class parents know intuitively.

So why, she wondered, did so many think there was a shortcut for children in poverty?

There wasn’t, she believed.

All across the country, in and outside of education, smart people were coming

to the same conclusion. And their voices were getting louder as research findings continued to challenge the impact of charter schools, turnaround teachers, value-added measures measures and foundation investments. If you wanted to attack poverty’s toxic impact on schooling, your only tools are unrelenting hard work and individual attention, they argued.

Diane Ravitch, an education historian and policy analyst who worked in both the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations and once backed No Child Left Behind, school choice and high-stakes testing, is among many who turned on the privatization movement and began to argue fiercely against it.

“Reformers say that American education is failing. They say that it is obsolete. They say that we spend more and that achievement is flat,” said Ravitch in a speech to educators three years ago. “It’s the big lie. They are wrong!”

“The test scores of American students are at their highest point in history. The test scores of white students, black students, Hispanic students and Asian students are at their highest point ever,” she added, citing federal data.

While other developed nations might out-score American students, none have the rate of childhood poverty that American schools are combating, she said.

“Struggling schools enroll the students with the greatest needs,” Ravitch added. “We must ask why the world’s richest, most powerful nation looks away from the needs of its children.”

More thorough and long-term research is



CGLA Executive Director Elaine Swafford walks among students on the first day of the 2015-16 school year in August.

needed to determine whether an investment in community schooling or wraparound schooling will pay off for struggling school systems and poor children, but the current body of evidence indicates that it might.

In 2014, Child Trends, a nonprofit, non-partisan Maryland-based research organization, crystallized what is known about the model and reported that the approach is firmly rooted in the science of childhood and youth development and does seem to contribute to academic progress.

Eleven evaluations of three models showed that integrated support decreased grade retention and dropouts and increased attendance, math achievement and overall

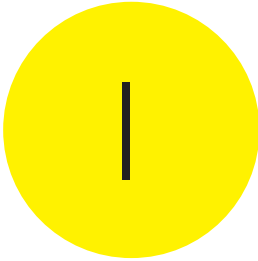
GPA's. Preliminary studies also found the model, while more expensive upfront, saves money over time.

Three long-term studies showed the return on investment ranged from more than \$4 saved for every \$1 spent to almost \$15 saved for every \$1 spent.

"We have to create a new type of school because schools aren't designed for this," said Robert Balfanz, a senior research scientist at Johns Hopkins University School of Education, who is researching the impact of integrative supports in schools.

"But no one wants to accept the degree of challenge," he added. "We are still hoping for the one-off solution."

Beyond Basics



I**N JANUARY,** before the spring semester was underway, Swafford invited two students to come with her to a meeting with the school's foundation board to give board

members the student perspective on CGLA.

She had no idea what the girls, a junior and a senior, would say. While she wanted her students to represent themselves well, she wanted their ideas and thoughts to be their own.

Keosha Cross was one of the two. Keosha briefly attended CGLA before Swafford arrived, but returned to finish her high school education as a junior. When she stood in front of the board members and Swafford, she was nervous because she had never spoken to a large group before.

Still, she spoke from her heart.

The school had given her something extraordinary, she told those listening that day.

Keosha had always been a student who straddled the academic line, not quite behind, but not quite ahead. In sixth grade, she had tested as basic in math and reading. When she took the ACT as a junior, she made a 19, just enough to be considered college ready.

At a lot of public schools where disadvantaged students struggle to reach even basic comprehension and a middling score on college admission tests, her results would have certainly been considered good enough.

Yet, at CGLA, she said, nothing she ever did was good enough.

It was easy to assume that the CGLA staff's constant insistence on high performance discouraged students who already

had so many hardships to overcome. But Keosha said she needed the push.

Swafford, as well as her teachers, saw their students' value and refused to give up until they saw it, too.

When she got a 19 on the ACT, she went to Swafford to tell her the news, but got a wake-up call, she told the board that day.

"It isn't good enough," she said Swafford told her.

Then, when she got a 21 on her next try, she was sure the school's executive director would be pleased.

"It isn't good enough," she said Swafford told her, again.

And Swafford was right, she said. The next time Keosha took it, she made a 24, enough to get into almost any college she wanted.

And she wouldn't be the only one to leave CGLA with a shot at a real middle-class future.

When Swafford came to CGLA, the school hadn't graduated anyone who was college-ready. Among the graduating class of 2016, however, 9 of the 21 seniors, almost half, had high enough ACT scores to be considered ready for the rigors of college-level courses.

Students not considered college-ready weren't being left behind. Swafford met with each of them and had them take personality tests and interest inventories. Every child would get some training after high school, she told the girls and their parents, and the surveys would help them think through all their options.

At home alone, when she thought about the accomplishment, Swafford couldn't help but return to a moment, a few years ago, when 48 percent college readiness seemed like a pipe dream.

She and a few others, including Wells, were

finalizing the school's mission statement, and Swafford, not surprisingly, wanted the statement to be a bold one.

"Inspire hope so each girl has the possibility to change her trajectory in life and empower her to possess infinite choices in the future," she said in her office one day, trying to recite the statement from memory.

Her girls were amazing, she said. But her girls were a light, too.

They were illuminating a path forward for

their families and their neighborhoods, but they were also showing all of Chattanooga what was truly possible.

Other girls, and even boys, would watch them and follow, Swafford thought, and together they would shine so brightly they could no longer be ignored.

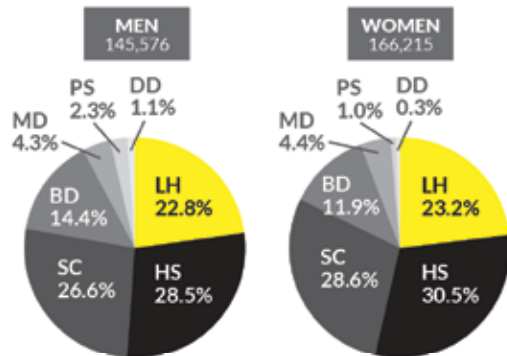
Now, when students walk by the black box at the front of the school and read the words "ACT 25 and Up Club," there are five names underneath.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

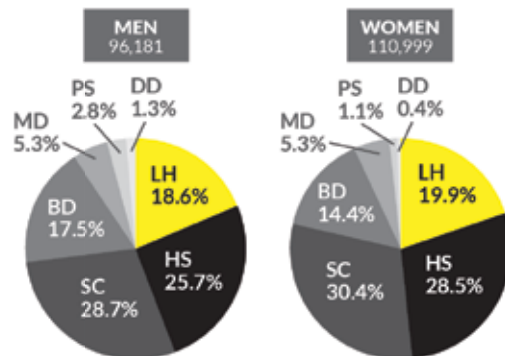
Population over 25 years old



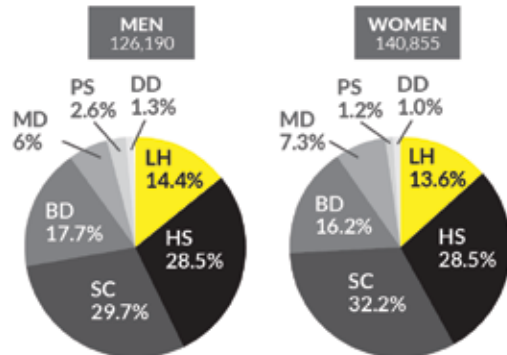
CHATTANOOGA METRO 2000



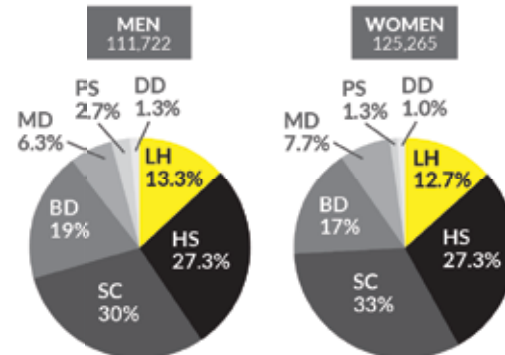
HAMILTON COUNTY 2000



CHATTANOOGA METRO 2014



HAMILTON COUNTY 2014



Source: U.S. Census Bureau *Numbers have been rounded



Ricky Varnell waits for a work assignment outside the day-labor staffing company Command Center on Brainerd Road at 6 a.m. in September 2015. Once he and others have been given their day's job assignments, they travel to their worksites and often carpool.

CHAPTER 5

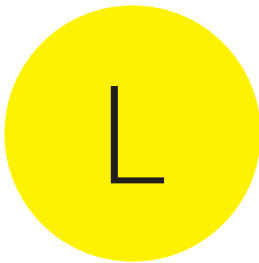
BLUE COLLAR BLUES

BY JOY LUKACHICK SMITH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DOUG STRICKLAND

Young men from working class families have few lifelines as the dirty jobs their fathers and grandfathers worked slowly evaporate or evolve. But local approaches that connect those lost boys, many now lost men, to pride and purpose, are proving a rebound is possible.



Tim Jones, left, rides a bus home from the Chambliss Center, where his sons Tariq, center, and Timothy are cared for while he works, in September 2015. Jones has no car, so picking up his kids after school involves a 9-mile round-trip bus ride from downtown to Brainerd and back.



LONG BEFORE the sunrise, Tim Jones started the work of fathering. He cleared the futon of blankets and pillows, trying not to stir the 4-year-old and 9-year-old asleep on

his twin bed and trundle in the living room.

Jones, a 30-year-old divorced father of two, boiled water to make hot oatmeal, a nutritious and affordable breakfast that at least his baby boy, Tariq, liked.

He studied the landscape of the day. Will it rain? What will the boys wear? Did they finish their homework?

He realized Tariq didn't have clean pants.

So he dug through dirty clothes.

Once Tariq was awake, he set a place for him at the table and watched him bow his head for a silent prayer, squeezing his small fingers into one another with surprising reverence. Timothy, the older son, skipped breakfast.

Not long afterward, Jones' cross-city morning trek began.

Jones would start by walking Timothy to the school bus stop across from the YMCA downtown. Next, he took Tariq's hand and boarded a Market Street bus toward his prekindergarten program in Brainerd. Finally, he boarded another bus to return downtown.

In total, the whole trip would cost him nearly two hours if the buses ran late. But



Tim Jones makes oatmeal for his sons before school while Timothy, left, plays a reading game on the computer and Tariq sleeps in a pullout trundle next to Jones' bed in his studio apartment.

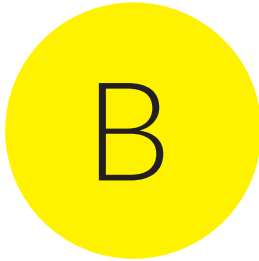
eventually Jones would find his way back to his day job, parking expensive cars for minimum wage.

Jones is one of Chattanooga's working poor. With a limited education and child-rearing responsibilities, his options are limited. But, in his own way, Jones is heroically rising above his circumstances, while many of his generation are not.

Employment among undereducated American men in their prime is free-falling, statistics show, creating an underclass of able-bodied males who don't have the income stability or social capital to become good husbands and fathers. This contributes to a cycle of multigenerational poverty that has hollowed out Chattanooga's middle class and threatens to stop economic progress dead in its tracks.

EMPLOYMENT AMONG UNDEREDUCATED AMERICAN MEN IN THEIR PRIME IS FREE-FALLING, STATISTICS SHOW, CREATING AN UNDERCLASS OF ABLE-BODIED MALES WHO DON'T HAVE THE INCOME STABILITY OR SOCIAL CAPITAL TO BECOME GOOD HUSBANDS AND FATHERS.

Roots of the Problem



BENEATH THE SOUTHERN economic malaise is a powerful force often unrecognized.

For decades, working-class men — those who forged America’s industrial

strength and whose rugged physical commitment is romanticized in country music and regional folklore — have been battered by an identity crisis.

Falling unemployment rates have masked the fact that many men have abandoned work altogether. In fact, there has been an historic decline in the number of prime-age men in the workforce, according to a national report published last year by Stanford University.

In Tennessee, the share of prime-age working men, those between 25 and 54, tumbled from 88.2 percent in 1999 to 81.8 percent in 2014.

Few businesses remain in the market for simple, straightforward hard work. Intelligence, innovation and interpersonal skills are the prerequisites of tomorrow’s professions that were once male-dominated, say economists and social scientists.

The past nine recessions — spread between 1953 and 2008 — battered men, whose employment rates were notched down each time and never fully recovered, and sectors that employed the least-educated men were hit the hardest. Women, on the other hand, have fared better and remain on pace to recover the jobs lost during the most recent recession, the Stanford Report Card



Mark Davis checks the job listings in a newspaper classifieds section while searching for employment at a Tennessee Career Center in September 2015. Such career centers are located across the state to help job seekers find work.

on Poverty and Inequality reports.

But at the current rate of recovery for men, it could take 12.5 to 13 years for their employment to be as robust as it was before the Great Recession. Still, the U.S. economy has never gone more than 12.5 years without a recession, the report pointed out.

“The glum assessment here is that no state has come up with a policy that might, if widely adopted, increase the rate of recovery

HAMILTON COUNTY RESIDENTS EMPLOYED AT VOLKSWAGEN OR AMAZON

Volkswagen and Amazon hired nearly 4,000 employees by 2014. But Chattanooga neighborhoods with the lowest median household income in the county had the fewest hires at the biggest companies in Enterprise South.

