



Livin' on Life's Byways: Rural Mothers Speak©

by

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Livin' on Life's Byways: Rural Mothers Speak is a dramatization of stories from real, low-income mothers and their families living in Maryland. The mothers are representative of the 413 who participated in a 17-state, multidisciplinary, longitudinal study¹ tracking the well-being of rural families in the wake of welfare reform. All were eligible for, or receiving, food assistance. The drama focuses on the challenges faced by rural, low-income families to raising children, making ends meet, food security, health, employment and civic engagement.

The research study upon which this dramatization is grounded was created by the research team to answer policy questions and inform programming. The study was launched in 1998 in response to 1996 federal legislation, and subsequent state and local legislation and regulations, affecting families on public assistance and fills a gap in the literature on rural, low-income families. The 10-year research project was funded through a combination of federal, state and foundation funds. The research team, primarily from land-grant universities, has not only published and presented findings in professional society circles, but has sought opportunities to share the findings with practitioners and public policy makers.

Foundational to the presentation, is extensive mixed-methods data analysis by a team of nearly 150 faculty and student researchers, including those with county and state Cooperative Extension appointments. The study constitutes a unique investigation of rural families and their lives over time. In addition to this drama, output from the study includes dissertations and theses, research articles, presentations and research & policy briefs. Team members have shared findings with members of Congress, state legislatures and county commissioners, program, agency and policy personnel and local citizens. Through the scholarship of the presentation, the researchers are again fulfilling their pledge to the mothers to get their often unheard stories and voices heard.

¹ Data were collected in conjunction with the cooperative multi-state research project NC-223/NC-1011 (CSREES/NRICGP Grants - 2001-35401-10215, 2002-35401-11591, 2004-35401-14938): *Rural Low-Income Families: Tracking Their Well-being and Functioning in the Context of Welfare Reform*. Cooperating states include: California, Colorado, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming

Purpose of Drama: The dramatization is intended as a teaching tool to increase awareness and understanding of the state of well-being of rural, low-income families and of the options for public policy at local, state and national levels. Its name, *Livin' on Life's Byways: Rural Mothers Speak*, sets up the first point—that rural residents, and particularly the lower income residents, live on the byways of America, their states and counties. They are not mainstream and therefore aren't foremost in the minds of policy makers and the public.

Rural families are not well represented in the literature nor well studied in the family science curricula of colleges and universities. This dramatization is one means for family, and other, teachers to involve students vicariously in the lived experiences of the families who gave of their time and shared their stories with student and faculty researchers who converted that information into analyzable data that expands the body of knowledge.

The dramatization, a means of translating research findings, is crafted in the tradition of social theatre to provoke thought and action. It was created as a tool for teaching in classrooms and communities as a means of converting research findings into ideas for action by citizens, policy makers and other decision-makers. For campus and community educators who focus on family and community systems, dynamics, strengths, resilience, poverty, resources, health, or policy, this teaching tool should have utility. And, while it may be entertaining, its intent is to both reveal research findings and to model a way to translate those findings. The dramatization should have particular interest and appeal to teachers, educators and practitioners and community activists.

The relationships between jobs, personal and family health, access to care, transportation and the state of well-being along a continuum from in-crisis to thriving was revealed in data analysis. Thus, the complexity of the lives of the mothers is shown in the dramatization even though each act has a different setting and purpose.

The drama permits the voices of these mothers to be heard as their lived experiences unfold in a town that's anywhere rural USA. The drama introduces some of the town citizens that both help and hinder these mothers as they struggle to make ends meet through the challenges of health, jobs, childcare, transportation and relationships. And the drama introduces the use of a citizen engagement method, deliberative forums, as one means of involving both citizens and public policy makers in issues and policies of concern to the public.

While some artistic liberty was taken in telling the stories in drama form, when possible, actual statements from the mothers were used. Names were changed to protect the identity of the family. Community characters are composites of person described by the mothers and whom the author met over the period of the study or has known over time. They are representative of the types of people with whom rural families interact. The nature of those interactions was formed by the stories of mothers speaking about their communities and the residents of those communities—townspeople, elected officials, human services staff, employers in both private and public sectors.

