

# AT HOME WITH POOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN: MY SABBATICAL AT BETHANY HOUSE

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*This author spent her sabbatical leave at a homeless shelter for women and children. In a joint endeavor with a photographer, they created a work that would help to dispel some of the myths about poor women by giving voice to their stories. She feels privileged to have witnessed their strengths, and to now be able to share this experience with others.*

Sabbatical leave is the great plum of academic life; it almost makes up for the generally low salary. Due to my perpetual responsibility disorder, I did not take my first sabbatical until after 18 years of teaching and serving as the social work program director at Shepherd College. Like most faculty, I had dreams of a truly sabbatical experience; as in a time of rest and reflection. I would like to have spent some time hanging out in coffee shops, reading and writing poetry; but as faculty are to be productive at all times, I had to forego this dream. Yet I was eager to begin my adventure—one quite different from most sabbaticals and closer to the reality of non-academics.

I chose to do something close to my heart. I returned to a practice setting with a vulnerable population—poor women and children in a homeless shelter: Bethany House. I believe that most social work academics go into the field out of love and compassion for the clients they serve. Thus, we need to revisit this source of motivation occasionally so we do not forget where we came from. It also brought home to me connections between my early professional commitments and my role as a big sister in a family in which some members remain impoverished. The intersection of our professional and private lives is often ignored in academic writing, but as a feminist, I believe there is validity in this connection, and I support reflective integration of the two. The fact that I come to social work from a less-than-affluent, activist, feminist background informs my

practice and my teaching from a feminist-strengths perspective.

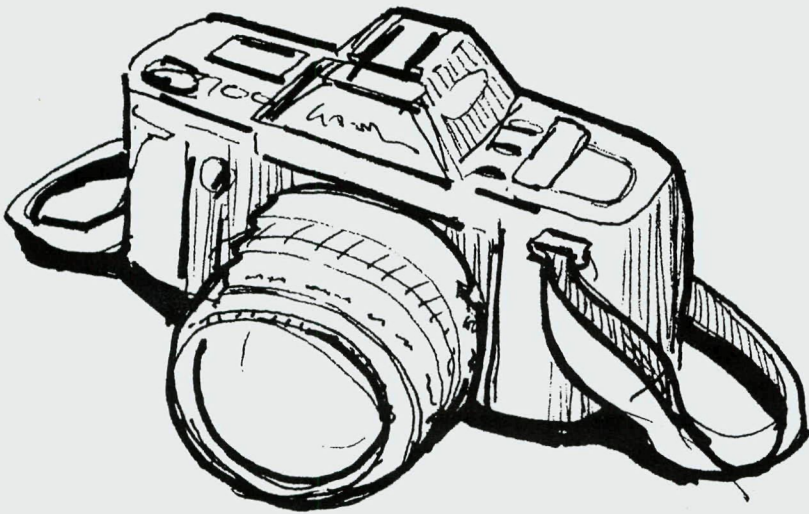
Although I have never been homeless, poverty is part of my family legacy. My father grew up during the Depression in western South Dakota, on the edge of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. As an adult, he worked hard as a shoe store manager to avoid such poverty for his own family, while my mother worked evening and weekends as a waitress. As the oldest of six children, I learned early that wealth is not equally distributed. From observing differences in how people lived, reading about people like Jane Addams, and listening to stories told by my parents and grandparents, I came to understand that poverty is not a personal failing but a reflection of a larger social reality. Of course, I did not use such words, but I had a felt sense.

I eventually obtained a master's degree and a doctorate degree in social work so that



I could focus on social and economic justice. I began as a VISTA volunteer in 1969 working to organize poor people into political units such as welfare-rights groups

and other activist organizations. This was one of the most memorable experiences of my life. I discovered that even though we have unequal resources and face different challenges, we all share the same human struggle to survive. More than anything else, I developed deep friendships and very much enjoyed working with poor people. Some of the time that I spent informally with people in their homes and neighborhoods would be perceived by many as just hanging out,<sup>7</sup> but this is how organizers learn about the community and its people. I liked this work.



