



The Cavalier Daily

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2006

Revealing realities of poverty

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OF ALL the theories, ideas and formulas put forth in the study of economics, there is one that is repeated and affirmed so often that even the most thick-skulled student sitting in the very back of an ECON 201 lecture could not possibly miss it. In a capitalistic system there must be both winners and losers, otherwise there will be no competition and the system collapses.



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This point seems beyond argument, but its guise of simplicity masks a difficult and very important question, namely, how badly do the losers have to lose and must they stay losers forever once they're out of the game? This is the nagging question of poverty, and it's as relevant here in Charlottesville as it is in New Orleans. However, like many of the people affected by it, the challenges presented by poverty have been effectively shunted to the other side of the tracks of American political discourse. Reporting on the issue in the mainstream media pales in comparison to the magnitude of the problem, and according to the Quality Community Council, a Charlottesville group that focuses on community issues, giving to charities that help the poor is at an all-time low.

Nonetheless, there are some who aren't standing for it. At a community forum on poverty held at the University this past week sponsored by the Quality Community Council and the University of the Poor, students and residents were painted a picture of the face of poverty, and they didn't like what they saw.

As Americans and especially as privileged university students, most of us don't like thinking about the problems posed by poverty. First of all, the problem is difficult and growing larger. In 2004 the number of Americans in poverty jumped by 1.1 million to 37 million people, meaning that one in eight Americans live in poverty. In the

city of Charlottesville the poverty rate is 25 percent, a figure comparable to pre-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans. Such poverty raises some difficult questions about what we owe to those less fortunate and how we benefit from their suffering.

One of the presenters at the forum, Karen C. Walters, the executive director of the Quality Community Council, began by offering some clarifications on the condition of the poor here in Charlottesville and around the country. She explained that the federal government places the poverty threshold for a family of four at \$19,307. She then proceeded to total the costs for basic items such as housing, utilities, transportation, food, health and childcare for that family of four, which would leave them about \$1700 in debt. The following question was then posed: Since the necessities can't even be covered, what else do you go without? Answers from the audience ranged from Christmas presents to school supplies, though most members instead silently sized up their own possessions and pondered all that would have to go. Walters also added that most of the poor in Charlottesville are working poor, which for many of them means working multiple minimum wage jobs.

Building on this framework, other presenters sought to challenge how the audience thought about those in poverty. When most people envision the poor they see panhandlers and problems caused by faulty work ethic, laziness, defunct family structure and the like. By and large, this image is wholly incorrect.

Poverty is a destructive social problem, not a personal one, and for some no amount of hard work will improve their lot and those of their families. Audience members were horrified when told by presenter Alex Gulotta of the Legal Aid Justice Center that there are widespread cases of immigrant workers making less than minimum wage and working 80 plus hours a week thanks to lax law enforcement and a general air of acceptability that the practice had gained among otherwise respectable businesses. Similarly, listeners gasped when told that local car dealerships regularly force poor buyers to accept loan agreements with interest rates as high as 39 percent and get away with it due to a legal loophole. Gulotta explained that these and a multitude of similar injustices are not only tolerated but also supported because they form an integral part of our economy. In other words, with our tacit consent, we share in the guilt.

The face of poverty is repulsive, but thanks to our place in society and at this University most of us can get by without having to look at it on a daily basis. We don't have to experience the hard reality of living paycheck to paycheck, where a cold day becomes more than an inconvenience because you can't afford heat and where contracting an illness means not the hassle of visiting Student Health but deciding whether to eat or take your child to the doctor. Like most other catastrophes in the modern world, the problem of poverty is one you have to see to believe. But don't take my word for it. The Quality Community Council is holding two more community conversations in the Charlottesville area this Tuesday and Thursday, and more information about them can be found at www.charlottesville.org/qcc. Go on; see for yourself.

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