The Maryland mothers' words and stories featured in this dramatization were chosen based on a quantitative analysis of data from all mothers in the multi-state study. They represent diversity in marital status, and number of children, county of residence, employment of mother, income, difficulty with making ends meet, physical and mental health, and use of public assistance--especially Food Stamps and other food assistance.

Interviews of the mothers were conducted by the author and research team at the University of Maryland and by other state research teams between the summer of 2000 and the fall of 2002. Each mother was interviewed three times. Quantitative and qualitative data, from the multi-state study, analyzed by multiple researchers, informed the dramatization². Funding for the research behind this drama was provided by the University Of Maryland School Of Public Health's Department of Family Science and the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources Cooperative Extension and Agricultural Experiment Station; the United State Department of Agriculture; Maryland Department of Human Resources; the American Association of Family Consumer Sciences, and the Charles F. Kettering Foundation.

As a faculty member with a long-time career in Cooperative Extension, the author uses multiple means to disseminate research-based evidence and get findings into use by practitioners. Finding a way to get beyond the head to the heart and then to encourage action, provided motivation for the creation of this dramatization.

Because context is important, the small town, rural setting, while contrived by the author, is grounded in reality of the kinds of public places and people who are part of the fabric of the community. The various sectors of a community, and especially the business, government, health and human services and education sectors, are incorporated into the dramatization. Each sector both acts on, and is acted on, by the mothers and their families for whom this dramatization represents. Literature about dynamics in rural communities, combined with data compiled about the rural communities and counties in the research study, informed the dramatization.

The relationship between public policy and private situations is based on literature focused on citizen engagement and specifically among low-income citizens and on research conducted by the author and a team of faculty and student research associates at the University of Maryland with funding from the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. The two year project, entitled *Unheard Voices*, included families who were part of the original, longitudinal *Maryland Rural Families Speak* research study. Mothers from the study were re-interviewed twice over a two year period and invited to participate in a deliberative forum to answer the research question: *Under what conditions can and will limited resource citizens engage in the deliberative public policy process?*³

² For additional information about the study and findings go to the team website: <http://fsos.che.umn.edu/projects/rfs.html>

³ The report of *Unheard Voices* is located at: <http://www.hhp.umd.edu/FMST/docsContribute/UnheardVoices-March2006.pdf>

Focus of Acts: Each act emphasizes a different but related aspect of the challenges of living in rural areas on the well-being of low-income families. The first two acts set up the problems facing rural residents from the research studies. The last act focuses on finding solutions through engagement of citizens—including and especially, low-income rural citizens.

Act One—Checking Out—emphasizes the food security status of the families while introducing the challenge of making ends meet. It takes place over three years to illustrate the conditions over time. Each of the three mothers represent a food security status from continually food secure to continually food insecure. The act introduces the roles and relationships of business people and local citizens who can both help and hinder the lives of the families. The act is set in a small town “mom & pop” store that’s served many generations of the community’s population.

This act was originally written as a one-act dramatization to disseminate research findings related on food insecurity to faculty of the Maryland Food Stamp Nutrition Education program. It was a means of demonstrating how to use data to inform educational programming as part of formative evaluation. The author serves as project director for the Maryland Food Stamp Nutrition Education Evaluation Project.

Central to Act One is the check-out clerk who talks and listens to folks and in so doing, the audience is checking out the characters and learning background information about the mothers not revealed in their dialogue. The clerk is a long-time resident of the area, thus knowledgeable of community resources. Additional information is provided through the dialogue between the clerk and the store owner/manager, a business man, who in act two, is revealed to be the town mayor.

Act Two—Dishing Out--shifts from the grocery store to the local café—another long-term establishment. Almost every small town has one gathering spot when food, beverages, gossip and unofficial business is conducted. The café owner/operator and/or the waitress(es) become acquainted with the situations and thinking of the customers. Service often goes beyond taking orders and delivering food as illustrated by the owner/waitress.

