

Surviving and Thriving

Single Moms and Poverty

By Linda Marcotte

La militante Linda Marcotte décrit ci-dessous un jour de travail type à End Legislated Poverty, une coalition de groupes anti-pauvreté de la Colombie-Britannique. Elle parle de ses expériences comme mère seule et pauvre et affirme que la meilleure façon de s'en sortir est de forger le changement en s'associant avec d'autres vivant des situations semblables. L'article se termine avec une note décrivant certaines des récentes victoires de la coalition.

The phone rings. "Hello, End Legislated Poverty. This is Linda," I say. The caller is a reporter with the CBC in Edmonton, working on an article about welfare and single mothers. Can I find someone in Edmonton who would have the information he needs? I call Freda, a welfare advocate with the Downtown Eastside Residents' Association (DERA), one of the 27 groups in our coalition. She tells me what I'm looking for. We chat, and I just have time to look up some names of single parents in Edmonton. Pat, one of our staff, helped form a group to work on getting lunch programmes in the low income schools there. A quick call back to Edmonton and the task is done.

Meanwhile, two members of the Burnaby Child Poverty Committee, Carol and Antoinette, come in to talk about a meeting with the Student Services Committee of the Burnaby School Board. They want to talk about the need for lunch programmes in the low income schools in Burnaby. They also want some help figuring out how to get this committee thinking about making all the schools in the municipality more accessible to low income children and their parents. We go through

the End Legislated Poverty (ELP) brief to the Royal Commission on Education in 1989 and pick out some of the most important points:

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often different from middle-class children, can be independent, spontaneous, creative, open, highly cooperative and unpretentious.

- Poor children show the wonderful human capacity to adapt and cope with their environment, yet it is this behaviour, along with language development, which is so often criticized in low income children

- The issues of classism, racism, and sexism aren't addressed in the classroom and children who are targets of those oppressions are made to feel like failures.

Before they leave, Antoinette hands me a list of names, addresses, and phone numbers of single mothers she got at a single parent camp in Cultus Lake. These women were keen to start a support group focussed on poverty. I'm excited. Just last

week a single mother in Chilliwack phoned and wanted to start a group out there. The name she had thought of was great: SMART—Single Mothers Are Really Tough.

The evidence of the work that keeps us whirling is everywhere. A volunteer, Steven, is making our Fighting Poverty Kits, which we send to anyone who wants to know more about the coalition. Another volunteer, Dave, is getting our mailing out. We have three monthly publications: our ELP Newsletter that goes out to people in food bank lineups, FLAWLINE that goes to British Columbia welfare advocates, and ACTIONLINE, a newsletter filled with analysis of poverty issues and what we're doing.

We're preparing a workshop on the economy and the real causes of poverty. Oxfam gave us money to do these workshops for groups. In this morning's mail are two letters from municipal councils which have passed our resolutions:

- Minimum wages should be raised to at least the same percentage of the poverty line as it was in 1975. This would be over \$7.50 an hour.

- The welfare rates should be raised to the poverty line.

- The provincial government should let single mothers on welfare decide whether they want to stay home and be with their children full time or work outside. Several towns, cities and groups have passed these resolutions. People can use them to discuss poverty in their area.

Jean is talking with Debbie, a single parent and ELP Board member. They are planning the details of an event we are organizing in a couple of weeks. There is so much to get done: banners to sew, street

theatre to create, actors to find and rehearse, leaflets to write up and copy, media releases to compose and fax out. The idea had come from the single mothers in the Forced Employment Committee, a group affected by the Ministry of Social Services and Housing policy of classifying single mothers with children six months or older as employable and thus forcing them to look for work.

I look around. Jean and Rose are both on the phones, Rose to Karen in Nanaimo, coordinator of our member group, the Association for Better Communities. Karen, another single mom, says she was on the front page of the *Nanaimo Times*. Her group of single parents have been working together for three years raising the issue of poverty. They have succeeded in forming a 15-member anti-poverty coalition in Nanaimo.

