Understanding & Breaking the Cycle of Generational Poverty

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I recently attended a training entitled “Understanding & Breaking the Cycle of Generational Poverty”, hosted by VOA-Oregon and presented by Lynda Coates, who holds a master’s degree in communication. I was prepared for an insightful lecture by a trained individual; someone who would discuss the psychology of poverty, related research and statistics using examples to make the research come to life. Lynda provided all this and more. The experience was far better than I imagined and what I learned will stay with me. Enhance your own learning with Breaking the Iron Cage – Helping People in Poverty Move Forward from Communication Across Barriers.

Lynda’s presentation was effective and memorable because she spoke from experience. She provided personal insight into her childhood experience of nomadic homelessness and hunger and her parents’ desperate struggle to provide for her and her five siblings. An articulate, soft-spoken young woman, she showed slides of her family, providing brief descriptions of their personal stories and struggles. She explained that in three generations of her mother’s and her father’s family, no one had gone past the eighth grade. Following the introduction, she asked us to complete an exercise in which we shared with our neighbor what we had been taught about the poor. The list, which we’ve all heard many times throughout our lives, made us cringe:

- The poor are lazy
- They don’t like to work
- They keep having babies to get more welfare money
- They buy stuff they don’t need and can’t afford (big screen televisions, etc.)
- They abuse the social system
- They don’t value education

I also realized during the discussion that these descriptors were used freely during the last election in an effort to justify budget cutbacks to services for the poor — take away the services and the poor will be forced to be productive like the rest of us; we found jobs, we got through school, we work hard and budget, we’ve gotten ahead, why can’t they? They can’t because poverty is a war zone: cars don’t work, there is no money for gas or other forms of transportation, illiteracy creates barriers to jobs, alcoholism and drug addiction (used to make life bearable) create barriers to a life outside of poverty.

Lynda used her family and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to shine a light on behavior most of us can’t understand because we have no concept or experience of poverty. As an example, she explained that although...
her mother is completely illiterate, she has never been lazy. Determined to keep her family’s clothes clean she used public bathrooms to hand wash and wring dry their clothing. When I see a “hand wash” label on my clothes, I don’t think twice about throwing it in the washing machine on the gentle cycle. I can’t imagine the effort required to regularly hand wash clothes for a family of eight. In example after example, Lynda’s family obliterated every stereotype we listed. Using stories about her family, she shed a very personal, forgiving light on the life experiences of families living in poverty.

The most insightful portion of the seminar, for me, was Lynda’s explanation of why she was able to pull herself out of poverty while her younger sister, Tammy, was not. She took us, step by step, through the relationships and experiences that helped her see the world differently and “navigate the middle class world.” These experiences and mentors, which Tammy was not fortunate enough to find, provided Lynda with the tools she needed to build a totally different life than three generations of her family that preceded her.

So how can we help? Lynda provided a number of strategies for working with individuals who have never experienced anything other than poverty. Here are a few of her ideas:

• These individuals have an oral culture and communication style – you must understand this style in order to connect. Relationships, for this communication style, are at the heart of everything because they get their information by talking to each other. To be effective, you must make every effort to understand and use this communication style when working with this group.
• Individuals from this background are crisis-oriented – their focus is on making it through the day. The system may require them to go through a process that will take a few days or a week to get the help they are seeking, but you must give them something to fulfill their need for instant gratification; something that makes them feel the effort was worth their time.
• Individuals raised in poverty learn best through hands-on learning. The more you can role play and model behavior, the better they will learn.
• Self-disclose to build a connection; make them feel you have things in common with them. Handled correctly, it does not require a great deal of time or information (i.e., “I struggle with math, too. In college I flunked a math class and had to take the class again.”).
• Repeat information and give reminders. Although this may feel like you are enabling poor behavior, these are oral culture learners and they need the information repeated. Once they begin learning new behaviors and print skills, they will no longer require this kind of help.

One of the problems with stereotypes is that they cause us to see only what we have been “trained” to see, and they prevent us from seeing those things that don’t fit into our preconceptions. They create a perceptual framework that becomes deeply embedded in the psyche – not just our psyche, but also in the psyche of the poor who believe these stereotypes about themselves.

Lynda reminds us that “we must make a collective effort to examine personal beliefs and open our minds to new interpretations of the behavior of those struggling without basic needs.” Only in this way can we help families like Lynda’s move out of poverty into fulfilling and meaningful lives.