

I never thought I'd be here, appealing to a Committee to End Poverty, but you see, this isn't the life I'd planned: *No more high rise apartments overlooking the Minneapolis skyline, no trips to Saks.* I live in subsidized housing and acquire my professional clothing through donations to the Displaced Homemaker Program. *In the late 1980's, I regularly attended business lunches at the posh Beverly Hills Hotel;* these days I hold an EBT card and have a case number in the state welfare system. *As first runner up to the young woman who'd go on to hold the title of Miss Minnesota, I once stood before an interview panel answering political questions;* today, not only am I providing answers to those types of questions, I am living them...

Members of the Commission, it isn't my objective to emphasize the differences between my upbringing and that of many who've grown up in the cycles of poverty. I would admit, however, that I am fortunate to increase an awareness of Minnesota that many of my long-standing friends and family are oblivious to. Therefore, I wish to advocate for all of us who are only one catastrophe or unexpected circumstance away from realizing the importance of safe and affordable housing, of reliable and reputable child care providers...of all the other issues you've heard throughout the state. We must address these components in order to make a system function with success.

However, I firmly believe there's an additional attitude that needs to prevail should we wish to see any difference in the lives of those striving toward self-sufficiency: **the philosophy of promoting education versus the "work first" policy currently in place.** What appeared to be initial success resulted in long-term ineffectiveness. Worse yet, it was laden with hypocrisy from the start. In 1995, former President Bill Clinton addressed the NEA by saying *"A good education is key to unlocking the promise of today's economy in the 21st century. Without it, people are at an ever-increasing risk of falling behind."* And yet, this was merely a year before the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act was instituted under Clinton. Coincidentally, President Bush appeared to support of the idea of post-secondary education for all socioeconomic classes while making the following remark at an elementary school in New Mexico in 2001: *"The question I like to ask every child I visit in the class room is 'Are you going to college?' In this great country we expect every child regardless of how he or she is raised, to go to college. That's the goal we want every child to have."*

Even so, education as a possible path to self-sufficiency continues to meet considerable roadblocks for those who are receiving MFIP benefits. Upon investigation, it becomes apparent that "participation rates" – funding stipulations for each participating program – are the driving force behind whether or not school plans are promoted, designed or approved for MFIP recipients. I know this first hand as both a non-traditional college student and a non-traditional welfare mom. I'm not what you'd expect given the stereotypes attached to that role. In 1982, as a high school senior, my future held considerable promise. I was an honor student, was on both the yearbook and school newspaper staff, had been a member of the danceline team and held two jobs in the community -- one as a staff writer for the city paper. Three months after graduation (merely one week prior to beginning college in pursuit of a journalism degree) I was a victim of violent crime and was propelled into the world of the criminal justice system. My aspirations of higher education were put on indefinite hold for two decades.

Over time, I began falling behind in marketable skills with the changing technology and with the prevalence of degreed applicants with whom I was competing for positions. The harsh realization, however, came in July of 2004 when I was pregnant with my son. I came home from work, on the afternoon of my first obstetrics visit, to find my husband had “chosen” not to be a father, leaving me the sole financial provider of our – literally – growing family.

Relocating from the Twin Cities to my hometown in Southern Minnesota, I stepped into my new role as a mother, but also suddenly became a member of the working poor. Living in a rural community without a degree, I was commuting 60 miles a day to a \$10 an hour job. My rent was nearly \$700 a month; with utilities, it often topped \$1,000. The cost of gasoline was draining me. At the time, a similar position opened in hometown. It was considered to be a professional position, and the job could have been mine: *for less than \$7 an hour, less than 20 hours a week and no benefits*. How was I supposed to raise a child and conduct a household on slightly over \$7,000 a year?

I put down my pride and applied for MFIP, and, thankfully, convinced my job counselor to approve a school plan. I originally was pursuing a certificate program for employment at Mayo Clinic, but was faced with rotating shift work, which isn't compatible with daycare centers in either Austin or Rochester. I refused to give up my education, though, and because of my persistence and perseverance within the system, I'll be receiving an Associate of Science degree through Rochester Community and Technical College this spring – with a perfect 4.0 G.P.A.

I still commute, now 90 minutes a day – but at least it is a journey with a destination. I won't say it's been an easy road, for I have faced the typical obstacles of many MFIP recipients with housing and child care due to waiting lists and other loopholes. At age 43, I'm currently in a work study position with a non-profit agency for \$8.75 per hour. It is not where I expected to be at this age. However, while the pay is low, my experience is rich. I have a new career path on the horizon -- once I attain a bachelor's degree. Unfortunately, two years is the maximum time limit allowed for education under the TANF program. Therefore, I'm faced with making a choice. I can either continue with school without the help of MFIP, uncertain how to make ends meet...or I can try to go into back into the workforce and abandon my dreams of a well-paying, professional career in a field where I show considerable promise. We all know that MFIP stresses the latter of the two options. Yet, statistics show that even with “successful” departure from TANF due to employment, most of its former recipients are still living at poverty level. I refuse to add myself to that statistic. And by 2020 -- hopefully much sooner -- there will be an alternative to that in Minnesota.

The state of Maine has implemented a program with their state's maintenance of effort funds that encourages those living in poverty to pursue an education, including a four-year degree – which is currently not allowable in Minnesota with the MFIP program. Their program, which differs from their TANF program, is called Parents as Scholars, and has indicated a 50% increase in salary for participants – and a great track record: 90% or working grads leaving welfare behind permanently. In fact, an education department report concluded that “achieving a bachelor's degree. . . increased women's annual median income by as much as 71 percent.” Of course as a tax payer, her contributions to the state increase as well.

Perhaps just as important, however, is the matched increase in self esteem. While we need tangible efforts and outcomes to rise above poverty, we also need hope. As a society we talk of “leaving no child behind,” and yet, if kids grow up in poverty, chances are they will have become discouraged long before they ever have the opportunity to even consider college. An education provides that hope, where a quick detour into the first available job doesn’t; that only serves as a short-term solution to long-range problems. And each time a set-back occurs, the pit of hopelessness gets deeper and the road to hope gets considerably longer.

In order to attain the goals of this Commission, I feel it is imperative to find another method. If we cannot revamp the workings of the MFIP system, then perhaps we can supplement, as the state of Maine has done with their Parents as Scholars program. I would, however, propose the implementation of mandatory parenting and life skills for program participants. This may help parents cope properly with the multiple stressors they face while juggling a variety of roles. An educated adult is of no use to a child if he or she cannot be well-educated in parenting as well.

Despite the barriers I face, I’ll succeed in my endeavors and will serve as a role model for my son. Leadership is not a task appointed to someone else. Education allows me to read the inspiring words of great people – many of whom were also simple, ordinary individuals in their beginnings. I can’t deny myself the same opportunity to make a difference.

TANF has given me much to be thankful for – being humbled has its own quiet rewards that speak louder to a soul than the glittering billboards of materialism ever did. But the system is not working with only a work-first mentality. We must focus on more than pushing recipients to get a paycheck so that work participation rates are met by each county. Encouraging the transition to skilled/trained/educated employees who can maintain self-sufficiency is the first step in leaving helplessness, hopelessness – and poverty – behind.

Sincerely,

Michelle