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## Laurel Walker | In My Opinion

# Compassion brought home to participants

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Some local suburbanites - wealthy compared to the rest of the world - felt the touch of poverty this week.

In an exercise called "Passport to Compassion," about 200 people were taken on a journey that organizers hoped would open their eyes to the poor around them and touch their hearts enough to help.

City on a Hill, a faith-based nonprofit Milwaukee organization that serves the central city's poor, teamed up on the effort with Poplar Creek Church in New Berlin Wednesday. Like a similar event held last week at Parklawn Assembly of God in Milwaukee's Sherman Park neighborhood, this pilot program mimicked what individuals below the federal poverty level face every day.

Participants traveled through stations that demonstrated the extent of the problem and forced them - literally, at one point - to look in the mirror.

The most disquieting exercise randomly assigned participants to an income status in the gym-turned-banquet hall.

Most sat on the floor and were served a bologna sandwich on white bread, a beverage and a cup of salty broth and thin noodles. It's more of a meal, no doubt, than many homeless see in a night.

Some sat at bare tables, given a bowl of canned fruit, a grape-flavored beverage and a Hamburger Helper-type pasta.

A privileged few were seated at formal tables with white tablecloths, china and flowers. They were catered to by doting waiters, served multiple courses of delicious food, and protected from a dirty-faced beggar who was shooed away by wait staff.

"It was very good," 9-year-old Josh Wittenburg of Pewaukee said after his fine meal. "But I felt guilty."

Later on, he, his parents, Bryan and Lori, and his sister, Haley, would be part of a discussion about why most of us in our own homes eating that same type of meal every day don't feel such guilt.

True enough: Out of sight, out of mind.

Diane De La Santos, executive director of City on a Hill, said reactions to this experience at the two churches were powerful. One woman cried. One refused to eat if her friend couldn't. Some moved a table into a hall so they could eat with the "homeless" man.

She encouraged the group to remember what they'd felt.

"Just be aware that there are people around us who have so little that we could share with," she said.

The banquet ended the night's journey, but there were other stops along the way.

It started with a look at portraits of the obviously super-rich, like Oprah Winfrey and Donald Trump. Then, some questions were asked of participants.

Do you have a variety of clothes? Own a house? Drive your own car, maybe two? Have a savings account? And the final question: Who's in the top 5% of the world's wealthiest people?

All who turned the corner and found themselves surrounded by a dozen or so mirrors saw the answer staring back.

They were among the world's wealthiest.

The next exercise asked for a guess. How many Milwaukee children are living in poverty? The clue was piled high in containers on a table - with each child represented by a tiny marshmallow.

Thousands and thousands and thousands of marshmallows.

Nearly 50,000 children in all.

Rita Bunn of Waukesha was visibly moved to tears at one point - reminded, she said, of the Milwaukee soup kitchen for which her mother volunteered.

"I saw them," she said, referring to the homeless and hungry who turned up there. "But you never put two and two together."

Tina Schneider of Waukesha was lost in concentration as she tried to divvy up the \$58 in play money she was given - one day's equivalent a family of four would have at the \$21,200 per year federal poverty level. She had to buy groceries, school supplies for kids, lodging for a night and somehow pay for the medical crisis assigned her - a child having a severe asthma attack.

She managed groceries for two meals of rice and beans and cereal with powdered milk.

"This is how I ate in college," she said. But since then, she said, she'd developed a gluten intolerance. How could *anyone* afford a special diet on this budget? she wondered.

She lucked out on housing - drawing a card that allowed her to stay one night with a friend. She was careful with school supplies.

Finally, left with \$29 of her \$58, there was no way she could pay for a doctor's visit or urgent care.

"It's a sad state of affairs," she said. Her only option - go to the emergency room and rack up a \$1,000 bill that she may or may not pay later.

Judy and Jim Smith of West Allis were among the "have-nots" in the banquet room. For a night, Judy seemed accepting of her lot.

"We know when we leave here, it's all make-believe," she said. "But what if my husband were to lose his job? How long would it take?"

As the night ended, De La Santos and Poplar Creek Senior Pastor John Davis urged participants to remember what they had learned, to help the poor, to stand up for justice.

"Not any one of us can solve these problems by ourselves," De La Santos said. "But we can make a difference, one person at a time helping one person at a time."

It's a meaningful message especially as Thanksgiving approaches.

Giving thanks? Of course.

Giving? All the better.

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