ZIP CODE	MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME	EMPLOYED AT VOLKSWAGEN	EMPLOYED AT AMAZON
POOREST ZIP CODES IN HAMILTON COUNTY			
37402	\$9,954	4	14
37410	\$13,575	8	22
37407	\$21,870	11	39
37408	\$22,375	7	6
37406	\$27,632	27	99
37404	\$27,878	28	58
ZIP CODES WITH MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOMES ABOVE \$35,000			
37411	\$36,842	44	131
37403	\$37,120	5	8
37412	\$38,998	97	137
37351	\$40,577	1	0
37416	\$41,298	101	130
37415	\$41,596	72	116
37409	\$43,533	4	13
37405	\$45,035	70	47
37373	\$47,039	10	10
37419	\$51,843	7	21
37421	\$54,595	330	275
37379	\$54,713	82	77
37341	\$56,609	86	59
37343	\$59,644	146	164
37363	\$66,641	304	141
37302	\$66,859	24	10
37377	\$84,493	35	23
37350	\$110,208	0	2

Source: Commuting data compiled by the Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce

in employment,” wrote Michael Hout, professor of sociology at New York University. “The prevailing optimism about the recent jobs and unemployment reports is in this sense misplaced.”

And this fact is currently driving the concern building among Chattanooga leaders.

Experts say Chattanooga is one of the few cities where good-paying jobs in manufacturing fields are increasing. But the reality is that many local residents aren’t filling those positions.

Currently, there are 15,000 jobs in Hamilton County being filled by commuters coming from outside the county because not enough local high school graduates are qualified for the positions, says a report called Chattanooga 2.0, published in December by a coalition of local business, nonprofit and education leaders.

In 2008, state and local leaders heralded the rise of automotive manufacturing in Chattanooga when Volkswagen picked the city for its new \$1 billion plant. Politicians wooed the automaker with roughly \$577.4 million worth of tax incentives, which, at the time, was the biggest incentive package ever offered to a company by politicians in Tennessee.

But by 2014, less than two of every three employees at the Volkswagen plant were from Hamilton County. And only a few dozen of the employees came from neighborhoods in Chattanooga where the poorest men and

women, with the lowest employment rates, lived, local commuting data show.

Finding workers was and is surprisingly hard, said Bill Kilbride, president of the Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce. The chamber advertises and holds job fairs, but attendance is often sparse, he said.

Despite an impressive placement rate, Chattanooga State Community College's technical training programs for the most in-demand fields, such as welding, aren't full, said Jim Barrott, president of the College of Applied Technology.

Others believed that men just didn't want to work and they had abandoned both work and family because they had lost their moral backbone.

But a study released in January indicates that what is more likely affecting those men is economic segregation in neighborhoods and schools, the rise of income inequality and the rising share of single-parent homes in communities.

These days, working-class men can't leave high school and walk into a job that pays middle-class wages. They can't get hired at the factories their fathers or grandfathers might have worked at. Too many have closed. And the ones that are here require more skills.

So without connections to or experience with a line of work that requires academic or skills training rather than physical prowess, their pride and their earnings have suffered.

And the diminished stature of working-class men is contributing, experts say, to the recent rise in poverty and decline in marriage among families of all races. In the long run, though, their aimlessness may pose a threat to the entire region's economic growth, some warn.

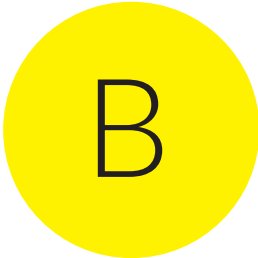
"The challenge facing us in part is how do we get our boys, teenagers and young men

on an education track and a life track that gives them hope for their future," said W. Bradford Wilcox, one of the nation's leading experts on the topic of marriage and families and the director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia.

"We are in a vicious cycle where boys who aren't raised by their fathers don't get the schooling or the labor force experience they need to be marriageable, and they are more than likely to repeat the process."

THESE DAYS, WORKING-CLASS MEN CAN'T LEAVE HIGH SCHOOL AND WALK INTO A JOB THAT PAYS MIDDLE-CLASS WAGES. THEY CAN'T GET HIRED AT THE FACTORIES THEIR FATHERS OR GRANDFATHERS MIGHT HAVE WORKED AT. TOO MANY HAVE CLOSED. AND THE ONES THAT ARE HERE REQUIRE MORE SKILLS.

The Lost Boys



BENT OVER a canvas, Kourtney Brown traced his sketch with blue acrylic, circling with his paintbrush until the image of an alien appeared alive, in color. The

alien, drawn with bulging eyes and a wide forehead, was the 19-year-old's signature, an image he returned to when he wanted to illustrate his precarious position in the world.

In his bedroom in Avondale, a pocket neighborhood of East Chattanooga, he was working late to get ready for his first art show, a chance he thought would finally launch him into a career that could give him purpose. In the background, a song by he liked by hip-hop band NERD played on repeat.

*Do you know what I am?
If you don't see my face no more
I'm a provider, girl*

One year after graduating from high school, Brown was still unclear about who he was and where he belonged.

He had attended Chattanooga School for the Arts and Sciences, a magnet school introduced to the county to accommodate a federal integration mandate, and had been exposed to wealthier children with professional parents and ambitions. Still, he was unable to leverage the school as a resource.

While he had the creative bent of his classmates, he didn't have their resources.

At home, Brown had no one to help him study. When he was down after receiving a bad grade, he didn't know who to turn to for encouragement. If he needed to go somewhere for academic reasons, there was no one able to take him. While he languished in the inner city through the summers, other students used their breaks to connect with artists and actors at expensive camps far away, travel abroad and participate in clubs and honor societies that catered to creatives.

Brown's father was in prison when he was born and stayed there until his son was just about to leave high school and enter adulthood. In fact, Brown was so disconnected from his father that he had never even learned his last name. And his mother gave him to his grandmother who gave him to his great-grandmother to rear.

His great-grandmother, Betty Jean Morgan, now 82, never thought much of Brown's artistic ambitions. She had thought it best for him to pursue a practical profession. Young men worked with their hands when she had been a young woman, but she knew college had become the ticket for the modern man.

He also felt another kind of pressure from the boys in his neighborhood who sold drugs, joined gangs and resorted to violence to feel respected.

Yet, the larger message he heard from the outside world was that he had no shot at success at all. Statistics about boys, especially minority boys, showed their test scores, graduation rates, earnings and life expectancy were among the lowest of any demographic group in the country, while their incarceration rates were among the highest.



Kourtney Brown stands on Glass Street in October 2015 before the first gallery exhibition of his artwork. Brown, who was raised by his great-grandmother, grew up in Avondale just a few blocks away from Glass Street.

Ken Chilton, a professor at Tennessee State University who has studied the city's racial gaps at length, offered a chilling example last year to the NAACP. If 100 black male ninth-graders in Hamilton County were followed all the way through their schooling, only 56 would end up graduating from high school, he said statistics showed. Then, only around 23 of those graduates would enroll in a training program or college. And by 2018, only five men would have college diplomas or degrees.

Statistically, young black men still continue to struggle the most in school and in the labor force, David Autor, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, states in a report titled "Wayward Sons." But the report found the struggle to adapt to the

economy is growing among men of all races.

This was a situation created by education deficits and a deterioration of opportunities for unskilled men, he said, but it was a situation created by a fathering deficit, too.

Social science research showed that dads played a key role in preventing poverty. Boys raised by single mothers without their father were at an increased risk of substance abuse, risky behavior and poorer school performance, research showed.

Scientists were still teasing out why. Some research has shown that absent fathers hindered proper brain development. Yet, a Georgetown University researcher's analysis of data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics showed that childhood poverty, not family structure, were to blame

for adulthood poverty and low educational achievement.

Boys who grew up without fathers in poor neighborhoods became men who struggled in the work world, found a research paper released in January by the National Bureau of Economic Research, a nonprofit research organization. The report found much lower employment rates for boys than girls who grew up in single-parent homes in bleak environments.

Surrounded by women and without his father, Brown tried to father himself. He told himself to stay positive. He chided himself when he fell behind. He wrote himself inspirational messages.

“Find your passion in life, and let it kill you,” he wrote.

Brown loved to draw. But he never believed being an artist was possible until he skateboarded down Glass Street a year ago. In a rehabbed section of the East Chattanooga neighborhood, a nonprofit, the Glass

House Collective, sought to bring art to inner-city neighborhoods by helping to open several businesses.

Riding by Studio Everything, he saw a black man working on sculptures and painting, alongside neighborhood kids there to use the studio’s resources. The sight jarred him. He had never seen a black, male professional artist, and in an instant his dream seemed so much more possible to him.

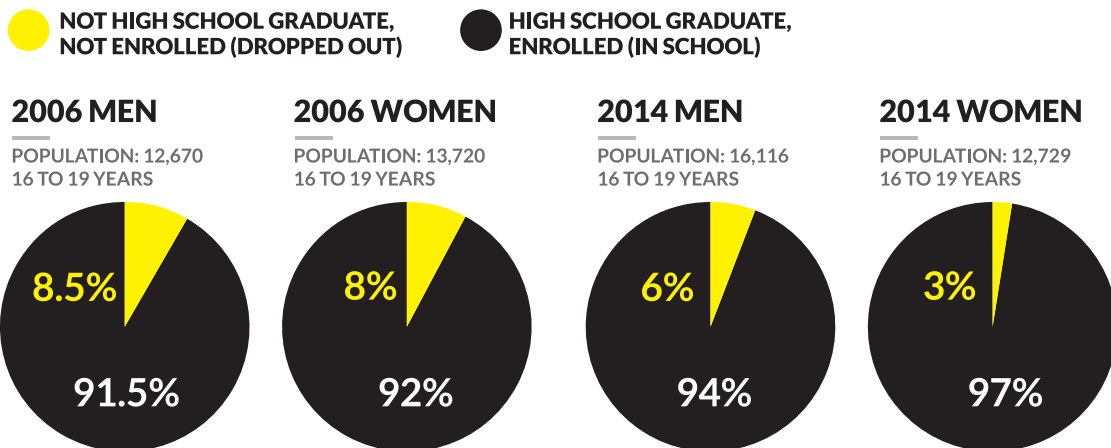
He tried to write song lyrics. He painted posters at the art studio, which opens to the neighborhood twice a week. He designed his own logo to go on sweatshirts, trying to re-brand himself as an artist and an entrepreneur. All the while, his great-grandmother urged him to go to college.

Six months later, he signed up at Chattanooga State to start classes and work toward a degree in graphic design. To earn money, he drove the train at Chattanooga Zoo.

Not long after, he was invited to display his art in a gallery show on Glass Street intended

HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT RATES

In Chattanooga and the surrounding metro area, high school dropout rates for young women have decreased significantly since 2006. Young men have made only small gains compared to their female counterparts.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau



Kourtney Brown talks with his girlfriend, Briah Gober, at his art exhibition in a renovated space next to a collapsing building on Glass Street.

to highlight unknown artists.

On the crisp October night in 2015, hundreds of people filled the new studio and walked past his paintings on display. Some, including a few friends, a former girlfriend and an old coach, stopped and took notice. One man even asked him to follow up about a piece. Brown scribbled his number on a piece of paper, but the man never called back.

Brown hoped the show would be his big leap into adulthood and toward being the respected, self-sufficient man he longed to be. But in the months that followed, without a mentor, money or connections, his dream seemed further off than ever.

Then in January, just as he was about to

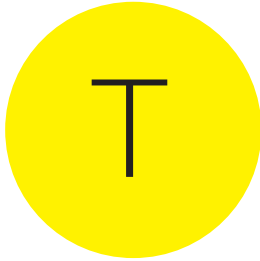
turn 20 years old, he took a job as a laborer hauling boxes for FedEx. It certainly wasn't art, but he told himself to be thankful he was at least working with his hands.

He hadn't wanted to give up on art, he assured everyone. But he was already a man, and a man had to take any work he could get. He wouldn't look for a father figure who could teach, love or guide him anymore, he told himself.

Still, he checked his phone hoping to find calls, and when his girlfriend brought him around her family he always palled around with her dad.

He held out hope that someone, somehow, would offer him a pathway to purpose.

The New Man



HE MEN ARRIVED in dirty jeans and steel-toe boots, some with work gloves still tucked in their back pockets. Some men came because a judge said they

might avoid jail time. Others because they needed a job.

Todd Agne greeted each man in the conference room at the nonprofit First Things First, located downtown, as they stacked slices of Little Caesars pizza on their plates and sipped on grape and orange Fanta.

It was the fourth time the men were meeting for Agne's "Dads Making a Difference" class, which claimed to stabilize troubled men. These men owed thousands of dollars in child support. Many had already been to jail and needed steady employment. But Agne knew the solution wasn't to push them off to a staffing agency or send them to a job fair.

Agne asked them to talk about their feelings, their likes, desires, motivations and their personalities.

Agne knew from experience that these men had been beaten down. When they thought about manhood, they often thought of the messages they were told throughout their life:

"You ain't no good."

"You're never gonna be any good."

"You're just like your daddy."

He found that they were constantly screamed at, demonized by the court system, haunted by juvenile records and addiction and hurt from abandonment they didn't understand. They were also confused about what it meant to be a father and a husband.

And all the pressure, discouragement and lack of support caused men to check out of marriage, fathering and even the work world, some experts said. Social scientists have proven that men tend to shrink from responsibility when they can't provide for their families.

William Julius Wilson, a Harvard sociologist, found a man's earnings play a significant role in whether he will get married or will stay married. But Wilson found men aren't necessarily the ones who want to check out of responsibility — often women see these men as less desirable marriage partners and choose not to marry them.

