

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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Editorials

Rochester's Poverty Initiative
By Aaron H.

Leadership is the essential requirement to elevate people out of poverty. I think about the disappearance of the leaders who have close ties to our communities and who had the ability to think critically. Leaders on a national level, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and on a local level like Willie Lightfoot Senior have become a rarity. The absence of these leaders, not just in my community but also in all communities where poverty exists is significant.

Communication and the misunderstanding of differences have always created difficulties across neighborhoods in my

community. Having one or more neighborhoods feel that they are not part of the very community in which our neighborhoods exist causes residents to become outraged.

The ability to accomplish goals with a lack of available resources has always been an expertise of the poor residents in my community. The ability to maneuver resources has developed into a "professional" skill set learned from our everyday struggles to survive poverty.

The induction of Dr. Leonard Brock as the Director of Rochester's Poverty Initiative by Mayor Lovely Warren gives me new hope. I believe Dr. Brock is exactly the leader my community has been lacking. His resume demonstrates a rarity in the approach to this enormous problem.

It is my strong belief that people in my community want stability provided by jobs. Jobs provide self-sufficiency. I am not asking for a hand out, I am asking for the opportunity to be a productive member of my community. I want a good life. I want to achieve. I want to leave a heritage to my children that they will admire, one that will encourage them to be successful.

I ask all involved in the Poverty Initiative to address the needs of the people they are going to serve. I am part of that population.

Rochester's Poverty Initiative
By ShaAsia J.

In my community people don't see me. At times I feel as if I am a burden to society due to the simple fact that I was not employed for the year and a half that I engaged in criminal activities to remain stable.

I know I can be a great help, influence, and voice in my community if I chose to do the right things with my life and continue my education. The lack of jobs and opportunities make me despise my community. Stigmas and discrimination make me hate the establishment and give up. Poverty made me feel as if I had nothing to lose so why not risk my freedom for the things I needed but couldn't afford.

In my community I am no one. I am a mother struggling and living in poverty.

Writing for FOOD FOR THOUGHT gives me time to think and to express myself. It has given me a voice and a desire to change and make an impact. I'm learning that yes I may have done wrong and yes I am incarcerated, but this does not hinder me from thinking and from having an opinion on a topic that is dire in our community. Someone can only know poverty if she has lived it and gone hungry first hand.

The FOOD FOR THOUGHT group has me reconsidering my thought process about poverty, parenting, incarceration, and our community. It has opened my eyes to the vulnerability one feels when they succumb to poverty. How susceptible one is to incarceration by any means. Many may think otherwise but fighting poverty sometimes involves incarceration. It is simply a survival tactic.

I have learned to voice my concerns, admit my wrongs, and advocate for change.

No one ever asked me these questions. No one asked me if I needed help. Many have seen me steal, but no one has ever given me a hand. No one has asked me what I need. The system didn't give me a chance. It took me from my children. No one wants to hear me express myself. Everyone wants to see me punished.

Incarceration: Thoughts and Dreams

Poverty has dominated my community for decades. My community has learned to

adapt to poverty more so than to arrest it. The people in my community have strong beliefs in many areas. However, we stand divided on the pertinent issues of employment, education, and policing.

I believe better employment is the key to a better future. However employment needs to be accessible. Here in Rochester employment is in locations not accessible to everyone, only to those with reliable transportation. Using public transportation complicates the ability to be on time for work. In some cases public transportation gets us only partly to our destination and leaves us with a lengthy walk to get there on time. Public transportation, also, only frequents areas one bus an hour for eight hours, and in many cases public transportation does not travel to an area at all. Employment in accessible areas of the city would be a minute start to a major problem. This, however, is a step in the right direction and says the community cares. Lack of accessible employment is one of the contributors to poverty in our community.

In my community only one-third of the population is highly educated. When we examine this more closely and factor in failing schools and only a small percentage of those in our community have graduated from college, this is not only hurtful to our community, this damages our future. This is where our youth learn to adapt to failure. This is the frustration of our guardians, our families, our peers, and society. It becomes acceptable behavior not to attend school and to be rebellious. We are destroying our future from the continuous effect of failure while we propel discouragement directly into the hearts of our youth. This is another contribution to poverty in our community.

