People’s University Report

Theme: Homelessness
February 10, 2018

Guests: Corey Ortega, Jean Quinn, Simon Sandvik

Participants: Abraham, Anne-Marie, Christelle, Colleen, Darnell, Emma, Gia, Guillaume, Jim, Josiane, Karen, Kiley, Kimberly, Marcia, Maria, Marie-Claire, Marlon, Maryann, Maxine, Monica, Omar, Patrick, Rebecca, Rosetta, Stacy, Virginie, Yvette, Zena

Thank you, everyone, for your participation. Your input throughout the Fourth World People’s University (FWPU) sessions this winter is the start of further dialogues, as we will follow up on Corey Ortega’s invitation to meet City Council members on the topic of homelessness and changes we’d like to see in policy. Following are highlights from the February 10 FWPU session.

If you would like to have the video footages, please e-mail us at nycteam@4thworldmovement.org.

1. Introduction

Background:
In a welcome circle, we warmed up with a game that helped us to remember one another’s names. It set a positive, welcoming tone for the theatre forum presentation. For this first Fourth World People’s University (FWPU) session of 2018, we focused on housing, and specifically the situations surrounding homelessness. We chose this theme because we see more and more people on the street; and ATD Fourth World in New York City has always been very involved with families who experience or have experienced various stages of homelessness, e.g., about to lose their apartment, living in shelter, living in the street, and living in new places after shelter.

For this meeting we wanted to brainstorm together ways in which homelessness can be eliminated, not just how to reduce it. How can people facing a situation of homelessness be treated with dignity?

FWPU peer groups met in two sessions before our guests arrived on February 10. In the first session, we represented houses with six concepts derived from a discussion of feeling and staying safe. The results revealed similarities about what it means to have a safe place. The activists talked about fair distribution of wealth, and the allies focused on a stable income. Also, the activists called for quality of life provided through heat, light, and hot water, and the allies emphasized access to amenities such as a bed, food, and light. As for community the activists said they looked for empathy and faith, and the allies mentioned support from management,
family, friends, and neighbors. The activists discussed the necessity of staying alert with a motto, “Watch, look and listen.” And the allies referred to peaceful surroundings. The allies talked about a sturdy house with roof that doesn't leak, and the activists spoke of needing somewhere safe to go at night. A simultaneous discussion about safe homes took place with children in an art workshop, where they painted their impression of safe houses.

The children’s paintings were also posted on the wall during this People’s University session. In one child’s house, people are holding hands on the other side of the front door. In another, the words “home is my safe place” are written.
In the second preparation meeting, we came up with the idea to have a theatre forum after one member of the prep team spoke of a painful experience talking with a social worker, and said, "If she hadn’t talked to me like that, I wouldn’t have reacted like I did.” We thought the theatre forum would be an opportunity to enact these scenarios and consider how they could have gone differently. We decided to find a way to portray three stages in the homelessness cycle through identifying situations experienced by our members: before being homeless, during homelessness, and after being homeless.

Our Guests
Our guests come from a variety of locations and backgrounds.

- Jean is executive of UNANIMA International; she has a degree in nursing and leadership and is active in Ireland in the field of homelessness. She founded Sophia, which provides supportive housing in Ireland. She is very interested in engaging directly with people living in homelessness.
- Corey has served as a tenant organizer, as part of the New York State legislature in the field of housing, as field organizer for various campaigns, as a district leader for Harlem, and as a community leader for the NYC Board of Elections. He is involved in providing support and aid to veterans in New York City.
- Simon works for the State of Massachusetts and, for the last ten years, he has worked for a HomeBase program serving state-funded shelter programs.

2. Theatre forum: Presentation of ATD Fourth World members’ preparation

Presenting the three scenarios prepared at the second preparation meeting, and role playing that aimed to change the scenarios for the better:

The scenes were developed by three small groups and presented during this People’s University meeting.

The suggestions of our members and guests to improve, not necessarily resolve, these situations are summarized below. The aim of this theatre forum exercise is to understand different points of view and brainstorm alternative solutions.

“Before” scenario:
Two actors are on stage sitting in chairs.

Characters: A patient is ready to be released from the hospital. A social worker arrives to conduct the hospital exit interview.