Persistent joblessness mixed with negative outlooks on marriage "have increased out-of-wedlock births, weakened the family structure, expanded the welfare rolls and, as a result, caused poor inner-city blacks to be even more disconnected from the job market and discouraged about their role in the labor force," Wilson wrote in his 1996 book, "When Work Disappears."

Twenty years later, his words sound prophetic as uncolleged men, both minority and white, can't find work, upsetting the balance of family life.

While men still hold the elite top positions of power, women have been replacing men in jobs they traditionally held, such as managerial and finance positions, and they now dominate nearly every job projected to



Graduating dads pose for a group photo at First Things First's "Dads Making a Difference" class graduation in November 2015. Todd Agne, left, teaches the class.

grow the most in the future, said journalist Hanna Rosin, who wrote the book "The End of Men."

So when Agne came face-to-face with those men in a room, he realized that, sure, there are few who seemed to deserve the term "deadbeat." But most of the men wanted to work hard, and often did, splitting their time between two jobs to scrape by at home. They were trapped, though.

Agne knew many of the men he worked with hadn't been nursed or nurtured as infants because they had been raised by very stressed single mothers trying to provide

for their sons with little support. And he knew that the lack of attention they received delayed them when they entered school. Their first grades were often failing ones, and when they couldn't get help to catch up academically, the humiliation caused them stop trying.

They were playing a game for which no one had ever taught them the rules. So Agne stepped in.

He taught them they had talents and skills to offer to the workforce and they played a significant role in how their children were shaped.

The Wallet



WHILE THE FEDERAL government has funneled billions of dollars into job training programs with mixed results, there's a shift happening in communities

driven by Harvard's Business School call for businesses to change their posture toward at-risk populations.

Often that looks like a partnership between businesses and a community college, referred to as sector-based training, where programs are created to give workers certifications for jobs in their community. Last year, Gov. Bill Haslam heralded Chattanooga State's technical school as a model for the state when he unveiled his plan to make training programs at state-funded schools free for anyone over 24 years old.

TWO PARENTS MATTER

In Hamilton County, boys raised with two parents in the home have a higher probability of being employed after age 30 than boys raised in a single parent home.

INCOME LEVEL	BOYS RAISED IN SINGLE-PARENT HOMES	BOYS RAISED IN TWO-PARENT HOMES
\$104,087 or more	80.6%	84.2%
\$64,554 to \$104,086	87.1%	85.8%
\$39,736 to \$64,553	81.4%	83.4%
\$20,593 to \$39,735	72.5%	79.8%
\$20,592 or less	62.2%	64%

Source: The Quality of Opportunity Project

But training programs alone won't bridge the gap that research shows at-risk, uneducated men, marred by poverty, single-parent homes and isolation bring into the workplace, said Harry Holzer, a Georgetown University professor of public policy who also does research for the Brookings Institution. Many don't meet minimum education requirements to get accepted, and those who do often drop out without sufficient support services along the way.

Agne knew it took more drastic tactics that involved teaching men how to take pride in their work again by giving them a road map to overcome their own obstacles.

In his class, it often looked like this: When the men wanted to go back to school but feared failure, Agne helped them work through it. When they wanted to give up on fathering because their child's mother couldn't talk without screaming, he offered communication strategies. When they seemed discouraged about their criminal record, he told them to think about their past in a positive light and sell employers on what lessons their mistakes taught.

And feeling known made a difference to the men in his class. They called Agne when they buried their parents, when their children were shot and when they lost a job they desperately needed.

"What would a great man do in this situation?" he would ask them.

Approaches that use tactics similar to Agne's are often centered on the idea of teaching people to believe in their own abilities; it's what social scientists call building self-efficacy. Cognitive development research shows boys who approach



Todd Agne, right, hugs Marvin Roseberry after the graduation ceremony for his “Dad’s Making a Difference” class.

adolescence with low self-efficacy are at risk of developing problem behaviors, perform poorly academically and lack social skills, according to “Theories of Human Development: A Comparative Approach” by Michael Green and John Piel.

But self-efficacy is developed when people accomplish difficult tasks, when they see their peers succeed, when they learn to persevere through tasks and when their options grow as they continue to succeed, according to Albert Bandura, a psychologist at Stanford University, who developed the theory of self-efficacy.

In Minneapolis in 2003, then-Mayor R.T. Rybak found a creative way to give isolated teens in poor neighborhoods the chance to gain experience in summer internships that often led to long-term employment.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH SHOWS BOYS WHO APPROACH ADOLESCENCE WITH LOW SELF-EFFICACY ARE AT RISK OF DEVELOPING PROBLEM BEHAVIORS, PERFORM POORLY ACADEMICALLY AND LACK SOCIAL SKILLS.

The students first were given the training to succeed, then sent to employers.

In those paid internships, the students weren't asked to shadow employees, fetch coffee or work for free. Instead the positions were in a variety of professions, allowing students to explore their interests and gain real-world experience. After a decade, the program has given more than 21,000 students paid summer jobs, and many of those students have gone on to full-time employment. But several students said the most important thing they took from the experience was the confidence they needed to step out on their own.

BRIGHTER FUTURE

Career academy graduates earned an average of 11 percent, or \$2,088 more each year, than their non-academy peers over eight years. But male graduates experienced the greatest gains in their earnings and their chances of getting married.

GAINS IN EARNINGS

Male graduates earned



17%

more than their peers, or

\$3,731

per year, which equals about

\$30,000

over eight years.

GAINS IN MARRIAGE



36%

of male graduates were married after an eight-year follow-up study, compared with



27%

of their peers.

Source: MDRC, a nonprofit research firm tracked career academy graduates over eight years and Daniel Schneider explored the findings in "Lessons learned from Non-Marriage experiments."

In Chattanooga, the Public Education Foundation is mimicking Minneapolis' program, called Step-Up, hoping to train 100 low-income teens to fill paid summer positions in their first year of the program.

Other tactics focus on students in the classroom, offering hands-on experience in work that could lead to a career.

In Nashville, the district transformed its high schools into career academies where schools push teens toward college but also work with businesses to create pathways to careers that pay well but don't require a four-year degree. The hands-on projects are just one way students learn how to problem-solve in a field of their choice, which could include making bio-fuel, building engines, conducting mock trials in a simulated courtroom or writing and producing songs in a Grammy-designed studio.

An extensive, eight-year study showed young men benefited the most from career academies, increasing their future earnings up to 17 percent after graduation. Yet not only did men increase their earnings, they were also more likely to get married, the study found.

Daniel Schneider, a sociology professor at the University of California at Berkeley, found that career academies were the only jobs-training program that also helped boost marriage for men. He concluded that when a program is successful at giving men financial footing at career academies, it may also give them the confidence to take the next step and care for a family.

In November, the 15 men who made it to the end of Agne's 13-week course were invited to a dinner and graduation ceremony. At that point, 168 men had graduated from the class and, of that number, 135 had found work since 2011.

Men were excited to introduce Agne to the children and women they had talked so much about. Others weren't ready to let go. They pulled Agne aside and pressed him for

last-minute advice.

One handed him a sheet of paper. He had been accepted into Chattanooga State's welding program.

Agne pounded his fist on the table in excitement and clasped the man on the back.

Then Agne's phone rang.

"You ready?" he asked the man on the other line.

It was Robert Burson, a former graduate who once had no job opportunities and had no contact with his daughter. Now, he explained, he had earned his commercial driver's license and just been awarded shared custody of his daughter.

"Todd is good about keeping you level-headed," he said through the cellphone speaker, pulled over on the side of an interstate in Florida.

Agne interrupted.

"No. It was you," he said, before explaining that Burson's tenacity had been the real change agent.

After he hung up the phone, Agne called out the first graduate's name to receive his certificate.

He wanted them each to leave knowing their value.

"It's a rare quality to find someone to listen. Please don't lose that gift," he said to the first man.

"I would stand by you and go anywhere with you in the right direction," he told the next.

He then pointed to a man named Marvin, sitting in the back of the room studying for a test he had to take later in the evening at a Bible college he attended.

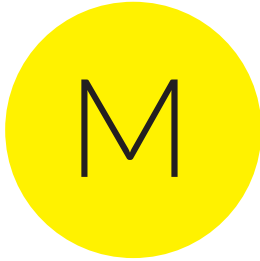
"I would like my kids to spend a week with you," Agne said, looking him straight in the eyes once he raised his head. "I would tell them, 'This is what a man does.'"

"Come up here my friend."

And when the festivities were over, he left them with a simple gift — something that symbolized what he had come to believe about their potential — a brand-new wallet.

"IT'S A RARE QUALITY TO FIND SOMEONE TO LISTEN. PLEASE DON'T LOSE THAT GIFT," HE SAID TO THE FIRST MAN. "I WOULD STAND BY YOU AND GO ANYWHERE WITH YOU IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION," HE TOLD THE NEXT.

A Ray of Hope



EN LIKE TIM

JONES, a single, divorced father of two boys, needed to be reminded he mattered to his sons.

When Jones enrolled in Agne's class three years ago, he

was behind in child-support payments by more than \$12,000. The amount had piled up after he didn't file the right paperwork in court when his seasonal job at an iron foundry had expired, and they kept charging him as if he was making the same earnings. In the judicial system, Jones said, he was treated as if he meant nothing more than a monthly check to his children.

Agne saw that Jones was a hard worker who was desperate to improve the lives of his sons, and when Jones finished Agne's class he was able to apply what he learned.

During the time of the class, Jones worked at First Things First part-time, recruiting people to take the nonprofit's parenting and training classes. But he quit the job and moved back in with his mother at 29 when he was caught smoking marijuana and lost the public-housing unit he had planned to use to launch into middle-class life. It was an embarrassing setback since he had been so determined to move forward. Jones had turned to marijuana from time to time over the years in moments of stress or anxiety when he just wanted an escape.

Like so many men in similar circumstances, he often felt very alone. His own father had died of an illness when he was a teenager, and the hurt never went away.



Tim Jones waits for the elevator with Tariq, center, and Timothy as he sends them off to school in November 2015. Jones will leave Timothy, who is in elementary school, to wait for the school bus outside their apartment while he and Tariq walk on to a public bus stop. Jones has no car, so he takes Tariq to preschool on a CARTA bus.

Isolated in Hixson with no car, no income and no access to the bus service, some would have languished, but after nearly a year he mustered the courage to step out again for the sake of his sons.

He wanted his own place when they came to stay with him for half of the week, so he leveraged his connections like Agne had taught him. He found a former classmate who had become a lawyer to help him lower his child-support payments to match his current salary. Then he went back to an old job parking cars at the DoubleTree Hotel. He found a one-bedroom economy apartment across from the YMCA where he could walk to work and to the bus stop to pick up his boys.

Jones knew how important it was to invest in his sons, and he developed a routine when they came to stay.

After his eight-hour day parking cars, after splitting tips with the college students who worked alongside him, he made the journey home again, at one point walking



Tim Jones plays basketball with his youngest son, Tariq, at the YMCA across from their apartment building. Since his studio apartment is small, Jones tries to go outside with his kids, Tariq and Timothy, to keep them entertained.

half a mile through discarded fast-food wrappers and broken glass to pick up his boys at Tariq's day care in Brainerd.

On the way back, he bought chicken and mushrooms with his cash tips and stuffed the food into his backpack, avoiding the easier drive-through, dollar-menu options.

Dinner would wait, though.

Despite the hours of travel and the hours of work, Jones had to follow through with the routine he and his boys had established. So he put on gym clothes for an hour of basketball and sweat before chicken and homework.

Then in January, he was offered a parking supervisor position in Jacksonville, Florida, a chance to launch his career further and make more money. The move would have been a no-brainer had he been a single man. But he

wrestled with the idea of leaving his sons.

He made a last effort to stay when he interviewed at the Edney Building, the downtown hub of the city's new innovation district. He told them he could use his experience working with people to help set up and make their events run smoothly.

The decision paid off. He got the job. It was part-time, but if he worked hard it would lead to something more, he told himself.

He wouldn't be the guy people slung their keys to. He wouldn't be the man at court they assumed was a bad father. He wouldn't be the interviewee with a criminal record and no track record.

He would finally be the man he had always wanted to be.

A man, more importantly, that his sons wanted to be as well.



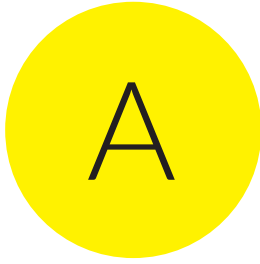
From left, Calvin Neely, LaTwala Winston, Greg Brown, Hollie Roberts, June Baker and Towatha Foster Pall, who are allies and leaders with the Circles of Troup County chapter, sit together to begin their meeting in December in LaGrange, Georgia. Each Circles chapter begins and ends its meeting with all attendees sitting and sharing in a circle.

CHAPTER 6

FULL CIRCLE

BY JOY LUKACHICK SMITH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAURA FRIEDMAN

A model that unites middle class families with their struggling neighbors is proving poverty can be beat.



S CHURCH MEMBERS ACROSS AMERICA were sharing copies of “When Helping Hurts,” Sherri Brown picked up the book in 2012 in LaGrange, Georgia.

Brown, a Southern Baptist preacher’s wife and former journalist, didn’t need to be convinced that Christians needed to do more to help the poor.

Leaders in Troup County had hired her to launch a local chapter of Circles USA, a successful national program aimed at teaching families in poverty to stabilize their lives by connecting them to the middle class.

