

Fighting poverty in New York City is much more than just a job. Those who respond to this calling can transform the lives of individuals, but breaking poverty's grip on society is harder.

HELP NEEDED

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Muzzy Rosenblatt '97, CEO of the Bowery Residents' Committee, says that it takes a relationship, not a mandated program, to change lives, and a relationship begins with a conversation.

Muzzy Rosenblatt '87 is navigating the streets of lower Manhattan in his van on a summer morning. We are stopped at a red light when we see a man on the sidewalk tracing an erratic path, from one pedestrian to another. Rosenblatt, with his elbow out the window, pulls over to the curb. The man lopes toward us, and Rosenblatt, chief executive officer of the Bowery Residents Committee, or BRC, explains what is about to unfold.

"An interaction always starts with a name," he says. "If someone is looking to make contact, we want to communicate in the friendliest way that we are a resource—for help, or a conversation, whatever. And we don't assume anything."

"If you give a sandwich to someone who hasn't asked for one, that's not going to build a relationship. But if you ask someone, by name, what he or she needs—that's a beginning."

By this time the man is at his side.

"How are you doing? You are all right?" Rosenblatt starts the conversation.

"Nah, I got put out of the men's shelter and I don't believe in robbing or stealing so I'm just wandering the streets."

"My name's Muzzy; what's yours?" He puts out his hand.

"Keith, Muzzy. How you doing?" Keith grasps Muzzy's hand in a strong shake.

"I'm from a place called BRC. You heard of that?"

"Yeah, I got suspended from there, too."

"The drop-in center? Oh, man." Rosenblatt's tone is commiserative.

"You got a dollar so I can buy breakfast?"

"I can't give you anything; you probably know that."

"Sure you can. You can do anything you want."

"Well, that's true, and so can you. So after breakfast, what's your plan today?"

"I'm probably going to go to Central Park and sleep like I did yesterday."

Rosenblatt waits out a pause.
“So you want to help me or not?” the man asks.
“The food at the BRC drop-in center is good; you know that.”


“Yeah, I know that.” The man smiles at the memory, then shakes his head and lopes off.

Rosenblatt turns to me, with a shrug: “So it goes.” He picks up his cell phone to call Larry, the director of the drop-in center, and let him know that they may see Keith again, sometime soon.

I am concerned by what I perceive to be failure: Keith is still hungry and homeless; Muzzy’s efforts were rebuffed.

That is not Rosenblatt’s perspective. “He wasn’t in any obvious distress: he was clean, coherent, and advocating for himself. He had a plan for the day and some confidence. He remembered the food at BRC was good; that’s what we want.”

The quality of free food seems a small detail to me, but to Rosenblatt, it’s huge: “Think about what you remember from a vacation. You remember if it’s clean, if the food is good. Just because someone is poor doesn’t mean that we can’t provide services with dignity and respect.”

 Hurricane Katrina shoved poverty—our failure to provide all our citizens with the basics of food, shelter, and medical care—into the spotlight. Bowery Residents’ Committee, with its finely tuned focus on a segment of those living in poverty—the street people of New York City—and its patient one-on-one method of forging relationships, has proven to be effective. Yet the problem of poverty in New York City, as in the rest of the nation, is so large, so daunting. How to improve the lives of millions of people remains one of the great unsolved dilemmas of our time, a legacy remaining after the War On Poverty first launched by former President Lyndon Johnson.

Later on the BRC tour with Rosenblatt, we visit outreach workers, who are talking with some homeless people living underneath the city’s bridges, near the highways and rivers. We can see that one entrepreneurial sort has used the hollows of the steel supports to stow his belongings, which protrude, a tangle of flannel and cardboard.

The riverbank, itself, however, is unusually neat, and

Rosenblatt is concerned. The city had turned a blind eye to it, and the homeless had been lulled into thinking this was a safe place to stash bedding and belongings. Without warning, the city one day disposed of all items in the improvised settlement. He asks the outreach workers if the people here think it was BRC that instigated the sudden and disruptive cleanup. If so, it’s going to make their job to build a relationship that much harder.

They don’t blame us, he is told. But this incident—not the first time he’s seen the city act in a peremptory manner—frustrates him.

When I ask Rosenblatt if he finds the work at BRC discouraging—homelessness is obviously a large and ongoing problem—he shakes his head. The city’s homeless number in the thousands, the size of a small village.

His statistics show that every eight minutes an outreach worker starts a conversation—and after an average of 35 conversations, a homeless person will agree to accept the “hand *up*, not the *handout*” that BRC offers. Last year, he says, BRC helped 400 people who had been homeless move into a home—more than one person every day.