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Here, the walls have long brown paper sheets, starting close to the ceiling and going almost to the floor, and covered with newspaper articles about poverty. ELP and our member groups are everywhere. There's an article about lunch programmes in Victoria, with quotes from the single moms in the Victoria Child Poverty Action Committee. Beside it is an article in the Ottawa *Citizen* quoting Jean, from a speech she gave at the National Symposium on Women and the Law.

I sit down to catch my breath, but two groups of people come into the office. Three high school students are researching poverty for papers they're doing, and a TV crew from Radio Canada wants an interview.

We have to keep information about

poverty and social justice issues current. We speak to groups, and keep active in national groups like the National Anti-Poverty Organization and Action Canada Network. We are funded by unions, churches, and law groups like the Law Foundation and Legal Services Society, the United Way, and others.

I often think I am privileged to be on staff here. Getting paid to do this work still amazes me. I've been a single parent since Steven and Melanie were one and three, and now they are teenagers. All those years were spent mostly on welfare. I chose poverty on welfare over a slightly higher income working at a job outside. Melanie needed extra attention, having Down's Syndrome. Looking back over those years with bad or no housing (one summer we stayed with a friend), not enough money and the overwhelming bone-tiredness, I wonder at myself, at all the other work I did. I helped start a welfare rights group in Surrey, acted as an advocate to more than 30 people a month out of our home, and led the Poverty Game workshop dozens of times.

I was lucky, too. I didn't have trouble with the law or have an addiction or health problems that would have forced me to deal with authority more than I did. While I was doing advocacy, I talked to women whose choice of working on the street made sense after the hundredth experience of harassment by workers at the welfare office. Stealing food is sometimes more dignified than waiting hours in a food bank line-up for stale buns and canned peas. Getting drunk or stoned is sometimes a vacation from an ugly reality.

I see myself come in here to the office or hear my voice on the other end of the line every day. Keeping your family together and healthy is almost impossible—is impossible sometimes. Single parents with the edge to start fighting poverty usually live in public housing or housing co-ops, with the worry of high rents and crummy housing gone. Some people pay 70 per cent of their income on poor shelter, with no yards where kids can play and no quiet place for study, in addition to the cold and bugs. There may be no place to do laundry, so you end up on the bus (with kids) to the coin laundry, where all those quarters could pay for a washer, if you didn't do laundry for a year.

The memories I have of being on welfare are grim, pushing two kids up this huge hill with five cases of empty beer bottles which my new landlord had given me to cash in for supper money. Waiting in a 20-minute line at the welfare office to make an appointment to see my worker and having the receptionist insist I can only make an appointment by phone. (I used a quarter and called from a phone booth right outside the office.) Bringing the kids to one of Melanie's hundreds of doctor appointments on the bus and seeing us never as clean and unrumpled as the people who packed their kids into a car and drove.

These daily small humiliations threaten to pervert the love I have for Steven and Melanie and turn it into impatience.

I can feel the rage and frustration as I write this, but the biggest memory, and the one that comes back to shake me, is of shame. The hardest, most confusing time I spent here was trying to see myself as a worker deserving of a paycheque. I feel the ten years on welfare beat my pride and the trust I had in my thinking right out of me. To get it back was a fight. The support of friends was a big help. Another factor in the healing of my self-esteem was seeing myself as part of the huge movement in Canada and around the world, working to get justice for women, our children, and poor people everywhere.

This kind of activism is what I am lucky to see every day in other single parents. The first step is to get together with others to share stories and support, and practical help. Then I see women change and grow, doing things they never thought they had the courage to do, meeting politicians and telling them what they and their children need. I see single parents go through the process of working together, figuring out what's wrong and why and what to do about it. It's exciting to watch.

There are powerful consequences: feeling better and stronger so you don't blame yourself for your poverty; learning skills like writing and reading; organizing and running a meeting; making a speech; giving an interview on TV or radio; keeping a group going—it's all very empowering.