In LaGrange, an old textile mill town, nearly a fourth of the population lived in poverty and more than half of the county births were to single mothers. But in 2010, Kia Motors built a \$1.2 billion auto plant, pumping thousands of new jobs into the area. Three years earlier, county and city leaders, recognizing the need to rebuild their local workforce, formed a strategic planning committee made up of all the county’s leaders and a local foundation to study how to address the county’s economic needs.

But when Georgia Institute of Technology published a study diagnosing the county, the committee couldn’t ignore the number of people living in poverty, the high teen pregnancy rates and low graduation rates, said then-Commissioner Ricky Wolfe, who was chairman of the committee at the time.

“We didn’t know what to do about it, but we felt strongly that poverty had to be addressed,” he said.

After months of research, the committee found Circles, a community-based program known for moving families out of poverty developed by Scott Miller after more than 20 years of study.

When Miller was in college, he said, he began to notice the ineffectiveness of poverty

alleviation efforts when he volunteered at a homeless shelter. Agencies were focused on solving their piece of daily emergencies, but he found they treated poverty as if it could be fixed with policies instead of relationships.

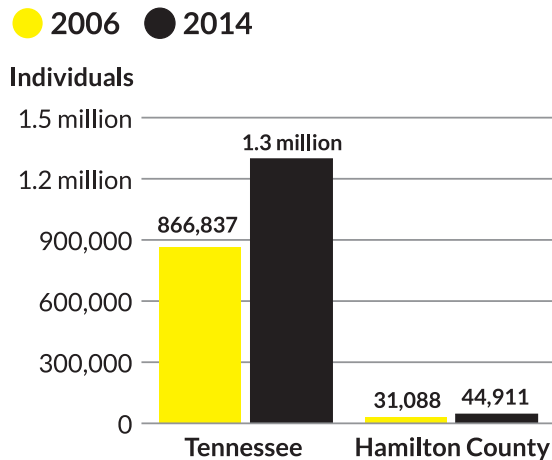
“If the plan is more oriented to the crises of the day, it’s ‘I have a housing problem. I have a car problem,’” he explained. “To do the whole work, you have to be committed to the whole work. Someone has to be accountable. It is the biggest reason we don’t get rid of poverty. Everyone just has one piece of poverty.”

So he developed a program to help build social and economical capitol for families in poverty, starting with weekly meetings that

LOCAL BENEFIT GROWTH

Since the Great Recession, many more Tennesseans and Hamilton County residents are accessing food stamps to pull through their economic hardship.

Increase in Tennessee, Hamilton County food stamp users



Total spent on food stamps in Hamilton County:

2006 › \$36 million 2014 › \$69 million

Source: Tennessee Department of Human Services



Director Sherri Brown of the Circles of Troup County chapter talks to an attendee before the group's meeting in December in LaGrange, Georgia.

offered dinners, child care and facilitators. The linchpin was bringing in the middle class.

Once the idea caught on, Circles expanded to more than 70 communities in 23 states and parts of Canada. It's a model the United Way of Greater Chattanooga plans to introduce locally.

The Circles model also caught the attention of Brian Fikkert, a Covenant College professor and co-author of "When Helping Hurts." In his 2009 book, he wrote that the program, though not faith-based, was an example of how churches could help the poor help themselves and, in the process, rebuild their community.

After Troup County leaders decided to fund a Circles chapter through a public-private partnership, they called Brown, who at the time worked for the local newspaper, and asked her to write a story.

When Brown began to research the Circles

model in 2012, she read how those in poverty were taught the hidden rules to the middle class. In turn, the middle-class volunteers were taught what it's like to be born into poverty. After the course, each person in poverty was paired with two or three middle-class volunteers, called their "allies." Then the relationship went beyond a class. Each of the allies committed to helping those in poverty for at least 18 months, becoming a coach and a cheerleader and a hand-up to the middle class.

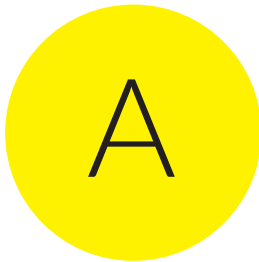
Nationally, the results were impressive. Of the 518 people who stuck with the program for more than six months in 2012, 92 percent found safe housing, 73.6 percent got reliable transportation, 38.1 percent opened a new savings account and 33 percent obtained new employment.

After Brown's article was published, she applied to become the director of the local Circles chapter.



Circles of Troup County chapter director Sherri Brown looks over the meeting among Circles leader Tameka Johnson, center, and her allies Molly Carmichael, left, and her husband Bobby Carmichael, right, during the group's meeting in December in LaGrange, Georgia. The Carmichaels have been paired with Johnson for more than three years.

The Cliff Effect



DOZEN LOW-IN-COME WOMEN came to Brown's first class in late 2012 at a Baptist church in LaGrange. Among them was Inetha Hatten, a grandmother who

couldn't afford to buy shampoo or toilet paper, and Tameka Johnson, a single mother of two, who wanted to become a nurse. Seven women eventually graduated from the 13-week class.

Hatten was paired with Brown's husband,

Greg, who pastored the 500-member Western Heights Baptist Church in LaGrange. Johnson was paired with Bobby Carmichael, who served on the county's strategic planning committee, and his wife, Molly. Both Greg Brown and the Carmichaels say they were moved by the women's faith, even though they lived in poverty. They also were surprised by how difficult it was for the women to become self-sufficient.

Research shows one of the most difficult barriers to leaving poverty is overcoming the hurdle of losing government assistance. Eligibility for these programs is generally based on income, with benefits phasing

out as earnings increase. But an increase as small as \$50 a month can cause a person to lose hundreds of dollars' worth of program benefits, and often the gained income doesn't cover what's lost, creating what researchers call the "cliff effect."

Greg Brown's first goal to help Hatten was to open a bank account in her name. When she arrived at the bank alone, she was shooed away by the teller. The next day, Brown put on a suit and tie and went back to the bank with her. The bank employee's demeanor changed entirely.

"Rev. Brown, how can we help you?" asked the employee.

Next, Brown tried to help Hatten get a job, made difficult by a felony conviction on her record. Brown finally convinced a friend to give her an interview. She was hired part-time and eventually offered full-time work as a trainer for a program that helped connect people who had work barriers find employment. Later, she was asked to serve on the housing authority's board to represent the residents' needs. A few months later, the housing authority hired her to become a community liaison. Now she speaks to local groups and also sits on the citizen police commission. Meanwhile, she is working to get her criminal record expunged.

"My life came back to me," Hatten said. "Before I was just existing; now I have a platform."

When the Carmichaels were first paired with Johnson, they met her every Friday morning at McDonald's. She kept track of every expense in a little pocketbook. They found she was meticulous and determined to go back to nursing school. She was able to find a job as a medical assistant during the day and take classes at night, while the Carmichaels watched her children.

Circles leader Sherri Brown didn't let the barriers to poverty stop the women in her class from moving forward. She convinced the local workforce development office to

THE BENEFITS DROP-OFF

In Tennessee, a raise or promotion to a \$10-per-hour wage in a two-person household means losing most government assistance. And earning only a few extra dollars per day is not enough to offset the loss.

PROGRAMS	MAXIMUM MONTHLY INCOME	TRANSLATED TO HOURLY INCOME
TANF	\$1,658	\$9.42 per hour
Food Stamps	\$1,726	\$9.80 per hour
Child Care	\$1,658	\$9.42 per hour
Housing Assistance	\$1,945	\$11.05 per hour

Note: Some government programs offer transitional assistance. Source: Tennessee Department of Human Services and The Chattanooga Housing Authority

visit her class and help women enroll for school assistance, saving them hours and keeping them from having to take time off work to visit the office during business hours. She helped organize a committee to study how to solve the county's lack of public transportation after women in her class explained how expensive it was to get to places in a taxi if they didn't own a car.

But the hardest people to work with were often the charities and churches, the Circles volunteers said. Many offices closed at 5 p.m., and they weren't open on the weekend. Sometimes, they sent women away when they didn't fill out the right paperwork. While many church members were generous with their time and money, other churches tried to dictate their own terms to volunteer.

Sherri Brown's biggest frustration was when a Christian would tell her that her Circles class was helpful but what the women really needed to turn their lives around was Jesus.

"What makes you think they don't have Jesus?" she asked.

One woman in her class drove her car without brakes. She told the class that she



Tameka Johnson stands for a portrait outside her medical assisting job in December in LaGrange, Georgia. Johnson has been with Circles for three years, and she is now in nursing school.

had loaded her three children in the car, pumped the brakes and prayed for God to keep them safe all the way to work, and he did. Another woman cried when Sherri Brown brought her food. She said her pantry was empty, and she had prayed for enough food for the week. Brown said she realized, when the women in her class pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” they actually mean it.

Then late last year, Sherri and Greg Brown became aware that some of the Christians within their own congregation didn’t agree with what they were doing to help the poor.

Ten years ago, Greg Brown had started an Alcoholics Anonymous chapter and invited the participants to visit the church. The back pews began to fill with men who were trying to get sober. Then, their church paired with a homeless women’s shelter, and women with bruises cried at the altar.

When Sherri Brown’s father, a pastor

in Chicago, came to visit their church, he looked around and saw the changing climate.

“You’ll stop growing,” he told his son-in-law.

His words were prophetic. The changing demographics created tension in the church and, in 2015, it was one of the reasons cited for a church split.

But Greg Brown realized he couldn’t base the effectiveness of the church on how many people filled the pews or who participated in hospitality work like volunteering in the nursery or singing in the choir. The church was what God’s people did when they left the building and cared for “the least of these,” he knew.

In mid-December, at the last Circles meeting of the year, Sherri Brown wanted to leave her group on a high note. The women had just been introduced to their allies. Each woman had written down her goals: Build a \$500 savings account. Ace an upcoming job interview. Finish nursing school.



LaTwala Winston looks on while Blake Trent shares at the end of the Circles of Troup County chapter meeting on Dec. 17, 2015 in LaGrange, Georgia. Winston told the group that she was able to buy all five of her children Christmas presents and still had money left in her savings account.

The lists were specific and obtainable, and Sherri Brown felt like they were as ready as they could be to practice what they had learned over the 13-week course.

Each woman had already come so far. Johnson was halfway through nursing school, working part-time at a clinic. Carole Hopkins had a job interview. LaTwala Winston saved enough money to buy her five children Christmas presents and still had \$384 saved in the bank.

Of the 34 families that participated in Circles in the last three years, those who stayed six months or longer saw their total debt cut in half while their assets increased 366 percent, Sherri Brown told the women at the December meeting, pointing to the numbers, written in red Sharpie on a page tacked to the wall.

Yet the most significant changes, she thought, but didn't say out loud, had come from the middle-class church members who volunteered to help the women.

When the Carmichaels, who are Methodists, joined three years ago, they said they brought their preconceived judgments to their new relationship. But Johnson had become like a daughter to them, said Molly Carmichael, whose children were grown, and they are constantly encouraged by her faith in God. Now, they try to convince their Sunday School class, their church and the surrounding denominations to volunteer and to fund Circles.

"This whole program should be on the backs of churches," Bobby Carmichael said.

Because the mission of Circles, he said, is the mission of the church.



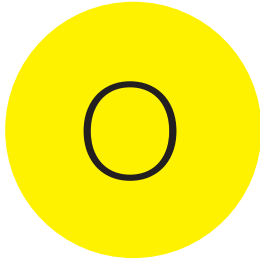
Homes rise along the hillside in the town of Keystone near a set of railroad tracks in McDowell County, West Virginia, in January. McDowell County, once a prosperous community built around the coal industry, has become one of the poorest counties in the country.

CHAPTER 7

REWRITING MCDOWELL

BY JOAN GARRETT MCCLANE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DOUG STRICKLAND

A hard-hit coal mining community has a lesson to teach Chattanooga about the power of community bonds, the impact of humble leadership and the healing effect of restored trust.



NCE CLASSES ENDED and the school bell rang, scores of bouncy children flooded into the cafeteria for dinner at Southside K-8 School, one of seven elementary schools

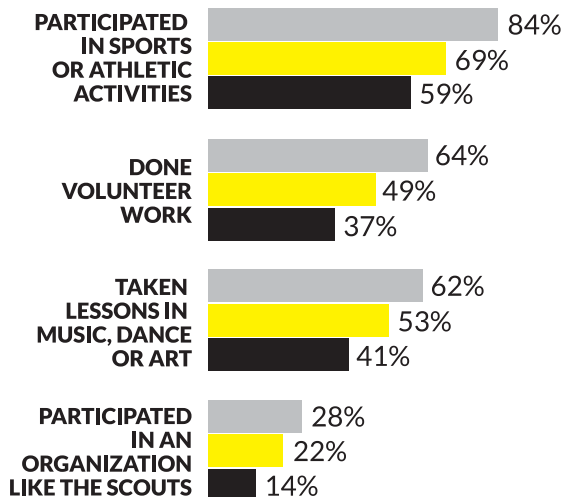
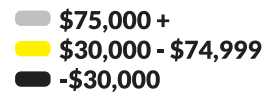
in McDowell County, West Virginia.

But just as the children were digging into their food and cartons of juice, several sprang up and ran. In the corner of the room, a familiar face appeared and the children raced to be noticed.

CUT OUT OF COMMUNITY

Children from poor families are often unable to participate in extracurricular activities because their parents cannot pay increasing sign-up fees or equipment and uniform costs.

