

A Cultural Experience: Poverty 101 Through Mary O'Donnell's Eyes

My name is Mary O'Donnell and I am a 72-year old woman. My husband passed recently, and the only part of him I have left is our son. I have very little money, and I feel with the economy hit so hard recently that I will be unable to take care of myself. I have multiple health problems, but one that truly affects me would be my eating habits. I feel that I am limited to certain foods that are soft, but because of this they are very bland. I have to pay rent monthly for my apartment, it is only \$250, however, to me this is a lot compared to what my husband and I used to pay for our first homes. On top of this, I have to pay \$50 monthly for utilities and \$75 for my phone calls to my son. Since my husband died, I receive a small portion of his pension which is \$200. I also receive \$250 in social security benefits a month and I do not have to pay taxes. So in total for a month's income I have \$450, and after all of the expenses are paid I have \$75 for the month and that is not even \$19 a week for food. Luckily, I have free transportation with my assisted living facility's van service.

I appreciate my benefits, my lowered housing payments and transportation resources. My major stresses are my health, money, worrying about my son, and not having my husband anymore. Ever since my husband died I don't know where to go to for help, he always knew what to do. My biggest joy is talking to my son, but I am always grateful when I am able to pay my bills but actually have money leftover as well. I have no time for simple things at certain times of the day because I have to plan strategically where I go with my transportation.

I talked to my son earlier last week and he suggested that I go to DES to apply for cash assistance or food stamps. I went there, filled out an application and waited for hours to be seen,

but I was never helped and had to leave because my van service had a specific time to be back and it is 35 miles away from our apartments. I tried calling the multiple numbers they had given me on the application for an interview but no one has answered because it is always busy. Sometimes when I call, I get an automated message and it hangs up on me. I have a few days before my whole application expires and I am unable to communicate with anyone because they are always busy. I had the van service drive me to the community dining room which is also 35 miles away, and they said they couldn't accept me because I did not live within their district. They are the closest community dining room to my apartment. I do not know what to do, or who to go to. I don't understand how this happened to me because my husband and I always had a beautiful home, a car, and we never went hungry. Medical bills have taken everything, and I will never ask my son for money because I couldn't bear the thought of being a burden on him. I just wish that with all of the years my husband and I worked and gave back to the community that there would be a better system or at least more assistance. I just feel that I am only a number in the system, and that I am not recognized or valued at all.

As a future teacher I expect to have students in my classroom that might have grandparents in this same situation. With something this seriously it could potentially influence the child's behavior in the classroom. I will get to know each of my students and I will try to get to know their families. I can communicate with a student's family about their behavior and perhaps suggest they spend a little time talking about their family situation. I will do this as tactful and respectful as possible. However, some parents might still take this as being insensitive or think of me as a so-called "snoop" but ultimately my interest is in the child's health, well-being, and their learning experience. A student dealing with this will most likely be emotional

and even distracted by everything going on with their family. I think school will be great for them because they will enjoy the feeling having some control in the classroom. By asking for the parents to participate in their work at home, I can ensure that they are doing something together. Also, a way to make sure they are not behind in learning, the parents and I could set up appointments before or after school for me to help the student finish their work. Overall, I will try to give my student and their family as much support as possible, but also I promise to give their child a safe and fun learning environment. If I am unable to help my student, and the parents confess to me they are not sure how to approach the situation, we can always ask for help and guidance from other resources available at the school. I could always pair up my students to help each with their schoolwork, or if they are in a similar obstacle they can talk to one another about it. I will always have hope for my students and their families, but either way I will do my best to help them through this. I will make sure this will not affect my teaching and the learning of my class.

In conclusion, life is hard for everyone and we all have challenges. As a teacher, it is even harder because there are multiple students in the classroom that are most likely going through something very difficult. I cannot take away their pain, but I can help them through it and try my best to have them transfer those negative feelings into something healthy to help them. I plan on my class having awareness of poverty and to recognize different challenges for families. To me this will help them persevere through their experiences, but also try to help those in need in the future. My main goal will be to give my students a safe, fun, and stable learning environment.