Policing in my community has changed and is destroying dreams. It has eroded like the oxidation of weathered metal. If I am considered a criminal this leaves me stuck in poverty. Considered both a criminal and being incarcerated bars us from employment and institutions of higher learning. It pushes us deeper into a poverty-ridden life where

another dream is successfully destroyed and another youth is shattered to pieces.

-Aaron H.

What Is Important To Me?

Before becoming a part of FOOD FOR THOUGHT I did not feel I was part of any community. There was no "our" or "my" community. My voice had been ignored. I belonged nowhere.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT has given me my voice back. It has given me a sense of belonging. The gap between me and society has gotten smaller.

In the past I was a functioning, productive member of society, appreciating the community I was a part of. However life threw a curve ball, society took me out and sat me on the bench apart from the rest. There was no longer any community.

Today as I sit here incarcerated I feel that it is a major task for us to try and be heard and to be a part of the community that exists outside of these walls. To most, they think they are not missing much, not from an incarcerated women.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT has afforded me the opportunity to change, the opportunity to be heard, the opportunity to show the true value of my voice and my experiences.

-Amanda M.

Learning about the college application process is important to me. So many of us know next to nil. My own self-interest motivates me. For years I have avoided the elephant in the room that is college. I lacked the initiative to take the bull by the horns. So many of us behind these walls do not know how to utilize our skills to apply to college.

-Brandon G.

I want to know what will help me become a better parent to my child. I want to learn how to become positive, supportive, and encouraging. I need support for my child to

ensure my child can break the cycle of incarceration.

-Joey G.

I had my son when I was seventeen years old. I was still a child myself. Everyday I asked myself would I be a good mother. I wondered if when my son grew up he would think I am a good parent. Parenting consists of so much. When I became a mother I became a nurse, a cook, a teacher, a housekeeper. I want my child to know I love him. I want my child to feel my love for him.

Being incarcerated I feel I have abandoned my duties as a mother. I am able to call, see, and write to him, but this is not what I call parenting. I am not there for him when he needs me the most. He is the one who suffers day by day.

-Jessica O.

My child wants me, but I'm behind these walls hurting. I need help, help to find out who I am and why I am hurting.

-Brenda H.

You may not know me, but you know of me. You've heard about me. You have seen me and possibly talked about me.

I want to see a way out, not a dream shattered by society.

I have lived in silence, learned it was a mistake trying to reach further. I ended up incarcerated.

Aaron H.

Reading other people's writing made an impact on me. When I read the words written by the men and women in here, it gave me another perspective on being incarcerated. As a woman I thought we had it much worse, but the men's writing shows me they suffer as much as women. To know that there are men and women who want to be part of their children's lives and our community lets me know we are looking to change.

It seems easy the way we do not want to re-offend. It is not. Being incarcerated

sometimes makes me feel as if no one understands.

To understand me is to know me or get to know me. I use FOOD FOR THOUGHT and writing to learn and to address issues common amongst all of us. Incarceration can be a learning experience.

Jessica O.

I am a female inmate. In terms of male and female inmates, women are typically the caregivers in a single parent household. With female incarceration on the rise, more children of incarcerated women will experience an upheaval in their lives than children of male inmates.

My children suffer material hardships and family instability with all of the turmoil and changes resulting from my being incarcerated. I know the sad statistic that my child is six times more likely to be incarcerated later in his life.

Research suggests that visiting is important and can contribute to post release success. Visits can be so stressful and unfriendly for a child when they visit their jailed parent. The setting does not lend itself to a warm reunion and the discomfort may be exacerbated by everyone else in the Visiting Room.

My suggestion is that upon completion of a Parenting Class while in here what about participation in a Saturday visit on alternate weekends to strengthen the bond between parents and children? We could show the Sesame Street DVD on children of incarcerated parents. We could share with our children how much they are loved and missed. If we could communicate and hold our children more, our children would begin to feel our love and we would begin to stabilize our families.

-Kelly F.

Job Hunting And Education With A Criminal Record

For too many Americans like me the burden of a criminal record and the easy accessibility of our records impose a debilitating and devastating obstacle when we apply for a job or apply for a higher education degree.

What does this mean to me? This means I am at high risk for re-offending. This means I am at high risk to live in poverty. Employment and education have been identified as two of several variables that keep people out of the criminal justice system. Solutions like "ban the box" or record sealing are not enough. They aren't optimal solutions, not in our current day when one's offenses easily become public record.