Percent saying any of their children have _____ in the past 12 months



Note: Based on parents with at least one child ages 6 to 17. Income is annual family income. Source: Pew Research Center

Debbie King, a mild-mannered and gray-haired 61-year-old former teacher, had been retired from the school system for a few years, but she came back almost every week to check in on her babies, as she called them. She combed fingers through their hair, held their small faces in her hands and hugged a few into her side.

“Miss King.” “Miss King.” “Miss King,” the children chirped, pulling on her clothes, elbowing others aside for an extra hug.

“Hold on. Hold on. Let’s each take turns,” she said.

Some students hadn’t seen King in weeks. A recent winter break isolated many at home in the mountain hollows, and some of the children were shaking off holiday loneliness.

Some kids may hate school, but not the ones in McDowell County.

Once a place that held tremendous political sway over West Virginia, McDowell County had become one of the poorest and sickest in America.

Families had been ripped apart by joblessness, drug addiction, depression and lack of opportunity. The brokenness ran so deep, locals said, almost half of children weren’t even living with their biological parents. Drug overdoses and suicide had become the leading causes of death.

And what was left of the once thriving mining town mirrored what was happening all across America, thanks to the steady and precipitous decline of the nation’s working class. It stood, too, as a warning to cities such as Chattanooga about what happened when poverty was left to fester.

A rare experiment with the bold name “Reconnecting McDowell” was taking shape, however.

Volunteers, trying to right the ship, were building partnerships and excitement, and by 2016 their work appeared to be nudging the community toward change. In decades, though, they hoped their leadership in southern West Virginia could teach the en-

tire county what was possible when poverty became a middle-class concern.

Communities all across America had become frayed and the country needed a revival of sorts, those involved said, with a significant amount of research to back their case.

While Reconnecting McDowell — comprised of hundreds of locals and dozens of state and national nonprofits — had formed committees, goals and plans, it refused to be a slave to metrics. Instead, many in the community were taking stock of their personal values and experiencing a change of heart.

McDowell County needed to return to the message its churches preached, locals said. Maybe it was as simple as embracing the Golden Rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And after four long years, the hard work of reknitting the torn community fabric was underway.

After finishing with hugs, King pulled away from the crowd of children when she saw Maddie Hicks timidly approach.

A 16-year-old high school student, Maddie was the bright but quiet daughter of a single mother who couldn’t work because of a back injury. To make ends meet, Maddie and her mother lived with extended family. Her father wasn’t involved in her life. And she was just one of many local children, King knew, who needed someone to pay attention to them.

King and Maddie had met at a Baptist church the year before, and not long after their introduction, Maddie called King for help during a difficult homework assignment when her mother suggested she reach out.

King had been an educator for decades and sometimes wept over local children’s wasted potential. Poverty might dim or bury potential, but it didn’t erase it, she believed.

Maddie dreamed of becoming a writer one day, and teachers told her she was good at composition. But who was going to talk with Maddie about the difference between Hemingway and Faulkner, King thought.



Children board a bus leaving Southside K-8 school in the town of War, West Virginia. Southside is one of the county schools participating in the Reconnecting McDowell program, which uses community building techniques and mentorship to give the next generation a better chance at success.

Who would counsel her to think clearly about the earnings potential of a liberal arts degree, and then tell her to follow her heart?

When King asked Maddie if she had a mentor or wanted a mentor, Maddie hadn’t known what to say.

“There aren’t many ... people willing to help,” Maddie told her that night. “No one notices.”

“I noticed you,” King said.

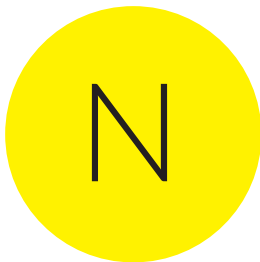
**WHEN KING ASKED MADDIE
IF SHE HAD A MENTOR OR
WANTED A MENTOR, MADDIE
HADN’T KNOWN WHAT TO SAY.
“THERE AREN’T MANY ...
PEOPLE WILLING TO HELP;”
MADDIE TOLD HER THAT NIGHT.
“NO ONE NOTICES.”**

“I NOTICED YOU,” KING SAID.



A sign in the town of Coalwood, West Virginia, indicates that it is the home of the Rocket Boys, made famous in the movie "October Sky." Coal played an integral role in the formation of McDowell County, and its legacy remains in the form of the still-standing company-built homes and namesakes like "Coalwood."

The Great Divide



NO ROAD IN OR OUT of McDowell County, West Virginia, is simple or straight.

Coal trucks teeter along switchback roads that bend over the heights of Appalachia and descend

through pockets of valley crowded by old, coal-company homes.

Shoulderless roads force a focus that can divert attention from the soaring landscapes, but the grandeur — while a deep source of

pride for those with generational ties to the mountains — is rarely why people think about or visit McDowell County anymore.

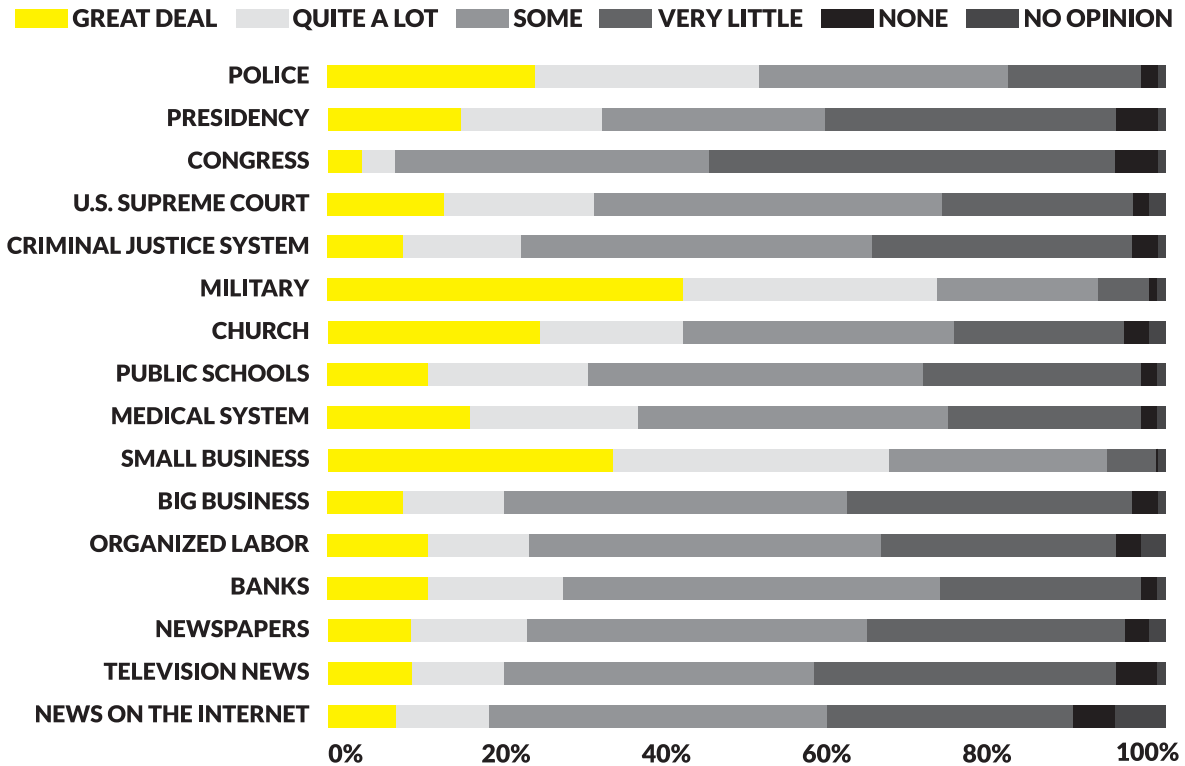
The county, with a population hovering around 20,000, has only a handful of restaurants and two family-owned hotels. Even gas stations are hard to find.

After natural gas, a cheap energy alternative to coal, became more widely available, the mining industry fell into decline. Beginning in the 1970s nearly 100,000 middle class individuals fled, data show, and in a single year, 1981, more than a hundred businesses closed shop.

Homes were left behind to crumble in the

A LOSS OF TRUST

Americans have lost trust in a lot of major societal institutions, which experts say has contributed to community breakdown across the U.S. as well as the achievement gap between poor and rich children.



Note: Numbers have been rounded. Source: Gallup

hills, and, by 2016, county officials said more than 5,000 structures in the area needed to be demolished.

Photos from more than a century ago showed crowded sidewalks and a bustling city center. A stronghold of the United Mine Workers of America and the Democratic Party, the county held enough power to flip even national elections, many said.

It also was a place famed for helping poor and minority children get ahead. Black professionals flocked to the county before 1930, attracted by the spending potential of a wage-earning black population, and historians note African-Americans held signifi-

cant political power and openly did business with whites, while many just like them faced discrimination all across America.

Homer Hickam, who ascended from poverty to NASA thanks to the attention of a kind teacher, reflected the region's past mobility. His story was made popular by the movie "October Sky."

A local newspaper declared the county's unique brand of community on its masthead: "The Free State of McDowell."

Now, though, journalists — struck by the county's stark poverty data — came from all over the world to gawk at the emptiness.

The median household income in 2014



An abandoned storefront in Welch is occupied by bicycles and shopping carts.

had fallen to \$23,607, far below the state median income of \$41,576 and the national median income of \$53,482. The percentage of population in poverty had reached 35.2 percent, double the poverty rate of both West Virginia and the U.S. as a whole, and almost half of all children were living below the federal poverty line, data show.

Some locals had resorted to running cameramen, trying to capture pictures of the houses disintegrating in the hills, off their property with shotguns, said Greg Cruvey, a math teacher at Southside K-8 who drove from Virginia every day to get to work. On Facebook, locals who agreed to interviews with visiting news organizations were chided for aiding and abetting “poverty tourism,” he said.

“Church groups come up all the time,” he added. “But we have to orient them and tell them they can’t talk about how poor they think the children are while locals are listening.”

The roots of America’s 1960s-era War on

Poverty were in the mountains of southern West Virginia, and, in many ways, McDowell County answers the question of whether the war had been won. After all, McDowell County residents Chloe and Alderson Muncy, who were raising 13 children and had no income at the time, received the nation’s first food stamps in May 1961.

But the deep, generational poverty being experienced in McDowell County in 2016 is different from the low-wage working-class poverty families lived through decades earlier.

During the 1990s, when McDowell County lost its major mines because of the downturn in the American steel industry, family breakdown became widespread. Mining had always been a cyclical industry. So locals were used to having work and then not having it, but most believed the jobs would come back.

When they didn’t, those left behind in poverty had no way to support their children. Educational attainment was low. Only

64 percent of high-schoolers graduated and only 6 percent of the population had a college degree.

And many crumbled under the depression and addiction the lack of opportunity seemed to spawn. Forty-one percent of children were born with drugs in their system and went on to have serious health issues because of neglect or abuse.

Decades ago, families weren't so divided by class, experts on American civic life say. Decades ago, however, Americans weren't so politically polarized either.

Cruey can remember when the middle class and the working class blended together and cared for their neighbors' children. In Charleston, the state capital, Cruey said, it's easy to find government leaders, wealthy business people and professionals who grew up poor in southern West Virginia but made it out decades ago.

Today, those stories are few and far between, he said.

While McDowell County rivals Chattanooga in churches per capita, the faith community had lost its impact, locals said. Many who sat in church pews on Sunday morning were bitter about what entrenched poverty had brought to the area and judged the poor for how they hurt themselves.

"In the past, everyone was clannish," said Dan Riley, director of the McDowell County Redevelopment Authority. "Community isn't strong here anymore. A lot of people have given up. The mines wore people down. It all took its toll."

Cruey and other educators were seeing children so neglected that they entered school neither socially nor academically prepared. No one had explained sharing. No one had told them why it wasn't appropriate to run down a hallway and hit other kids, he said.

And these shifts were a national problem, said Harvard University political scientist Robert Putnam.

Class segregation — accelerated in the



Brittany Collins, right, and Margie Hall, both of whom grew up in McDowell County, hold a customer's dog as they help him at the drive-through window of Citizen's Drug Store in Welch. The store has been a fixture in the town for over 50 years, and it has been owned by pharmacist Shawn Jenkins for seven. Jenkins says he moved to McDowell County because his wife was born there, but he observed that it seems more common for people to leave the county than to return.

divisive nature of politics, the rising importance of college and a growing distrust of institutions and strangers — was destroying the futures of children and communities, Putnam argued in his prolific research on the frayed nature of American community.

Poor children were growing up alone. Their parents had little money or stability to offer them. Left out of churches, clubs, decent schools, safe neighborhoods and sports, they had lost all trust in society. It was no wonder many were so violent and careless. They had little to lose, Cruey said.

"When I grew up, parents were responsible for teaching behaviors and how to respond in circumstances," Cruey said. "But as a teacher, I have taught things like how to apologize and what is a real apology."

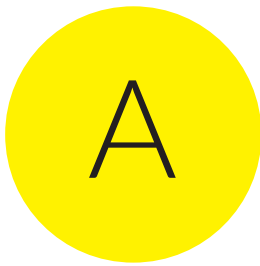
Untended, the isolation of poor children in rural pockets such as McDowell County and in inner-city neighborhoods such as Alton Park or East Lake in Chattanooga would escalate entrenched, generational poverty and mount to a national crisis, Putnam and others cautioned.

In McDowell County, the crisis had long ago arrived.



