



Station at the Passport to Compassion event held earlier this month

## City on a Hill Shines Spotlight on Less Fortunate

By LaToya Dennis

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Over the past year or so, people across the country have been forced to adapt to new ways of living because of the economic downturn. For some, this means not taking that annual vacation, while for others, it's meant losing their homes and sometimes going hungry. To foster empathy for the most vulnerable, a local nonprofit has been demonstrating to people what it's like to be poor. WUWM's LaToya Dennis has more.



People enjoying lavish meal at Passport to Compassion event

If you want to see poverty, you'd probably visit spots in rural America or an inner city, but not a suburb like New Berlin. That's why Diane De La Santos took her program there, so residents could gain an appreciation of what it's like not to have enough.

"We hope that that journey will take them to a place of greater compassion in their lives for people around them who are struggling in poverty, and are hurting in various ways," De La Santos says.

De La Santos is executive director of City on a Hill, a group that aids poor people in Milwaukee's central city. Her demonstration project for others is called "Passport to Compassion." Earlier this month she took it to Poplar Creek Church in New Berlin. As I walked with De La Santos to the various stations she posed questions, and I was surprised by what I did not know.

"Do you have clothes to wear? Do you have enough food? Do you have a home that protects you from the weather and does your family have a car? If you can answer yes to those four questions you should take a red card off the table. That red card tells you that if you are able to answer yes to those questions, you're actually in the top 15 percent of wealth in the world. And then next four questions ask you whether you have a variety of clothes, whether your family has a bank account, whether you own your home and whether your family has two cars. And if you're able to answer those questions yes, which of course many Americans can, then you take a blue card and you see that you are actually in the top five percent of the wealth of the world," De La Santos says.

Throughout the night, around 200 participants signed in at the church and were given passports. People walked from booth to booth, and at one point were forced to figure out how to provide basic needs for a family with limited income.

"We welcome you to your destination. You are going to be shopping in four different areas. There's medical, office supplies for school supplies, neighborhood grocery store and housing. I'm going to give you \$58 that you will take to go shopping. Remember that you are spending money for a family of four."

But, the most humbling part of the night came when it was time for dinner, and everyone was gathered in one room. Participants were given different color beads, which determined what they were fed and how they were treated. Those privileged enough to sit at tables decorated with linen and flowers were served chicken and potatoes with vegetables, salad and dinner rolls; and for desert, chocolate cake and ice cream. The middle class received hamburger helper and pudding for dessert. But the worst off watched everyone else enjoy their meals while they had to sit on the floor and eat Ramen Noodles and cold bologna sandwiches. Rebecca Springer was one of the less fortunate.

"It's a little humiliating. I mean even as were sitting here and we're just kind of looking around, you truly do get a sense of the fact that you are the lower class sitting here," Springer says.

“So did you learn anything tonight?”

“I did. And what I think what I learned the most is right now I’m laid off and I realized that even being laid off I have it better than people who don’t even have jobs. It’s humbling and it’s a little humiliating at the same time I realize that I have so much more and it makes me thankful,” Springer says.

After dinner, participants were led into a room with organizer De La Santos for a discussion about what they’d experienced.

“So how was dinner?” Santos says.

People who drew the shortest stick that night, spoke about resenting those with better meals and better service, while those who were served more appetizing meals say they felt a little guilty. De La Santos questioned why.

“So on a normal day, when you’re having your dinner do you feel bad, do you feel guilty when you eat your dinner?” De La Santos says.

“No.”

“Why not?” De La Santos asks.

“Because you aren’t aware of what’s going on around you.”

“You’re not aware of what’s going on around you. You’re not aware of the poor, right? When you have your dinner you don’t see people sitting right next to you who don’t have anything, do you?” De La Santos says.

By the end of the conversation, participants were discussing things they could do to help those less fortunate, such as volunteering at food banks. De La Santos encouraged them to remember the feelings that surfaced during dinner, when they return to their lives. She says a community can’t thrive if problems remain out of sight, out of mind.