Plot: The social worker asks the patient if she is ready to leave the hospital. The patient informs the social worker she has nowhere to stay, as she has been evicted from her apartment during her stay at the hospital. She adds she has no relatives or friends to help her out. The social worker seems surprised by this information. She has no solution to offer and calls for another social worker to help.
- Another social worker steps in and remains standing as he firmly asks the patient to prepare herself to leave the hospital. He provides no solution and tells her to call social services. The patient doesn’t agree, and the dialogue between them escalates.
- The social worker calls the president of the hospital, who tries to defuse the situation by urging the social worker to find a solution. She talks in an aside with the social worker, and they come back with a solution for the patient: stay at a shelter. The patient is unhappy with this decision and refuses.

**Audience members propose three changes to this scenario:**
- 1: Someone steps in and takes over from the first social worker. He explains to the patient her rights after receiving an eviction notice and wants to make calls for her himself to make sure those rights are respected and she is allowed back into her home.
- 2: Someone else steps in and gives information to the patient so she could avoid the eviction. The dialogue continues and addresses the issues of furniture storage and access to rights, and how to manage them without money.
- 3: Another one steps in and plays the patient, wondering why no one has asked her about her feelings. She says she feels uncomfortable that no one is treating her with compassion after a long hospital stay and after hearing she has lost her home. The social worker tries to make her more comfortable by being on her side and, without making any promises, tells her he will fight alongside her.

Two participants present the “before” scenario
“During” scenario:
*Three players are on stage. One is seated at a desk. Two are standing across from her.*

**Characters:** A couple who just lost their apartment. They arrive at PATH (The Department of Homeless Services intake center: Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing agency) with their child, in order to be assigned to a shelter. The social worker calls them to her desk. There is no place for them to sit.

**Plot:** The social worker asks for the couple’s identification and proof of their marital status. The couple is not married but the man is the father of the child. The social worker finds out in the computerized records that the couple had a domestic violence report. Because of those two facts, she can’t refer them to the same shelter.
- The father is told to go to the Bellevue shelter and leave the building, where he’s not allowed to stay with his family. The mother doesn’t understand where their child is supposed to go. The couple say they want to stay together, and that they have worked through their dispute.
- The social worker tells them that if they want to stay together, she will have to place their child in foster care. Because the couple doesn’t agree with that, the social worker asked to see the next clients and calls for security.

Audience members propose two different changes to the scenario:
- 1: Get chairs so the family can be seated.
- 2: The social worker acknowledges that because of their situation they should be separated in different shelters, but to avoid that, he offers to turn them over to one of the counselors.
- 3: The social worker offers to look into how to get their birth certificates and social security cards. He explains clearly and calmly why family members with domestic violence issues can’t be placed in the same shelter. The social worker asks for a few days to go through some of the options to find a way to get past that policy and be able to reunite the family. Meanwhile they will have to be separated. The social worker gives his own phone number to the family so they can follow up. The father doesn’t want to go to Bellevue because it’s a hospital for mental health issues. The social worker asks questions to understand why the family got evicted and to see if other alternatives, such as the HomeBase program or Section 8, could have been useful.
- 4: In Massachusetts you can have your familial cases sealed so that when you apply for housing it doesn’t affect you.

“After” scenario:
*Two actors are sitting across from each other.*

**Characters:** Mother and son (13 years old) in a new apartment.

**Plot:** Although the family had agreed together to move to a larger apartment, the son is upset to have left his old apartment and his friends behind.
- They wish they had the option to move to an apartment in the same neighborhood instead of moving to an unsanitary place with no heat or hot water. They don’t know anyone and are far from their community.
- The mother does not want to complain about the heat because she is afraid to be kicked out again by the landlord. She chose this place for her family because it seemed safest and closer to grocery stores and schools.
- But the son complains of being bullied by the kids in the neighborhood and the rats in the apartment. The son leaves the room and slams the door behind him.

**Audience members propose one change in the scenario:**
- 1: A neighbor knocks at the door and introduces herself. The mother is very reluctant to let her in, but the neighbor insists and pushes the door open. She introduces her family and explains how she felt when she moved in a year ago. Her teenage son follows her, the two boys get to talk and go out to play basketball together.
- 2: The two mothers sit down around a cup of coffee. They try to solve the heat and hot water problem by calling the supervisor. He promises to send an exterminator for the pests and a repairman for the heat.

