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A Face of Poverty

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A Face of Poverty

The circumstances are different for every individual who lives in poverty. Society foremost believe the information about poverty from people who have not experienced it, as opposed to the people who have. When people in poverty try to defend themselves from societal stereotypes, they are pushed back and told to know their place. It is as if we have zero credibility in our experiences living in poverty. The policies targeting people in poverty do not include us in the decision making. We are told to just get up and walk out of poverty. We are stereotyped and shunned from the economically privileged in society. If we are to one day become successful, we are still not worthy enough of the upper classes. We have aspirations, intelligence, experience, families, compassion, and most importantly we, have lives. People in poverty have stories that many could not fathom. This is my story.

Introduction

“I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept.”

-Angela Y. Davis, as cited in Kelty, 2017

My sisters and I were waiting in the car while our mom was inside of the gas station. We noticed it was taking a while for our mom to come back, so my older sister went inside to check on her. Our mom had a gallon-sized Ziploc bag with coins that she was using to pay for gas. One by one she counted out the change anxiously hoping it would reach just enough to get her by for the week. The cashier was the first person to express his frustration. After his remarks, the people in line behind her started making comments

and urged her to get out of the way. My mom came back out with my sister and proceeded to fill up her tank. I looked out at my mom and saw the tears rolling down her face. I do not think she felt shame, but the intensity of the experience brought her to tears. In that moment, I realized that money was an issue for my family.

The United States Census Bureau (2017) places the 2016 poverty threshold for a household with a family of four at an average yearly income of \$24,563. Being a single mom in the state of Missouri with three children, my mom made less than \$15,000 a year. This made me question how many people in Missouri lived below the poverty line. In 2015, the total Missouri population was 5,901,975, although 875,704 Missourian adults and 277,687 Missourian children lived at or below the Federal Poverty Level (Missouri Community Action Network, 2017). If so many people in just this one state are living at or below the poverty line, how do children born into poverty get the same opportunities as a child in a middle or upper class family? The fact is they do not.

For most of our lives, we lived in low-income housing. It was not until people started making negative comments about the neighborhood we lived in that I truly realized we were

living in poverty. Throughout my entire life, I have been reminded that I come from an economically disadvantaged family. I often reflect on the judgments people have made about my family. I am not only writing as someone who is still poor, but as someone who persevered even when I was discouraged and pushed to the margins. My story is not one of those once-in-a-lifetime success stories that you hear about in the news or in movies. The truth is, I'm still in poverty, and I will continue to face economic and social challenges as I move forward. My story details some of the challenges of growing up poor and explains how being poor continues to be the greatest hindrance of my success.

Childhood

My family's circumstances have a lot to do with my own story of poverty. After my parents divorced, my father got remarried and had my brother. Similarly, my mother remarried and had my younger sister. My mother ended up getting divorced again but even during that marriage, she was still playing the role of a single mom. My step-dad was an alcoholic, drug addict, and never kept a job. He lived with us but he was not part of the family; he manipulated my mother into enabling him. Throughout my entire childhood, my

parents were constantly in court fighting for custody of my older sister and me. Since my parents were always in custody battles, I moved around a lot. I attended seven different schools by the time I graduated high school.

In court, my parents frequently fought about who was the better parent and who had a better living environment, but the truth was, neither of them were exemplary parents and neither had a better living environment. I remember walking to my elementary school without a coat because neither of my parents could afford one. When I was in first grade, my parents were called because I came to school so cold that I was crying. That year, my babysitter, whose house we stayed at in the mornings before school, bought me a coat.

Throughout my childhood and teenage years, I noticed different ways my parents coped with being poor. My father would act like he had enough money to afford a stable living environment, but that was only to impress our friends, family, and the court. My mother never tried to deny that she was living in poverty. She knew it and she worked every day and tried as hard as she could to pay the bills. Just because they handled it differently does not mean one parent was better than the other. In my father's household, it

was a secret that we were living in poverty, even though it was obvious that we were. Putting on a facade to hide the fact that we were in poverty was something that I began to start doing myself.