The theme of difficulties in making ends meet continues in Act Two where issues of jobs, transportation, health, child care are introduced. Act Two also introduces the interrelatedness of the lived experiences of the low--income mothers and their families and the public policy decisions of the town’s elected leaders. The tensions in approaches and the gap between the two groups are illustrated by the setting and the dialogue.

The research study and literature support the concept that one caring, trusted citizen can make a difference both for individuals and in public decision-making. Often that person is not in a positional leadership role in the community. The waitress serves as this person who dishes out more than the food she serves. She’s the character to whom the audience can turn to understand what’s going on in the community through the setting of the local café.

Act Three—Meeting Together-- is set in the local American Legion Hall, the town meeting site. The act presents findings from research regarding challenges to rural, family well-being and demonstrates ways to overcome barriers to civic engagement in public decision-making among low-income families. The simulated deliberative forum shows how the use of research findings, and a tested process of citizen engagement⁴, can expand the idea pool for addressing the tensions and tradeoffs of public issues facing a community. Such inclusion of diverse perspectives held by citizens can increase the social capital of a community by viewing all citizens as assets to the community.

The act illustrates a departure from standard town hall meetings chaired by the mayor and usually attended by positional and vocal leaders of the community. It is based on findings from the *Unheard Voices* research study which identified the barriers to participation and the conditions under which limited resource citizens can and will participate in deliberative public policy processes. It demonstrates the use of deliberative forums as a means of engaging the voices of an expanded and diverse representation of citizens showing how to shift from a hierarchical to an inclusive structure and how to facilitate such a process.

Validity of Drama: To assure that the drama is congruent with the objectives of the multi-state research study, the published literature from the study, and rural-focused literature, the play was reviewed by the multi-state research team. They confirmed congruence and assurance that the findings are representative of mothers we studied.

Teaching Guide: Under development is a teaching guide with ideas for usage, research findings and supplemental materials.

⁴ For more information on deliberative forums, developed by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation through the National Issues Forums, go to: <http://www.nifi.org>

Acknowledgements

The playwright thanks the over 100 members of the multi-state research team, both faculty and students, undergraduate and graduate, and especially her University of Maryland colleagues, who, during a nearly 10 year period, contributed their expertise in the design of the overall research study, project management; data collection, processing & analysis; presentation and publication of findings and recommendations for further research & for application in programs and public policy. Working with this team of competent, committed professionals was a once in a lifetime experience.

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The playwright also thanks the over 400 mothers who gave their time, shared openly and allowed us to learn about their lives.

Without their participation, this study would not be possible.

We pledged to share the information and their words with researchers, policymakers and program directors, with the intent of improving the well-being of low-income, rural families.

This dramatization is one way of sharing.

*Bonnie Braun, September, 2007
College Park, Maryland*



Act 1 Checkin' Out

The Setting: Act one is set in a small, hometown “mom & pop” grocery store. Lois, the clerk, a kindly hometown, middle-aged woman, has worked there much of her life and knows everyone. The store owner-manager is also a hometown person who represents the business community.

The Staging: Long table to right of stage. Small table and chair to left. Door on left near the small table and chair. If available, grocery baskets, bags, a table top podium to serve as the cash register.

Act One **September, 2000**

Scene One *<Music fades, if used. Mike & Lois enter>*

Mike Good morning, Lois, cloudy day, isn't it?

Lois Yes, it is Mike. Folks may flock in getting food before the storm I hear is coming.

<Manager moves over and sits at his desk. Clerk puts on her apron and opens the cash register behind the counter. Opens a local paper and starts reading while waiting for customers to come>

<Caressa enters, pushing a baby stroller, grabs a basket and moves some distance behind the counter>

<Kaelin soon enters, gets a basket and also moves some distance away. Caressa comes to the counter to check out. The clerk puts her paper aside and prepares to ring up the groceries in the basket>

Lois Good morning *(to Caressa)*.

Caressa Mornin' *(Spoken softly. Turns to child not seen but apparently standing next to stroller and speaks emphatically.)* Jeremiah, quit that. I can't pick you up, get our food and push the stroller. And don't hit Jahan, he's your brother.

Lois Haven't seen you in our store before. Are you from around here?