3. **Dialogue**
All the statements of the participants reflect their own personal experiences.

**Virginie (facilitator):** We came together with all different experiences, and we want to use those experiences to find ways of improving the situations. The role-playing was very intense, even though we had a lot of fun. Our guests will first share with us how the situations resonated with their experience, their understanding of what homelessness is, and how what they experienced in the theatre forum (all of them participated) may have confronted something they already knew.
Simon: I noticed a lot of emotions, both in the families and the social workers. I felt that the whole first scene happened because there were not conversations occurring earlier. In the other scenes, when talking about being evicted, it seemed that it couldn’t be prevented. It’s hard. Some people don’t know until it happens. For others, when an eviction notice is posted, they realize they still have rights. Many don’t know they have rights, only finding out their stuff is locked up in a closet somewhere. We as social workers, as human service providers, don’t always understand that our clients don’t know what we know. How do we close that knowledge gap? But we don’t know that gap until we have a dialogue with the family, until we work directly with them. My biggest take-away today is that there needs to be a dialogue at all levels, to be started by everybody.

Corey: My reaction is to let you know is that there’s something I’ve learned and never seen before. The way I process things is, I need a solution now; I need to do something as quickly as possible and cut through government red tape like a hot knife through butter. What Jean taught me was, I never asked how you felt. I’ve thought about it; but not one time, except with my mother, did I ask someone how they felt. I will start doing that, to ask how you feel, so simple. [Knowing] how you are feeling gives me a better tool to do my job.

Jean: Today, for me, I recalled some of my own experiences of working with people. There’s something about this People’s University that acts like a trigger, giving us an opportunity, whether it’s role-play or otherwise, to have a chance to know what is going on in our lives. As Corey said, it’s knowing the person as a human being. The whole philosophy of ATD Fourth World links with my passion. To do something like this is very moving. I don’t know if that’s what you expected, but it linked in with a lot of my experiences. It’s really about trying to have the stories of the people heard. I said at the United Nations last week, "Don’t talk about us without us."

Themes addressed during the dialogue:

A participant recalled his personal experiences with homelessness. First, he lost his job and then had problems with the landlord who put everything he owned out on the street. He had trouble with his other roommates as well: drugs, gangs, violence. He knew he couldn’t pay his rent so he called social services for help. “I got no help, zero.” “I spent 18 hours in the department of social services, on my feet. I was not speaking English well then; I did not have my documents with me.” “I said I have no place to stay, no money.” They took a long time to accept his case and to open it afterwards. They tried to contact him via mail after 45 days, but he was living on the street. “People need to know the law.” “My heart cries because a lot of people died because people do nothing.” “I am here to fight.” This participant’s three main points to the guests were that people need to know their rights, there is an incorrect implementation of the laws, and people on the street feel humiliation and must be strong both physically and mentally to survive.

Another participant then recalled her personal experiences with PATH and being evicted. She started by going to a shelter and didn’t get in because it only accepted those living in the area for at least two years. They referred her family further away to the Bronx. “I don’t know anyone there; my husband didn’t even know how to get there.” At the time, she and her husband only had a domestic partnership and, because of this, they were sent away from that shelter as well. Over the weekend, they went to the court to get married so that they could register at the shelter.
It was a very cold winter and, while waiting, they had to stay overnight at many different places. She lost her ID. “We lost everything.” She and her family had to return to PATH seven times before getting a place. “Every day we were on the fence. You can’t get this, you can’t get that.” When she finally got the paper seven months later letting her know they had a place, she cried very hard. “You got to be strong.”

Virginie asked this participant what could have changed to help her in a situation like that. She responded saying they should place you in local shelters, have a staff member help you get your papers together, and **shorten the wait time**. The staff at PATH needs to be open-minded and informative. Simon expressed his appreciation to this participant for sharing her experiences with PATH. He asked her what she meant by people being more open-minded. “Were they not open-minded about your situation? Or the options they were giving you?”

