

'I know how it is to struggle': A bridge out of poverty in Mississippi town

Thu Oct 3, 2013 7:21 AM EDT

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Lauren Wood / Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal

Sara Moyer helps her nephew Keyon, 8, pick out shirts for the day as son Marshall, 9, and granddaughter Zykeriah, 3, look on in the living room of their house in Starkville on Aug. 10.

By Robbie Ward, [Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal](#)

STARKVILLE, Mississippi – Standing among a crowd recently in rural Oktibbeha County watching youth football games, Sara Moyer could have been mistaken for a social worker, sociologist or cultural anthropologist.

She stood near the fence separating spectators from the boys playing football and commented about poverty conditions affecting approximately 1 in 3 county residents, according to Census data.

Moyer, 43, a Starkville native, can discuss poverty with a hint of detachment, mentioning hidden rules members of different economic classes follow, the need for impoverished people to have strong support systems of family or friends and misconceptions that many people in poverty have about those in the middle class.

Along with taking classes for nearly two years now related to poverty's causes and ways to overcome it, Moyer has lived in it her entire life.

While many people in poverty feel shame discussing what they don't have – money, nice clothes, a good job and car – Moyer speaks of her life with an honesty and objectivity that few people will, at least not publicly, and certainly not while watching her children play football on a hot Mississippi Saturday.

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Since participating in **Starkville Bridges Out of Poverty**, a program aimed at helping people in poverty identify strategies and come up with a game plan to transition out, Moye's thoughts about her life situation have changed dramatically. The program is modeled after a national program used to connect people in the middle class and poverty so that they can understand and communicate with each other to better help those in need.

"If somebody said I was in poverty, I was ready to fight," Moye said, still watching the football game. "I thought my life was normal."

With 1 in 4 Mississippians living in poverty, this lack of resources is relatively common in the state, which had the highest rate of poverty nationwide, along with one of the highest rates of child poverty. Many such people rely on government assistance, which drains resources that could otherwise help fund education, better roads and other state services.



Lauren Wood / Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal
Sara Moye works with Clara Dancer as they complete an exercise about building resources during their Bridges Out of Poverty class on Aug. 13 at the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection in Starkville.

High poverty rates also affect quality of life in an area and can create stigmas for communities, leaving some desirable businesses reluctant to locate there.

Moye describes her life until recent years as a series of bad decisions mixed with tough luck that have forced her to try to make it better her and her family.

After dropping out of a year of college at Mississippi State University, the African-American woman from a close-knit family began working low-skill jobs at a convenience store, cleaning hotel rooms and other work she could find.

By age 21, she had her first child and was in a relationship with a man who would hit her in the face. Moye would lie and tell her mom the marks came from falling on a coffee table at home.

Five years ago, Moye quit working low-paying jobs to take care of her mother, who had a stroke. They lived off of income from disability payments to Moye's mother, child support and food stamps.

And in 2011, one of Moye's sisters died from liver hepatitis. That's when she felt her life unravel. She never felt suicidal, just angry at the world.

Along with helping her mother, Moye took in her sister's son, Keyon, 8, to raise as her own child.

"When he really wants something, he'll call me 'mama'," Moye said.

Along with her nephew and mother, Moye's younger son lives with them, while her 22-year-old son lives in Texas working in retail. However, he fathered a girl, 3, who lives in Starkville with her mother, who works at a gas station while attending community college. Moye keeps her granddaughter on weekends.

Through Starkville Bridges Out of Poverty, Moye met Lynn Phillips-Gaines, a successful financial planner who created the grassroots effort after spending years trying to find a vehicle to help poor people through financial literacy. Bridges also helps people in poverty identify resources beyond financial, such as emotional, mental, spiritual, support systems, relationships and knowledge of unspoken cues and habits of different economic classes.

Moye shakes her head when asked if she'd ever think she would have a financial planner as a friend.

"I never thought in a million years I'd have a friend like Lynn," Moye said recently at her house just south of Starkville's city limits. "I'm of the poverty level and Lynn is more of the middle class."

Getting to know Phillips-Gaines helped shatter stereotypes Moye had of people in middle class.

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She generally thought that middle-class people were stingy and didn't want to help poor people like her. She considered many of them hypocrites, ignoring Christianity's teachings of love and charity.

"I used to think they were stingy, uppity," Moye said. "I thought they thought they were above God."

But now Moye says she understands why people with more money than her haven't just given her and other poor people direct help. She talks about her old habits of spending money as soon as she got it, how she had so many expenses she couldn't save any of it.

"I know how to save now," she said. "At first, I couldn't do it."

At her home, she spends time during the weekends with her family. Many cousins, uncles, aunts and others live nearby, allowing them to gather and visit. Family is an area in Moye's life that makes her feel rich. Her supportive family leans on each other during tough financial times, and when a crisis strikes, such as a death or sickness in the family.

Some family members felt a little skeptical about Moye completing the Bridges program, knowing that she has started projects and programs previously but not finished them. But she made believers of them and others when she graduated from the class.

