

# Reflections on Social Work, Social History, and Practice Experience: “It Ain’t the Same If You’re Poor”

Alice Skirtz

**Abstract:** Reflection on more than four decades of social work practice with poor people and poverty-stricken communities reveals necessary and sufficient connections between micro and macro practice, but finds gaps in social work practice knowledge in settings where corporate interests obviate democratic participation in public policy decision-making. Practice experience is found to have surprising connections to both the author’s social history and to socio-economic-political systems now stifled by privatization supported by diminishing democratic procedures at several levels of governance. Case illustrations from the author’s practice provide richly detailed accounts of lived experiences from casework and advocacy practice in settings where social welfare policies reach deeply and effectively to meet human need, while at the same time revealing grave social-economic-political injustices. Mainstream powers and governance are inoculated from social work advocacy, and community organization is impotent. On behalf of clients and communities suffering social injustices of poverty, discrimination, and erasure from communities, the author calls for social workers, social work educators and researchers to refine and renew social work knowledge (including poverty knowledge) and practice knowledge (especially advocacy) to empower work for social justice.

**Keywords:** economic poverty, poverty-stricken communities, privatization, socio-economic-political injustices

The words were stunning. “We just want them, the residents, out of there.” The “them” are single low-income women. The “out of there” refers to their permanent homes at Cincinnati’s Anna Louise Inn (ALI) where some had lived for as long as 30 years (at the time the shortest tenancy was 11 months). The words are those of a high ranking official of the Western & Southern Financial Group (W&S) on the occasion of the company’s initial opposition to City Council’s unanimous decision to forward approval of Cincinnati Union Bethel’s (CUB) request for Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) to Ohio Housing Finance Agency (OHFA) for renovation of the agency’s ALI (United States District Court, Southern District of Ohio, 2013).

A four-year battle beginning in 2011 for ownership of the historic Anna Louise Inn residence was orchestrated by the powerful W&S privately held company in contentious public encounters concerning funding, zoning, historic preservation, and economic development. W&S launched strategically organized attempts not only to remove low-income women residents but also to nullify and undermine fully vetted democratic proceedings of City Council, the Historic Preservation Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, and Ohio Housing Finance Agency. In other strategies, W&S sought judicial overturn of public decisions in the Hamilton County Court of Common Pleas, and ALI women residents sought relief in the United States District Court United States District Court, Southern District of Ohio (2013). In simultaneous inflammatory public discourse through print and broadcast news media as well as public meetings, W&S launched a vigorous PR-style campaign demeaning both the residents and the owners of ALI to

advance the company's goal of purchasing the building for purposes of economic development, as if it was entitled to do so. The building was not for sale.

I was privileged to work with CUB in this unthinkable hostile takeover, providing some research for the residents' Fair Housing case. What I found crystallized both my affective and cognitive understandings of decades of social work practice, and surprising connections to my own social history. What follows here is a reflective review of those decades of social work practice. I ask readers' forbearance with the tedium of case detail, but know of no other way to convey the often unseen lived experiences of economically poor people and their communities found in casework and advocacy relationships and illustrative of broader injustices engendered by economic, racial, gendered, or political status.

By 2012, as the Anna Louise Inn (ALI) residence became the object of the aggressive takeover by the privately held Western & Southern Financial Services (W&S) the company had the audacity to spin public discourse to assert the building was essential to the economic development of the entire Downtown area, indeed for the economic vitality of the entire City of Cincinnati. This historic residence for single women was given to the City in 1909 by Mr. and Mrs. Charles P. Taft (half-brother of the President), and it was named after their daughter Anna Louise Taft Semple and placed under the stewardship of Cincinnati's oldest social service agency, Cincinnati Union Bethel (CUB). For more than 100 years, CUB has provided permanent housing at the Anna Louise Inn located adjacent to the Taft homestead and the beloved publicly owned Lytle Park in the Downtown residential neighborhood. In recent years CUB added Off the Streets™ (OTS) permanent supportive housing for women recovering from prostitution. The Downtown residential neighborhood where ALI is located has been coveted for years by developers for upscale economic development, and it is especially attractive as the Taft's home is now the Taft Museum of Art adjacent to the public green space of the City's Lytle Park. Both are but a few yards from the George Grey Barnard 11' bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln known in the art world as the "Taft Lincoln" (Moffatt, 1998). The "spin" contrived and perpetuated by developers continued with the twisted narrative that this lovely, livable residential neighborhood adjacent to the Park was crime-filled due to the prostitutes who lived at ALI. Actually few documented police citations were for Part I crimes or felonies, most were for parking and traffic violations.