Since then, I have spent nearly all of my adult years preparing undergraduate social work students to work with people who are socially or economically disadvantaged. During my sabbatical leave in the spring of 1998, I wanted to spend time with the people and problems I teach students to address. For personal and professional reasons, I am especially interested in the lives of working poor women and children.

I fear that because changes in social policies are often based on false images and myths, welfare "reform" may make these women's lives even more difficult. I wanted to do something that spoke to the dignity of the poor as real people who work hard. Social workers know this, but I hoped to take the message to a broader audience. Remembering the impact of social work

pioneers who were also social photographers, my concerns led me to the Bethany House shelter and a joint book endeavor with photographer Benita Keller to document the lives of rural homeless women and their children.

Also from a working class background, Benita shares my interest in the lives of poor women and has photographed them in various settings, including Viet Nam and Africa. She is a documentary photographer as well as an adjunct instructor at Shepherd College and photo editor of the regional publication, *Antietam Review*. She has exhibited her work in New York and Washington, D.C.; has been accepted into the archives of the National Museum of Women in the Arts; has twice received the Ernest Haas award for the top 100 photographers nationwide; and was awarded a Maryland State Individual Artist Grant in 1997. Keller uses a 35mm camera with black-and-white film and a wide-angle lens to get close to her subjects and reveal their surroundings in order to capture intimate details and create visual metaphors.

In doing the project together, we respected one another's individual approaches and styles to bring together words and images and tell the story of the women at Bethany House as fully as possible. Although our main goal is publication of a book, art exhibitions and slide presentations have provided additional avenues of communicating our experiences at Bethany House. We wanted to help dispel the stereotypes that surround poor women and their children and, through their stories and experiences, to find the common human threads that connect us all. We were privileged to witness the daily lives of these women. A testament to the struggles and survival of rural homeless women, the Bethany House sabbatical project attaches faces and voices to the national statistics of women in poverty and reveals how the stereotypes associated with the word "homeless" mask the humanity of the poor. As the resilience of poor women and children emerges, we discover that to survive and

even laugh at insurmountable odds requires enormous strength. The women I met at Bethany House have what it takes.

In her excellent study of poor women in Minneapolis at the beginning of the century, Poor Women and Their Families: Hard Working Charity Cases, 1900-1930, Beverly Stadum (1992) describes how these women worked to survive. She tells of a Mrs. Nordheim, who wrote to the Associated Charities/Family Welfare Association about her plight, after a lifetime of struggle. What struck me about this book is that earlier in the century, this impoverished woman asked the charity workers to appreciate "what I done and struggled." (Stadum, 1992, p. xiii)

In order to do the project, Benita and I volunteered our services. By being at Bethany House on a regular basis, we were able to gain a good sense of the place and the people. My primary role was to facilitate the morning life-skills class, which is mandatory for all women who are not working or at other appointments. This was the heart and guts of the experience for me, and where I came to know the women; around the kitchen table at Bethany House. I want to share my experience by introducing you to the women who had such an impact on me, and by telling the story of our time together in a homeless shelter.

### **Problem: Rural Homelessness**

Numerous statistics on poverty—presented in newspapers, on National Public Radio, during network news programs, and in thick government reports—reveal an increasingly serious situation for poor women and children. Many of the facts are now common knowledge. Over 50 percent of female-headed households in rural areas live below the poverty line; extreme poverty, lack of economic opportunity, and inadequate state and federal support place these families in the worst housing available. For women with partners, domestic violence heads the list of factors driving women and children out of their homes. As a result, in recent years, women with families have

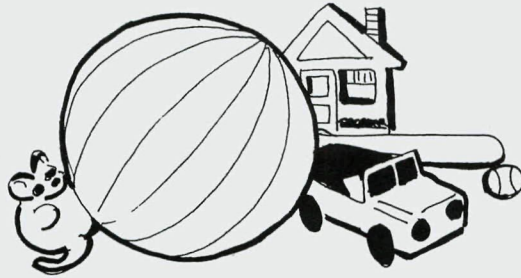
been the fastest growing segment of the homeless (Butler, 1997).

