

WOMEN ALL OVER THE WORLD SUFFER MANY COMMON PROBLEMS. HERE IS A STORY BY A WOMAN IN AMERICA WHO DESCRIBES HER SITUATION - ONE WHICH IS SIMILAR TO MANY WOMEN HERE IN SOUTH AFRICA.

I Just Don't Know If I Can Make It

Colleen McNamara

...That's what I find myself saying almost every night before I fall asleep. I'm a woman alone with an infant son, trying to exist on welfare. Before the baby was born I used to find myself crying a lot because I just couldn't get the money together to buy things, like a crib and clothes, that the baby would need. I guess like any mother I wanted the best for my child, but now my tears are being shed for things much more serious. I am 21 years old and my background was far from comfortable and stable. I was raised in a small apartment over a liquor warehouse in a big city. We couldn't afford hot running water because my Mom paid the utilities and she had to think of every little way to save. She would turn the hot water heater on once a week and we would all have a bath. The rest of the week we'd heat water on the stove. At night we'd all have to stay in one room to save electricity. Our food was always simple and our clothes usually made-over hand-outs.

My parents broke up when I was small because my Dad was slowly turning to drinking as a way of life. I guess it was hard for him to have to watch his family live like that even though he was working. He was a high-school dropout and an unskilled labourer, so the jobs he could find didn't pay enough to raise a family on. When Dad left, Mom started working full-time as a nurse's aide at night, and by the time I was a teenager I was practically on my own. We didn't see much of her and the temptations of being on my own started getting me into trouble.

Through these years I've met many a social worker and parole officer through the juvenile authorities. At 15 I had a job as a nurse's aide after school and on weekends. I've always worked and



worked hard; that illusion that welfare recipients are lazy can't be proved by me.

The reason I told you about my background was to let you see that being poor and not having everything I want is not new to me. And yet the way I live now is like a constant nightmare. As I started to say earlier, I used to cry a lot before the baby was born because I couldn't get him the best of everything; now I'm happy if he's got pyjamas to keep him warm, no matter what they look like. Now my tears are shed for a much more urgent need - food. According to the county, I'm allowed \$14 worth of food stamps for two weeks - that's \$7 a week, \$1 a day. Last week when I got my food stamps I bought all the baby's food for two weeks. That way when the money runs out at least the baby will have food. The other foods I bought were rice, beans, bread catsup, potatoes, four pork chops, two quarts of milk, one box of cereal, and two cans of soup. My bill was \$11.00. That means I'm left with \$3.00 worth of stamps for the other thirteen days. That

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\$3,00 will have to pay for milk, bread, and butter as they're needed. Right now my baby's on vegetables, cereal, and formula. God only knows what I'm going to do when he starts eating meat, fruit and fruit juice.



Please understand that I want to get back to a job as soon as I can, but it's impossible to get employment and the government cut its funds for training programmes. I feel like I'm on a dead end street. I'm cursed for being on welfare and yet the very people who condemn me won't hire me so I can get on my feet again. Is it so hard to understand why the urge to steal is becoming stronger and stronger? I receive \$148, a month from welfare to pay for rent, food, clothes, transportation, telephone and other things such as soap, Purex, laundromat fees, deodorant, toothpaste, and toilet paper. Maybe a lot of you people take these things for granted, but when you're making a budget out of \$148, there's many a time when newspaper or gift box paper is used until the real thing can be afforded.

Many people condemn poor people for being apathetic about what's happening in the country. But many of us cannot afford TV's and even a dime for the newspaper is sometimes more than we can spare. Is it any wonder that many a time we don't know what's happening in Washington and in other parts of the world? But just ask us about the things that are happening around us and we could fill a book. Ask us about that tragic battle that roars within us as we desperately try to save our faith in God while all the world is turning into a hell for us, and we are being made involuntary martyrs

to a country no longer believe in. Ask us about the cops in our neighbourhoods and about the schools. For God's sake, America, put down your newspapers and look around you.

Is it any wonder that the health of poor people is so bad? We can't afford balanced meals three times a day and our nerves are shot from being under so much mental strain. My body is so choked up with fear for me and my son's future, and the future of all other people like us, I can hardly breathe. And now we are burdened with the additional threat of the medical programme being stopped. Many old people have already died

because they were told they could no longer stay in nursing homes when the government cut their funds. They had no families and no place else to go, so they just died. If things keep up this way, soon America will have a mortality rate as high as the so-called uncivilised, underdeveloped parts of the world.



drawing by Melba Kirtland

Of all things in America, poverty is the only one that knows no prejudices. Poor people of all races, creeds, colours, and age groups are slowly being wasted away. I am white, but as the times get worse and worse my existence seems to be threatened as much as any minority group, not because I'm white, but solely because I'm poor. I believe working together for change can help all of us. At least I hope it can because that's our last hope. Otherwise I just don't know if I can make it.

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