Such discourse ramping up "crime, drugs, and sex" narratives have plagued the City for decades, often aggressively directed at the neighboring Over-the-Rhine (OTR) community. This "Old World" community adjacent to Downtown is particularly attractive to developers, as it has the largest collection of Italianate architecture in the country as well as arts venues like the prestigious Music Hall built in 1895 for the May Festival choral music extravaganza and home for the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. A major deterrent to development initiatives revolves around how to remove tenants from those historic Italianate buildings that have housed generations of economically poor people. Since the 1970's many lived in more than 1,000 apartments owned by a single landlord with HUD mortgages with project-based subsidies. OTR is the locus of much of my social work practice, and hence many of the stories that follow. Current iterations of economic development of OTR and erasure of poor residents are orchestrated by corporate interests including and led by those who sought and

acquired the Anna Louise Inn.

Resolution to the W&S hostile takeover of ALI was eventually achieved "out of court" in 2015. ALI was relocated to a new building providing permanent housing for low income women (including the prostitutes) with support of public and private funds; and, W&S promptly began renovation to make ALI a select service hotel. By virtue of timing and the social, civic, and political contexts surrounding the machinations of W&S v ALI case, it serves as a template for what I see as an implicit "disconnect" between lived realities for those who are economically poor and veritable realities of powerful mainstream, mostly corporate influences that openly and shamelessly steer socio-economic-political decisions in directions favoring those who are affluent.

### **Reflections on Social Work Practice at the "Disconnect"**

Reflection on my social work practice, informed by the dynamics of the W&S v ALI case, reveals enduring variations of themes of exclusion and discrimination of poor people at the socio-economic-political "disconnect." This is a Cincinnati story with historic and current "disconnects" between those who experience economic poverty and mainstream powerful private corporate interests aided by increasing privatization of public responsibilities. The "disconnect" has deep historical roots related to local governance, neighborhoods and places like the public Fountain Square (permits available for seasonal events, civic celebrations, free speech and protests), the Anna Louise Inn, the now-demolished Wesley Chapel Methodist Church, SRO residential hotels, civic institutions, social agencies, and many women's civic institutions and clubs. In this story, I land firmly on the side of those who are poor, and on the other side of the "disconnect" are corporate giants like Procter & Gamble (P&G) and Western & Southern Financial Group (W&S), along with private developers and corporate/economic entities who are supported and enabled by public policies with insidious instigation and promotion of inequities, discrimination, and removal of poor people from their communities. Unfortunately, our local proclivity is to yield planning and decision-making to corporate and business interests over people interests, thus valuing a market economy over differences that make a community inclusive.

My acquaintance with this Cincinnati story begins in 4th grade when the Ohio Conference of the Methodist Church appointed my dad to pastor historic Wesley Chapel Methodist Church then located Downtown at 322 East 5th Street across from the Cincinnati Masonic Temple and Taft Auditorium (now the Taft Theatre). The huge Wesley Chapel church built in 1831, with a sanctuary seating 1,200 was demolished in 1972 for a garden and P&G's world headquarters encompassing most of two city blocks on Fifth Street, embraced by hi-rise office buildings housing corporate offices.

Wesley Chapel's huge 10-room parsonage adjacent to the church on 5th Street was not available for the pastor's family, as it had been leased to the Cincinnati Board of Education as an annex to the over-crowded Guilford Elementary School, which was just two blocks away on 4th Street at Lytle Park across the park from the Anna Louise Inn and the Taft Museum. Wesley Chapel's nearby institutional neighbors were: Allen Temple AME (the

building once the home of Bené Israel Cincinnati's first Jewish congregation), the AME congregation historically active in the Underground Railroad Movement (Works Progress Administration [WPA], 1987); Sacred Heart Italian Catholic Church; St. Xavier Church and High School; the American Red Cross Headquarters; and the Masonic Temple. Nearby were the Fenwick Residence for 200 single men, the Fontbonne Residence for 150 single women, and the Anna Louise Inn. All of those buildings, except St. Xavier Church and the Masonic Temple/ Taft Theatre are gone to economic development, eliminated through the City's use of powers of eminent domain and by private property acquisition for development by the City for highways and infrastructure, and by major corporations for office and world headquarters buildings.

My family had previously lived in Lima, Ohio (population 50,000), and coming to Cincinnati (population 504,000) and Wesley Chapel was a big deal, a much larger city and a larger, more diverse church. On Sundays, Wesley Chapel held proper Methodist formal worship complete with a large choir and paid soloists from the College Conservatory of Music, and a congregation that included families who lived in Downtown "slums" between the church and the Ohio River as well as nearby city neighborhoods who valued downtown church membership. They were joined by a large contingent of adults who lived in downtown residential hotels. These working folks (singles and couples) who lived in SRO hotels worshipped at Wesley Chapel with fellow church member the Gibson Art Company's poet Helen Steiner Rice known as "the poet laureate of greeting cards" (Brown, 2011). Mrs. Rice lived at the nearby prestigious Gibson Hotel as did a few other affluent professionals who were lifelong Downtown residential hotel dwellers and lifelong members of Wesley Chapel.