Homeless women and children in rural areas such as West Virginia remain less visible, are much less frequently studied, and face different concerns than their urban counterparts. They typically may have fewer problems with mental illness and substance abuse, higher levels of personal resourcefulness and informal helping networks, but at the same time, fewer formal structural supports such as jobs, transportation, and public funds.

### **Place: Bethany House**

Bethany House, a shelter in West Virginia's eastern panhandle, provides emergency services to homeless women and children. Women who come to Bethany House find not only a home and food but also life-skill classes and case management. A part of the nonprofit organization Community Networks, Inc., under contract to the State of West Virginia, Bethany House has minimal funding and a small staff of less than ten workers. The number of residents averages between 10 and 15, with a maximum of 32. The 30-day limit assures that the shelter is a temporary place; a way station. Bethany House takes its name from the Hebrew word "Bethel," meaning House of God, a hallowed spot, or a chapel for Nonconformists. In many ways, the women and children who stay at Bethany House are nonconformists, as they do not fit the norms of society.<sup>1</sup> Due to circumstances beyond their control, they live outside of the American dream.

The house itself is plain and blends into the neighborhood. A sign on the door says, "Knock loudly." Once inside the gray steel front door, you hear phones ringing, women talking, sometimes laughing, children playing and crying. A sense of the crowded chaos of poverty prevails. In the morning, women gather around a wooden kitchen table with children squirming on their laps or clamoring for attention, asking for one more piece of a jellyroll or more Toasted Oats.



The kitchen table is a central feature in the lives of women in the shelter, as it is with many women. Here, the Bethany House women not only eat meals but also attend classes, make crafts, and share their stories. As with many families, the kitchen table becomes a place of communion and learning from others, and those who pull up a chair are no longer strangers. The kitchen table, as in most homes, is a place to share love, warmth, laughter, sorrow, nourishment, and problems. We found all of these at Bethany House, as we learned of the strength of the human spirit to face adversity.

The women are all eager to leave the shelter and get places of their own, but they are also glad that when they needed help the shelter was there. Though the shelter's formal rules mandate a maximum residence of 30 days, the stay can be and often is extended for a number of reasons, and a few residents return from time to time. Given the difficult situations facing these women and their children, it is often not possible to resolve all of these problems in 30 days or even two or three months. Such a notion is even more ironic considering that the public



often views the homeless through a lens of psycho-pathology, which suggests that the problems facing these women would take years to address.

### Person: The Women

The women of Bethany House are trying to maintain a “balance-in-movement” as young mothers in their 20’s and 30’s. They are all part of the invisible rural poor. Often they are survivors of difficult situations—abandonment, addiction, and abuse. Like most low-income, working poor, Bethany House women work hard at factory or minimum-wage service jobs. They want the same things as everyone else: a home, a decent job, good food, someone to love. But more than anything, they want better lives for their children.

The individual women were the most important part of my sabbatical experience. They reminded me of my family members who have been only a short step away from homelessness. Most specifically, my sister Cindy who, working six days a week at two jobs in the fast food industry, made only \$8,000 last year. She has trudged to work at 5 a.m. in snowdrifts so she could be home when her kids returned from school. But working has not made all the other problems with poverty go away. Her son quit school and made \$9,000 working at a car wash. She lost food stamps because he was not in school, so that he could work and contribute to the household—but instead, he used his money to buy a Dodge Ram truck. Cindy is often threatened with eviction from public housing due to problems caused by her teenagers or her ex-husband. Like the women at Bethany House, she keeps on keeping on.

### Tina: Escape from hellish adoptive home into jailbreak marriage

Tina, a young white woman with long brown hair and expressive eyes (24), lives in the shelter with her youngest daughter, Sandra, because “things were not working at home and I had no other place to go.” She once won a poetry contest but could not

attend the awards ceremony because her husband didn't want to watch the kids. But now Tina is in the shelter with no job, no childcare, and no money.