She even served as a facilitator with the most recent Bridges Out of Poverty class in Starkville, transitioning from student to teacher. Moye knows she's still poor but understanding the larger causes of poverty and learning more about resources available in the community to help her attain a better life, she says she has hope for her future.

She also prods her children to do well in school, encouraging her son Marshall, 9, to embrace his love for animals, hoping he may study a field of science in college.

Moye said she and her family also eat healthier, trying to limit sodas and other foods that give empty calories. She's trying to find a way to get a reduced cost gym membership to lose weight.

Wander Carr, Moye's older sister who lives a short distance from her, works as a bookkeeper for a state Department of Human Services office in Starkville. Married 25 years, Carr said with two incomes in her family, they still border along the poverty line.

Carr said she's proud of her younger sister for the effort to learn more about poverty.

"She has started things and quit before, but she really likes this," Carr said. "If she really likes something, she'll stick to it."

Although Moye hasn't made concrete steps, she said she wants to enroll at a local community college to learn skills that will help her re-enter the workforce.

"I want to help others," she said. "I know how it is to struggle."

*Editor's note: This story was **originally published** on September 30, 2013 in the Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal and is reprinted with permission. Reporter Robbie Ward volunteered as a facilitator in the first Bridges Out of Poverty class in Starkville in 2011.*

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TruthComesHere

Hope she stays on course and pulls herself and family out of the vicious cycle that is government welfare programs. Perhaps she should read about and listen to Dr. Benjamin Carson (neurosurgeon) and how his mother pulled their family out of a similar mess.

#1 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 7:52 AM EDT REPLY 1 vote

 **Tony-344506**

"Family is skeptical", "...hasn't taken any concrete steps" where's the story? Do a follow up in a year.

#2 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 7:56 AM EDT REPLY 2 votes

 **k4him**

We have this program in our community in PA as well. My husband and I live in a poor community and work to help our neighbors. We are so hoping that one day we can convince neighbors to take this class. I also have dreams of teaching women in my community how to shop frugally, cook from scratch on a budget and tight schedule, and organize their homes and lives. A lot of those things are taught in the class, but some people may feel more comfortable learning from a loving neighbor. This is good stuff!

#3 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 8:15 AM EDT REPLY 2 votes

 **Evelyn M.**

The answer to all of that is job skills and jobs and learning to be oriented to those things; to learn how the predatory environment seduces the poor to spend more for less and to live at their means without a chance for savings. Just teaching classes is a small step, but we don't address the bigger social issues that amount to those who have too much to gain by there being pockets of poverty.

#4 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 8:34 AM EDT REPLY

 **Moderate in madison**

So....What are her main sources of income now??? Did "Bridges" also lead to TRAINING for a skill or field of knowledge that produce a JOB?????

#5 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 8:47 AM EDT REPLY

 **Domewars**

Wish her luck.

#6 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 9:13 AM EDT REPLY

 **Erin-PA**

I had the pleasure of meeting Lynn at a conference for Bridges just this week. The work is challenging and people don't "get out of poverty" with just a job. They need skills to keep the job. It takes time and money. No one learns all the skills they need to be successful in this world in 4 months. If you've never been taught how to manage money, the value of education or employment, how would one learn it and adopt it in 4 months? This work takes time and committed people like Lynn. I commend the business community for stepping up and showing people the choices they have.

#7 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 9:17 AM EDT REPLY 2 votes

 **Brian P Fussmucker**

Now let me get this straight. This lady has a 3 year old granddaughter who works in a gas station and attends community college? That's what it said in the 17th paragraph. Now that kid has a way out of poverty! Good for her!

#8 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 9:20 AM EDT REPLY 3 votes

 **Lauren84**

If you read more closely it says her son's baby's mother works at the gas station and attends community college. Moya watches the 3 year old on the weekends....

#8.1 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 1:39 PM EDT

REPLY 



hs321

"she had her first child and was in a relationship with a man who would hit her in the face."

"Man"? Men don't hit women.

#9 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 9:27 AM EDT

REPLY 

2 votes



Steve Williams  VIA FACEBOOK

Looks like she's not missing many meals. I'll bet most of her time is spent sitting on that couch watching tv.

#10 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 9:29 AM EDT

REPLY 

1 vote



Guest924

In an area of rampant poverty she's "working" as a sort of home health care worker and foster parent already! If she wasn't helping her mother and sister's kid the taxpayers would be paying someone else to do it anyway. The fact that she is considering college appears to be her realizing there are attainable career paths that wouldn't leave her with a net loss after paying others to do things she can't while working (like daycare).

#11 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 9:39 AM EDT

REPLY 



najumamunirah

Not everyone that is poor is uneducated or lacking in skills. Poverty is a social issue more than anything else. I know wealthy people and they know of me. However, I do not get invited to their activities or to their house for coffee. Why? Because I am poor. I can add nothing to their wallets. Unless they are using my skills for their own gain. It is a never ending cycle of take but no giving. The unequal distribution of money is the cause and the root of the problem. No job, will fix it. I do not know what will.