The participant responded that it was both. “My situation was, I had no documents. I had no birth certificates, no ID; I had basically nothing.” Because of this, they didn’t help her and sent her away. **She didn’t know where to go, and she needed to be shown some compassion.** Even though it’s their job, they told her they couldn’t help her.

Corey reacted to this as well. Though he has been working in government for a long time, he had never actually been to PATH. He has never walked through the system. In a few weeks, he is going to be walking with members of the City Council into three different shelters in New York. After hearing from this participant, he is going to suggest they also take a walk through PATH.
"When I read reports, I only read that PATH served 900 people. The report doesn’t tell you what those people go through, what they feel."

Another participant furthered the dialogue by sharing her personal experiences with PATH as well. She believes that there should be sensitivity training for their staff. “I know they are aggravated. She and I don’t want to be here, but they are taking their aggravation out on us.” She has seen clients curse out the social workers, and the social workers didn’t seem to understand what was making them so upset. This participant told the social worker at PATH that she was homeless after her daughter went to college, which made them lose their family place. She had to go to a women’s shelter on her own. However, she cannot stay there when her daughter comes home between semesters. She worries that she and her daughter will be homeless every time her daughter cannot stay at school. “It’s not just me. I’m not the only parent with a child going to college. Where do these kids go when they have no place when they come home from college?” The social workers asked this participant to have her daughter take off a semester so that they could stay in a family place. She wouldn’t do that to her daughter. When her daughter comes home in March for a week’s break, they will have to go back to PATH to find a place to stay. PATH will place them for a week; then, once her daughter returns to school, she will have to go back to a women’s shelter. “If they could change this so that another family with a college student doesn’t have to go through what I went through?”

One participant then shared his experiences with the housing and healthcare systems of New York. He has learned to engage with the workers at social services to get what he needs. Though he gets frustrated, he knows that many of the workers have not seen or experienced what he has been through. He is an immigrant. “Had I not learned to engage, I wouldn’t have the things I have. My job is to figure out what you have that can protect me.” “Our lives are complicated by people in power. People in minorities have no experience of this power.”

Corey: I haven’t been to DHS, but I have been evicted. I’m an immigrant — my mother is from the Dominican Republic. And when you talk about social workers and sensitivity training: when I went to public assistance with my mother, the social workers treated her badly. I was just a kid; I was like, "Ma, don’t let them talk to you like that." Later, when I worked in government, I got desensitized, so I took a break. It’s a good idea to rotate social workers (so they don’t get desensitized). And I noticed my tendency was to always try to look for a solution. Instead of looking for solutions, I will try to first relate to the person and understand their feelings. I do this because I care. I will think about what my mother would go through if she were a constituent in front of me asking for help.
For another participant, the "one size fits all" approach is not human: You are treated like a number. If you would stop for one second and hear us. We are not lazy. You’d hear, "I am tired; my back hurts (from moving things into storage); I am trying to figure this whole thing out."

A participant recalled that the way to apply for a shelter used to be very different from the way it is now. She suggested to Corey, “When you go to PATH, go as an undercover, (as you promised to bring your colleagues to see it). Dress down to look homeless and see the environment for yourself.”

One last participant wondered why, instead of separating families, they are not offered family counseling.

4. Conclusion: Take-away for the guests:

**Simon:** We had the same thing in Massachusetts. We don’t have the resources needed to support everyone with what our legislatures give; we need more people to help, besides those just doing the paperwork.

**Corey:** I want to integrate the entity, to invite the organization to testify before the City Council, before the Welfare Committee, DHS (Department of Homeless Services). It’s change of policy we need, because you can change it much quicker than legislation.

**Jean:** At the United Nations you can also use the word "desensitized." I want to continue to hear the stories.

**Simon:** When I go home, at the office with my co-workers, I can talk about this. The conversation cannot stop here; we need to continue that conversation and broaden it.

***

After this interaction and dialogue with our guests, we enjoyed dinner together and continued talking about the energy and commitment of everyone in the room. Our next FWPU will take place May 19. Stay tuned for an invitation to the peer groups to prepare for that. Have a great spring!

Sincerely,

The FWPU prep team: Christelle, Emma, Kiley, Marcia, Marie-Claire, Patrick, Virginie