This saga began early. She says, "I had a happy childhood until I was six, and then everything changed. My parents decided to get divorced, and neither of them wanted us kids so they gave us up for adoption." But her adoptive home was not a happy place for her. For example, when her adoptive mom was angry with her, "She would make me go downstairs in the basement and I was supposed to scream as loud as I possibly could: 'My real mom and dad hate me. That's why they gave me up.'"

Tina got married early—a jailbreak marriage so she could get out of a difficult place. Unfortunately, the husband she met at church drank a lot and worked little. Tina has often worked minimum wage jobs to support her three kids, but childcare was always a major problem. While at Bethany House, she got a factory job like many of the other residents and worked a swing shift from 2:30 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. This necessitates childcare for Sandra during these hours, and Tina must wake her in the middle of the night to take her back to the shelter. There is a haunting sadness in bags under the eyes of two-year-olds like Sandra, who have no bed of their own.

If her life had been different, Tina could have been a college student in one of my classes as easily as a factory worker. She is bright, a hard worker, and actually looks like a nontraditional-aged student. What she needs is assistance in pursuing broader interests.

#### **Angie: Move from inner city to country**

Angie, a petite 30-year-old African-American, describes herself as "athletic, independent, outgoing, mature, sensitive, and above all honest." During high school, she was a track star and a cheerleader. She moved to West Virginia from inner-city Philadelphia because she thought it would be a safe place for her beautiful children, Latasha, Latrice, LaNikka, and Maurice.

She wanted them to be able to go outside and play instead of barricading themselves in a house to avoid gunshots and drug dealers. Her kids are well behaved, neatly dressed in donated clothes, playful, and friendly. They always bow their heads to say grace before meals. Angie describes the children's household chores and routine when she was working: "It was like this: come home, straighten up, change your clothes, fold your clothes, do your homework, go outside and play until six, come back in to help me set the table. And it worked, you know, it worked."

And it did work while Angie had two full-time factory jobs. But her eighty-hour-a-week work schedule and the responsibilities of making a home for her children finally proved too much for Angie: she became so ill she had to be hospitalized and lost her jobs. Angie said there was also a problem with her husband: "immaturity." So she ended up at Bethany House. It is extremely difficult to find housing for a family with four kids. As with many poor families, any kind of major setback—an injury, illness, childcare problems, or transportation difficulties—can wreak havoc.

Yet with all her own problems, she readily comforts and assists others. Her empathy skills are as well developed as those of many professional caretakers. One morning, she talks of seeing a child shivering at the bus stop and—no big deal—she gives him her hooded sweatshirt right off her back. That same day, she reads aloud to help an illiterate man who is doing volunteer work at the shelter. He appears to be embarrassed about not being able to read, but he smiles while Angie helps him. A natural leader, Angie is sought out by other women for advice on family problems. They listen as she speaks in her gentle, quiet voice.

#### **Tiffany: Welfare poet**

Tiffany, a 24-year-old white woman with Cherokee heritage, was told by her lawyer that she did not "seem like a home-

less woman.” She is bright and articulate but never finished high school or obtained a GED. When I got to know her, she was struggling with significant legal problems. Yet she could also pass as a college student in her jeans and t-shirts. As I spent time with the women at Bethany House, it was clearly obvious that homeless women do not look different from other young women.

A talkative, tall, slender woman with light brown hair and hazel eyes, Tiffany is concerned about her appearance and weight, like many women, even though she is quite thin. Her life changed dramatically when she was arrested, charged by her husband with allegedly molesting her five-year-old son. The charges were later dismissed, but in the meantime she lost everything: custody of her three children, her home, and even her clothes.

I learned about what had happened and got a look at the social welfare system through Tiffany’s eyes. Her experience with the system gave her extensive knowledge of procedures that she would share with others. Yet she says that she absolutely does not want to be a lawyer, judge, police officer, or Child Protective Services worker. She does not believe the system works: “It’s a crazy system. Husband takes the kids away from me for something I never did. Just calls the cops. Crazy system. All I am is a mom who cares about her kids and loves them and wants them back, but I have a system that doesn’t work. We all have a system that doesn’t work, you know.”

