

Understanding Poverty

Seattle University and St. James Cathedral host a powerful poverty simulation

As Program Manager at Seattle University's School of Theology and Ministry's Faith and Family

Homelessness Project I work closely with people of faith who want to change the world. Almost everyone I meet is genuine in their desire to help poor people, but most of them have never had to choose between paying rent and buying food for their children. It's hard to imagine what it's like for poor people every day, and some may wonder why don't people just pull themselves up by their bootstraps?

It's easy to think people living in poverty are simply "down on their luck," and go about the business of serving those in need. It takes guts to dig deep to understand destructive policies and ineffective systems that keep poor people poor.

That's why I believe that experiences and simulations that offer even a small step towards understanding poverty are better than no step at all.

Take actress and socialite Gwyneth Paltrow's announcement that she was going to spend one week eating like a poor person. Her photo of the \$29 haul of SNAP (Supplementary Nutritional Assistance Program) groceries flew across social media, releasing a firestorm of criticism. Gwyneth is well known for a lifestyle that includes private chefs who whip up gourmet meals with only the most organic and healthy ingredients. She's very public with her disdain for what she sees as unhealthy choices; in 2005 she told Conan O'Brien "I would rather die than let my kid eat Cup-a-Soup."

During the challenge Gwyneth quickly realized it's

Lisa Gustavson is Program Manager for Seattle University's School of Theology and Ministry's Faith and Family Homelessness Project. Funded by a multi-year commitment from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the project is a concentrated effort to inspire increased advocacy and care around the issue of family homelessness in the greater Puget Sound faith community. .



The Poverty Simulation gives participants the opportunity to "role play" in order to enter into the plight of the poor. *Photos courtesy Seattle University.*

not easy being poor--in fact she only lasted half the week. I don't think her "experiment" was a complete waste of time. It stimulated conversation around the SNAP program and Gwyneth just might rethink her harsh judgment of poor mothers who rely on inexpensive food like Cup-a-Soup.

Yes, it's impossible to fully simulate what it's like to wake up with an empty stomach for the third day in a row when you know you can reach for a snack whenever you choose. Just as it's unlikely you can begin to feel the depth of a parent's anguish when they

come home to an eviction notice if you know you will be sleeping in your own home that evening.

And yet, I believe a challenge or a simulation can be a first step in understanding what it's like to live in poverty, even if it's only temporary.

At Seattle University, we use the Missouri Association for Community Action's Poverty Simulation tool kit to help students and faith community members experience what it might be like to live a month in poverty. The workshop has been enormously successful; we can't keep up with the demand.

We were honored when St. James Cathedral's Patty Bowman asked us to produce the workshop in the Cathedral Hall on April 18th. The workshop was, by all accounts, a huge success. As you can imagine, it takes considerable coordination and hard work to pull off a large-scale experiential workshop for almost 80 people on a Saturday morning. We had a great team of volunteers from St. James and Seattle University who took on the challenge and transformed Cathedral Hall into a small town complete with 26 family "homes."

The workshop attracted people from across the region, including many Cathedral staff, parishioners and archdiocesan employees. We had people of all ages too—including middle and high school students, working parents, business owners and retirees. Roles were assigned at random, which often resulted in a youth playing the role of a parent or an adult playing the role of a teenager. For example, Father Ryan and the dean of Seattle University's School of Theology, Mark Markuly, played 13-year-old twin sisters who, along with their 3-year-old brother, were in the care of their 21-year-old brother. With their mother out of the picture and father in jail, they were left on their own to survive. Sadly, we can find families like this within walking distance of the Cathedral.

One hour of the workshop was broken into four "weeks" lasting 15 minutes each. During that time "families" must go to work or school, pay their bills, pay for transportation and feed their families. In our workshop, families with infants are given a life-sized "baby" filled with rocks to simulate how hard it is to lug a heavy squirming child around while moving from task to task.

Local parishioners, advocates and community members filled the roles of service providers. Some of those volunteers have experienced poverty or



Groups work together to strategize how to make ends meet. The simulation tries to give participants a sense of the unpredictability of the lives of the poor, and the compromises they must make from day to day to keep their children clothed, housed, and fed.

homelessness during their lives and were given an opportunity to share their personal stories at the conclusion of the simulation, offering a more personal look into the day-to-day lives of people struggling right here in our community.

The most important part of the experience is always the small group discussions that take place at the end of the workshop. Participants break from their assigned roles to talk about their feelings, ask questions and brainstorm ways they can use the experience to change policies and systems that keep people poor.

What makes the workshop a success is the number of people who confess to a shift in perceptions of poverty experienced by the participants. Our St. James workshop did not disappoint! We heard comments like these from many of the participants.

"It was such a grace-filled and fruitful Saturday morning!"

"The workshop was really valuable! As I went to Solanus Casey today and met our homeless people there, I was much more aware of all the trials and tribulations they go through!"

"Thanks to all who allowed us to experience, even minutely, the exquisite injustice we impose upon the poor by failing to demand just laws, taxing structures, wages, transportation issues and failure to provide adequate regulation over industries that handle our money, rent, property, utilities, etc."

Are simulations like our Poverty Workshop the solution to poverty? No, not alone. But they can be the catalyst that pushes people to look deeper at the problem and do something about it. [E](#)