Teenage

I felt the most embarrassment about being poor during my teenage years, and would do anything to hide it. I would add a few dollars into my lunch account so that no one knew that I got free lunches. When friends would ask me to buy them food, I would be able to do it without them questioning my financial status. It took a lot of effort to keep this facade. Even though I knew some of my friends also had free lunch, I never let them know that had it. I felt that if I told anyone, they would pity or make fun of me.

Privilege is an invisible package that is given to us by society. A great example of privilege comes from Felicia Pratto and Andrew Stewart's (2012) study:

Members of powerful groups...do not realize that they are privileged because they don't have the social-comparison information to recognize the discrimination they do not experience..., the poverty they don't experience..., and the prejudice they do not experience..., but which members of subordinated groups do (p. 31).

Many privileged people do not

adequately understand that kids are made fun of for being poor. Something as small as getting free lunch can make other kids treat you differently. It might have been my consistent anxiety of having to hide my disadvantage, but I saw the ways people pitied or made fun of other poor kids, and I did not want to be a target.

My poverty cover-up was constant and I was always conscious of my appearance. I shopped the clearance sections at name-brand clothing stores and received used clothes from people just so I would be able to look like the other girls at school. I tried so hard to fit in and not let people notice I wore the same Hollister shirt twice in one week. One day I was sitting in class, wearing my new shoes that my father bought me from Walmart. A girl sitting next to me looked down at them, started laughing, and she proceeded to say, "Are those WALMART shoes? Why would you get those? They are so ugly!" After that day, I never wore those shoes again. The embarrassment that flushed through my body at that moment had an impact on me. I thought that no one would notice that they were not name brand shoes. I thought that I was safe from judgment, but I let my guard down and someone noticed. At 13 years of age we try to impress others to fit in with the so-

called "popular kids." But most of the popular kids were the wealthier kids in my school. Even at a young age, educational institutions reflect the greater society in that socioeconomic status influences power and control. I look back on this moment and can still feel the flush of emotions that I experienced. I wonder if that girl remembers what she said to me. I wonder if she knew how painful it was for me as she publicly shamed me for wearing inexpensive shoes. I also wonder, was she too putting on a facade?

The education system was a challenge to my lower socioeconomic status. The public schools in my hometown require fees that need to be paid for each student before the beginning of the school year. If those fees are not paid, the school issues a notice of the outstanding bill to the students. The registration fees usually total a minimum \$300 for each year. During those years, my dad or step-mom took me to registration and expressed agitation with the costs. My dad fought with my step-mom about the money for school, they did not have the means to pay for my education. I wanted to play sports, but the registration fees did not include sports. The cost of playing sports exceeded \$1,000 each year. I played sports during my freshman year

after raising the fee money. After that first year, I realized that I was not able to afford extracurricular activities anymore. Being able to get involved in extracurricular activities was a privilege I did not have.

During my freshman year, I became friends with a girl who I met through the cheerleading team. Her father owned a successful business in town. When I arrived at her house and stepped inside, I instantly became uncomfortable. She lived in what I consider a lavish home, at least compared to the places I had lived. My discomfort stemmed from entering a space of economic privilege, something I never experienced or had. Anytime she asked for something from her parents, she usually got it without much hesitation. I found myself not being able to afford doing the activities she wanted to do together. One day, during the summer before my sophomore year, my friend's mom picked me up from my dad's house to take us to the public pool. When her mom saw my house, I could tell she realized why I was never able to afford the activities that required money. She began to pay for me to do things like go to the pool, the movies, and more. I felt a lot of guilt and continuously expressed how grateful I was for her kindness and generosity.

Later that summer, I was riding in the

car with my friend and her mother. My friend asked for something, and when her mother told her no, my friend began to get upset and threw a fit. Her mother replied, "You are very lucky to live the life you have! You should appreciate what you have! What about Melissa? Would you want to live like Melissa has to? I bet she doesn't throw a fit when she doesn't get what she wants!" I often reflect on the embarrassment I felt when my friend's mom used my struggles as a tool to reprimand her daughter. I know her mother did not say that with malice, but she did make me feel that I was less of a person compared to them.