She says the CPS worker later told her she was sorry for what happened. The investigation does not appear to have been thorough or done by a trained social worker. According to Tiffany, it never came out that her husband was an alcoholic who beat her in front of her children when she was nine months pregnant. Tiffany also says that the therapist who saw her son did not think the abuse happened. And Tiffany believes the father told the child to say that it did. In a rural area, Tiffany was the outsider. That’s difficult.

She likes to write poetry, and her poem, “Welfare Blues,” was published in the nationwide newspaper Welfare Mothers after I submitted it. Although she does not get to see her kids often, they are the focal point of her life, and she wants what is best for them. “I want no drinkin’,” she says. “I want no drugs, ‘cause it is bad enough me smoking cigarettes. I want my kids in church. I want my kids in school. I want my kids learning the proper things. I don’t want my kids knowing about condoms at five years old. I don’t want them to worry about adult matters. I want them to worry about kid stuff. I don’t want them to worry about what I have to worry about. And I talk to my kids all the time ‘cause nobody talked to me.”

Tiffany has tried various jobs including food service, but knows that this is not enough to live on. While at the shelter, Tiffany found work at one of the local industries finishing bathtubs on the second shift—not the work she would like to do. “I would like to be a nurse,” she says. “I really like to help people.”

Like so many women in the shelter, Tiffany has relied on her faith to carry her through the tough times. She says her beliefs started early. “Plain and simple,” she says, “the first time I went to church, I was only a week old. So it started with my mom. She just put the root in me, and it grew from there. God took over. God made me never forget who He was. I pray every day. Only God got me through the past year.”

### **Jennifer: Mountain Woman**

Jennifer, 29, proud of her mountain and Cherokee heritage, has dark eyes that flash but keeps them covered with bangs “so no one can read my eyes.” This tough/tender woman picks up an infant resident and glides across the shelter floor to the strains of Willie Nelson’s “You Ought to Hear Me Cry” playing on the pink radio with its coat-hanger antenna. Missing her own children who are with her sister, she coos, “Fussy little white boy. You hold your head up real good.”

She possesses a quick temper and an eagerness to please. She gets mad over what may appear to be minor insults (as in “she touched me”) and can hit the door, break a hand, and not let on that she is in pain. Jennifer says she learned wrestling and karate from her father. She also leaps to drag out an antiquated typewriter to type a poem written by a shelter woman. She willingly helps fix cars or gives rides to others.

Jennifer likes to cook and tries to eat healthy foods; she exercises to keep her weight down. One Friday, she prepares a better-than-Chinese-carry-out stir-fry pork as part of a “cooking class.” (Residents are not allowed in the kitchen unless it is for educational purposes.) She is quite pleased with the results, serves everyone, and watches their enjoyment.

Not a first-time resident, Jennifer knows the shelter well, and as she sees it, “You know the best thing about this place? We all got different personalities. Different cultures. Different backgrounds. The whole works. And let’s put it this way: 98% of us get along. We put our troubles at the bottom of the list and support each other.” Jennifer often shares with other residents advice she learned from her counselor: “Can you take care of it right now? No. Then don’t worry about it. If you can’t do anything about it right now, forget it.”

Her life has been difficult, and she remembers some bad times. At one point, she sold \$10,000 worth of tools to support her “drinkin’ and druggin’.” But now she works her program everyday; she is doing this in order to get her kids back.

She tells her story: “See, what it is...I been granted custody through the circuit court for my kids. When I was going for the divorce, he didn’t want to leave me alone. So I had to put my kids in a safe place—with my sister. Now she is trying to take control of them, saying I’m an unfit mother because I had to do what I had to do.” As for most women at the shelter, Jennifer’s kids are central to her life. “I don’t want nothing but my kids,” she says. “They’re the

best thing that ever happened to me. The little man and the princess.” Framed 8x10 glossy photos of them adorn her dresser.