Sunday morning worship and Sunday School classes at Wesley Chapel were followed by evening worship when the congregation came from dense tenements between the Ohio River and 4th Street extending from the East End to the West End—including those many families whose children were "overcrowding" Guilford School, and several dozen women who lived at the Anna Louise Inn and worked in downtown offices and restaurants, or clerked in retail stores. Many of these evening congregants held a place in the city, but in their hearts they longed to go home to the mountains. They came for a less formal worship style of preaching and singing that reflected their mostly Appalachian heritage. They turned off the pipe organ and tuned stringed and acoustical instruments for pickin' and singin' good old country hymns reminiscent of home. I can still hear those haunting harmonies of country gospel songs in that huge Methodist Church sanctuary where President William Henry Harrison's funeral was held in 1841, and where former-President John Quincy Adams delivered the dedicatory address for the Observatory in 1843 (WPA, 1987).

Since the parsonage was used for school, Wesley Chapel's Official Board rented a house on Dana Avenue across from the Jesuit's Xavier University for the newly appointed pastor and his family, where we came to know religious diversity in the remarkable neighborhood of Evanston. Our neighbors to the west were the retired Groenemanns who had raised their seven children in their home and were members of St. Mark's Catholic Church. My Mother's deeply-rooted Protestant skepticism about the Papacy was confounded by the genuine faithfulness of Mrs. Groenemann's daily attendance at Mass on campus at Xavier University. Neighbors to the east were the Greenbaums: I don't remember which Jewish congregation claimed them as members,

but these friendly neighbors were a real delight for my younger brother and me because Fred and Fannie Greenbaum owned the F&F Pet Store Downtown on Court Street. On many weekends they brought animals to their home rather than leave them unattended in an empty Downtown store. We played with hamsters, kittens, purebred puppies, parakeets and gorgeous parrots, and sometimes adorable little monkeys. What kids wouldn't love that! My Dad and Mr. Greenbaum, both amateur historians, shared their love of history in many conversations over the side-yard fence working their way through major historical events like the Holocaust, the war in Korea, and current McCarthy era/Cold War scary things like nuclear testing and Communists. As Wesley Chapel was Downtown, we spent time Downtown, often in the main Cincinnati Public Library, and on one occasion when we went to the United States Post Office in the Federal Building near the church, we encountered a crowd of Presbyterians who were boldly singing that bastion of Protestant hymnody, "Faith of Our Fathers," while their fiercely pacifist pastor the Reverend Maurice McCrackin, was being sentenced to prison in Federal Court for income tax evasion in protest of the war—of all wars—and nuclear testing.

Fast forward twenty years to when I returned to Cincinnati as an adult and subsequently was hired by The Salvation Army as a social worker to work with a citywide clientele, many from Over-the-Rhine (OTR), refugees from Downtown slums that were cleared for highway and economic development. Clients in my family service caseload were astonishingly poor, most working, many poorly housed, and an emerging group at risk of homelessness, as affordable housing options had nearly vanished with highway and economic development. Part of my social work duties came to include supervision of the Salvation Army's Emergency Home for Women and Children, the City's oldest shelter in continuous operation Downtown since 1895. And there they were: many now-elderly folks from Wesley Chapel, their children and grandchildren joined by their former neighbors, African-American families who had been displaced from the West End just like Appalachian families had from Downtown for economic and highway development. And that was the beginning of practice experience with those who are economically poor and whose lived experiences were at what I came to know as "disconnect"—poor people and their communities at one side, powerful mainstream, mostly corporate interests colluding with legislative and regulatory entities of democratic governance at the other. Both sides provide cognitive and affective understandings of social welfare policy, social work practice and a myriad of unforeseeable challenges to the democratic process and civic participation as evidenced by the *W&S v ALI* case to remove the powerless, economically poor of our communities. I now know that relationships with economically poor people of my practice experience forthrightly provide powerful, disheartening insight into discrimination and social injustice emanating from the corporate interest side of the "disconnect," if I can listen well enough to "get it." Begging readers' tolerance, a few case examples reveal how this comes and goes.

### **Social Work Practice at the "Disconnect"**

#### *Leaving the Baby*

My social work experience is richly and deeply informed by young moms like Maria who walked nearly two miles to my office wearing a cotton dress, a thin sweater covered by a denim

jacket, and flip-flop sandals protecting her from the 30-degree snowy weather. She had missed a Food Stamp recertification appointment and had neither bus fare nor a winter coat. She was hungry and had no food, nor milk for her baby. She was shaking with the cold, her shivering calmed in the warmth of the office as we talked of her plight. Tears rolled down her cheeks when she revealed she had left her infant in the care of a neighbor she barely knew to protect him from the bitter weather.

