

2014

SCU Voices of Homelessness Readers' Theater Script

Students and Staff
St. Catherine University

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Louise Edwards-Simpson, "Engaging the St. Kate's Voices of Homelessness Oral History Interviews:
Firsthand Accounts of Housing Insecurity from within the Campus Community"

OPENING FACULTY STAFF WORKSHOP, August 28, 2014

Interviewer- Where were you born?

1- I was born in Miami, Florida.

2- Minneapolis, Minnesota

3- In Cincinnati, Ohio.

4- I was born in St Paul.

5- Hayward, California,

6- Crookston, Minnesota

7- Vermillion, South Dakota

8- Port au Prince, Haiti

Interviewer: How old are you now?

9- I'm 19.

10- 32.

11- I was born in 1959.

12- I am 25.

13- I'm 22, turning 23 next month.

14- I'm 46

15- I'm in my 30's

16- 21.

Interviewer- When did you first experience housing insecurity?

17- I don't know how to describe the first because even before, when I was a toddler ... I don't really remember too much but I remember being put in foster care, or just being taken away from my parents, basically because they had an argument.

18- The following August, I moved to Maplewood and I lived with a family I nanny-ed for. I was there for about 6 or 7 months and that's when it happened. I just kind of decided there were some really odd things going on with the family I was nannying for and it was just not a safe place for me to live anymore.

19-I am not sure if our housing was unstable or if my mother just liked to move. I know that, as a child, we moved frequently. ... There would be times where we wouldn't have electricity for a few days or we wouldn't have gas for a few days but it was never an extended period and we always had a good attitude about it. I guess we [have] never not had electricity and not gas at the same time.

20- Things were fine the first half of the summer. I was living with my dad and little brother in [a nearby suburb]. I just graduated high school, so I was happy. Then my dad found a mobile home ... [in another town] and he wanted to move there. ... I was planning on moving with him, [and his wife and my step brother and sister]... but then, a couple of days before they were finally moving in, he told me that she said I can't move with them...so that's when I got confused. And, I wasn't sure where I was going to go.

21- First I think it's important to say I was... my birth mother was 16 when she had me ...and she lived in a birthing home [run] by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet.

...This is in the 60's. There was a secret birthing home not far from here and she lived in St. Paul with her family and her sisters. Nobody in the family knew, they all said she was going to stay with an aunt and she went and had me, at a secret birthing home when she was only two blocks from home the whole time. ...

They were ashamed back then. The way she explained it to me when she was at the birthing home, -- and this isn't putting down the Sisters, this isn't putting down Catholicism or any religion. I think it was part of the culture... they were repenting. ... and they were trying to repent for their sin. I honestly think that ... that impacted me, being born of that kind of stress...

22- My parents were separated before I was born. They had been married and they had had one child together before they were separated, my sister, who I'm very, very close to. My father was out-of-state when I was born but he didn't have much of a connection to the family unit of sorts.

So I lived with my mother for about three years. We moved around and she ended up with another man. There was a lot of violence and alcohol use and drug use. Anyway, I ended up in foster care and she ended in prison after that. It was a lot of moving around.

23- Even though I was growing up in an orphanage, I still spent some time living in the street. Growing up in the orphanage was great. Basically [it] is just like a place of refuge, to go and sleep and get something to eat.

But really, once you are born in poverty in the south, it is really hard [if you do] not find other ways to get money. So I used to spend plenty of time in the streets begging... One of the worst slums in Port au Prince is called Cite Soleil... which is sort of close to the airport, where I would wait to beg for money.

24- I was about 4 and a half when they divorced and when I moved back to Minnesota. My mom was living with the person that is now my stepfather. I grew up in St. Paul and the suburbs for the first 13 years of my life. ... I finally ended up leaving their house, when I was 13.

25- I was about 27 when I got married. That is a weird relationship for me. That was when I really experienced the ups and downs and the possibility [of] being homeless. It really came crashing down on me. My husband, shortly after we were married, he was deployed to Iraq. He spent nine months in-country but when he came back, he did not come back the same person. He came back and he was very angry.