Bob Brown, right, a lobbyist for the American Federation of Teachers in Charleston, West Virginia, talks with Dan Riley, director of the Redevelopment Authority, about blueprints for Reconnecting McDowell's new building in Riley's office in Welch. Brown has been helping to spearhead the Reconnecting McDowell program in the county.

Signs of Life



about the possibilities.

For the first time in 50 years, a permit was being issued to build a multistory residential and commercial building, and it was one

T THE BEGINNING OF 2016, something good finally seemed to be taking place in McDowell County, and many in downtown Welch, the county seat, were buzzing

of the first fruits of Reconnecting McDowell, the community-building effort that had connected locals such as Debbie King and Greg Cruey to a cavalry of outside support.

"I got the plans," said Bob Brown, a supporter who sailed into Riley's office from the state capital one January morning with a large roll of paper under his arm.

Shoulder to shoulder, Brown and Riley spread the architectural drawing across Riley's wooden desk.

One of the biggest obstacles to helping students escape poverty was the county



The Best's Furniture building, which will be torn down and rebuilt for the Reconnecting McDowell program, is seen in Welch. An estimated 5,000 structures in McDowell County are abandoned or condemned and need to be demolished, according to Dan Riley, the county's director of the Redevelopment Authority.

teacher shortage. For years, schools had limped through requirements with a glut of uncertified or temporary staff. Teacher turnover was high, hovering each year around 30 percent.

"The teachers we do have are novices," said Cruey, a union representative for the school system. "The number of seasoned professionals in classrooms are few and far between. Every year you start with a whole new set of teachers."

For some new teachers, concentrated Appalachian poverty was tough to swallow, but most left because it took almost an hour to reach "civilization" in almost every direction, said Cruey.

The housing stock in the county was the worst in the state, officials said, because homes had been built quickly and cheaply

by the mining companies. Most teachers who had jobs in the county came in from out of state. Long and winding commutes were common for teachers and government employees.

So when the group from Charleston, West Virginia, came with their national and state partners to launch Reconnecting McDowell and asked community members what they thought the first step should be, the teacher housing problem was top of mind. The solution, those like Cruey, Riley and King agreed, would be a "teachers village."

Downtown Welch was full of empty buildings, and one in particular, an old, five-story, former furniture store, would be the perfect spot to build apartment-style housing for professionals and teachers. If people had a nice place to live that was convenient to

work, they might stay around longer, the group reasoned.

On the bottom floor, the plans left room for boutiques, coffee shops or restaurants, which they hoped would open if some middle-class residents began to trickle back in.

“How you doing?” Brown asked Riley after the two studied the plans, which included space for 28 to 32 apartments.

“What hair I have left I want to pull out,” Riley told Brown.

It had taken years to get to the point of just having plans to look at, and much work was left to be done. There was no money to demolish the building. So those involved with Reconnecting McDowell found a business owner willing to donate his construction equipment. Removing cancer-causing asbestos, however, was the challenge of the moment.

“My asbestos guys need to be recertified,” Riley said, before explaining that the county couldn’t afford to pay for the training and recertification, which meant his men couldn’t do the demolition work.

“I found someone willing to do it,” Brown said. “We’ll figure it out.” He patted Riley on the back before leaving to deliver papers to Welch’s mayor.

Riley hadn’t thought Brown, very much the city slicker, would stick around McDowell County when he came with others in 2012 to pitch a shared vision for community restoration. But, without fail, Brown kept coming back.

And seeing Brown breeze through downtown, shaking hands with locals and catching up with them about their families, was beginning to convince Riley that he wasn’t alone anymore.

Aside from the teachers village, Reconnecting McDowell had an economic development plan that called for the county to move away from a mining-based economy, which most agreed would never return to its heyday. The focus, instead, would be on a burgeoning tourism niche. ATV riders were



Brittany Collins, right, and Margie Hall, both of whom grew up in McDowell County, hold a customer’s dog as they help him at the drive-through window of Citizen’s Drug Store in Welch. The store has been a fixture in the town for over 50 years, and it has been owned by pharmacist Shawn Jenkins for seven. Jenkins says he moved to McDowell County because his wife was born there, but he observed that it seems more common for people to leave the county than to return.

coming to the mountains in droves. The eastern part of the county connected with the Appalachian Trail, and a few businesses had popped up around the new opportunity.

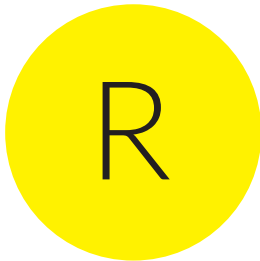
In 2015, for the first time in modern history, tourism had edged out mining as the county’s leading revenue source. Altogether, it seemed to say that change was coming.

Still, fatalism always seemed to tear away at what little optimism he could muster, Riley said.

“People have waited and waited for things to improve,” he said, holding back tears. “I don’t know if I will live to see it turn.”

IN 2015, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MODERN HISTORY, TOURISM HAD EDGED OUT MINING AS THE COUNTY’S LEADING REVENUE SOURCE. ALTOGETHER, IT SEEMED TO SAY THAT CHANGE WAS COMING.

The Governor's Wife



RECONNECTING MCDOWELL BEGAN with Gayle Manchin and an epiphany.

In 2001, the state of West Virginia took over the McDowell County school system because of abysmal test scores and low graduation rates. But after 10 years of trying to fix what was wrong, little had improved.

“What is the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result,” Manchin, a state school board member and the wife of current U.S.

Senator (and former West Virginia governor) Joe Manchin, said she told the school board when they were debating, once again, the fate of McDowell County students.

Poor children needed more than what the state and schools were offering them, she knew from having been a teacher. More than anything, she realized, they needed their families restored and their community to care about what happened to them.

In the past, politics had muddied the water, she said, but by 2010 people were so frustrated by McDowell County that many in state government were ready to wash their hands of the situation, leaving an opening for Manchin to argue for a new approach.

Not long after voicing frustration over the state of McDowell County schools, Manchin heard a rousing speech by the head of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, who seemed passionate about helping children escape poverty. After Weingarten’s talk, Manchin approached the union head hoping to pick her brain about what could be done. She told Weingarten that she wanted to put together a coalition that improved schools by extending its effort far beyond the schoolhouse.

“She looked at me like I was a crazy woman,” Manchin said, remembering the conversation and how the project quickly snowballed afterward.

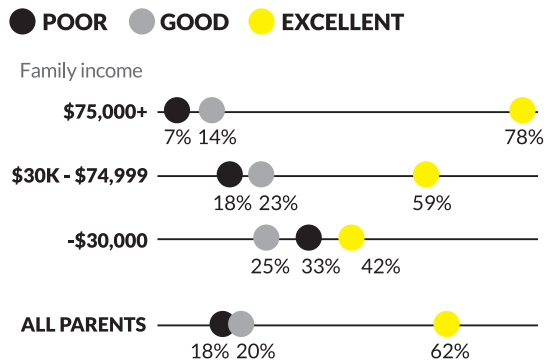
Manchin wanted a national partner such as the American Federation of Teachers because she thought it would lend credibility to the effort. It also would provide a megaphone for national exposure if the push were to miraculously succeed, she thought.

Fixing schools in McDowell County

THE PARENT PERSPECTIVE ON NEIGHBORHOOD

Many low-income parents feel unsatisfied with the places their children are growing up.

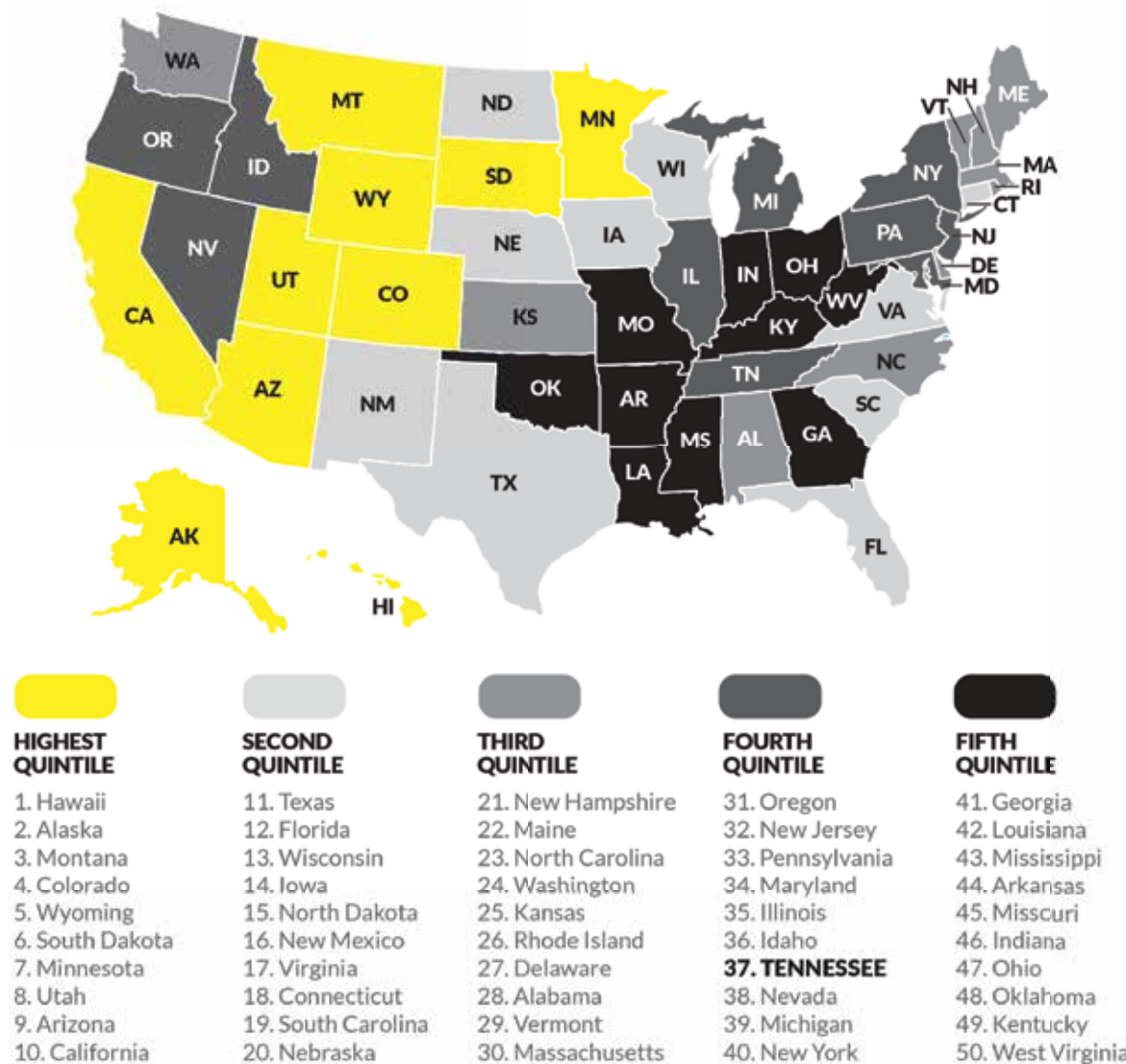
Percent saying their neighborhood is a/an _____ place to raise children



Note: “Don’t know” or “Refused to answer” responses not shown. Source: Pew Research Center

THE WELL-BEING TEST

Every year Gallup-Healthways publishes its Well-Being Index, which examines people's sense of purpose and community, as well as their social, financial, and physical health. It includes more than 2.3 million surveys, capturing how people feel about and experience their daily lives. Levels of well-being correlate with health care utilization and cost, business productivity and economic competitiveness, research shows.



Source: Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index

meant thinking with community members about economic development, birth control, transportation, employment aid and adult education, as well as literacy, technical skills development and college readiness, she argued before the Board of Education with the help of Brown, the state union representative.

“I sold this to a lot of politicians by saying (poverty is a problem for) McDowell County today, but it could be them tomorrow,” said Brown. “My kids and their kids were doing well in the Charleston area, but we have an obligation to make sure these kids have a future, too.”

And after getting buy-in from the Board of Education, Manchin turned to corporations, in particular energy companies, for funding.

“This area is devastated by the lack of work in an industry that has made people very wealthy,” she said she told the heads of energy corporations before telling them it was time for them to give back.

Some in education thought the only way to secure support for poor children was to argue that helping them made business sense, but Manchin didn’t waste her time. She didn’t want to work alongside people who couldn’t see the moral imperative. Self-interested parties were the ones who tanked well-meaning and ambitious efforts.

It could take decades for the numbers to turn, she told each partner she pursued, and McDowell County didn’t need another empty promise.

“It didn’t get this bad overnight. The county was going on its fourth generation on welfare. No single program would turn that around,” she said. “I hoped to find people who weren’t in it for money, power, positions or stepping stones.”

By the time she headed down to McDowell County with Weingarten and the AFT’s offer of aid, she had more than 40 nonprofit, government and private partners signed on.

“You can talk politics, but it really comes back to people,” she said. “I look at young

mothers who have no one and nothing. They don’t have the first idea how to be good parents and have no one to talk to and no one to call for help when their baby has cried for eight hours.”

McDowell County needed help, she said, but anyone going into the county needed to know the people there deserved respect, too.

“It’s so rugged and isolated and far removed from the 21st century, and yet these are people who love life. They love that land, and they love their families,” she said. “They just needed a little support.”

There were plenty of academics who offered answers to the problem of poverty and suggested leadership steps they believed would work to control outcomes, but offering prescriptions to poverty thought up in classrooms and boardrooms wouldn’t fly in southern West Virginia, the two women acknowledged.