I believe she used my circumstances as an example because she knew her daughter would never want to be in my situation. The problem with her thought process was that I was born into my circumstances; I did not want to be poor. I did not do anything to become poor. I wanted to be able to throw a fit when I did not get something. Experiences like this made me alter my methods to more effectively hide my socioeconomic status. I rarely invited friends over to either of my parent's homes. After that embarrassing moment in the car with my friend and her mother, I began lying about where I lived. Since I walked to and from school, I occasionally had

friends walk with me. When we got closer to my house, I went up the steps to my neighbor's house acting as if it were my own because it was nicer than mine. I waited until they walked further ahead and quickly ran into my house.

In my junior year of high school, I decided to move out of my father's house to live with my mom. While the living conditions were considered better at my father's house, certain circumstances pushed me to start living with my mom. My mom lived in an income-based three-bedroom apartment. She worked part-time at a grocery store while trying to be available at night for my younger sister. Since I moved across town, I had to switch high schools. Due to demographics, the school included wealthier students. On my first day, I got called to the principal's office. I sat down while he asked what neighborhood I moved into. After I answered the question, he expressed that if I was to make any trouble at the school, I would be expelled without question. I was confused as to why he said this to me. I did not have many records of deviance. I had only gotten a few detentions and a couple in-school suspensions, which is considered normal at my previous school.

As I became older, I began to understand why the principal unjustly

reprimanded me. The administration had preconceived notions of my behaviors due to the low-income neighborhood where I lived. Police patrolled my neighborhood every day. Kids from this neighborhood were perceived as criminals or troublemakers. Leonard Beeghley (2000) explains,

Poverty does serve certain functions for a capitalist society. It keeps a pool of low-skilled workers available for jobs no one else will do. It keeps prices down, via the inflation argument. It also creates jobs for people who regulate and/or serve the poor. However, persistent deprivation also increases the chance that crimes will be committed, and the poor are found guilty more often than others, whether they are or not (Cited in Koepke, 2007, p. 3)

It is easy for people who have the privilege of never experiencing poverty or living in low-income neighborhoods to stereotype people who come from those circumstances. But this also makes me curious about how people who come from poverty perceive others in poverty. Do people in poverty stereotype others in similar situations? I do not know whether my principal came from a privileged economic background or not. But what I felt was the acknowledgment of where I came from and the preconceived ideas of what that meant. The more I was stereotyped, the more I became aware

of my actions and how they could be skewed into the stereotype of how poor people act. Social psychologist Claude Steele (2010) writes:

This means that whenever we're in a situation where a bad stereotype could be applied to us—such as those about being old, poor, rich, or female—we know it. We know what 'people could think.' We know that anything we do that fits the stereotype could be taken as confirming it. And we know that, for that reason, we could be judged and treated accordingly (p. 5).

The stereotype itself is the only thing that matters to people; even if it is untrue, society still enforces it. This concept is all too real for me. Being a woman who comes from poverty, there are things that I do or say that can give others a reason to believe I fit the stereotypes. The wild part is, I too believed in the stereotypes of poverty. I continuously tried to not conform to the stereotypes, therefore I unconsciously believed in them.

Most of the time, I worked at least twenty to thirty hours a week between two jobs. One of my jobs was working for a fast food chain. Since I was at school during the week days, I worked nights and weekends. I usually got out of work between 12:00 and 2:00 a.m. Thankfully, I worked in walking distance from my neighborhood so I

did not have to find transportation. With my earnings, I was able to save up enough money to buy a prepaid phone. I was laughed at for having a flip phone in school, so when a friend was selling her outdated iPhone, I seized the opportunity and bought it.