26- I was probably 40... my first major experience with housing insecurity was I had been working for somebody who rehabbed houses, he was a landlord, and he offered me a house in south Minneapolis. In lieu of [a] down payment, I did some work on the house and it was in a disastrous shape. So I cleaned it out and sanded the floors and put in a kitchen and a lot of things, a lot of work. ...Sweat equity. And, he was behind in his taxes, so I paid the taxes for 4 years' back taxes.

Then one night I got a knock at the door. We had been there maybe a year and a half, enough to get established and liking it.... and I was invested in because I had put so much work into it and I got a knock on the door and it was this guy and he was.... he looked like half a mountain, big guy in one of those... like a flak jacket, ... He said he had some eviction papers for me and I went "WHAT!?" I totally was taken by surprise

Interviewer- Wow! What did you do?

26- Yeah, so I invited him in --which is not normally the greeting that they get? He explained to me what this was all about is because my landlord/employer hadn't paid his mortgage and so I was being evicted. Even though I had gotten the taxes caught up I was not aware he had stopped paying the mortgage.

We had a signed purchase agreement and everything. And I had no idea what was going on and at the time I had five children.... [from] probably 13 to just a baby. The youngest one she was

maybe 2 months, 3 months old. Then I started on a housing search in a hurry so we packed up and hurried. We had 30 days to vacate.

27- I would say when I took off, I stayed with friends. I remember the last time my dad had to come pick me up at the juvenile detention center. He said “if you’re going to take off, take off and stay gone.” So I did and I left. It was March. I can’t remember if it was ’93, probably ’94.

Interviewer: So, tell me about your experience with housing insecurity?

28- ...When I graduated from high school, I got a trade and well I guess... I was an LPN so I worked as an LPN... but my job was contracted through my school because my school was non-accredited. I knew my school wasn’t accredited but I was the first person in my family to go to college so I didn’t know what that meant for me and especially what it meant for my future education. So I graduate, I get a job at [at a local hospital] ... and I worked there as an LPN and it was going great.

I purchased a home and that was a really predatory loan situation and I got stuck with this crazy mortgage. It started out really low, it started off just amazing and I’m like “Oh this is great! I have this great job I’m only paying \$800 mortgage.” And you know, my bills were really manageable and everything was going great...

Then I got laid off. ... So I’m applying here, there, everywhere, trying to get a job. And they’re like, “Your education is not accredited, I don’t want to hire you to be a nurse at my hospital. We can’t even prove that you got taught by a legitimate professor. And that’s when the non-accredited piece really started affecting me.

Interviewer– You couldn’t independently get a job?

28- So then my mortgage just starts sky rocketing and it then it gets way out of control because I was getting unemployment benefits. But once my mortgage started going up, it was just... it just got way out of hand. I called the bank. I said, “Take this house, I don’t want it, I can’t afford it and I’m not about to get in a boat load of debt.” So I foreclosed. I got a foreclosure when I was about 21.

I had the house for maybe 18 months. It was just immediate. I paid \$800 for rent maybe three months and then it was \$1000 and then it was \$1200 and then it was \$1450. ... And I do believe that as a young African American woman, I was definitely exploited. Being the first person in my family to even own a home, I was just excited to be a homeowner.

29- I had a job but I was only making \$10 an hour and I had to pay back this \$10,000 credit [debt]...and I had a vehicle that I was paying off; on top of that, insurance, gas, because I was a

home health aide at this point. When I found out I was pregnant I switched from being a CNA to a home health aide, to get off of my feet and having to lift people and stuff like that.

So I needed my car; I couldn't afford to pay rent and everything like that. I did [need my car] just for safety reasons when I felt like... When he would get really drunk or whatever and I was actually worried about my safety, I would actually go and sleep out in my car. There would be times too where he would just be mad at me for whatever reason... It was his name on the lease, he had the keys. He would just not let me in. He would lock me out with all my stuff in there..... and I would have to go to school not showered, wearing the same things I had worn the day before, pregnant, hungry, looking crazy.

