

Putting the Poor in Their Place

By Connie Schultz-

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Finally, the mystery has been solved.

The reason we have so many of those pesky workers barely getting by on restaurant wages can be summed up in one word: bowling.

That's right, bowling. There they are, wrote one irritated reader, those hard-luck Bob Evans employees daring to spend a whole \$7 to bowl one night a week instead of doing something free to better themselves, like "running, walking, hiking in the Metroparks, going to the library, etc."

Not that only "wealthier people have a right to go bowling," he wrote. But still.

They have babies, too. And they smoke, which compromises their immune system causing them to miss work and take on doctor's bills they can't pay.

Bad choices, he wrote. Every last one of them. And who's fault is that?

He wasn't the only one wagging his finger. Reporter Leila Atassi, who chronicled the lives of restaurant workers in her two-part series "Just Getting By," heard from other readers, too, who blamed any and all problems of the less fortunate on their own wicked ways.

Reporters Dave Davis, Bill Lubinger and Christopher Montgomery also got an earful for their story last Sunday outlining how the ranks of the working poor are swelling well beyond the confines of the city of Cleveland and into some of our most affluent suburbs.

One reader took issue with a photo of a single mother of four pictured with both a computer and a television in her home. He also noticed "a fish tank . . . an attractive [TV] stand, complete with shelves . . . some nice prints on the wall . . . a nice recliner . . . no wear and tear on the furnishings. . . Her clothes are clean. Her hair looks nice."

In other words, this person isn't suffering enough to meet his standards for poverty.

"America is a great country," wrote one reader, "where a person willing to work hard, maintain their personal discipline and play by the rules cannot fail."

If that were true, more women and minorities would be running our companies and our country. We wouldn't have 600,000 Ohioans with full-time jobs and no health insurance, either, and parents showing up after work at hunger centers for basic groceries.

I don't begrudge these readers their brand of patriotism. Most want to believe that our own hard work and self-discipline conquer all, especially if we've achieved a measure of material success in this American life.

It's human nature to become defensive about our own advantages, ignoring the lucky breaks and good fortune that may have fueled our rise. Nobody helped us, we insist, forgetting how a stable home life, a sound economy or a well-timed mentor can dramatically alter the equation. Those born to privilege often protest the most, refusing to acknowledge that what propelled their life's trajectory was not so much hard work as favored bloodlines.

The problem with the working poor is they make the rest of us so uncomfortable. Their suffering pummels our long-held assumptions about America. If we can't blame them for all of their problems, then we have to be willing to ask tough questions of ourselves, our community and our country. If we admit that America has changed, that far too many who work hard still can't dig themselves out, then we also have to acknowledge that we aren't the America we're supposed to be.

Then what do we do?

Those willing to ask the tough questions engage in what the Rev. William Sloan Coffin calls a lover's quarrel with our country. It's the brand of patriotism for those who love America and want it to live up to its promise. If we continue to support a system that deprives so many of our brothers and sisters of hope, the America we cherish will live on only in our memories.

For that, we'll have nobody to blame but ourselves.

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