Sometimes I take low income people to one of the schools in Vancouver that have lunch programmes. In a bustle of 300 children eating (of the 1,500 Vancouver kids who are fed a nutritious, hot lunch

every day, in a programme that doesn't stigmatize the low income kids) I always feel so hopeful. End Legislated Poverty—low income people—started this. We brought people's attention to the problem of poverty and worked hard to get kids fed. I'm reminded of a quote from Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it's the only thing that ever does."

Post-Script

I wrote the above exactly one year ago, in June 1991. As an update, End Legislated Poverty has had two major victories and a few minor ones. In British Columbia, the New Democratic Party was elected into government in November, and within a month they ended the forced employment of single mothers on welfare. Our province went from having the most repressive laws around this issue to having one of the most progressive in North America. Instead of being classified as employable when our youngest child reaches six months, mothers on welfare can choose to work inside our homes and stay with our children until the youngest turns 19 years old.

Pam Fleming, one of four paid community organizers at ELP, organized a press conference and victory party to celebrate in February. At the end of the afternoon some of the women who worked on this issue sat in a huge circle. Each woman and some of their children spoke in turn about what working to end forced employment and the victory meant to them. It was funny, inspiring, sad, and moving. We had changed the law. *We* had made the lives of over 40,000 mothers on welfare slightly easier. Nothing could stop us!

Another major victory was the announcement in January of a \$7 million fund for a provincial school lunch programme. Low income women organizers from Burnaby, Surrey, and Vancouver invaded the press conference and listened with grins on our faces and tears in our eyes as the new Premier of the province said this programme would feed almost 50,000 low income children in over 130 schools in British Columbia. The strength of our five years of organizing and lobbying showed in the criteria the government

will be using to decide which schools should get lunch programmes. The programmes had to be non-stigmatizing to low income children; supply at least one-third of the child's daily nutritional requirements; and be universal within the school. (Every child in the school would have the option of eating or not, and there would be a way of keeping confidential the information about which child pays for the lunches and which child gets them free). School boards would have to set up community advisory committees. Our five member groups—the Child Poverty Action Committees in Victoria, Surrey, Vancouver, Burnaby, and Victoria—have been sitting on their local school board community advisory committees and seeing lunch programmes starting up every month. We're getting calls from around the country and from people who want to start lunch programmes in their communities.

ELP has been working since the coalition began in 1985 on raising welfare rates and the minimum wage. In 1975 the minimum wage was 122 per cent of the poverty line. It would be \$8.88 an hour if it was 122 per cent of the poverty line today. I was part of an ELP delegation of low income people who went to Victoria in April to lobby this Minister and the new Minister of Social Services. The Minister of Labour shocked us all by promising he would raise the minimum wage to 125 per cent of the poverty line in four years. Now we have to work hard with all our people, low income and allies, to get him to keep that amazing promise!

June was the last month for which we had funding to work on the school programmes (my main work here). ELP has chosen a new campaign to replace it: *true* medicare—free dental work to low income people, no medical services premiums (British Columbia and Alberta are the only provinces where low income people, some on welfare and others working outside the home, pay for medical insurance), and free mental health care to low income people. We're collecting people's stories about not being able to afford these things and what it's like.

We have also hired four more workers to do a participatory research project about charity and how low income people feel about it.

All of these accomplishments have:

raised the issue of the utter unacceptability of poverty; involved more and more low income people in fighting to end poverty; further developed our political analysis about the *real* causes of poverty (the neo-conservative corporate agenda); got many people who are not living on a low income to be supporters and strong anti-poverty allies; and moved low income people, mostly women on welfare, to overcome fear, low self-esteem, and hopelessness, in order to become powerful, articulate, and successful.

If you are feeling like you want to get involved after reading this article, End Legislated Poverty has 28 member groups in British Columbia, and is part of the Action Canada Network and the National Anti-Poverty Organization. Call us at (604) 879-1209 to contact a group in your area.

The first part of this article was originally published in the Summer 1991 Single Parent Newsletter of the Vancouver YWCA.



Dawna Gallagher