The scope and effectiveness of BRC’s outreach becomes apparent when I express concern for a man I’d seen outside Grand Central—bearded and barefoot, with a blanket tied around him, and pulling a shopping cart. The BRC outreach workers nod knowingly.

“Jeffrey,” they tell me. “He has clothes on underneath the blanket—sweat pants. He’s really very intelligent. We convinced him to let us drive him to the crisis center, to give it a try, but once he got there, he didn’t want to stay. At least not that time. We’ll keep talking to him, though. Maybe next time.”

Rosenblatt also notes that homeless outreach is merely one entryway into BRC’s system of care that continues as long as the person would like that affiliation. BRC is like a family, he says: a family doesn’t leave you. You may need different things as you grow, but the family is still there.

For some, the home that BRC offers, after an initial stay in the crisis center, is a studio apartment in one of their buildings; for others it’s “scatter-site housing”—apartments throughout the city for which BRC holds the lease from individual landlords.

Kenneth lives in a studio apartment in BRC’s “Glass Factory,” a building named for its earlier use. His housing includes group meals and onsite counseling services. He grew up the ninth of 10 children born to a career-military father and a stay-at-home mother. He never expected to need public services. In 1991, how-

ever, he was a gay drug addict, HIV-positive, and living in an abandoned building.

Now he is a certified volunteer substance abuse counselor. His apartment has a polished, orderly appeal, with classic jazz on the CD player and his music collection neatly displayed on a rack. “Remember *Xena*, *Warrior Princess* TV show?” he asks. “She said something that I never understood until I moved here: ‘It’s always easier to believe in yourself when someone else believes in you first.’”

“But you did the work,” Rosenblatt reminds him.

After we leave, Rosenblatt gives me some statistics and BRC theory: “Six thousand people a year come to us for help, and each is different. What we try to do is not put them into a BRC formula of services and hope they’ll pop out the back end with a job, home, and what have you—no

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more than Wesleyan tries to graduate a class of lawyers or doctors or physicists. What we say is, ‘Look, here’s an opportunity. We’ll help you find what you think you need at this time.’

“We do a lot of data collection, a lot of evaluations, because it costs a lot to do what we do, and if it doesn’t have a lasting impact, it’s a waste of people’s lives.”

With private donations and support of his board, Rosenblatt is free to try innovative programs. Two of his latest offer shelter based on the “harm reduction” model: unlike a traditional shelter, the residents do not have to abstain from drinking and drugging; the model suggests that they will choose to limit unhealthy habits when the stresses of homelessness are solved. This has allowed two brothers—one an alcoholic, the other brain injured from a childhood accident—to come in off the streets together, the only way they would agree to make the move. No previous shelter offered housing to accommodate both, so they had stayed together, on the streets, these past nine years.




David R. Jones '70, president and CEO of the Community Service Society in New York City, advocates for the “unheard third.”

Rosenblatt is clear about the frustrations he found earlier in his career working on the problems of homelessness through government programs. Those programs, he observes, are administered in a cold, prescribed manner. If your problems fit the model, fine. If they don’t, you are out of luck.

“Some would also argue that the government programs are keeping people in subsistence-level poverty. Some private programs offer survival charity: Vans come through, delivering handouts—food and blankets—making it possible for people to stay on the streets another day, still in poverty, still in despair. We come through, talking to people, offering a different way.

“Real change,” he adds, “is self-motivated. It’s a combination of respect and responsibility. It has to be done on an individual timetable. We have to regain our sense of personal responsibility. In our business, it’s about the process and the relationship. It’s not about the outcome or the timetable. BRC might seem cost-intensive, but ultimately it’s cost-effective.”

 A few subway stops uptown from BRC, David R. Jones '70 sits at the helm of another organization taking on poverty, the Community Service Society.

Jones, a former Wall Street lawyer who, in the early '80s, was commissioner of youth services for Mayor Ed Koch, joined CSS for what he thought would be a couple of years.

“That,” he says, clearly enjoying the irony, “was nearly three decades ago.” Now, he wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. “This is where the action is.”

One of the charities of the Rockefellers, CSS had pioneered “scientific social work,” and sought to investigate the root causes of poverty as well as ameliorate living conditions for the poor. Concerns included the rapid spread of tuberculosis, which ran rampant in the dark, airless tenement housing, often owned by corrupt politicians. CSS implemented the first modern public housing units that featured a central corridor, which provided light and air to all apartments, not just the ones at the end of each block.

In its modern incarnation, CSS is politically engaged. While still offering some service initiatives, it educates and lobbies, gathering facts and preparing the policy analyses

that give those in the political arena the information they must have in order to influence public opinion and bring about change.

“Providing direct service feels like bailing out the ocean with a thimble,” Jones says. “The problems are just too huge.”