That month I went to the nurse's office at school because I wasn't feeling well. When she suggested that I go to the doctor, I explained to her that I did not have health insurance and that Medicaid was not available to me. She looked down at my phone and said, "Well then how do you afford an iPhone?" I had to explain myself to her about buying it from a friend and using a pre-paid sim card. But why did I have to explain myself to her? Why do I have to even explain myself while writing this? Why are people in poverty not deserving of nice things?

I was 16 years old. Why was I being blamed for not being able to afford healthcare? It is as if she was saying that if I did not have that iPhone I would be able to afford healthcare. "The lack of funds and insurance means little to no healthcare for people, so the poor are less likely to prevent illness" (Koepke, 2007, p. 3). This shows how the system continuously oppresses people in poverty. It is not as if we can choose to opt out of certain care, we cannot afford it. In fact, 773,000 of

Missourians do not have health insurance and 420,000 of those who are uninsured are working adults (Missouri Community Action Network, 2017). There is a difference between the privilege to choose and being unable to choose.

So, where does the line get drawn in stereotyping people in poverty? We are vulnerable to any attack against our lifestyles. Victim blaming can happen in many contexts and what that nurse said to me is an example of victim blaming; she questioned my lifestyle as a poor person. My circumstances echo this,

...cumulative causation affects people of color and people living in poverty equally. The poor are subjected to inadequate school funding and then blamed by society for not valuing education. They are placed in substandard public housing in bad neighborhoods and then are criticized for not keeping up the property. They are denied job opportunities and then are shunned for not valuing hard work. They are denied the resources that would allow them to improve themselves and are then denigrated for not doing so. (Sernau as cited in Koepke, 2007, p. 8)

I am damned if I do and damned if I don't. I am criticized for trying to create a different outcome for myself. If I make one mistake while trying to do so, I am deemed unappreciative of opportunities. Then that stereotype of

poverty comes back into play and enforces the notion that I somehow deserve to be in poverty.

In the week of my 18th birthday, the housing authority taped a notice on the door of my apartment. The notice stated that since I was turning 18 the housing authority required that I immediately needed to start paying, and our rent would increase. I was to either pay the increased amount every month or I would have to do 20 hours of volunteer work. I was already working two jobs and I was in the last semester of high school. The last option given to me was eviction. That being the only feasible option, the day before my birthday, I packed all my things and had to figure out where I could stay. I could not afford the increase in rent nor to take off work to do volunteer work. In distress, I called a friend. Her mom was sitting next to her, heard what was going on, and told me to bring my belongings to their house. My friend's family took me in, gave me my own room, fed me, and made sure I had what I needed.

I did not try to impress people as much during my senior year of high school. I kept to myself because I was too busy to try and involve myself with other students. I was working full time and trying to make a living. During that year, I recalled how much I had

previously tried to hide that I was poor and how hard I tried to look like everyone else. I questioned, why did I try so hard? Every day I look back on how I was taught to hide where I come from. I wonder, if I did not have nice clothes to wear to an interview, would I have been less likely to get a job? Why do people who are poor need to look poor? But when we do, judgment is placed upon us.

“Passing” is something many from underrepresented races, classes, genders, and sexual identities do to try and fit into the cultural majority, to slide under the radar and not be tagged as different. My version of passing in society was trying to pass as economically stable. Especially during our teen to young adult years, we want to fit in with the majority. We try to hide anything that makes us different or places us out of the norm. At least, that is what I did. There is not a correct way to pass in society when you are poor. Even if you do have nice things, people still know you are poor and then try to expose your effort to pass.

My senior year was coming to an end and graduation was right around the corner. The same principal who told me not to make any trouble when I transferred my junior year, called me into his office. He explained that I had missed an inexcusable amount of

school to be able to graduate that year. Hearing that automatically made me break down into tears. I explained to him that I was missing school to go to work and help my mother with my younger sister. At that moment, I felt that I would never get anywhere further in life and that I would always be stuck in poverty. After he calmed me down, he told me that he understood that I had extraordinary circumstances and decided to excuse my absences. In return, I would go to school every day from then on for the rest of the semester. He told me that if I needed to be late to class to give him a call in advance so that he could inform my teachers. He asked me if there was anything that he could do to help me get to school on time. He even talked to my teachers and made sure I had breakfast even if I arrived late to school.