Caressa *(Shaking head negatively)*. Naw, my family's two counties over. I'm Caressa. *(Asks a bit anxiously)* How much will that be?

Lois \$15.11 *(Notices Caressa looking through purse so says)*
Do you have any coupons?

- Caressa** *<Shakes head, no>* No, mam.
- Lois** *(Lowers voice and says)* We also take vouchers from WIC and Food Stamps.
- Caressa** Don't have any. Here, I think this is enough. Ah, where would I get the Food Stamps and WIC?
- Lois** *<Taking money >* Well, you can get them at the county Social Services and Health Departments. The Family Support Center could help you and they have classes for mothers and child care for children. They even serve lunch and it's free. I bet you'd like to go there. Do you have time now?
- Caressa** *<Nods yes somewhat timidly>* Yes mam.
- Lois** Great, I'll ask Mike our manager to call the center and see if they could set another place for you and the children at lunch. And when you get there, ask for Miss J, and tell her Lois at the grocery sent you. If Miss J isn't there, someone else will welcome you. Ok?
- Caressa** Ok.
- Lois** *(Turns and yells at Mike the Manager)* Mike, come meet Miss Caressa and her boys. She's new in town. Would you call Miss J at the Family Support Center and see if Miss Caressa and her boys could have lunch today?
- Mike** *<Coming forward>* Sure, I'd be glad to call. Hi, I'm Mike. Welcome to our town. Hi, boys. Come on back to my office and I'll call the Center. You can walk there. It's only a couple of blocks from here. But you may want to hurry. Looks like we may be having a storm. *<Caressa and boys follow Mike. They leave the store while the Lois is talking to Kaelin, the next mother.>*
- <Shortly after Caressa goes back with Mike, Kaelin comes to the counter. Joanne enters the store, gets a basket and moves to the back of the store.>*
- Lois** Good morning, Kaelin. I always know it's Wednesday when I see you here. That's your grandmother out the in the car?
- Kaelin** *<Appears slightly nervous>* Un huh, you know she always brings me to the store.
- Lois** Yes, she sure is good to bring you every week.

- Kaelin** Yeah, it's too far for me to walk to the grocery store, I don't drive, you know, 'cause my nerves. (*Clerk nods in agreement*). That nerve problem—made me quit high school and now I can't drive because of it neither.
- Lois** (*Nods head.*) Uh huh. Is Sawyer with you?
- Kaelin** Yeah, he's out in the car. He's too much for me to handle in the store. Really, he's too much most of the time.
- Lois** *<Nodding yes>*. Uh huh. Say, Kaelin, did you mean to put a divider between these groceries and those?
- Kaelin** Uh huh, these two gallons of milk, peanut butter, juice, cheese, eggs and cereal I'm gettin' with my WIC voucher. Here. (*Hands over voucher*). My grandmother is gettin' the rest. She gave me the money. Sometimes, my fiancé does buy milk and stuff. When the WIC runs out, like for a month, he buys the milk and he'll buy a little bit of food, if he can, on weekends.
- Lois** That's \$48.15 outta \$50. *<While counting out the change she says>* You get a lot of help from your grandmother, don't you?
- Kaelin** Yep, she and my grandpop, too. Have been since I was growin' up and staying with 'em during the week so I could go to school while my dad was in D.C. workin' and mom was at the factory workin'. I don't know what I'd do without my grandfolks. Me an' Luke, he's my fiancé you know, we are having it rough 'cause he don't make much money and our rent is \$400 so that takes most of his check. WIC doesn't go far. I get food every month from the local food pantry. I don't get Food Stamps. Tried but they told me he makes too much.
- Lois** (*Nods gives Kaelin the change while asking*) Uh huh. Are you and Sawyer still going down to the Family Center?
- Kaelin** Yes, four days a week we're down there most of the day. I really like the parenting class. And, we get to eat lunch there. Sawyer likes playin' with the kids. Well, I better go. My grandmother and Sawyer's likely tired of waitin' for me. *<She leaves>*.
- Lois** Bye, now, see you next Wednesday. *<Joanne comes to counter shortly after Kaelin leaves.>* Hello Joanne. Good to see you again. Did your sister bring you today?