His constituents are anyone living at or near the poverty line in the city of New York—an estimated three million people out of the 8.2 million who call the five boroughs home. He notes that this huge segment of New Yorkers operates below the political radar, a situation that exists nationwide, and the reason that we, as a nation, found the level of poverty in New Orleans flabbergasting. In a market-driven economy, the poor, with little purchasing power, are simply unimportant. In 1999, CSS launched “The Unheard Third,” the only regular U.S. public opinion survey specifically documenting the concerns, attitudes, and hardships of low-income communities.

“As far as we can find out, no other poll is focused on the

poor,” Jones says. “This is the only one. It’s frightening.”

Some of the findings: Almost 87 percent of those in poverty are working. The image of people hanging around and collecting welfare checks is a mirage. They are under extraordinary pressure, particularly from housing costs. Two-thirds or more spend greater than half their income on housing. That leaves most of them a pittance—as little as 30 dollars a week—for all other necessities, including food, health care, and the rest.

“People are reporting that they can’t afford basic health care when they are sick, and they can’t afford to fill prescriptions,” he says. “When you are really poor, you can get Medicare. But the working poor are just above the margin. Many are immigrants, and thus are not necessarily eligible for Medicare. But even those who are eligible are often afraid of dealing with the bureaucracy.”

High-quality research is a CSS trademark. For example, a recent study showed that New York has one of the highest rates in the nation of disconnected young people. About 16

percent of people aged 16–24, roughly 200,000 individuals, are neither at work nor in school. The city is attempting to address this issue through the Mayor’s Commission for Economic Opportunity, on which Jones serves.

Statistics provided by CSS formed the underpinnings for a documenatry by Roger Weisberg ’75, *Waging a Living*, which aired nationally last summer on the Public Broadcasting System’s POV series. In this production, Weisberg’s crew follows five individuals who live at the poverty level and struggle day by day. For example, one mother of five returns to school part-time so she can get an associate’s degree and a better job. She succeeds—only to discover that the higher wages she earns are more than offset by an accompanying loss of benefits. With her degree and higher pay, her family has even less monthly income. Like her, so many of the poor are trapped on a treadmill.

One of the areas in which CSS offers a service initiative is in the crucial area of health insurance administration.

Janeene Freeman ’98 is the assistant director of the CSS

Managed Care Consumer Assistance Program (known as MCCAP), which helps consumers enroll in and navigate their managed care insurance plans. Jones hopes to take this New York City prototype of a health care advocate statewide, because a healthcare emergency is one factor that can cause a family just managing to make ends meet to sink below the poverty line and never recover.

Created in 1998, and with a network of 25 community-based providers, MCCAPS offers services in 13 languages and has reached more than 300,000 clients. Deciphering eligibility requirements and exclusions is complicated enough for those whose first language is English. In neighborhoods that boast a high immigrant population, a CSS healthcare advocate is a crucial resource in navigating the system of services, permissions, and appeals.

Jones and Freeman paint a dark picture for those living at this subsistence-level poverty. A difficult pregnancy, a child with asthma—issues that might be managed with the routine physician visits that would have been covered had they health insurance—escalate until emergency treatment is required. With medical care costs running into the thousands, the family often agrees to financing arrangements that they can’t truly afford. Of course, they fall behind in payments and the bill is turned over to collection agencies. Any credit the family had tried to establish is ruined, along with hopes of ever applying for a mortgage and owning their own home.

And a mortgage would presuppose a banking relationship—another establishment link that the poor can’t afford. Jones has been chairman of the board of the largest bank catering to blacks in New York City and describes the difficulties:

“It isn’t commercially viable for banks to handle depositories of less than \$1,000,” he says. “So, most poor people don’t have banking relationships; they work with check-cashers, which means that everything becomes hand-to-mouth. They don’t have reserves that are earning interest; they’re charged for every transaction. When you transfer money, it’s \$10 for every \$100 you transfer. It’s usurious, really. It becomes a circular problem, and very little has been done so far.”

Wesleyan economist Wendy Rayack, who teaches about poverty, corroborates the picture but cautions that it is not always as far away as we might like to think.

“People who are poor are no different from the rest of us,” she says. “They’ve had crises or bad luck; they’ve had emergencies and there was no safety net—no savings or family with resources to share. It’s a misconception to

think poverty is a person’s fault. Just one crisis can throw a family into poverty.

“Loss of job, of course, can start the poverty cycle, but even a decrease in hours can push a family into crisis.” One well-known discount store had been talking about cutting its full-time workers to part-time, Rayack notes, pointing out that, along with wages, these employees would lose health benefits—a double blow to a struggling family.

A change in family composition also tilts the delicate balance. With death or divorce, the remaining family members not only sustain the emotional blow, but must also adjust to a decrease in income while expenses stay nearly the same.