I was not a perfect student. I do not think anyone can be a perfect student. I skipped class a lot just like many of the other students. But the main reason I was showing up to school late is because I took my younger sister to school in the mornings, which started later than high school did. Even though I missed a lot of school, I never had poor grades. I made honor roll even in my last semester. I loved my classes, but I did not like being at school. Being bullied in school influenced my decision

to show up. Paul Gorski (2012) confirms,

It might be easy, given the stereotype that low-income families do not value education, to associate low-income families' less consistent engagement in on-site, publicly visible, school involvement (such as parent-teacher conferences) with an ethic that devalues education. But to do so would require an omission of considerable evidence to the contrary (p. 309).

I had teachers and faculty members who understood and ones who did not. Those who did not know my circumstances thought I was lazy and did not care about school. Parent-teacher conferences were very important in school, but since my mom worked during those hours that they were scheduled, I went alone. Some of my teachers were upset, and I could tell that they thought my mom did not care enough about my education. Some of them thought that I never told my mom about the conference. But I never missed a conference. Even though they were meant to be a conversation with a parent about my education, I wanted my teachers to know that I did care.

Adulthood

After graduating high school in the spring of 2013, I was accepted to the university in my hometown. Fortunately, I applied for scholarships

and received financial aid to be able to attend. My first year at the university was all right, but I felt unhappy with my surroundings. I felt that even though I was in college, I did not have a plan for my future or believe that I could be successful. I never wanted to stay in my hometown. I saw friends and family try to move away, but they always ended up coming back because it was too expensive to live anywhere else. My mom always said to me, "Melissa, you need to get out of this black hole of a town. This place is so dark and depressing. One day I hope I get out." I know that if I were to ever move away and become successful enough, I would help my mom and little sister get out of that town. I always told my mom that once I became rich, I would buy her a little house in Hawaii for her to live in. The reason that I am in college is to make a better life for myself but also for my family.

During the summer of 2014, I decided that if I were to ever strive for something greater, then I would need to leave. I knew if I were to stay, there would always be obstacles in the way. So, I sold everything I had, except what I packed in two suitcases, and purchased a one-way ticket to Rochester, New York. Some people I knew who lived in Rochester suggested that I move there. They offered me the

opportunity to stay with them until I found a place of my own. Once I arrived, I applied to transfer to another college and was accepted.

There were a few challenges that I dealt with when I first arrived. The people who I was staying with stole all the money and my personal belongings. I was homeless and did not know anyone else in the area. I worked at a coffee shop at the time. I went into work the next day frantic about where I would be able to sleep that night. My co-workers overheard my phone call with my sister in which I explained what happened. They offered me a place to stay for a few days until I could find a permanent place to live. I ended up staying with one of my co-workers for four months. The fact that he barely knew me but was willing to let me stay at his place for free is one of the kindest things that someone has done for me. During that time, we became very close. We have been friends ever since.

College

In the present day, it is my senior year of college and I am living on my own, working two jobs, and attending school full time. I am a double major in Psychology and Women and Gender Studies with a minor in Studio Art. My GPA is above a 3.0, and I have been inducted in the Triota National Honor

Society for Women and Gender Studies. Even though I have good academic standing, it takes a lot of effort to keep those grades. When I was younger, I felt that I was not as smart as some of the other kids, even though I had the same public education. One thing that I realized since being in New York is that the public education is much different from the one I received in Missouri. Every day is a challenge for me when it comes to my school work. But it was not just the education that I was lacking, it was my upbringing that hindered me from education in and outside of the classroom. *Ain't No Makin' it* by Jay MacLeod (1995), helped affirm for me that my education was different. MacLeod (1995) writes,

Children of upper-class origin, according to Bourdieu (1997) inherit substantially different cultural capital than do working-class children. By embodying class interests and ideologies, schools reward the cultural capital of the dominant classes and systematically devalue that of lower classes. Upper-class students, by virtue of a certain linguistic and cultural competence acquired through family upbringing, are provided with the means of appropriation of success in school. Children who read books, visit museums, attend concerts, and go to the theater and cinema (or simply grow up in families where these practices are prevalent) acquire a

familiarity with the dominant culture that the educational system implicitly requires of its students for academic attainment (p. 13).