### **Tammy: An “All American Family”**

Tammy, 34 and the mother of three boys, Uriah and twins Loren and Carey, suddenly found herself without a place to live. Her first three days at the shelter she did not take off her green wool coat and cried most of the time because her children were not yet with her, though they did arrive shortly thereafter. Her children are well behaved, play well with other kids in the shelter, and adore their mom. They wanted a picture of all of them for the wall in their new home. They posed just like any other family—all smiles. Tammy says, “There are many beautiful things to love—above all the ugly. Despite the obstacles of life, you have to grin and bear it.”

While she was in the shelter, Tammy read, went to the library, practiced her computer skills, and helped her kids with their homework. It is a handful. Uriah, the eldest, has a serious heart problem that requires a special Pritikin diet—not easy to afford on a limited budget. But by the end of her stay at Bethany House, Tammy was able to get a job as a secretary and was able to get on a waiting list for an apartment.

Tammy is like so many other women who have experienced family violence but who never really talk about it and just go on doing what they can. Her focus is taking care of her children. Tammy and the boys work well together as she tries to be the best mother she can while working full time.

### **Process: The Morning Class**

The morning classes that I facilitated allowed me to engage in one of my favorite practice modalities—group work. I believe in this because it is in groups that we learn so much about ourselves and each other, beginning with that first important group—the family. Attention to the group experience remains one of the unique aspects of social work and part of the person-in-environment model.

This focus on the importance of the group also supports my feminist-strengths perspective. The feminist framework for social work practice outlined by Karen Haynes and Karen Holmes in *An Invitation to Social Work* (1994), delineates a foundation for social work practice: holistic, nondichotomous thinking—seeing the connections between individuals and their environments rather than seeing them as isolated parts; reconceptualized power, empowered clients; the idea that the personal is political, which stems from the consciousness raising groups of the women's movement; emphasis on relationship as central for meaning in one's life and as the core of social work; and the importance of renaming and reclaiming, which includes knowing and recognizing the significance of her-story (Haynes & Holmes, pp. 21-26).

When taught by the Bethany House staff, the groups are generally informational or educational and cover such topics as job interviews, parenting skills, and health issues. In leading my group discussions, I wanted the women to have a chance to explore their lives in a different way that might be personally empowering. I saw them as women who were individuals and worked with them as I would any women's group. I did not concentrate on the fact that they were currently women who had no other place to live. And in fact, they rarely mentioned being without a home. Because we wanted to be an integral part of the session, the photographer, Benita, and I often participated in the exercises.

The first session involved an exercise from Susan Goldsmith Wooldridge's book, *poemcrazy: Freeing Your Life with Words* (1996). We used movie-admission tickets to write words describing first ourselves, and then another set of words describing a female role model. No one used the word "homeless." Although problems with addiction, depression, abuse, illness, and poverty were represented, the dominant image was that of strong women who have had difficult lives but maintain hope and

survive the best they can. The women portrayed themselves as "strong," "creative," "smart," "proud," "alive." We ended the exercise by writing a group poem that extolled the strengths of women.

All the sessions were not quite this wonderful; but they were positive experiences for all of us as a way of knowing each other as women around a kitchen table with stories that connect us. One of the liveliest sessions was the one in which we did an exercise on firsts from Susan Albert's book *Writing from Life: Telling Your Soul's Story* (1996). Tiffany's account of her first sexual experience had people howling because of the naivete. First friends were remembered fondly. Most women liked their first day of school.

Part of what emerged in the sessions was a more complete picture of women who are often stereotyped. It reaffirmed my belief in the importance of the group experience for breaking down barriers. The group sessions were often interrupted because the staff needed to talk with the women, residents had to leave for appointments, or kids needed diapers changed and bottles filled. But this is the nature of life in a shelter and also in large families—flexibility is the crucial element. Some of the interruptions were fun like the time a Willy Nelson song came on the radio and Jennifer began dancing with baby Jonathan in her arms. I kept the group sessions as loosely structured as possible because I wanted them to be a good experience of being at home around a kitchen table—everyday women sharing their lives.

