THE PEOPLE AT THE END OF THE ROAD

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In the rural Lincoln Hills area of southern Indiana, nature's attractiveness is abundant and is viewed with awe by many. However, in the midst of this natural beauty, at the end of some of the narrow gravel roads that wind through the area, live many desperately poor people.

Their problems are numerous and include many of the conditions popularly deplored—poor housing, unemployment, sickness, lack of education. But probably the gravest situation is one not readily considered, that of geographical and social isolation. Consequently, it is often difficult to convince many local residents that poverty in its most depressing and miserable forms is very prevalent in their community; that the poverty stricken are not uncaring, apathetic animals but fellow Americans, fellow county residents, fellow human beings; that complacency on the part of the more fortunate is inexcusable; that we each have personal, if not professional, responsibilities for these less fortunate.

Opening our eyes to such situations in our own locality is not easy, but such an awakening is long overdue. Accepting some responsibility for permanent improvement of these conditions will require dedication to eliminating "man's inhumanity to man."

The Family Management Project is designed to serve low-income rural families in the Lincoln Hills area (Harrison, Crawford, Perry, and Spencer counties). This project is federally funded through the Office of Economic Opportunity and is a component of the Lincoln Hills Community Action Agency. It is subcontracted to the Cooperative Extension Service, which provides the two professionals.

The philosophy of helping people help themselves permeates every activity we undertake. The ten to twelve nonprofessionals or outreach workers are hired and trained by the professionals, and their dedication and skills are extremely relevant to success.

The Family Management Project includes work in three main areas: family counseling, homemaking classes, and neighborhood centers.

Family counseling is made easier by the unparalleled rapport outreach workers establish with families. Outreach workers are not fearsome, authoritative figures but friends and neighbors who are obviously sincerely

interested in helping the family to stand on its own. Intensive home visitation is both vital and a singular accomplishment of this project.

Let us examine the "A" family, which has come a long way when we consider their problems of two years ago. The family, composed of wife, husband, and three children, lives at the very end of a dead-end road—far removed from the rest of the world. During her early childhood Mrs. "A" was shoved from pillar to post. No one cared for her; no one had any interest in her. When she married, she had completed nine years of formal schooling and had never been exposed to homemaking skills. Mr. "A" had grown up in a better situation and was accustomed to a cleaner home. He had, however, long since resigned himself to the filthy home his wife kept and felt that improvement was out of the question.

The first two visits to this home by outreach workers proved totally unsuccessful. On the third visit the outreach worker made it into the home and was greeted by twenty-seven dogs that had the run of the house. Other initially discernible conditions were the absence of screens, the run-down house and its extreme filthiness, the lack of any place in the entire house to sit except on the dog-laden bed, and especially the social awkwardness of the mother and children. For many months now the outreach worker has visited the "A's." This is unusual in itself, since very few people ever come down this road. But now screens are on the doors. All the dogs are on the outside, and many have passed away.

When an organization from St. Meinrad Arch Abbey donated screen wire and labor for a few homes, the "A's" gratefully accepted. The bed has its first bedspread, the kitchen has a table and chairs that have been donated, things are picked up, the house is about as clean as it can be in its present condition, and Mr. "A," pleased with his wife's unbelievable progress, has purchased a second-hand sofa and is planning to paper the kitchen. Mr. and Mrs. "A" are able to communicate with each other better, and the two older children will wear you out relating all that happened in Head Start. Before, Mr. "A" never allowed his wife to leave their property. Their improved relationship and her newly acquired self-confidence have altered this. By herself, she took her son to a Louisville specialist recommended by Head Start.

Mrs. "A's" mother-in-law attributes the improvement to the constructive friendship that has developed between the outreach worker and Mrs. "A." After all, she is the very first person who ever really cared!

The homemaking class series, the second of the project's three areas of concentration, is designed to cover the following ten areas of information during a five-month series: (1) importance of homemaking, (2) budgeting, (3) nutrition—meats, (4) nutrition—milk, (5) nutrition—cereal, (6)

nutrition—fruits and vegetables, (7) storage, (8) housekeeping and laundry, (9) grooming, and (10) seasonal cooking and graduation. A group meeting is devoted to each of these topics. Each lesson includes academic material, buying information, storage directions, correct and sanitary cooking procedures, and recipes when appropriate. The outreach workers who teach these classes use a combination of visual aids, handouts, discussion, demonstration, and participation by the enrollees.

Time during class is limited; therefore, to adapt and reinforce learning, at least ten working visits are made to each class member's home during the series. Because mothers and children come together, we have the opportunity to involve the children in supervised group activities while their mothers are attending class.

Now let us consider Mrs. "B," a very nice lady, and her family. Mrs. "B" and her husband have lived in their present home most of their married life. She knows that the house is in disrepair, but the fact that her husband's parents once lived in it and that the four-room house was originally a school is a source of pride. A visitor must thread his way through a number of partially dismantled cars to reach the house, but he can be sure of a friendly welcome when he arrives. Of Mrs. "B's" sixteen children, thirteen are living, nine of them still at home. She is pleased with her children and, like most mothers, eager to discuss them and what she wants for them. Getting what she wants for thirteen children is the hard part.

The interior and furnishings of their home, although old and worn, are clean and in good order. She and her family have participated in every activity available to them through this project. She has particularly benefited from the sewing she and an outreach worker have done during the home visits. The family does not own a sewing machine, and when she does not have access to the project's equipment, all sewing must be done by hand. The "B" family's children have been afflicted with serious and expensive illnesses and handicaps. One son suffers the crippling effects of polio; one attends the Indiana School for the Deaf; a daughter has a serious speech defect; another son has an eye disorder; the youngest suffers from a bone disease. The "B's" could have been a perfectly ordinary family, except they have had more problems, more children, less opportunity, and less money than most.

Neighborhood centers, the newest activity of the Family Management Project, have been in operation about six months. No center is intended to serve an entire county but rather is designed to reach the immediate community surrounding the center. Programs in the centers vary with each locality. What may appeal to residents in one area could be completely unacceptable in another area. The wishes of those who use the centers are

a primary consideration whenever programs are planned. The ultimate goal is for the low-income residents to take over completely the operation of their centers. That the centers are needed is undeniable! They have provided opportunities for learning sewing, home nursing, carpentry, ceramics, and driving. They have also provided facilities for mothers' clubs, teen clubs, coffee hours, story hours, and recreation programs. Never before have our low-income people had a facility in which they feel completely comfortable, are inolved in the planning, and can afford what is offered. They are organizing themselves and realizing the functions of groups. They are learning and liking it, and are helping others.

There is no certain solution to poverty, but there is a certain basis from which we must work if any improvement is to be realized. It is a simple point, which unfortunately is overlooked by many of us—that poor people are human beings.

Any permanent breaking of the cycle of poverty will require this awareness on the part of the nonpoor. A higher income and more fortunate circumstances give no one license to be demeaning to a fellow human being. It was on Christian principles that our founding fathers based their declaration that all men are created equal. It is time for us to examine our principles!

We are not proclaiming that all poor people, given humane treatment and an equal chance, will improve because human nature cannot be predicted. Be assured, however, that many strides can be made if attitudes on both sides of the economic fence change. There is a long way to go, but it is a two-way street. Our choices are simple: take the circuitous and often travelled road of noninvolvement or sincerely accept the responsibility and endeavor to help the people at the end of the road.

Robert Frost offers this challenge in better words:

> I shall be telling this with a sigh
> Somewhere ages and ages hence:
> Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
> I took the one less traveled by,
> And that has made all the difference.