Reading this helped me realize that I am as smart as my peers. The differences in my own success lay in not being given the same opportunities to thrive and learn as a child. I may try harder to catch up to my peers in college, but that is what makes me strive for more. I feel accomplished when I am praised for my work and when people notice my will to learn.

Privilege and oppression intersect place (where we begin in life) and identity, the social categories of race, gender, sexuality and ability under which we fall and are categorized by society. Even though I live below the poverty threshold, my privileges give me many opportunities others may never have. This is important to recognize because understanding poverty means understanding how power and privilege operate. Despite coming from what is considered a “rough” neighborhood, I am a white woman who lived in that rough neighborhood. I remember when the cops would patrol our neighborhood every day. They usually treated me kindly, but my friends who were not white were always questioned. As a teen, I did the same deviant things as

many of my other counterparts. The difference was that I never got caught and that is primarily because the police did not suspect me. People are not afraid of me. This is my privilege for being white.

Another privilege that I have is that I usually have a way to receive food and shelter. My mom had a place to live, even if it was not ours. She found a way to feed us. We did not go hungry. She might have, but my siblings and I never knew. She made sure we had what she could provide for us. I think about the people who have taken me in while I was homeless, but many people who end up homeless do not have that same opportunity. The National Alliance to End Homelessness (2016) reported, “On a single night in January 2015, 564,708 people were experiencing homelessness — meaning they were sleeping outside or in an emergency shelter or transitional housing program” (p. 3). Not having to live outdoors or in a shelter, like many homeless people do, is a privilege that I acknowledge.

My life changed when I moved to New York State and immediately received full coverage under Medicaid. It was very easy to apply for, and I was instantly approved. I have always been given numerous obstacles when trying to receive Medicaid in Missouri. When I went to the doctor, the secretary had to

tell me that I was not covered any longer through Medicaid. I was never given a notice that it was discontinued; I just would not have it. This happened countless times. Trying to receive health insurance in Missouri put so much stress on my life growing up that I gave up and stopped applying. The healthcare system makes it so difficult to get coverage. I should have been worried about tests at school, not about receiving health insurance. The fact that I was approved and given zero obstacles in New York has made me recognize how much of a privilege it is to be insured. From experience, government assistance programs require recipients to remain poor in order to continue receiving support. For instance, if I were to make just \$100 extra a month, my assistance would be discontinued. So why should I try and better my life by trying to get out of poverty when my income still would not be enough to cover basic necessities? I might be able to earn more money that would make me ineligible for Medicaid, food stamps, and most importantly, financial aid, but I would then not make enough to cover my health and education expenses.

Throughout my college experience, professors assign material that frequently needs to be finished by the next class with only one day in-between

each. Most of the time, I am working at one of my jobs after class and every weekend. In reality, I do not have a day off. I am either in school, doing schoolwork, or at work. I understand that homework and college are a package deal and it is designed to help reinforce what we are learning in class. But students come from different backgrounds and income levels, and many college professors never even consider this variable when assigning out of classroom coursework. Heather Hollifield-Hoyle and James Hammons (2015) write about college students living in poverty, finding,

...while college and university practices and activities have recognized and embraced the diversity brought to campus by women, racial and ethnic minorities, and gay and lesbian students, college administrators, student-support staff, and faculty are still lacking in awareness, understanding, and appreciation of the challenges faced by low-income students (p. 30).

