

The human side of poverty

Liz Curran | 27 April 2006

As many in the leafier suburbs of Australia become 'relaxed and comfortable', they may find it difficult to believe the difficulty and the hardship that others face. West Heidelberg represents one of the poorest postcodes in Victoria. It was named in the Henderson Poverty Inquiry of the 1970s. It was also the site of the 1956 Olympic Village, a history that gives much pride to the locals.

I run a clinical legal education program for students who provide legal services under my supervision. Over the years that I have been working in West Heidelberg I have heard rank-and-file police describe the people as 'West Heidelberg scum' and departmental officials describe them as 'hopeless'.

I would argue that, on the basis of my day-to-day contact with the locals, these stereotypes of low-income or marginalised people are wrong and misplaced. Further, I would argue that in one of Melbourne's most disadvantaged areas, the locals are ordinary people like those elsewhere. They demonstrate the usual positive traits of humanity, but they struggle against extraordinarily difficult odds and life circumstances to survive.

A student of mine once said, in the first week of the clinic, 'Poverty is a state of mind. If people made the right choices or saved their money, their lot could be different.' Similar views are promulgated by many, including the Centre for Independent Studies and talkback radio participants. Rather than argue with the student, I decided to let his experience and contact with clients inform him. Three weeks later, in one of the daily debrief sessions, he said, 'This is so unfair. How can the system fail this woman so badly? How can she be expected to cope, to assist the children and to go on in a state of crisis with minimal social support?'

The student's client was a single mother who, after her husband's death, moved with her three children to West Heidelberg to reduce her living expenses, as a two-bedroom house had become available. She had large debts which had accrued on the joint credit card, and a loan she shared with her husband, who at the time of accruing the debt had been employed. Some years later, the client's brother committed suicide.

Our client decided to take in his three children, as they had no other home. Her hope was to keep the siblings together and with family who loved them. The client applied for another house with more bedrooms but there was a two-year waiting list. Then the Department of Human Services told the client that it was inappropriate for a 14-year-old to share a bedroom with a six-year-old. She was told that if she did not find a bigger house, all the children could be taken away. The department knew of the waiting list but became more insistent. The client's stress increased. This is when she came to see us. Her story is similar to that of so many other clients with whom, and for whom, we work.

Recent studies in the United Kingdom and Australia have found that being a lone parent is one of the surest ways into poverty. This client's experience of how one event can trigger an accumulation of problems is a well-documented phenomenon in recent studies by Cardiff University and the Legal Services Research Centre in England. This client was brave and generous despite her own adversity. She was stoic about her circumstances, only becoming exasperated when she was up against strong external forces. Her attributes are like so many that one sees in West Heidelberg, but over time people's resilience is worn down.

So often in the poverty debate the actual human stories have been lost. With the current discussion around social welfare reform and the tightening of eligibility for the disability and sole parents' pensions, the battles faced by families on a day-to-day basis can be lost. Great care must be taken not to penalise the most vulnerable members of society.

In Victoria, as part of a Victorian Government Justice Statement, a great opportunity presents itself in the Government's proposed intention to start a community discussion on how our human rights can better be protected. Human rights are great because they attach to all of us by virtue of our being human. How they relate to society's most vulnerable would be the topic for a timely and much-needed discussion.

So many people, like our client, struggle with unsympathetic bureaucratic processes, experience a shortage of social supports and have difficult and compounding life circumstances which are not of

their choosing. They often lack any voice, as they can be sidelined by interests with more power and money who can make their presence felt.

I look forward with optimism to a conversation that can include all Victorians, especially those who never get asked, about how we can create a better and more respectful society.

Liz Curran is a lecturer in the School of Law and Legal Studies at La Trobe University and runs the student clinical legal education program at the West Heidelberg Community Legal Service.

Liz Curran

Recent articles by this author

Kids or criminals ([article.aspx?aeid=8373](#))

The price of education ([article.aspx?aeid=1034](#))