These are quick reflections when I think about my life after incarceration.

-Amanda M.

Having a criminal record is not easy. A crime makes life so uneasy. I am trying to make my life right, but there is no job for me in sight. It will be a struggle to fill out an application. I would like to get into school, too. I want to show and prove that even with a record I can succeed.

Javonte K.

Incarceration and Poverty

It starts with motivation of families, educating children, jobs, having positive influences in our lives. We need to believe in ourselves and in our children. We need to believe we can make it.

-Earl B.

Lack of an education, lack of jobs, and a future nowhere insight in Rochester are reasons for poverty.

We have to start by lowering the cost of living, like affordable housing in safe neighborhoods. We need to produce more jobs for minorities who do not have degrees. This will build our self-esteem, proving to ourselves we can take care of ourselves.

In Rochester we need patience and we need to learn from one other. Poverty will decrease when young men have fathers who are able to work and are not incarcerated. We need more fathers to be in their children's lives.

-Jose S.

I want to begin by saying that incarceration is a mental process. It kills your spirit, and it is very difficult to stay positive surrounded by negativity.

As far as education in Rochester, I believe that nowadays school is more of a fashion show rather than a place where people are motivated to be interested in learning. Kids don't listen to teachers. Kids listen to OG's, gangsters, and people who live the life they think is fascinating. So many kids are afraid to be themselves. They want to be characters.

It is important for kids to believe they have a future and there are rights and wrongs and what will happen to them if they choose to live the life. It is important for Rochester to show kids that education is a way out of poverty. It is important for every child to believe he or she has a future.

Rodney B.

I am a twenty-five year old female with an eight-year-old son serving a county year at MCF. I would like to find employment and enroll in college when I am released from incarceration. I do not want to be released to still face living in poverty.

Being that I have a criminal record I know things will be difficult. Statistics show the many obstacles for felons. The application process itself for employment and college is an obstacle. The applications ask if you have ever been convicted of a felony. I have been convicted of a felony. I am forced to check the box. Just by doing this it will be hard to get an interview or to get accepted into a college. That box should be banned so that people with criminal records, like myself, who need an education and a job, have a chance.

I think once accepted into a college an interviewer should ask that question. For employment, an employer can ask later in the application process to offer an individual a greater chance to prove himself/herself worthy.

We have to work to minimize discrimination by barring public and private employers from immediately asking about criminal convictions.

Education and employment decrease the poverty rate. According to *The New York Times* Editorial Board two thirds of convicted felons never complete the application process.

I am a Certified Nursing Assistant. I cannot work in my field due to my criminal background. The NYS Department of Health removed me from working and has asked me to provide documents to become eligible to work again. I have sought help LawNY to provide these documents. I have also worked with the Judicial Process Commission to assist me with getting a Certificate of Relief. I still have not completed the whole process, but I am determined.

When I leave here I plan to enroll in the Rochester Educational Opportunity Center to participate in their LPN program. I hope my criminal record will not jeopardize my chances of getting accepted. If I am accepted and if I don't have a Certificate of Relief, will my felony conviction hinder me in finding work?

Before my conviction I worked at a donut shop. The job did not pay enough to support my child and me. I struggled on a day-to-day basis due to the minimum wage. I want to have a shot at breaking the cycle of poverty in Rochester and not be judged by my criminal history.

-Jessica O.

What Would Have Kept Me From Coming to Jail?

My father was an alcoholic and a workaholic. I excelled in cooking, baseball, and music. We were a large family. My mother worked as well. My father was not around to keep me off the streets. He was in the streets all of his life. He took my oldest brother with him. I learned about the streets from both of them. I was introduced to alcohol and drugs at a very young age. I was arrested at twelve for assault. I beat up a fifteen-year-old paperboy who called me a "nigger." That word always makes me angry and hurts.

Forty years of alcohol, thirty years of almost every drug known to man, over one hundred fifty arrests, at least a dozen detox, rehab, and recovery programs. I believe my current situation is a real mental issue going back to the lack of adult guidance, especially my father.

-Anonymous

I needed to cry.
I was numb,
emotionally shut down.
Sometimes
I felt like I was incarcerated
for being broken.

-Anonymous

One thing I think that would have kept me from being in jail is to think before I speak. Self-control bit my tongue and let it bleed. I need to be in control of myself and not fall for an argument with fools. I need to be humble and still.