I frequently read prose or poetry by writers such as Dorothy Allison, Alice Walker, or Maya Angelou at the beginning of sessions, and the women seemed to enjoy this. A favorite was Alice Walker's "Never Offer Your Heart to Someone who Eats Hearts." Poetry sometimes evolved out of these sessions. Jennifer and Tiffany often suggested that we take what was written and create a group poem. Jennifer typed the strong woman poem, which began "Yesterday I was betrayed, / but tomorrow I'll try to



be kind” and ended with the lines “Courage and strength can never be taken / away from you.”

I did the Rorschach Values test with them, and what emerged was honesty as a core value that they seemed to live out in their lives. All the women insisted that people be honest with them, and they held themselves to the same strict standard. Benita and I left our personal belongings lying about the shelter unattended and did not worry about theft. This may strike some as unusual among a group of dispossessed and impoverished women, but there was trust at Bethany House.

At one point, I had them do an exercise from Julia Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way* (1992). They imagined they were at the store and could buy anything they wanted. Any store. Any items. No money limit. All the items chosen were practical ones, like furniture or, in Jennifer’s case, tools. They were items that would be found in a working person’s home. They were not extravagant, luxury items. This is a good exercise to demonstrate what people value. A home emerges as what is important to these women. Another primary value in all discussions was their children. I asked the women, “What is larger than you and keeps you going when times are rough?” The universal answer was “my kids.” Tina confided that she would not be alive if it were not for her children.

Though we had first begun spending time at the shelter in February, by the time the weather warmed up in April, the women wanted to have more frequent breaks and spend more time smoking on the back porch. They insisted that we join them. It felt good being included in their private time, accepted and trusted. Yet while out there one day, I was acutely aware of the differences in our lives as I noticed my Volvo parked next to Jennifer’s “yellow bomb.”

The last day at the shelter on a lovely May 4th was an emotional time. I had the women make medicine bags as a termination ritual. Benita and I brought the bags and materials like stones, feathers, and beads.

They were small leather bags with pieces of nature as a reminder of our time together. It felt right as a feminine act. No one wanted to talk of termination or another loss. But people rarely do, and in this case it was best to do the artwork and have a Chinese lunch that I brought in from the Peking Restaurant.

### Conclusion

My sabbatical semester at Bethany House reinforced my feeling that social workers have a responsibility as advocates and as a part of society’s conscience to share our knowledge of what poverty does to the body, mind, and soul. We need to take the message beyond the social work community so that we are not talking only to each other. That is why I wanted to do this project with a photographer—to reach more people, to allow them to see what we have seen. As social workers, we are indeed privileged to have known intimately the truths of so many by sharing in the details of their daily struggles. We can reach people with our words. But we can make the message even more powerful if we go beyond words and include faces that are now anonymous.

To date, Benita and I have exhibited at the Shepherd College art gallery, an installation that included photos, words written on the walls, a kitchen table, and a cabinet. We also presented a slide show and narration as part of Women’s History Month and at the Conference on Rural Social Work in Salisbury, Maryland. All three events were well received. Some of the women from Bethany House attended the opening art reception in the Shepherd gallery. They were excited about seeing themselves and the children jumped with glee. I believe they were pleased that others saw the courage and dignity in their lives. Currently, we are at work on a book that we hope will bring the humanity of the Bethany House women to a larger public audience. In this way, as Mrs. Nordheim so humbly hoped at the beginning of this century, the public can “appreciate what [they] done and struggled” (Stadum, 1992).

I can see a century of struggle for poor women and children played out at Bethany House. At the turn of the last century, settlement houses addressed the plight of many immigrants. As we turn into the 21st century, I would like to see more homeless shelters operate with this model—hospitable places that provide classes, job skills, room, and board, as well as exposure to art, literature, and music. In this way, we will nourish not only the physical, but also the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs of the working poor.

Stepping through that gray steel door of Bethany House on that first cold February day, I had no idea that joining the homeless women of Bethany House would be such a homecoming for me. But as I spent time with these women, got to know them, became part of their lives, I realized that our true home is the center of our daily lives, and for me—in my family and in my work—poverty has lived at this center. In remembering my own personal legacy of poverty and in reconnecting professionally in the midst of my now-privileged life, I came home at Bethany House. □

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