### *Three Meals Every Day*

There was Desmond, whose "blended" family—her kids, his kids, and our kids numbering seven—had been served by our Family Service agency for years through intermittent emergencies, summer sleep-away camp and Christmas toys, marital counseling, utility assistance to prevent shut-off, purchase of a hearing aid for one child, and school truancy prevention serving their chaotic but mostly self-supporting circumstances. Desmond finished high school, turned 19, somehow found a day labor job, and soon had his own ramshackle car. For a boisterous encounter with the law that added 10 days to his sentence, he was sent to adult jail to serve 30 days. When he returned from doing time, he came to see me, revealing his self-described stupidity of mouthing off to the police officer who arrested him. But it was his poignant comment about jail that touched my heart. With genuine rather childlike astonishment he said "You know Miz [Author], at jail they have three meals every day...yes ma'am every day." In all of his 19 years, he had rarely had three meals every day.

### *Getting "Happy"*

Marlene came to the Family Service agency in crisis precipitated by her husband William's accident on his laborer's job that landed him in the County Rehab Hospital with a broken back. His care was not covered by insurance, as his employer had been paying him "under the table" and had no insurance, not even state Workers Compensation coverage. To keep the family going, Marlene was trying desperately to retain her hourly wage employment at a nursing home and care for the couple's two children. The younger of the children was 10-year-old Danny, who often came to the office from his nearby school to meet his Mom and get a ride home instead of taking the school bus. The family's situation worsened when Marlene's nearly worn out car parked legally on the street (her sole transportation to work and hospital visits) was struck by a runaway truck, totaling it and instigating an insurance snafu of unimaginable complications. A previous owner had reported the old car stolen, a fact never corrected in the BMV database so the trucker's insurance company was refusing to pay the claim to Marlene. Somehow we got that resolved, William's condition improved, and by the time of discharge from hospital, he had been certified for disability benefits. Marlene got a replacement car, and the family was reunited. At our final visit Marlene advised that Danny would be joining us as he had something to give me—it was a delightful two-inch ceramic bearded elf bearing a yellow flower and tipping his pointy green hat. We had a round of hugs. Danny said he liked to come to the office with his Mom because "Well...she got like all, uh...peaceful and stopped crying." It was after Danny was gone that I realized the figurine is a characterization of the dwarf "Happy" from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. "Happy" sits on my desk to date.

### *The First 50 Years*

There was elderly Mr. B. who came to my office on the occasion of his 55th wedding anniversary seeking "the fixin's for a cake" so he and his bed-ridden bride of 55 years could celebrate their anniversary. While I prepared a voucher for the local Kroger store, he revealed the troubling news that the building where he and his wife lived had been sold to developers, and he and his wife (and her home health aide's twice-weekly visits) would have to move out within 45 days from yesterday. They had rented their affordable apartment 20 years earlier in one of the first developments with HUD building-based subsidies and now needed to find another place to live as the landlord's mortgage was expiring, the building was to be purchased by a developer for upscale condominiums. As a condition of the sale, the building was to be vacated of all tenants, and no relocation assistance was included. Our casework plan required an assist from the Legal Aid Society housing attorneys, and we secured an appropriate apartment for Mr. and Mrs. B. On the visit for the "fixins," Mr. B. asked if I was married. To my affirmative response he lovingly shook his index finger in my direction admonishing me, "Little lady, just know that the first fifty years of marriage are easier than the second."

These case vignettes are not unique to my social work practice and are probably familiar to many practitioners. They provide exposure to lived experiences of poor people often in difficult circumstances that would rarely occur for those more affluent. These cases reflect essential, life-sustaining social welfare policies operative in real time, in real neighborhoods with related needs for assistance and authentic relationships - income maintenance eligibility from AFDC/TANF to Food Stamps; social insurance from Workers Compensation to Social Security; health care from CHIP and Medicaid to county rehabilitation care and Medicare; vouchers from child day care stipends to housing subsidies to job training.

Upon deeper reflection, I realize that others of my economically poor clients experienced nearly unbearable social injustices unreachable by social welfare policies, services, and programs. As casework relationships took me deeper into the lived experiences of my clients and our communities, so my outrage deepened at astonishing social injustices and exclusion of poor people from mainstream community, not only unreachable by social welfare policies and services, but immune to social work advocacy and community organization best practices.