- Joanne** Yeah, she needed to come anyway so I tagged along. It's hard to get to the store when you don't have a car. And it's really bad in bad weather like the storm that's comin'. Without a car, Jeff's walkin' to and from the shop to work nearly 4 miles each way every day. It will be soooo good when he gets his license back and we can get a car and he can bring me shoppin'.
- Lois** Isn't there a store out near where you're living?
- Joanne** Yes, but it's up the road a ways. I can't walk much and carry anything and you can't buy meats. Besides, things are 5, 6, 7 months dated. So, I come when Sis is coming or with my friend.
- Lois** How ya feelin' ?
- Joanne** Not so good. I was in to see Doc M. He ran all kinds of tests and everything. You know, I'm 26 years old and he says I won't make it to see 35... <pause>... I have an enlarged heart. He won't start me on any kind of treatment or anything. He told me to get a medical card or go get some money and then come back.
- Lois** Oh, Joanne, I'm so sorry. Have you gone down to Social Services to get temporary help, you know, like cash assistance?
- Joanne** Yeah, we were approved, but why take it out now when we might need it down the road? Right now, we've got what Jeff makes, a hundred and forty-two a week, and my Food Stamps. We gotta pay the rent and I'm still buyin' diapers and paying my child support for my oldest. So, it's Not easy but I'm not complainin' I live with it. Someday, we might *really* hafta have the cash assistance.
- Lois** Uh huh. You never know what the future might hold. Expenses just seem to pop up out of nowhere sometimes. Well that's it. Anything else?
- Joanne** Nah.
- Lois** How do you want to pay?
- Joanne** Here, take my Food Stamp card. <hands over her EBT Food Stamp Card>.
- Lois** Ought oh, can't use this for that shampoo or detergent.
- Joanne** Oh, yeah, I forgot. Let me see if I have enough cash. <searches in purse> Here, this will pay for the detergent. Just keep the shampoo. I'll get that ... <pause> another time.

- Lois** <hesitantly> Um, Joanne, what about getting WIC? Your youngest isn't five yet so you'd still be eligible?
- Joanne** I can't because I can't get to the WIC office and the transit won't take me unless I pay them and it's not a medical visit, so no. <pause>
- Lois** Well, you could get the Earned Income Tax Credit since Jeff's workin'. Have you applied for that? Some folks don't know they can. It's often worth about a \$100 a month in money that comes back to you because you earned it.
- Joanne** No, we haven't applied. When tax time comes this winter, maybe we can. But for now, I need cash. Say, do you know anybody who'd like to buy a go-kart, do you? My kids love to ride it out there but . . . we've decided to sell it. We're always havin' to sell something--like our TV, VCR, tapes, radio. Sometimes we swap. Right now, I need to sell.
- Lois** Well, you could stop by the store bulletin board and put up a for-sale notice as you leave. You know Mike our store owner and manager? Of course you do! You went to school together didn't you?
- Joanne** Yeah, me and Mike go back to first grade only he graduated high school and went on to college.
- Lois** Well, go back and get a card from Mike and put your notice up. Maybe by the next time you come in, you'll have found a buyer.
- Joanne** Ok, thanks. Maybe I'll be back next week. It's the last week before school starts, and I need school supplies for my oldest girl. Good thing Jordy's still at home and Tess is at Head Start where they provide all the paper and crayolas. Why, when me and Mike were in school, our folks didn't have ta provide nothin'. Now, ever time I turn 'round the kids need somethin' for school and I don't just mean clothes and shoes. I'm talkin' paper, glue, pencils, things the school always had when I went!
- Lois** <Nodding> I know, I know. I hear that complaint a lot.
- Joanne** Yeah, if I could, I'd run for school board and change things.
- Lois** Well, maybe you can work with the Parent Teachers Association to make changes.
- Joanne** Yeah, maybe. I've gone and had my say, . . . but nothin' happens.
- Lois** Well, it's good you've gone to the meetings. Here's your food.
<Hands over groceries> Good luck, Joanne. See ya' next time.