30- It was a pretty big deal the night I moved out. I gave them my four weeks' notice because that's what we'd agreed upon. And the dad just kind of lost it and said: "You need to get out tonight, if you have something else planned." Which I did-- but it was for a month out. So I contacted one of my friends in the Twin Cities and I was like, "Hey, can you come get me?" And so I moved out and stayed with her for a month or two. And then I would stay at—I had an aunt and uncle in town too—I would stay at their house but I never really told them the circumstances.

31- ... One of the things I will say is I've been worried about being homeless since I was about five because I was always thinking about [it]. I thought my dad was going to kill my mom or kill me or somehow I was going to end up homeless....

Interviewer: How did you handle it?

32- I went back to the neighborhood I grew up in. I had a friend... who had a house that he had grown up in and he was in his 70's. He said he didn't really want to rent it out but would I be interested in buying it. I went sure, I think. ...So I went to take a look at it and it was neglected and it had been un-lived in for 4 years. So it looked sad but I undid a lot of things there that needed attention. Like the upstairs kitchen was dilapidated and the sink was rusted through... things like that. ...

33- I had run away from home but I had gotten suspended from my last two weeks of 7th grade. I never graduated 7th grade and they scheduled me to repeat it because I had failed. I just never went back, I ran out of the whole system.

Interviewer— Where did you run to?

33- Minneapolis. I met someone older on the bus, he was 19. So I met someone of that age and they were of course willing to take me on, so I just kind of left with him.

Interviewer– [Where] was he living...?

33- He was homeless. ... Yeah, like we stayed on people's couches together and stuff. That was about June and by July; I had found good people to be with. Within a month I got away from this person who didn't really care about me and found really good friends --that were my age group and older as well. So, I did the same couch hopping, living under bridges and stuff but I was with a good group of friends. ...Then I moved in with my first good real boyfriend and moved in with his parents, lived in the basement but it didn't last long.

34- Ok, so after I foreclosed I moved back in with my mother who was homeless, also being foreclosed at the same time. I stayed with her until... Well, we actually stayed in the house until the sheriff came and bolted us out. We didn't have any hot water, we didn't have anything in the house, but we just stayed in there because we didn't have anywhere to go.

This was right before I was scheduled to leave for the military.

Interviewer: How well did this solution work in terms of solving your housing insecurity?

35 – At that time it worked out well. ...But then my ex-husband had a brilliant idea to refinance -- which we did-- and that wasn't such a good idea. So that tripled my house payment more or less but... that makes it more challenging.

36- Then I was able to move in with my aunt but that's still kind of iffy. Because when you live with a relative, they can kick you out at any point. You're still living in someone else's house. As long as they are happy with it, you can still live there... I had to bite my tongue [and] make it work because I had decided that come hell or high water, I was going to graduate from this program.

37-There is the American dream. Like if you work hard, you will be prosperous. No that's fictional like. If the system is broken, if the system is not allowing you to get to that point, well then you can't do anything. My dad worked 14- hour days and he still couldn't get to the point where he wasn't poor, it's fictional. I think also for immigrants it's harder to negotiate this society and the bureaucracy and the paperwork but also just some of the norms that [are here]. We're in a different situation and you realized hey, not everyone grows up with things like this and that's a lot to deal with.

Interviewer: Were you able to access resources to help?

38- Another thing that was a lifeline for me was being able to get food stamps and WIC. So even the food stamps, I think sometimes people don't realize like, "Oh, you're getting something for nothing." But sometimes you really need that just to eat, for real ...and sometimes even then it cannot be a resource to you.... [Because] You need a place to store the food, cook the food that kind of thing too.

39- I want people to know that there are a lot of resources but at the same time I want people to know that those resources aren't always easily accessible or quick fixes.