### **Economic Poverty at the "Disconnect": It Ain't the Same When You're Poor**

#### *Yeah Right, Ambulatory Schizophrenic*

Early on in my practice, nearing the end of "deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill" from state mental hospitals there was "Fifi," a flamboyantly dressed client my mental health colleagues diagnosed with the rubric "ambulatory schizophrenic." She was known around the neighborhood as a lovable, laughable "street character" for her unusual attire and ostentatious behavior that spared no one, especially those in power. Her outrageous wardrobe matched her behavior—white majorette boots, a red velvet mini-skirt, a lacy blouse, a trailing yards-long wedding dress veil, and a colorful wig topped off with a Cincinnati Reds baseball cap. Although never homeless, Fifi was a regular attendee at soup kitchens, Hamilton County Court

proceedings, political campaigns (she had attempted to enter the New Hampshire Presidential primary in 1968, running as Princess Running Waters Red Legs St. Swanee) (Freeman, 2007) and City Council meetings. Taking full advantage of "public comment" opportunities, she could bring an assembly to raucous laughter with her uncanny ability to point out foibles of elected officials or pompous language of proposed legislation.

To avoid arrest under then current municipal codes for "vagrancy" Fifi daily pinned a \$1 bill on her blouse or coat lapel, accurately reasoning that as she was not impecunious she couldn't possibly be a vagrant. She enjoyed pointing this out by thumping her finger on her \$1 clearly announcing, "Legal-tender-verified-by-the-Federal-Government." This proved to be important during the 1976 trial of Larry Flynt and *Hustler* magazine, of which the outcome was an indictment and a guilty verdict for obscenity and racketeering. Each day during several weeks of the trial in the Hamilton County Court of Common Pleas, Mr. Flynt parked his sporty white Corvette in the truck zone just outside my office window, opening the door for his wife, Althea Leasure, to escort her across the street to the courthouse. On each day of the trial, Fifi appeared near the Corvette with shopping bags filled with copies of *Hustler* magazines to follow the Flynts to the courthouse where she distributed his magazine. Legal tender pinned to her shirt seemed to protect Fifi from arrest for vagrancy, or perhaps because no uniformed Officer or Deputy dared risk being seen with a *Hustler* when on duty. Somehow her right to "distribute" obscene materials remained unchallenged; after all, she wasn't selling anything. Flynt was found guilty of obscenity and racketeering and was spared tickets for parking his Corvette in the truck zone and Fifi distributed her entire supply of magazines. Fifi told me after the trial, "Larry was a nice boy who should never have been tried like that because he never forced anyone to read his magazines."

Years later, Flynt was prosecuted again by Hamilton County for distribution of material harmful to juveniles (Ohio Revised Code [ORC] §2907.31), without Fifi's magazine distribution. Fifi's foresight and interpretation of the City's vagrancy code heralded community-wide attention to vagrancy and free speech when the City passed laws to prohibit panhandling and to establish drug exclusion zones in OTR, laws that voided vagrancy codes but stifled free speech and freedom to move about, and ultimately did not withstand judicial review.

### *Utilities Off and On*

Long time Cincinnati residents Antonio and Bessie and their four school-age sons lived in OTR, each of their families of origin having been displaced from the historic African-American community of the West End during urban renewal (some say "negro removal") to build interstate highways. Antonio worked full-time in the scrap yard (now it would be called a recycling business) where his father had worked for a generation; his mother and Bessie's mother as many African-American women of their generation, were domestic workers for prominent, white Cincinnati families. Bessie worked part-time in a school cafeteria, part-time of a day and of the year so she could be at home when the boys came home from school, and during school holidays and summer vacation. I knew the family for seasonal services: sending the boys to summer camp, lots of sports-oriented Christmas toys, and a summer reading program for Antonio, Jr. when he was transitioning from elementary to junior high school. Their finances worked if



everything happened as planned: Antonio got to work his scheduled 40 hours each week, Bessie got to work her regularly scheduled 28 hours, and Bessie's documentation and papers for the county welfare worker's quarterly redetermination of eligibility for Food Stamps and CHIP came off with no problems—Bessie prayed, "Please Jesus, let there be nothing missing and the caseworker makes no mistakes!"

Financial catastrophe ravaged the budget when the scrap yard lost a huge contract selling scrap metal to foreign markets and Antonio lost hours. Bessie fainted at work and was not allowed to return without a doctor's note and had to wait for a standby clinic appointment waiting nearly three weeks, and three weeks with no pay. The landlord was willing to wait for rent, but then it happened—the utilities were shut-off. The weather was still cold but beyond the utility winter shut-off rule. The family unified efforts to raise cash for reconnection: Antonio, Sr. begged his boss for extra hours to no avail; he and Bessie tried to sell plasma at the local commercial "blood bank" (Bessie was rejected for high blood pressure, Antonio got \$18), and Antonio, Jr. and his brothers collected aluminum cans to sell for a few dollars. Then it happened, Cincinnati Gas & Electric Co. (CG&E, now Duke Energy) shut-off both gas and electric service.