-Anonymous

I was a student addicted to Heroin. Who do I tell? Do I even tell someone? Who can help me? Will my father still love me?

I was not content and felt that something was missing. Something was missing. I had not found my niche; I had just earned a title.

What was I thinking? I'm fine. Look at what I have accomplished. I made it through school; I graduated. That was all that mattered. Everyone was so proud. We celebrated and planned for what was to come. It never came. My addiction continued and finally consumed me. Is there

help for me? I just needed one person, one person to really hear me.

Being incarcerated for eight months gave me insight about myself, an awareness of my passion to work with others and to provide a voice to those who are mute.

-Anonymous

I jumped from family member to family member. When my dad got out of prison, I went to live with him. I was always in trouble in school and at home. After my twelfth birthday, I was put in an institution by my father. He promised me he would come get me in forty-five days. No one came. From there, shelters to boys' homes.

I am now insecure, mistrusting, skeptical, and depressed. This turns in to anger and rage. I was put away and put away.

-Anonymous

I am financially unstable. This is the second time I have been incarcerated. The first time I was working at Wendy's, and I had just had my third child. Minimum wage was not enough to even keep up with diapers and wipes let alone rent and RG&E. Day to day needs were there and debt accumulated. I saw no way out. Shoes and clothes were out grown out left and right for three healthy children. I had to keep up, and I couldn't.

I stole for the stability to give my children what I believed they needed. I stole to fight the poverty I was trapped inside. I did not know how to get out. I know I have to work harder and do a better job as a provider. I know now doing anything illegal will hurt my three children and me. I have to fight poverty through education and employment. I am a mother who has to escape the trap of poverty.

-Anonymous

I am the child of an incarcerated parent. My father died in jail when he was thirty. He died of Cirrhosis of the Liver. I was angry. I always felt I had to be the person who took care of my little brother.

-Anonymous

I am a child of incarcerated parents. I was in school and waiting for graduation when I was arrested. Thinking before reacting could have been a way to prevent my arrest. I learned through being around negativity you become involved in the same wrongdoing. I think if I had been surrounded by positivity I would not be incarcerated.

-Anonymous

Poetry

Incarcerated Woman

I am a woman incarcerated,
waiting for my release.
I hide behind these walls,
my feelings buried beneath.
I'm in my best-dressed pink scrubs
and orange shoes.
These are my clothes now,
torn, tattered, and used.
Who am I,
an ID number?
I am simply another woman in here
who chose to commit a crime.
I am in their world,
their rules, their time.
I eat when they let me,
finish up when they say,
take a shower real quick
before they say it's too late.
I am not used to this.
I am a mother, a daughter, as sister,
a good friend, a survivor, a teacher,
a student.
I love my life;
I love my children's even more.
I love optimism;
I believe there's an open door.
I love motivation; I am burning with desire.
I crave a meaningful life,
I can almost catch fire,
a life where my children can attend college
and bravely stand
against statistics
and the burdens of my past.
I want my children to have educations
and careers.
I want my children to know friendship,
love and trust.
I have so many things to make up.
I'm in a fight with these walls.

When I leave I pray I won't have to start
from the beginning.
I may lose my house, my car, my clothes,
and my children
if the courts want it.
I may lose my mind, my sanity,
get out to no house, no money,
no food to eat.
Go to Social Services, they can barely help,
having small children,
they don't care either way.
I am thinking about what to do
to make it through another day.
These are all things I dread.
but I take into account.
It's a real life nightmare
I'm awake dreaming about.
16.2 percent of people
are extremely poor.
Mothers who are felons
cannot find a job,
not even good enough to clean a floor.
This isn't discussed,
it's acted unknown.
What kind of society
would allow women, children and men
not to have a home?
My heart aches, my mind races.
I am an incarcerated woman
what will I be released to?
-ShaAsia J.

"Some dreams hang in the air like smoke"
Lucille Clifton

No dream is far fetched,
it can be right in front of your face
lingering like smoke
or engraved in your subconscious.
You can either
Live to reach your dream,
or continue to fan it away.
Your dream will always remain
in your thoughts
sensed in your core,
your being,
your day-to-day activities.
The desire may subside,
but the dream will always be there.
The fire may go,
but the smoke will linger.
-ShaAsia J.



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