40- Welfare to work. "We really want you to work so you won't have to need these benefits anymore." But it's like once you get a job, --for me for example, the cut off cap is \$950. So if I make more than \$950 a month, I'm ineligible for cash benefits. I might get a little bit of food stamps but maybe, probably not. It's like how am I really going to get ahead? ... Luckily for me when I was getting childcare assistance when I was working 35 hours a week or more. I was selected for public housing after being on the waiting list for seven years.

41- We were very resourceful we... St. Marks [Episcopal Cathedral], used to have a youth dinner on Monday nights; you had to be 21 and under to eat. And there were always bags of produce that we could take with us and the food that you got at food shelves wasn't very good...

We also went to Streetworks, they had drop-in hours and their Offstreets workers would give us candy and bus tokens and condoms and socks and they always had socks.

...Perkins used to throw out food and then Perkins started pouring bleach on their food and Rainbow Foods started locking the dumpster and pouring bleach in there... it was just to spoil it so nobody else could eat it ... It was stupid. It's not like somebody is going to sue because they ate something out of your dumpster.

42- One reason I didn't want to go back [home up north] was because I was in school and I really wanted to finish out the semester. I think it was also a pride thing. Like this was a second try of being on my own and I didn't want to have to have my parents bail me out again.

Interviewer- Who could you rely on?

43- I think it's kind of back to childhood. Honestly, I've never learned how to rely on anybody.

44- There's always so much explanation when you have to rely on other peopleand they're well-meaning or not. They ask so many questions, at the time I could not answer....

Interviewer- Tell me about your educational journey.

45- I definitely saw the path out of poverty through education and even now, as I'm working on my masters... I think the school system is pretty much what saved me growing up and just that five-days-a-week of being in the same place with the same people. And I really relied on guidance counselors and even the recess attendants.

46- Where I'm from, you don't go to college. It's not the thing that you do. ... You graduate from high school maybe and you get a job and you help your family. ... College was meant for people who had money. And I think there were people that didn't expect me to go to college because my mom had always been the black sheep. So even though we were good kids, we were always expected to screw it up somehow. Maybe I'd get pregnant and drop out of school ...or maybe have a couple of kids and work a job...

47- I got my GED when I was 20. I tried to go to MCTC and they needed my parents' information and I didn't have their financial information. And so I waited until I was 24, and then I started MCTC.... I wanted to get a degree in social work...

48- Last semester I got straight As but the semester prior, I think 1 F, 1 D and a couple Cs. It's kind of like a repeating cycle. I feel like in the fall it gets bad for some reason and in the spring it's better and the fall gets worse. I don't really have a stable environment to help me cope.

49- School life was quite different. Being picked on at school was something that happened a lot. I quit school after the 8th grade. I went back some years later and got a GED.

50- [M]y father was against us going to college. ... I think there was a bias on the one hand, about college being for rich people, not for [us] ... "Who-did-we-think-we-were," like we could go to college, have that kind of privilege? There is some anger to that....

I told him one time that I was thinking about going to college and...his first response was "How the hell are you going to pay for that?"

I don't know if there was a part of him that maybe felt guilty because he didn't want to pay for it.

51- I came here as a nursing student and once I started being able to think critically and learn how to know things for myself and using my personal experience to benefit what I've learned with my education, it took me into a different direction. And I'm way more social justice-oriented and that's why I'm no longer seeking a nursing major but critical studies of race and ethnicity and sociology because I'm a very social person. And it's nice to know how society affects your choices and how the plate you're given at birth is not the same. To not only know that for myself but to educate others.

52- My oldest daughter had started at St. Kate's and I had come to take care of business at Derham and walked up the steps at Derham and I just touched the [door] handle and I thought "Geeze, I got a feeling: I should be here." It was just a very palpable feeling. I thought well I doubt that I'll make it in here, but I'll give it a whirl. Then the opportunity came and I was accepted and then an even more cool opportunity happened that I actually got to walk with my daughter across the stage and graduate. That was really cool.