When I only have one day to complete an assignment, I find myself frantically trying to finish it or having to meet with professors to explain to them that I work a lot and I did not have enough time. If I do not work enough hours, I cannot pay rent, my bills, afford food, or even afford the cost of the highly priced books required for those classes.

I hear all the time that my health is more important than work or school. Being able to pay my bills and pay them on time plays a major role in my physical and mental health, and this correlates with my success in school.

I still face financial aid challenges. I have the privilege of receiving full financial assistance to cover tuition. But the only downfall is that I must include my mother's annual income when applying for financial aid. I am no longer considered a dependent of my mom and it creates a burden for me to get her information sent to me from Missouri to New York. I have provided for myself since the age of 15 and do not have economic support from my parents. Problematically, when I tried to get financial aid to cover courses during the summer, the financial aid office at my college explained that the only way I was going to get summer funding was if my parents applied and were denied a loan. I explained to the financial aid advisor that I do not have parents to do that for me. For summer financial aid, having my parents apply for loans was the only option. But that was an option that I did not have.

My adulthood experience is just beginning. I write this as a 22-year-old woman who has the privilege of receiving higher education. I think about all the people who supported me

emotionally and financially throughout my life. They are the reason I am succeeding today. While in college, I became a scholar in the McNair Research Program. It is designed for participants who are either first-generation college students with financial need, or members of a group that is underrepresented in graduate education and have demonstrated strong academic potential. The goal of the McNair Scholars Program is to increase graduate degree awards for students from underrepresented areas of society. This program has shown me that I am able to further my education and it has given me the skills to do so. I have many plans after I graduate with my undergraduate degree. After graduate school, what I want to do in life is still in question. A major focus for my future is to educate others across the nation on poverty. I want to help kids who come from low-income families understand that they do have a future, that there is a chance for them. I have so many goals I want to reach in my lifetime and I am just getting started. I am going to go from poverty to PhD.

Conclusion

I am never truly satisfied with where I am in my life; I am always reaching for more. I am constantly planning my

future and waiting for the day that I can sit back and say, "I did it." When I hear others say that they believe poor people are lazy, I am confident enough to stand up for others and myself. I do not speak for everyone in poverty, but I will continue to dismantle false societal beliefs of what it means to live and learn as a poor woman.

People in poverty tend to work more hours and have more than one job. Usually these jobs, like most blue collar work, require a lot of physical strain, such as working in a factory where there is no air conditioning and large machinery that lets off heat. My mom worked in a factory and used to come home during her lunch break dripping in sweat. She would be so broken down after her shift. The next time you hear someone say that poor people are lazy, have them read this. It might not change their minds, but hopefully, my story can provoke people to think about why they stereotype people in poverty.

From childhood, to teenage years, and finally, into adulthood, I can advocate for myself in a way that I was never able to do before. I challenge our capitalistic society that works to keep others and me in poverty, down. While in college, I have thought about how it truly pays to be poor. I have state and federal supported healthcare, I am approved for full financial aid for

college, and I am in the McNair Program, which will help me pursue graduate level studies that will help me succeed in the workforce. I have been given opportunities like these that many do not have. But I sometimes worry about the future. What if I do not make enough money to take care of my family and myself? This is troubling, but I sometimes wonder if I should remain poor so that I do not have to worry about losing my assistance.

I am at a college that provides me the education and voice that I need to change my future. I have learned so much about myself, but I still have so much more to learn. I still catch myself justifying to others why I have a nice car, phone, or new clothes. I know I should not have to explain myself to people and yet I still do it. When people compliment my nice outfit, I always mention how much my entire outfit costs. Sometimes I do not even realize I am doing it. It has been ingrained in my mind that I must always be ready to defend myself. There is nothing wrong with explaining to people how much my outfit costs; it usually strikes a great conversation. But the fact that I automatically do it is the problem. The fact is, I am deserving of the things I have. I work so hard and I have come a long way from where I use to be. I will create change, and I will keep working

hard to dismantle stereotypes. As Angela Davis once said, “We have to talk about liberating minds as well as liberating society.” That is exactly what I strive to do.

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