Antonio's desperation took hold. At nightfall, after a cold supper and a "game" with the boys to sleep in their sleeping bags for warmth, just like being at camp, he opened the window and crawled out to the metal fire escape to see if he could figure out the wiring and a way to bypass the meter to reconnect electric service, and tomorrow try to figure out something to restore gas services. With flashlight and tools in hand, Antonio went to work to "hotwire" the meter. An enormous bolt of electric current struck Antonio the instant he made contact and he was badly shocked and burned. The paramedics of the responding life squad thought he was dead. They raced him to the hospital and miraculously he lived.

Antonio, Sr. was hospitalized for long-term, intensive treatment for his severe burns and injuries from the electrical shock. Bessie and the boys were eventually evicted and came to the Emergency Home Shelter for Women and Children without Antonio, Jr., who at age 16 fled to stay with his cousins away from those little kids in the shelter, and so none of the guys at school would know he was in a homeless shelter. He handled these unbearable circumstances finding solace in break-dancing, and as Bessie later realized, he was "running with the wrong crowd" and skipping school. (Several years later Antonio, Jr. was killed in the cross fire of someone else's botched drug deal.)

Then this unbearably sad situation took an unexpected turn on the day of Antonio, Sr.'s release from hospital: the Deputy Sheriff appeared with a warrant for his arrest for felony utility fraud and took him directly to jail from the hospital. Bessie got word of the arrest at the shelter, crying out in disbelief, her agony palpable: "Oh dear Jesus, he was only trying to help us! He hurt no one but his-self!" Sobbing as she told the boys what happened, barely able to say what we all felt, "He paid the price in pain in that hospital bed...it was so scary...we know it was wrong, and it nearly killed him, but he did for us...for a few hundred dollars when we had nothing." We were all in tears. The next day there was a trial and Antonio was sent to jail for six months, convicted of utility fraud. A felony.

A few weeks later, a man from a prominent affluent Cincinnati family was also charged with utility fraud by the Cincinnati Gas & Electric Company for theft of electric services at the Riverfront Coliseum, built to be the home of professional basketball and hockey teams, and the venue for rock concerts and ice shows. He was a lawyer and majority owner-manager of the Coliseum and had successfully by-passed the electric meters of the Coliseum allowing his company to avoid paying for electric service for a period of time long enough to incur charges of more than \$750,000. Investigation also revealed a similar theft of water from the Cincinnati Water Works during the same period bringing the total of the thieveries to nearly \$1m. He was convicted of both thefts committed by tinkering with the meters. His *modus operandi* was later revealed when the Coliseum was sold to new owners, a sports writer noted "the former Coliseum president spent six years ripping off CG&E stealing \$750,000 worth of electricity...at first he stuck magnets on the meters, when that didn't work, he simply turned the meters off." (Daugherty, 1993). He was defended before the Court by a law firm as prominent as his own family and their company. He was found guilty of both thefts, his company repaid CG&E, and he avoided jail as the judge reduced his five-year sentence to probation for utility fraud. A felony.

### *Prostitution and Principle*

Under the headline, "Dead prostitute testified against cop," the *Cincinnati Post* news account begins, "Nikia Mapp's short, sad life was mostly spent in the dark corners of Over-the-Rhine" (Garretson, 2003). Although I knew several members of Nikia's extended family, I had not met Nikia, but wept with her kin and most of our OTR community at her tragic and complicated death. My despair deepened when I found "RIP Nikia" signs scrawled on several buildings on Elm Street near where Nikia lived: Huge block letters spray painted by neighborhood teens bringing me a visceral understanding of both "Rest in Peace - RIP" and realities of life in the 'hood. The most poignant of the "RIP Nikia" signs was at the Pool Room, 1737 Elm Street: painted-over fading but perfectly executed graphics of a scantily clad woman in stylized bondage superimposed on top of a male figure, somewhere between S&M and *Hustler* magazine, but 13 blocks north of Larry Flynt's Books, Magazines & Gifts on Elm Street. As the agonizing realities of Nikia's death began to sink in, I began to "git da' message" of our hip-hop generation graffiti artists and their lived experiences in OTR's 'dark corners' and the emerging gentrification of residential streets and disappearing affordable housing.

The "RIP Nikia" signs were but six blocks from where youthful OTR artists had scribed "The Rose that Grew from Concrete 2 Produce RIP, M.T.A."—artistically scripted on a vacant building on McMicken Street, paraphrasing legendary Tupac Shakur's famous poem "The Rose that Grew from Concrete...when no one else even cared" (Shaw & Shakur, 1996). It was autographed not with initials, but hip-hop lingo MTA - "More Than Anything." And another 'message' nearby, perhaps more explicative of Nikia's life and death, was more excruciating: "All Good Niggas Die in Violence."

