



BOOK REVIEW

Leon Dash. *Rosa Lee: A Mother and Her Family in Urban America*. New York: Basic Books, 1996, 279 pages. \$23.00 hardcover, ISBN 0-465-07092-2.

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The material presented in *Rosa Lee: A Mother and Her Family in Urban America* was gathered during a four year period in which *Washington Post* investigative reporter, Leon Dash, followed the lives of Rosa Lee Cunningham and her family. Based on a series of reports which won both the Pulitzer Prize and the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award, this book presents a provocative, intimate, and disturbing view of the lives of our most vulnerable citizens; the urban poor. What one comes to see in reading this chronicle is that one need not be a "foreigner" by birth to be displaced; Rosa Lee's life exemplifies how some of us can be strangers in our native land. Whether the reader is a Social Work practitioner, policy maker, instructor, researcher, or simply a person interested in understanding the humanity of those plagued by poverty, one will find this book compelling and a worthwhile investment for their library.

Rosa Lee Cunningham and her family live in the slums of Washington, D.C. Rosa Lee is the matriarch of a clan that includes eight children and many

grandchildren. Some of Rosa Lee's children are living with AIDS, as is Rosa Lee. Some of her children are addicted to heroin, as is Rosa Lee. Some of her children have been arrested and spent time in jail for a variety of criminal offenses, as has Rosa Lee. People like Rosa Lee face illiteracy, poverty, teenage pregnancy, prostitution, and drug and child abuse as a part of everyday life. Two of Rosa Lee's children escape the cycle of poverty and lead stable lives. The two that make it out attribute their success to the mentoring and involvement of a social worker and a teacher. Their examples challenge the idea that nothing can be done to alleviate the conditions of the urban "underclass." The problems Rosa Lee's family address in their day-to-day lives are the problems that should compel the modern profession of social work to action. Practitioners and policy makers will find much in this book to help them understand the problems this population face.

This book, however, is not for the practitioner and policy maker alone. Dash's chronicle of his investigation

provides a practical and captivating example of ethnographic research. The book provides an excellent tool for instructors teaching qualitative research methods. Throughout the book Dash uses quantitative research to offer a broader description of the problems Rosa Lee and her family face. His work is that of the ethnographic researcher. Each of the nine chapters is organized around a central theme which Dash found in the four years he spent observing Rosa Lee's life. Chapter One, "One Crisis After Another," describes daily life in Rosa Lee's world; Chapter Four, "A Hell of A Rush," describes the role drugs play in her existence and Chapter Six, "Another way of life," centers on Rosa Lee's two children who escape life in urban poverty. In the tradition of qualitative methods, Dash allows Rosa Lee and her children to speak and live without interference. In so doing he provides us with a haunting picture of life inside the urban poor community.

On the surface one might think Rosa Lee's story is about the "African-American underclass" or perhaps one might conclude that it is about the travesty of chemical dependency and AIDS. While these subjects are a part of Rosa Lee's story, there is a subtext to Rosa Lee's story that I found strong and difficult to dismiss. Rosa Lee, the mother of three small children, moved at the age of 16 to Washington, D.C. from the South where she was born and lived as the child of North Carolina share croppers. In her early life, Rosa Lee

learned that her family's survival depended upon hard labor and lots of it. Thus, education came secondary to working in the fields and large families were important as children were a primary source of labor. Whether living with the harsh realities of a sharecropper's life or the equally harsh life of the urban poor, Rosa Lee's life exemplifies the fact that some of our citizens have never had a place in the homeland we call America. Rosa Lee's America was never "the land of the free" for she never had access to the resources, education, opportunity, and money, that freedom provides. Nonetheless, she lived her life with courage and proved that those of our citizens who live here as outsiders make America the "home of the brave."

Dash dedicates his book to "unfettered inquiry." It is his "no holds barred" approach to detailing the realities of Rosa Lee's life that make this story so compelling and difficult to dismiss. Rosa Lee Cunningham and her family could be the story of any family living in the exile of urban poverty. Dash's in-depth inquiry goes a long way in presenting the complexities of life for families like Rosa Lee's in a way that calls for thoughtful reflection. *Rosa Lee: A Mother and Her Family in Urban America* is an excellent source of information, ideas, and insights. Rosa Lee's story is our story; though we might like to think of her as a stranger, she is a part of who we are. It is not easy to read this chronicle without realizing that many of us live in exile,

though we are citizens of this land. As an African-American woman who grew up in a poor family, I identify with certain aspects of Rosa Lee's story. I too have felt displaced in America and have struggled to make a place for myself in an arena where there are few people like me. Rosa Lee's story serves as a reminder of why I chose the social work profession. Rosa Lee's story makes me feel that my experience as an outsider may well be the very thing that makes a place for me in social work. All who are interested in helping those who are strangers in their own land, America's urban poor, will benefit from reading this book. □

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