#12 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 9:40 AM EDT

REPLY 



catthepat

Everyone who is crying that we are headed towards Socialism reads what you wrote and just reinforces what they feel. Sorry for you trials and tribulations but if you really want to get a good job, move somewhere where there are jobs. There are church groups all over this country who are willing to sponsor families that want to move to get a better job. Don't just sit there and bemoan your fate. Do something about it and stop looking for someone with money (who has earned it) to "give" you what they have.

#12.1 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 9:55 AM EDT

1 vote



gary myers-1348409

Poverty is both a social and economic issue.

In recent years capitalism and the economic structure in this country have not been able to produce enough good jobs to support societies needs. There are many working poor out there who are making an effort to pull themselves up but the economy and society keep putting the steps up the ladder further apart.

#12.2 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 10:55 AM EDT

1 vote



Brad from Des Moines

I'm in a middle class family. We have some friends that are poor. Some of those friends I invite regularly because they're fun to be around, and I don't care that they don't have money. Others, we rarely invite because they have poor hygiene, but they're some of the nicest and most loyal people we know, which is why despite the fact that they always literally stink, we still try and do things

together. Finally, there's some extended family we almost never invite around because they're mean and angry about the fact that "you have things and I don't!"

My point is, to a lot of people, it's the attitude and person that is the turnoff, not the financial situation. Be positive, grateful, and a person someone wants to be around, and people will want to be around you.

#12.3 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 1:57 PM EDT

1 vote

REPLY



jim insolo

Yeah- right another big ' help me out" program that ends in success when the government gives her a job carrying papers from point A to point B and back again all day. If you need a plan to get out of poverty, how about not eating about 20 big macs per day.

#13 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 9:52 AM EDT

REPLY

2 votes



k4him

This is not a government program and it teaches real skills. Best of all, it teaches a new way of thinking.

#13.1 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 3:29 PM EDT

REPLY



chander

Poverty is real in USA&its increase is caused by US Congress!US Congress neither honors its Oath /Pledge to work as "One Nation under God nor perform its Oversight Duty in 21st century--That is why Poverty among Americans rose from 3o M to 46M below the Poverty Level and National Debt peaked to \$ 16 Tr.!Both Democrats & GOP are responsible for2001 TAXCUT that continued till 2012!

US Census Data shows direct relation of National Debt & Number of Americans below Poverty Level--the more the Debt ;more is the number of Americans below Poverty level!Decrease the National Debt;Number of Americans below Poverty Decreases---President Clinton &GOP Speaker Gingrich Balanced Budget for four years 1996 to 2000 that decreased both National Debt as well as Number of Americans below Poverty Level to 30 M from 40M in 1990.President Reagan& US Congress caused Steep Rise in National Debt & Consequent Rise in Poverty Level from 30 M in 1980 to 40M Americans below Poverty Level!

Now Look at the Tax rate & National Debt data from 1950 to 1980;National Debt generally kept decreasing till 1980 inspite of decreasing TAXRATE from 94%!

How to Zero NationalDebt &Poverty? Increase Tax rate to the Average rate of Ideal Taxrate of Zero & Peak Tax rate of 94% namely 47% & Balance the Budget immediately (Plug Tax Code Loopholes).

US Congress must ban Campaign Funds & instead Provide National Radio &TV Service (C Span / NPR)for Politicians to propogate freely their Agenda under the Election Commission!

#14 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 10:14 AM EDT

REPLY

gary myers-1348409

I remember Hilliary Clinton's, "it takes a village to raise a child". I came from one of those villages, population 150, in Indiana back in the 50's when I was growing up. And Hillary was right, it did take a village.

Maybe the same principal should apply for poverty. It takes a village to help people pull themselves out of poverty. Remember there are a great many children living in poverty.

Now if there were just villages somewhere to do this.

#15 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 10:32 AM EDT

REPLY

Rachel-2747008

This type of program is great. The knowledge we take for granted; learning to budget, finding and keeping

a job, even healthful eating is not innate. When we can teach this to others and they can live outside of poverty. What a blessing!

#16 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 10:43 AM EDT

REPLY

Bobby in Vicksburg

I am so impressed with this woman's beginning. We of the middle class have difficulty imagining what she has had to face....I have never faced the challenges she has. and Kudos to Lynn and all those who have invested so much time and energy to get Bridges off the ground in Starkville....Vicksburg's initiative to address poverty is just now trying to get started with training for the community on November 2. Pray God we move with such energy and strength as those Starkville folk have.

#17 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 11:45 AM EDT

REPLY



eerielake

Taking responsibility not only for oneself but one's family is stellar. Helping to teach younger people that continuing the negative landslide of a poverty stricken population by multiplying rapidly would also be a good resource, perhaps, for some.

#18 - Thu Oct 3, 2013 2:17 PM EDT

REPLY

1 vote



rockamama

A 20-something black man ahead of me in the grocery line (as he paid for his groceries with his EBT card) was bragging to the cashier that he lived in Section 8 housing and didn't pay rent. He went on to say he didn't work and received monthly welfare checks. This able-bodied young man was PROUD that he was living off society. I don't agree that some "poverty" people are "ashamed" of their lot in life.

#19 - Sat Oct 5, 2013 6:31 AM EDT

REPLY

1 vote



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