Interviewer- Do you think that your classmates are aware of and or sensitive to issues of poverty and homelessness?

53- We study it a lot in my classes. In two of my classes we're studying it right now; and in my speech class sometimes it comes up as a topic for speech. So I say yeah they're *aware* of it, but I think people here [who] have probably gone through homelessness, like they don't talk about it.

54- I don't think many people know about it. ...There is still a really big stigma about what it is to be homeless. And I'm not very open about talking about it. But maybe if I do share my story more, then it will be... it's kind of like if one person does it, then other people might feel more comfortable too.

55- One of my classmates had suggested, unfortunately, that people who are homeless will become socially deviant and of course... You know how they say "Speak your mind even if your voice shakes?" Unfortunately he hit me on a tired and emotional day and my voice was shaking a little as I informed him that I had been in a transitional living program. I believed I was the only person in the entire program who had ever experienced something like that. And that my sister had been homeless multiple times and my mother had been homeless multiple times too --but she ended up being a little deviant. So my sister and I are, I feel very upstanding people and are not socially deviant.

I was offended by it and of course, he completely retracted his statement, but I felt like it was an opportunity to give feedback to a bunch of people because there is an "us versus them" mentality

when you are in a classroom discussion. And people do not understand that ["They"] might be sitting next to you.

56- I think a lot of my classmates don't understand that poverty is a system. I think a lot of my classmates think that poverty is a choice and if we wanted to be rich that we would and if we just try harder, then we would just have everything that we want...

So class hasn't began yet, and me and my classmate I'm sitting next to we're talking about the inflation in tuition here and we're like "Ah you know it's already expensive enough and then they're raising it \$40 more..." And so my classmate in front of me turns around and she's like, "Why do you even care how expensive tuition is?" I didn't even understand what she was saying... like why wouldn't I care about tuition, if I have to pay it? She was like "Oh you pay tuition?" And I said "Yeah, why wouldn't I pay tuition?" "Oh 'cause you know what I thought? All black people got the United Negro College Fund."

Interviewer- What do you want people to know about homelessness?

57- People should understand that ...the system is set up that if you are not given the resources at the appropriate times; you're more susceptible to fall... It's not because people are stupid or lazy or whatever. It's because they weren't given the appropriate resources at the appropriate times and I was very lucky because I was. That doesn't mean I didn't struggle.

58- Just don't be too quick to judge somebody that's homeless because you don't know what they're going through. You can't just right away think, "Why don't they have a job?"

59- ...I think that you definitely can't make assumptions about people. About where they live based on where they go to school or you would assume an institution as prestigious as St. Kate's, like nobody is homeless but that is far from the truth. And you can't expect your story to be everyone's and you have to understand underlying issues...

60- I want everybody at St. Kate's who comes here to stop saying, "Why doesn't she leave?" and start asking, "Why does he abuse?" I just want to change, like you do, [to] change people's thinking and bring awareness.

61- Being homeless, living on the street, life on the road, whatever a person chooses to call it, is very real. It is a part of my life I will never forget [and]... I would never want to return to. With

God's help and some hard work, I'm not out there anymore. Now I have my recliner and big screen TV. One thing I've noticed over the years, a roof is a wonderful thing to have.

62- I just feel like everyone in the world has forgotten that we got here as human beings. [Because] we used to look out for each other we used to try to take care of each other as a species and now all we're doing is trying to get ahead of each other and trying to push other people down to get ourselves up, everyone out for themselves. It would be nice if people remember that above all everyone just wants to be accepted.

63- Homelessness sometimes doesn't ...it doesn't show on the outside. ... If you have that student that is always coming to your office or looks up to you, just be open to the fact that ... there's no one set face for housing insecurity. There is no one person that is walking around with a homeless badge. It could be anybody...it could be your favorite student or anybody.

64- Surviving homelessness takes a lot... a lot of ingenuity and a lot of hard work. Being able to survive being homeless and [to] go on to higher education is something to be celebrated.

THE END