

## Helen Prejean, C.S.J.

I was twelve years old the first time I witnessed physical violence against a black person. Elise Gauthier, my friend and classmate, and I rode the bus one December day in 1952 to Third Street to do our Christmas shopping. We were in seventh grade; everything was funny that year, and we had a great time on the bus, teasing and laughing uproariously over twelve-year-olds' jokes. The bus stopped at the end of Third Street and everyone on the bus was getting out when Elise and I heard the bus driver shout an obscenity to a young black woman and saw him kick her with his foot off the bus and onto the sidewalk. She landed on her hands and knees and her purse flew open and coins rolled all over. She didn't say a word, did not even look at the bus driver, just picked herself up and walked away.

I felt awful. My parents never acted *mean* to black people, even though they never questioned the system of racial discrimination that permeated every aspect of life. Daddy, an attorney, represented a slew of black clients, charging them five dollars for his services, and he helped several families buy property and, eventually, own their own homes. It would take me a long time to understand how systems inflict pain and hardship in people's lives and to learn that being kind in an unjust system is not enough.

Now, here in St. Thomas, I am learning plenty about systems and what happens to the people in them, here in a state whose misery statistics are the highest in the nation—where residents bring home an average yearly income of \$10,890, where half the adult population has not completed high school, where one in every six persons is a food-stamp recipient, one of every three babies born has an unwed mother, and the violent crime rate is ninth highest in the nation.<sup>2</sup>

I am meeting seventeen-year-old girls who have had one, sometimes two children. Without a chance for college, a senior trip to Florida, the possibility of a career, and the independence and mobility that a car gives, they are vulnerable to the first young man who looks at them. Sixteen-year-old Lily, swaying with the blanketed bundle in her arms as if she were holding a doll, tells me the familiar story that she wanted a baby so she could have "something of my very own."

With paper and pencil I am helping Shirley, a single mother, compute how to make ends meet for herself and her child on an AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) check of \$138 a month and \$123 in food stamps. I witness her agony of deciding if she should give up AFDC and get a job, which means losing medication, the only health insurance she has for her child. The cashier's job at a supermarket which she is considering pays minimum wages and is part-time—thirty-five hours a week (the policy of most super-

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markets in the city), which means that she won't get medical or retirement benefits. The St. Thomas residents who do find full-time work usually receive minimum wages, which amounts to about thirty-five dollars a month above the AFDC income level. (1990 Census Bureau statistics reveal that *full-time* minimum-wage earners received \$8,840 a year.) Plus, mothers like Shirley, who choose work instead of welfare, face additional costs of child care, medical bills, an increase in rent (proportionate to income), and transportation expenses. I had always thought that jobs were the way *out* of poverty. Now I'm learning the meaning of *working poor*. (In 1989 37.3 million working Americans, accounting for 39 percent of total tax returns, received incomes below \$15,000.)<sup>3</sup>

At the supper table at night I am listening to the stories Sister Therese St. Pierre tells of the three- and four-year-olds in her preschool group who do not know words like "over" or "lettuce" or "sofa." Most of these children will hit the overpopulated, understaffed, ill-equipped public schools with "failure by third grade" stamped on their foreheads.

I am watching how easy it is for a teenage boy to "run a bag" of cocaine down the street for an easy twenty bucks. (If he gets an after-school or summer job, his income will be deducted from his mother's AFDC check.)

I am seeing, with my own eyes—shocked, disbelieving—bags of white powder peddled in the open with no police in sight. Sister Lory Schaff, who began Hope House in 1969, tells of meeting in 1972 with a high-ranking city official to express her concern about the freewheeling dope peddling in St. Thomas, and of being met with, "Well, now, Sister, we know drugs are going to pop up *somewhere* in every city. At least we know where they are."

I also notice that when residents of St. Thomas are killed, the newspaper barely takes notice, whereas when white citizens are killed, there is often a front-page story.

But the most frightening revelation is the treatment of neighborhood residents by the police. Story after story, incident after incident is told of people, especially young men, picked up, verbally abused, handcuffed, beaten, and sometimes killed. I've witnessed such scenes myself, watching young men thrown forcefully against police cars, handcuffed, pushed into the car and driven away. One called out to another Sister and me as we watched in disbelief, "Sisters, y'all are my witnesses. I got no drugs on me. They gonna stick it in my pockets. I got no drugs." According to a 1984—1990 U.S. Department of Justice survey, New Orleans logged more complaints against its police than any other city in the country.<sup>4</sup>