



The poverty project

By Dana Robbins
The Hamilton Spectator (Oct 29, 2005)

Wayne was my best friend through most of my boyhood.

He had an easy laugh. And he made it effortless to like him. We were the same age, but Wayne was always the leader of our small band, having mastered all the requisite skills that boys deem essential. He could play, badly, a few chords of Deep Purple on guitar, he could gut a fish, imitate the sounds of sundry bodily functions and stitch together profanity in the most colourful of quilts. I thought he was the coolest guy in the world.

For all that, and despite his standing in our boyhood pantheon, there was always something tentative about Wayne. It was almost as if he was never quite certain that he belonged in our group, or that he was as much of a hero to us as was obvious to everyone else.

Like a dog that's been cuffed once too often, Wayne was oftentimes suspicious of an outstretched hand. And you sometimes had the sense that he fully expected his friends to one day turn on him. As we one day would.

Wayne was a poor kid in the poorest neighbourhood of a poor town. I don't think he had more than one pair of jeans the whole time I knew him. He was always hungry, scrounging leftovers from friends. "Do you got anything to eat?" was his standard greeting. At home, there was no running water, no toilet, sometimes no heat. Worst of all, there was never any hope. Wayne knew, at an age when a child should not have such wisdom, how fragile is life.

Of the many sins that can be laid at poverty's door, surely none is greater than the vulnerability it instils in those who have been brutalized by it; that nagging, sometimes suffocating, fear that everything you have can be taken from you.

As a child, I thought that Wayne's place in the world was unfair. I now appreciate that it was much worse than that. It was scandalous. And it was an indictment of the community in which he lived.

In Hamilton, we, too, stand accused. More than 22,000 Hamilton children live in poverty -- an astounding one out of four children under 15. More than 6,000 Hamilton children show up at city food banks every month. Children who, as you read this, are being taught the lessons that Wayne learned -- that the world is mostly indifferent to them, that they are not deserving of anything better, and that what little they have can be taken from them.

When you factor in adults, the number of poor Hamiltonians balloons to almost 100,000 people. In all of Ontario, only Toronto has a poverty rate comparable to our own.

Today, The Spectator is doing something we have never done before. We are formally identifying a public policy issue upon which we will hang our corporate hat.

That issue is poverty. We are doing this because we believe that there is nothing more pressing in our community, no greater obstacle to Hamilton reaching its fullest potential.

For the next three years, we will be examining poverty in a way that has rarely been attempted before. We hope to answer one simple, but confoundingly difficult, question: What is the true cost of poverty in Hamilton?

We will look at the many ways poverty affects us all, not just the poor. Health, social services, economic development, crime -- we'll explore how poverty touches almost every aspect of our civic life.

We will introduce you to some of our poorest neighbours, giving voice to those who are often silent in our public discourse. We'll also come to understand how many different faces poverty wears in our community.

All that said, this will not be a sentimental ride in a liberal Cadillac. This isn't about "validating" the poor. This is about finding ways to reduce poverty. We'll probe its myriad causes, including those that keep some families impoverished from one generation to the next. We will resist cliches and worn-out explanations, and look for deeper truths, ones that may guide us as a community. We will not demonize the poor, nor will we lionize them. We will understand always that every poverty story is unique. We will be suspect of rhetoric, and not allow dogmatism from either side of the political spectrum to hijack the conversation we begin today.

You might reasonably ask, why now? Is poverty worse today than it was five years ago, 10 years ago? The short answer is that poverty is worse, that the gap between the poor and the rest of us is growing wider. But that alone does not answer "Why now?" We're doing this now because we believe that we can make a difference. We're convinced that a window of opportunity has opened in Hamilton, that there is a willingness in our city to confront this issue in a meaningful way.

One of the most concrete expressions of that change was the creation this year of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. The Roundtable was the brainchild of Carolyn Milne, president and CEO of the Hamilton Community Foundation, and Joe-Anne Priel, general manager of public health and community services at the city. Together, these two women convened a meeting of community leaders and activists, people who care deeply about Hamilton. And from that group, the Roundtable was born. (We'll learn more about the Roundtable in the weeks ahead.)

As part of our poverty initiative, we have created a full-time poverty beat, the first one ever at The Spec, and the only one I know of at a Canadian newspaper. Bill Dunphy, one of our most senior and experienced reporters, has been given this important assignment. As you will see from the stories on this page today, Bill will bring great passion and thoughtfulness to this project.

It's been years since I last saw Wayne. One of the last times, he was in hospital, bloodied and barely conscious, after a violent suicide attempt. There were a couple more encounters afterwards, but the centrifugal force of his life spiralling out of control eventually spun all of the old gang out of his circle, and out of his life.

Over the years, I've heard snippets now and then -- health problems, a failed marriage, years of addiction, and Wayne's ever-present companion, poverty.

I wish Wayne's story had a different ending. But the legacy of poverty is rarely edifying. Wayne the adult is a stranger to me now. But Wayne the boy -- expert fisherman and builder of forts -- is much on my mind today as we launch the Poverty Project. And so, too, are the possibilities of what might have been.

You can contact The Spectator's editor-in-chief at drobbins@thespec.com 905-526-3482.