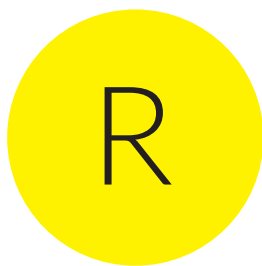
“We are acting on our values in McDowell County,” said Weingarten. “The folks from Harvard and the folks from Vanderbilt, they are smart. They are very smart. But if you don’t actually engage with people and walk their walk, why would they listen?”

“IT’S SO RUGGED AND ISOLATED AND FAR REMOVED FROM THE 21ST CENTURY, AND YET THESE ARE PEOPLE WHO LOVE LIFE. THEY LOVE THAT LAND, AND THEY LOVE THEIR FAMILIES,” SHE SAID. “THEY JUST NEEDED A LITTLE SUPPORT.”



Bob Brown, right, a lobbyist for the American Federation of Teachers in Charleston, West Virginia, talks with Dan Riley, director of the Redevelopment Authority, about blueprints for Reconnecting McDowell's new building in Riley's office in Welch. Brown has been helping to spearhead the Reconnecting McDowell program in the county.

The Mountaineers



ROWN HAD EXPERIENCED A LOT before he entered into McDowell County and all its hardship in 2012, he said. Close to retirement age, he had enjoyed a successful

career. He had traveled the globe, negotiated teacher contracts and orchestrated impressive legislative victories. The work in

McDowell County, however, had become the most rewarding of his career, he said, and by 2016 he was beginning to believe it was the most important.

One of the hallmarks of Reconnecting McDowell was a mentoring program, funded through a grant from AT&T, that paired professionals with juniors in the local high schools and paid for students to travel to both the state and national capitals. There weren't enough middle-class residents in the county to provide mentors locally,

Brown said. So out-of-towners stepped up to the plate when he and Manchin asked.

While the mentors couldn't connect face-to-face with students very often, they stayed in touch through phone calls, texts and scheduled Skype conversations made possible when another grant expanded Internet access and provided laptop computers.

On one of the trips to Washington, D.C., with students, Brown, who is one of the mentors, said he noticed one of the young men break off from the group to ride up and down an escalator. The union leader asked him why he kept jumping on and off.

"I have never been on an escalator before," the student told him, brimming with joy.

Over the years, when Brown had trained young union leaders, he had warned them about the intoxicating nature of politics. Being on a first-name basis with people in power can go to a person's head and twist and corrupt their thinking over time, he said.

Strangely, though, McDowell County had taught him that living out of compassion and altruism felt even better than achieving power, and there was even research that showed giving was better than receiving.

A compassionate attitude can greatly reduce the distress people feel in difficult situations and can become a profound personal resource in times of stress, according to the Stanford University School of Medicine, which includes a division that researches compassion and altruism.

"I underestimated what this would do to me and what these kids would do to me," he said. "I love them like they were my own kids. We hug and we email and we Facetime and we tweet."

He had become jaded, he said, and didn't appreciate the advantages he had enjoyed for so long. The children he met were glad to receive any piece of knowledge or attention. Even a ride on an escalator lifted their spirits.

"They are so full of awe over things we take for granted," he said. "This has been almost like a religious experience. It is the most incredible thing that I have ever done."

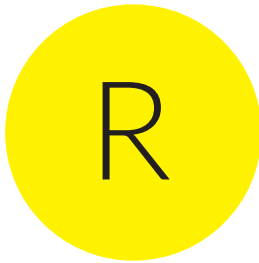
THE CHILDREN HE MET WERE GLAD TO RECEIVE ANY PIECE OF KNOWLEDGE OR ATTENTION. EVEN A RIDE ON AN ESCALATOR LIFTED THEIR SPIRITS.

"THEY ARE SO FULL OF AWE OVER THINGS WE TAKE FOR GRANTED," HE SAID. "THIS HAS BEEN ALMOST LIKE A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE. IT IS THE MOST INCREDIBLE THING THAT I HAVE EVER DONE."



Southside K-8 principal Flo McGuire, right, talks with her mentee and student Tristan Prater, left, as they get dinner at a combination Pizza Hut and KFC in Tazewell, Virginia, which is about 45 minutes from McDowell County. McGuire, who went to school with Prater's father, mentors Prater as part of the Reconnecting McDowell program.

Change of Heart



RECONNECTING MCDOWELL has yet to move the needle on poverty and test scores, but there are many signs that make those who have worked so hard for four years confi-

dent that they remain on the right track.

"They see a connection to the outside," said Weingarten. "We haven't come in to tell

or dictate anything to the community. We respect so much that these people have had a really tough go of it. West Virginians are very proud and wonderfully resilient folks."

In 2013, just a year after Reconnecting McDowell began, the state Board of Education announced it was coming to the county to hold its monthly meeting. Weingarten traveled 11 hours through the night from Philadelphia to get to the county in time for the morning meeting.

After more than a decade of state control,



Olivia Vaughn walks past trailers in her neighborhood of Hemphill.

the board of education had made a decision, they told a crowd of hundreds. McDowell County would regain control of its schools, they said, thanks to the connections being built by the local effort. The entire room erupted in cheers and a standing ovation.

“It was incredible,” Brown said, thinking back.

The group plans to break ground on the teacher village this month, and many expect to see locals gathered around to watch when the machines begin to move. The schools are slowly moving toward improvement, too, Brown said.

A recent accreditation review offered exciting news as well. This year the graduation rate was up for the first time in many years, and absenteeism was down for the first time in several years. Other data showed a drop in teen pregnancy for the first time in years.

“There is still a lot of work to be done,” Brown added. “These little small victories are what keeps me getting up early in the morning.”

The most obvious signs of change, however, were in the lives of people the effort had touched.

Olivia Vaughn spent her entire life in a double-wide trailer in Hemphill just past the county hospital where she was raised by her grandmother, a registered nurse. She had just about given up on school when Reconnecting McDowell arrived on the scene her junior year.

So many teachers and principals had come and gone, and most students at her high school, Mount View, felt forgotten and dismissed.

“People think we are a bunch of hillbillies,” she said.

But those involved with Reconnecting McDowell didn’t dwell on the community’s weaknesses, she said. They looked to celebrate its strengths and build on them.

Just as she was about to check out of academic life, she said, a teacher asked her if she wanted to be part of the mentoring program offered through Reconnecting McDowell, and she agreed.

Then, when funds were donated so every student was able to travel with their class-

mates to both the state and national capitals, all expenses paid, she jumped at the chance. Children who grew up in “The Patch” — a nickname many students have for their hometown — rarely left the county and knew little about what lay beyond its borders.

Vaughn said what she discovered on the outside was life-altering.

She went on tours that taught her about government. She met the governor with her classmates and was delighted when he was kind enough to hug them all and pose for photographs.

If the goal was to show students they didn’t have to conform to the picture painted by McDowell County statistics, it worked, she said.

“I think about that now,” she said. “What would my life be like if I hadn’t gone on that trip?”

When she came home and headed into her senior year, she turned her disappointing grades into straight A’s. It didn’t resuscitate her GPA or generate impressive college admission test scores, but it did put her on a path to stability. In February, she was signed up to enter a two-year nursing program and intended to pay part of her way with a job at the only McDonald’s in town.

“I like to help people, and that trip made me think that I could do anything I wanted to do. It made me think about being a nurse,” she said.

Students from McDowell County often internalized what the world said about “The Patch.” If it was among the worst places in America, then what did that make her?

But the people who met them in Charleston and Washington, D.C., seemed to care about what they had to say. Senators asked her how she would improve West Virginia and McDowell County. She couldn’t believe someone would actually want to know her opinion.

Like many, Vaughn’s parents had abandoned her as a child, leaving her with an uncertainty that made it hard to trust or



Olivia Vaughn, who participated in the first year of Reconnecting McDowell’s program before she graduated from high school, right, talks with her grandmother Laura in their double-wide trailer in Hemphill. Vaughn’s father died when she was 9 and her mother left, so, like many children in the county, she was raised by her grandmother.

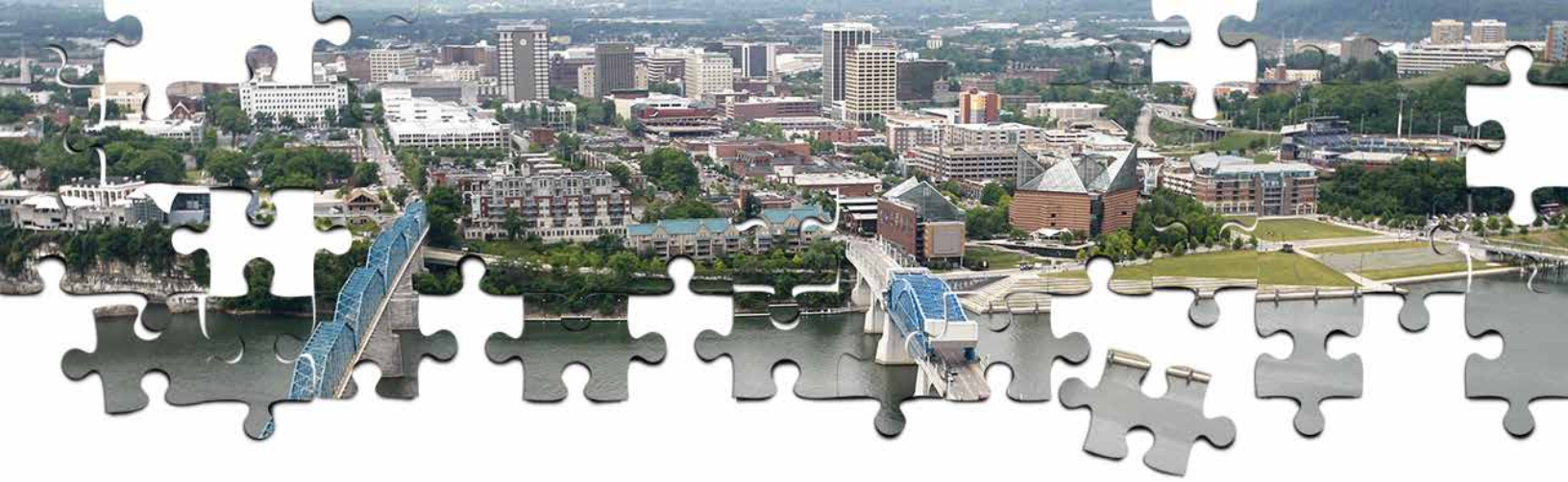
believe something good was possible.

“I had seen people try to help,” she said. “But I told myself, if my mom could leave me, then anyone could leave me.”

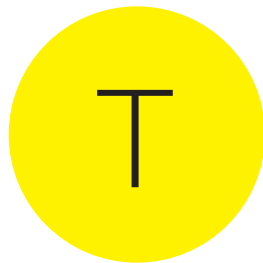
So the genuine interest she saw in the eyes of the people she met through Reconnecting McDowell sparked confidence she hadn’t known before.

“It made me feel pride,” she said. “It made me feel like my words mattered.”

THE GENUINE INTEREST SHE SAW IN THE EYES OF THE PEOPLE SHE MET THROUGH RECONNECTING MCDOWELL SPARKED CONFIDENCE SHE HADN’T KNOWN BEFORE. “IT MADE ME FEEL PRIDE,” SHE SAID. “IT MADE ME FEEL LIKE MY WORDS MATTERED.”



ABOUT THE REPORTING



HIS SERIES WAS reported for more than a year. To have a foundation of knowl-

edge on the issues of poverty, income inequality and economic mobility, reporters Joan Garrett McClane and Joy Lukachick Smith read more than 250 peer-reviewed studies published by major research institutions and nonprofit organizations and read a dozen books written by social scientists.

In reviewing these academic publications, reporters tried to be conscious of the political leanings

or financial ties between researchers and partisan opinions. For the sake of transparency, much of the research used to build this series is being made available to readers online here. Readers can scroll over any words underlined in yellow and link to the research on which that piece of reporting was based.

In addition to academic research, reporters expanded their knowledge base through hundreds of interviews with struggling individuals, nonprofit leaders, government officials, policy analysts, social scientists, economists, psychologists, neuroscientists, political scientists, pastors and neighborhood activists. Reporters traveled to Middle Tennessee, southern West Virginia and western Georgia as well.

BUILDING THE PUZZLE

How searching for the solution to American poverty changed a reporter's life

BY JOAN GARRETT MCCLANE

ILLUSTRATION BY MATT MCCLANE

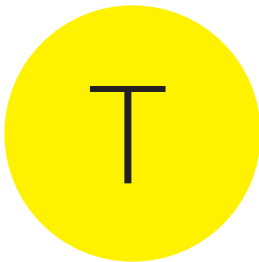


Chattanooga Times Free Press

TIMESFREEPRESS.COM / POVERTYPUZZLE



The five Garrett sisters pose for a family picture. From left to right is Deborah, Sabrina, Ruth, Joan and Dalta. Dalta was killed in 2012 in a car accident in Alabama.



HERE IS A STORY behind every story, and this is mine.

I am the oldest daughter of two middle-class college graduates who homeschooled me and my four sisters in Birmingham, Alabama. Everyone called us the Garrett Girls, and we learned very early on that much was expected of us.

My father, a workaholic trying to earn enough to pay for his daughters' college one day, held down a full-time job as an environmental researcher, while earning a master's and a doctoral degree in engineering. He was gone so often, leaving the hard work of parenting and teaching to my mother, that I often cried and begged for him to stay home.