Nikia's body was found in the dark of a bitterly cold night on January 12, 2003, set afire under a construction shed on Stark Street, so badly burned the responding police officers had difficulty determining if it was a woman or man. It was Nikia, age 30, lifelong resident of OTR who was

brave enough to testify against a cop who offered to accept sex *in lieu* of arresting her for prostitution. She had consented to avoid jail; he threatened to kill her if she talked. Nikia was strong enough and brave enough to testify against former Police Officer Patrick Knight, who was indicted and convicted on two counts of bribery and one of sexual battery for his actions.

We will never know how Nikia found the courage to testify to three occasions that Officer Knight demanded sex *in lieu* of arrest, threatening to kill her and her family if word got out. County Prosecutor Chris McEvilley pressed the charges against him. Judge Robert S. Kraft found him guilty on all counts with Nikia as witness. Ms. McEvilley spoke to the press of her respect for Nikia, "She got nothing out of it...recognize her courage to stand up and tell what happened against a respected Police Officer...regardless of her lifestyle, recognize her as a principled and courageous person." The prosecutor and the poet would have been in agreement on this one, as Tupac's words paraphrased by the OTR hip-hop artists were, "All good niggers, all the niggers who change the world die in violence. They don't die in regular ways." (Shaw & Shakur, 1996). Nikia did not die in 'a regular way.' If only the Anna Louise Inn Off the Streets™ program for recovering prostitutes had been available then!

Nikia's murder remained unsolved for a decade until Jessie Collins was indicted in 2013 on two counts of murder, one each for felonious assault, gross abuse of a corpse, and tampering with evidence. Knight was still incarcerated. RIP Nikia.

### *Violating Nellie, but Not the Law*

Teenager Nellie came to the Emergency Shelter for Women and Children, but a few days after her thirteenth birthday, holding her newborn infant daughter for us to see, as if showing off a new pair of shoes. She and baby Samantha were referred by University Hospital social workers who had been unable to find a responsible adult for Nellie's discharge from the Maternity Ward and were stunned when the father of the baby appeared. His name was Harold, and he proudly proclaimed paternity, asked to sign the birth certificate, saying, "Pretty good for an old guy of 53 years." As the hospital social workers couldn't find a parent or guardian for Nellie and the baby, they made a referral to Children's Protective Services, and brought both to the shelter so together we could sort out this heartbreaking case. When I searched the shelter records, I found that Nellie and her mother had been in the shelter several years earlier after an eviction from an OTR apartment that was the only place then-10 year-old Nellie had ever lived. We found a new apartment in a six-unit building, Mom went to work second shift, Nellie went back to school to begin the fifth grade, but now at 13 she had not yet finished the sixth grade. It was at this new apartment that Nellie met next door neighbor Harold whom she visited nightly while her Mom went to work, first sharing pizzas and cheeseburgers, eventually Harold's bed.

Nellie still looked like a child: Her strawberry blond curly hair fell over her eyes in long ringlets that she repeatedly tried to pull behind her ears, her freckles darkened from time spent during the summer at the recreation center swimming pool, and just six weeks before Samantha was born. There is something gut-wrenching with each admission of a minor mother cum-newborn to the shelter, but this one was extraordinarily disquieting. Nellie was just thirteen and Harold was 53, a 40-year age difference that meant Nellie was impregnated when she was 12, 40-years age

difference! This case was finally sorted out, Nellie and Samantha were “placed” in protective care with Nellie’s mother —not Harold—who moved to another county away from Harold under court-ordered supervision by that county’s protective services for both minor mother and child.

This case continued to haunt me, especially when I learned Harold could not be charged with anything illegal, not even statutory rape, as the “age of consent for sexual activity” in Ohio at the time was 13 (ORC §2907.02 - ORC §2907.04). A commonplace notion of “statutory rape” that having sex with anyone under age 16 is rape - victimizing by the “status” of age - was a myth, a misconception, NOT the law. In Ohio, the “age of consent” was 13, and as Samantha’s birth was to a 13 year-old mother, Harold escaped the law. I had to say it out loud to believe it, and then say it again. This meant that Harold’s sexual contact with 12 year-old Nellie did not violate the law, he had only violated Nellie. By Ohio statute, that was okay. No, it couldn’t be!