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Rayack also notes that the gap between the richest and the poorest in the United States has been growing for years, so those at the bottom are “increasingly further from participating in the broader society.”

People can have full-time jobs, she says, and not make it out of poverty, or they may be living above the poverty line but still face a bleak existence thanks to the changing definition of poverty: “In 1964, the Johnson Administration defined ‘poor’ as ‘all families with total money income of less than \$3,000,’ or 50 percent of median income for a family of four. In 1969, revised figures became the Federal Government’s official statistical poverty measures—and the poverty line was still more than 35 percent of median family income for a family of four. Today, it stands closer to 28 percent.”

The significance is that many people considered to be living above the poverty line today would have been classified as poor in earlier eras. Median family income for a family of four in 2005 was \$70,312. The poverty line for

a family of four is \$19,971. If the standards in place in 1964—50 percent of median income—were used today, a family of four with income below \$35,156 would be considered poor.

Welfare reforms have pushed many people into the job market at wages of \$7 or \$8 an hour. Their earnings place them slightly above the poverty line, but expenses such as daycare ensure that they fall into the category of working poor. That portion of the population has been growing, according to Rayack.

Living from paycheck to paycheck, barely covering their expenses, these working poor begin a downward spiral when any sort of economic disruption hits their family.

One particular group that has been the subject of study for a CSS policy report is the security guards at skyscrapers. Seated behind polished desks, in lobbies holding thousands of dollars’ worth of art, the uniformed guards are tucked into a posh landscape, as though offering a discreet, but very real, level of protection to New Yorkers. In actuality, however, these workers—mostly men of color—have a job that dispenses hourly minimum wages with few days off, and health insurance offered at a rate that is beyond the reach of most.

Jones’ take on the matter: “So the people guarding the Empire State Building, the 75 workers? Not one of them has health insurance. And not one of them has any training. And they have to come to work sick, because they have no days off.” The difference between the appearance and the reality is chilling—and our general ignorance of the situation, and what that implies for our country, is even more so, Jones fears.

Why don’t more people care about the plight of the working poor? In a reflective moment, Jones recalls an era from his youth, when he went to live in Maine on a potato farm with his brother-in-law. A handful of Brooklynites and a town of Down-East farmers found, in common work, mutual understanding.

“As a country, we have no unifying experience. It’s very important for this nation that we find it. Perhaps a year of required service, a City Year, a VISTA experience. It’s a somewhat visionary idea,” he acknowledges, “but we need to find common ground.”

For further information on the Community Service Society, the Bowery Residents’ Committee, the Tiger Foundation, and *Waging a Living*, please see www.wesleyan.edu/magazine, www.cssny.org, www.brc.org, www.tigerfoundation.org/ and www.pbs.org/pov/pov2006/wagingaliving/.

FUNDING PROGRAMS THAT PROVIDE A FUTURE



The disconnected youth of New York City—the subject of a 2005 policy paper by the Community Service Society—are the people living in poverty who are of the most concern to Phoebe Boyer ’89.

Boyer is executive director of the Tiger Foundation, which provides grants to organizations working to break the cycle of poverty in the city. The foundation’s focus is preventive programs related to education, job training, and social services/youth development.

“What some of these kids have gone through; I’m

amazed they are still standing,” says Boyer. She is speaking about the teens she meets who are out of both school and work—and lack the skills to gain and retain employment.

Boyer oversees distribution of funds to the programs that meet these criteria: They must be replicable in another venue, produce measurable outcomes that document their efficacy, and leverage public sector and/or private investment.

From her vantage point, she also sees a city deeply divided, with those in poverty suffering profound

isolation from mainstream society. Boyer knows of teens who have never left their neighborhood.

“Someone can tell them that the city is filled with all sorts of museums, but it’s meaningless to them; these resources might as well be in another country,” she says. Furthermore, she adds, the entrance fees are prohibitive for those in poverty.

Tiger Foundation programs address these issues of isolation, but as Muzzy Rosenblatt of the BRC has noted, the best intentions can run smack into government regulations—which proves frustrating.

“One of our grantees was running their teen program, even though the day fell on a holiday,” recalls Boyer. “The kids had MetroCards to get to the site—but they weren’t valid on a day when public schools weren’t in session and the kids didn’t have any money. So what did these kids do? They leaped the turnstiles and got arrested and had to pay a fine—all because they wanted to attend the program and comply with its attendance requirements. They are caught in endless Catch-22’s.”

Her real worry is how these kids will fare in a few years, when they become adults and heads of households—and how we, as a society, will cope with a whole segment of our population that we have failed to include. Still, she remains determinedly optimistic, buoyed by the programs that Tiger Foundation supports.

“What we need,” she says, “is more effective use of public and private resources for programs that actually work.”