"He has to go be the breadwinner," my

mother would say, hoping to calm me down.

"We already have bread," I'd snap back.

And when my father wasn't poring over his work he was poring over the Bible. Often he woke up before the sun to memorize passages, hoping to still the inner murmur that told him he didn't have what it took to provide for his big brood of girls.

In my house, faith translated through love of family and conservative politics. The billowing voice of Rush Limbaugh decrying the stain of Bill Clinton's presidency inhabits most of my childhood memories. In the car to piano practice, Limbaugh was there. On the way to weekly Bible study, he was there. Scrubbing the kitchen, his voice was in the air.

But it made me think, "You know, those liberal journalists, their lives seem pretty exciting." So when I found myself plopped in the middle of a massive state university at

17 with no clue and no friends, after a dozen years of being home-schooled, I ran after all the knowledge I thought my parents had kept from me.

Over the years, I learned what it meant to be a reporter, and I honed my craft over nearly a decade at the Times Free Press after graduate school at the University of Alabama. And slowly but surely, I began to shed my parents' certainty as I learned the truth was often messy.

Still, I didn't abandon the hard work of modeling my father's puritanical work ethic, completely certain it would deliver my American Dream. Thinking there was a logic to success always gave me a comforting sense of control.

As a journalist bearing witness to crime and crisis from the front lines, however, I began to feel the foundation my parents had laid begin to crack. And the unexpected death in 2012 of my 20-year-old sister, Dalta — my parent's pride and joy and the greatest of all the Garrett Girls, in my mind — left me with nothing under my feet.

I tried to suppress the fear I felt when I began to believe there was nothing beyond the grave, and replaced the hope that had once resided in my heart with a striving for success I thought would bring me purpose. I faked it at church. I hid the truth from my closest friends. The routine was working fine. Between the day my sister died and the day I started working on this project two years later, I married the man of my dreams, was named a Pulitzer finalist and moved into a beautiful new home in Red Bank.

But my nights were empty. I often worked until the only fast-food restaurant open for dinner was Taco Bell and then came home to numb out on Netflix. Losing my sister had made me terrified of feeling love. I just didn't want to play a losing game.

So when I approached the problem of poverty, I brought the same cynicism to my work. If an answer to poverty existed, which

I doubted, it would come from academia or politics, I assumed.

Now I know differently.

A week before Christmas 2014, I met a teenager named Daysha. She was pregnant and homeless and walking down Brainerd Road to find work on a day when it was near zero degrees, and suddenly I felt empathy.

I asked if she wanted to sit in my car to warm up for a few minutes.

I had everything a millennial in America could want, but I was disconnected, alone and desensitized. Journalism had taught me that few stories had happy endings. Reporters are taught to be objective, detached.

Before I knew it, though, I was offering the soon-to-be mother help. I wanted to feel human, I decided, and not just be a stenographer with a notebook. It was exhilarating and terrifying, all at once.

The friendship played out over months. I even stood beside Daysha in the hospital the day her beautiful son Payden came into the world. But our relationship fizzled in a single day when we were both hot headed.

**WHEN I APPROACHED
THE PROBLEM OF
POVERTY, I BROUGHT
THE SAME CYNICISM
TO MY WORK. IF AN
ANSWER TO POVERTY
EXISTED, WHICH I
DOUBTED, IT WOULD
COME FROM ACADEMIA
OR POLITICS, I ASSUMED.**

**NOW I KNOW
DIFFERENTLY.**

I wanted her to take advantage of a local housing program, but she didn't trust the system or feel that following rules would pay off. My judgmental tone told her it was time to push me away. I said good riddance. We blocked one another on Facebook, the digital equivalent of a door slam, and stormed out of each other's lives.

Soon, though, I felt my heart beat again.

Niki Gore, a mother living in deep poverty in East Lake Courts, was saddled with one of the bleakest situations I had ever seen. Over the years, she struggled through homelessness, addiction and abandonment with four of her five children in tow. Yet, just when she turned it around, got a stable job, married and seemed to be moving her boys onto the right track, Niki was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer and told she had only two years to live.

She defied what I had often believed about people in poverty. While she had nothing, what she did have she gave away. When young children came by her house and asked to come inside because their parents weren't home, she let them in. When a man, who had suffered brain damage after being shot, stumbled onto her front porch and fell asleep, she brought him food and blankets. When extended family couldn't come up with the few extra dollars needed to cover an important bill, she gave them all of what she had, knowing she would have to trust God to provide for her and her family.

I wanted readers to know her because her life taught me the gospel of Jesus Christ. People all around her made mistakes, but she offered love and forgiveness. Everyone in East Lake was at the bottom, in the same spot. It took family and community to survive the pain, and she knew it. While her loving heart often left her empty handed, her faith told her God was real and that God was good, even though he was terrifyingly silent so often and often seemed to have a different plan than hers. The promise of love



Bill and Vivian Garrett hold their oldest daughter, Joan, after her infant baptism ceremony in 1985.

and restoration he poured daily into her heart was enough, she said.

I had a lot of questions for Niki; I wanted her to explain all this for the series. I just couldn't believe such faith could sustain under suffering. Mine certainly hadn't. But our conversations would often get off track because she had a lot of questions for me, too. Time was ticking away and she could feel it. She said she needed to know her children would be all right, but she knew so little about the middle-class world and was at a loss, not knowing what advice to give her children.

And she saw a role for me, she said, helping her only daughter, Lexi, who was frustrated by couch surfing and disappointed that all the money she earned at her job was handed over to people driving her to work or

handed over to family in need. She needed a friend, Niki said. Lexi wanted to escape the inner city, she assured me, but just didn't know the way out.

I'd think about it, I told her, but only after her story was done.

Journalism ethicists have long debated what reporters should do in moments like this. Some say stay out of it; don't mess with the history unfolding before your eyes. Others tell journalists to put down the notebook when needed, especially when it is a matter of life and death.

And a few days after finishing the story about Niki and putting it to bed, having checked all my facts, that very dilemma stood before me.

I had gone by Niki's house on Sunday to check in and say hello. But an hour after getting home I checked my phone to see nearly 20 missed calls.

"Jaylin has been shot," Lexi said of her 14-year-old brother once I got her on the phone. I could hear Niki wailing in the background.

Lexi said her older brothers, enraged by the drive-by shooting that put four bullet holes in their baby brother, were acting as if they wanted revenge. Niki had always feared what the streets would do to her boys, and now a moment of blind panic was at hand. Her friends had buried so many sons, she told me, and her boys couldn't be among them.

"Can you talk to them?" Niki pleaded, explaining to me that her hands were tied because the police wouldn't let her leave the house. "Can you find them? I am just so worried, Joan. I don't know where they are."

For me, it was a crossroad.

Storytellers are drawn to harrowing tragedies. We feel they say something important about the human condition, and in the journalism world much ado is made of them. But Niki didn't need a story, she needed me to get in my car and search for her sons. So I had a choice. Follow in her footsteps and

I HAD GONE BY NIKI'S HOUSE ON SUNDAY TO CHECK IN AND SAY HELLO. BUT AN HOUR AFTER GETTING HOME I CHECKED MY PHONE TO SEE NEARLY 20 MISSED CALLS.

"JAYLIN HAS BEEN SHOT," LEXI SAID OF HER 14-YEAR-OLD BROTHER. I COULD HEAR NIKI WAILING IN THE BACKGROUND.

walk toward love, or trudge down a road to professional success that would eventually leave me empty handed.

I grabbed my keys.

After rounding up Niki's sons and a few of their friends, I somehow convinced them to calm down. I called my husband, Matt, and told him to order as many pizzas as we could afford and to rent the movie "Friday."

Of course, I was nervous about filling my house with angry teenagers, who were really just strangers to me, but I thought of Niki and reasoned the risk was worth the reward.

The next morning, when I walked downstairs to make coffee, my living room was covered with a dozen sleeping teenagers who looked a lot like little kids leaning on one another and fast asleep. My husband was shell-shocked. We looked at each other and stared, as if saying silently, "What have we done?"

Ultimately, Jaylin survived his injuries, and his brothers and their friends simmered down. Somehow, we sent them home with smiles. My husband won their friendship

and respect by being able to cite “Friday” line by line. He knew quite a bit about ’90s hip-hop, too, which didn’t hurt his street cred.

The next time I saw Niki, she wrapped her arms around my neck and thanked me. I told her I had just done what any decent person would have, but she told me I was wrong. Her praise made me begin to feel that my soul wasn’t lost.

As time went on, Matt and I grew closer with the family. We did, in fact, decide to invite Lexi and her boyfriend Trell to move into our guest bedroom and live for a few months rent-free while they saved to buy a car and tried to find someone willing to rent an apartment to them. It meant, too, that I had to scrap the story I had written about Niki’s family.

I could go on and on about all that happened after that and all I learned about poverty from seeing it play out in my house. I could tell you about how Lexi threw up unexpectedly in Wal-Mart the day after she moved in and about the hours we cried and talked about whether it was right to have a baby when you are poor without a college education and just 23.

Despite being raised pro-life, I found myself making arguments the baby would hold her back, that she had nothing to give it and that the child’s life would likely pan out much like hers. My heart got a wake-up call, when she looked at me one night and told me I was dead wrong. A baby didn’t need money to be OK, she said. A baby just needed love.

I could tell you about all the times Matt and I noticed how we received preferential treatment from police, landlords and business owners unwarranted, while Lexi, working morning, noon and night, through morning sickness and severe back pain, was targeted and taxed.

But it would take a book, and I don’t have that space here.

Essentially it all boiled down to this: A

I COULD TELL YOU ABOUT ALL THE TIMES MATT AND I NOTICED HOW WE RECEIVED PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT FROM POLICE, LANDLORDS AND BUSINESS OWNERS UNWARRANTED, WHILE LEXI, WORKING MORNING, NOON AND NIGHT, THROUGH MORNING SICKNESS AND SEVERE BACK PAIN, WAS TARGETED AND TAXED.

year after I met Daysha, I found myself having come full circle somehow.

The depression I had felt after my sister’s death was in full retreat, and I could feel my faith seeping back in. I had sung “Amazing Grace” my entire life, but only then did the words begin to feel real to me. My house was messy. I was running late on the project because of having to scrap Niki’s story and my bosses were getting a little peeved. But I was the happiest I had been in a long time. At night, Matt and I would stay up laughing with Lexi and Trell about everything from the presidential race to Tupac. They began to feel like some of our closest friends. On some very stressful nights, when my husband and I felt we couldn’t finish the work of this project and wanted to give up, we would think about Lexi and Niki and draw inspiration from how they kept going everyday, taking steps forward in faith, even though they often got knocked back.

If, as I had been taught as a child, everything in life is under our control, if our careers are in our own hands, if our health can be beaten into submission, if God’s favor can be earned, then poverty should be left to the poor.

The problem is that I now know outcomes aren't simply the products of good choices and hard work. The poor are often fiercely moral and loyal. Many land in poverty through circumstances beyond their control, and they have much to teach some of us in the middle class who remain slaves to an inner murmur of self reproach.

In December, Matt and I invited Niki and her entire family over to our house for a Christmas party.

After we passed around Christmas cards and ate our fill of meatloaf and cake, Niki stood up and asked if she could make a toast. She handed Matt and me each a gift. She had spent her last dollars to buy us both watches.

But her words were the real treasure.

Her family had felt alone for a long time, she said, and she had been tempted to give up around the time I knocked on her door to ask permission to dig into her painful life.

Yet, what had resulted was a journey and a partnership neither of us could have predicted.

"You are a part of our family now," she said.

That night, as Matt and I got into bed, we were left a little misty-eyed by the whole thing. The project was winding down, and we were tired. But we knew, even after these stories were published, we had started something that would never be finished. We were Niki's family now. Her children's, too. The moment became far more poignant a month later when, sitting beside Niki's hospital bed, she told us the doctors insisted her time had nearly come and she made us promise to watch out for her babies. Staring down death, her faith didn't flinch.

"Love your neighbor as yourself," the Bible says.

It's a tough bar to reach, and I get why most of us avoid stretching when we can

morally muddle through. Love can hurt. It's nearly killed me. But, when wrapped in forgiveness, love heals, too.

A few days after Niki's toast, I got a call from Daysha. She had been in jail for 21 days, and she told me she had thought a lot about the stuff I had said. She said she was sorry that she had been angry. After being abandoned and poor for so many years, she was afraid of being hurt, she said.

I told her I understood.

A few days after that, I got another call. This one was from my dad.

As the year had gone on, my parents had been watching my strange behavior and seemed to be wondering how it would resolve. At times, I knew they must have worried I was turning communist, not Christian. "Did the kids move out?" my father asked. "Are you still helping those kids?" he wanted to know. I heard: Did they perform? Did they earn the help you gave?

Eventually, though, his tone changed. For Christmas I had given him some of the books I read for my research on poverty, and I told him to make up his own mind. On the phone that day, it seemed he had.

While my mom had been out of town, he had taken a family out to eat after church. He said he had decided to reach out to them because he had been thinking about me and Matt and the risks we had taken. With almost a dozen foster kids, the family's big hearts were bigger than their wallets, he said.

"I just want you to know how proud I am of you," he told me, uttering words I had longed to hear my whole life. "You have really inspired me."

I started this project thinking I would find the answer to poverty, but boy was I wrong.

At the end of the day, I saved not a single poor person, but they absolutely saved me.



THE POVERTY PUZZLE

Visit timesfreepress.com/povertypuzzle
for all citations and references