My growing indignation about this case propelled me to call together ten of my women colleagues in social work and public service, each with expertise and interest in direct service for teenagers, health care and/or public policy administration. We were broadly representative of several points of view, especially “hot button” matters like teenage sex, abortion, minor mothers, sex education, “illegitimate” births to the unwed, etc. We included representation from our local Planned Parenthood Association and its nemesis, Crisis Pregnancy Center, developed by local Right-to-Life followers. We agreed to advocate for teen pregnancy prevention, directing our advocacy toward social and legal policies, not toward forming new social or health care services. We called ourselves Tackling Teen Pregnancy through Prevention (T2P2). Before we could get to work on teen pregnancy prevention and the Ohio Code on age of consent for sexual activity, an absurd scrap with the Mattel Toy Company brought us visibility, even some credibility in the community. Mattel’s toy catalog for the upcoming Christmas shopping season introduced a new toy doll they named “My Baby Bundle,” a baby doll sold in a soft fabric pouch for a child to strap around her waist simulating pregnancy, popping open a Velcro fastener for the birth of the baby complete with a birth announcement card to reveal “It’s a Boy!,” or “It’s a Girl!,” or miraculously for some, “It’s Twins!” Mattel marketed the doll as an educational toy; T2P2 viewed it as about playing pregnancy and marketing pregnancy to latency-age children. Local broadcast media picked up our T2P2 press conference to protest the doll, several outlets airing it out of disbelief that Crisis Pregnancy Centers and Planned Parenthood were in agreement. A local talk show host branded us as “a motley crew of women on a mission being silly and naive about sex education.” *Cincinnati Post* reporter Laurie Petrie, writing under the headline, “Women fight pregnancy doll as tide of teen parents rises,” added “The women object to Mattel’s new toy because they believe it gives children the message that pregnancy is a game” (1992). The context for Ms. Petrie’s article was then-current in-depth coverage on prevention of teen pregnancy that was emerging in national conversation leading up to the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 (PRWORA). The local and national conversations were promulgated by ideological arguments that preventing teenage pregnancy (by abstinence from sexual activity prior to marriage) would reduce the unwed mothers of single parent families who had no “personal responsibility,” and thereby reduce spending on Federal programs and eliminate Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Mattel responded by sending two bright, sharply dressed women executives to meet with our group to explain the psychological research the company used to develop the doll, inexplicably asking for our endorsement! Without

endorsement, the executives returned to California, and within a few weeks a local merchant advised that "My Baby Bundle" was no longer available from the distributor.

We soon went to work on Ohio's "age of consent for sexual activity," joining with nearly a dozen advocacy groups from other locations in Ohio and were successful in repealing a part of the Ohio Code to restore "age of consent for sexual activity" to 16 (ORC §2907.04) and a related but more important revision to include "sexual contact with anyone under age 13" as a felony in the Code defining Rape (ORC §2907.02).

### **Forty Five Years Later...It Still Ain't the Same if You're Poor**

Preparing this reflective review of my years of social work practice with those who are economically poor is a humbling exercise that I find both exhilarating and painful. It has deepened my respect for the hundreds of poor people who dared trust me enough to participate in casework and community relationships, who shared their life stories and lived experiences, both heartwarming and heartbreaking, on matters ranging from: having food every day to the First Amendment; from prostitution to principled testimony; from child violation to child protection; and even insights from "Happy" to Tupac...M.T.A.

From Maria and her baby, Desmond and Mr. B., I learned that our social work services and tools undergirded by public social welfare policies and regulatory procedures reach profound needs and require vigilant protection from capricious legislators who "reform welfare" and threaten to "privatize Social Security," and shamelessly support erasure of poor people from communities to advance corporate-driven economic development.

From Marlene and Antonio, Sr. I learned about the depth and frequency of local social injustices unseen and unknown by mainstream society: employers with 'off the grid' payroll practices and no insurance protections; inequity in sentencing for felons of poverty and affluence.

From Fifi and hip-hop graffiti artists I learned more about the 1st Amendment and freedom of expression, no matter how outrageous or disquieting, than found in textbooks, continuing education seminars, or legal documents.

From Nikia and Nellie I learned about women's rights, sexism and abuse in real time, in ways that provide stunning clarity to feminist theory and bring startling urgency to advocacy of women's movements; from Nikia and the prostitute residents of ALI, I learned of the profound courage of women to protect our rights and rectify injustice; and from Nellie we (as advocacy is not solo, this requires first person plural) found the determination to change the Ohio Revised Code.

As I own my social work practice history and this reflection, I recognize that our shared social work knowledge (especially our poverty knowledge), however well researched and well tested in practice, is ill-equipped to respond to current socio-economic-political realities where corporate powers obviate democratic participation in public decision-making. When social policy decisions are driven by corporate interests, "research" comes from ideological "think tanks"

rather than social science; when communities are denied access to policy decisions on social welfare and community development, our advocacy practice and community organization capacities are effectively impotent. Similarly, public policy decisions made "in private" without grievance procedures and recourse are not contestable and hence are immunized from traditional advocacy and community organization. Recent examples are found in the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, and closer to home in the privatization of the authority of our City Planning Department for purposes of corporate driven economic development. My hope is that as a matter of urgency, the present generation of social workers, social work educators, and researchers can research and refine social work best practices to recoup our powers to work for social and economic justice for all of our clients and communities.

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***About the Author:*** Alice Skirtz, Ph.D., LISW-S is a board member of Affordable Housing Advocates and a founding member and current board member of Greater Cincinnati Homeless Coalition (askirtz@fuse.net).