- Joanne** Un huh. *<Walks away from the clerk. Stops by and talks to Mike— done in silence with clerk looking on. After she leaves, Mike gets up from his desk and walks over to Lois.>*
- Mike** *(Shaking head)* Lois, it's too bad about Joanne. Seems like she and her folks always have had it rough. First, she married that wife-beater. I gotta admire her for gettin' outta that marriage with her little boy. Then she married Jeff. You know, we were all in school together. Jeff's good to her but they sure have had it hard since he ended up in jail for drinking too much too many times. Then, they were evicted from that Section 8 place where they were living. And that eviction coming after their other place had a fire! I think the Community Action Agency director found her another place to live and just in time. She told me "they were inches from living on the street" before he helped out.
- Lois** *(Nodding head, affirmatively).* Yes, Mike, she told me she's proud of keeping the family together while he was in jail and that she was worrying if he'd be back...or what. And you know he came out, got sober with help and he's working down at Mac's Mechanic Shop but only three days a week. That's all the work Mac's got for him.
- Mike** Yeah, jobs around here are a bit scarce. The Town Council is worried about keeping work here local.

Scene Two September, 2001

< Lois at cash register, cleaning the counter. Manager not around. Caressa enters pushing a stroller, gets a basket, walks around the store. Katelin enters store, gets basket and walks around the store. Caressa comes to the counter.>

- Lois** Well, hello Caressa. Hi boys, your new sister surely is growing and so are you two. How do you like your apartment, Caressa?
- Caressa** Much better than living in the basement of the church like we were before I started going to the Family Support Center. I earned enough points for going to get drinking glasses. Then, for getting the boys their shots, I got a toddler bed from the Stork's Nest. The Salvation Army got me some other furniture. Folks have been so helpful.
- Lois** Well, good for you. Still walking everywhere I see.
- Caressa** *<Nods>*. I like to walk. The best thing about the new place is that I'm not far from any parks. We walk over there most days and we walk to the Center. Here's my food for today.

- Lois** How do you want to pay for these groceries?
- Caressa** These with WIC and the rest with Food Stamps. Miss J helped me get to Social Services and get the Food Stamps and over to the Health Department for WIC.
- Lois** That's good to hear. Miss J really cares, doesn't she? Bye now. Bye, boys, take care of your sister. *<Caressa leaves, Joanne and Mrs. Martin enter and walk around store. Kaelin steps up to the counter. Lois, speaking to unseen grandmother and child>* Good afternoon, Kaelin and Sawyer. Great weather we're having.
- Kaelin** Sure is. Me an' Luke and Sawyer been out fishin' Caught our supper, last night too!
- Lois** Oh, that's great. Fish seem to bite when it cools down a little. Was a hot summer. Say, I don't see any veggies in your order today.
- Kaelin** Nah, we still have some of that frozen food from the outlet. Luke's mom stops by there when they're open and brings us stuff. *<Looking sheepish and apologetic>*) Oops, sorry 'bout that.
- Lois** *<laughing>* Oh, that's alright. Food's cheaper there. *<Leaning over and whispering>*, I even stop by there sometimes and I work here!
- Kaelin** *<Laughing>* Besides, we can't have anything cold with us today. We're gonna take my bags of cans over to the recyclin' place. I've been collectin' cans since I was 11-12 years old--nearly 20 years! My mom, grandmother and grandfather help me collect and store them. I don't have a place to collect them where I live so I put them in Grandmother's chicken house.
- Lois** And do you make quite a bit of money?
- Kaelin** Depends on the goin' rate. Everything helps. After that, we're going to buy shoes for Sawyer. I get all confused about sizes and everything. So she's gonna buy them for me. He needs them for school.
- Lois** Oh, that's right he's starting this year. What you gonna do without him at home?
- Kaelin** Oh, it will be better for me. I can have the whole day without him to sleep, do anything.
- Lois** *<noncommittal>* Umm. Do you have a WIC voucher today?

Kaelin Nah, I was cut off WIC for him at his last birthday. My fiance's mother gives me money for food and my mom comes and helps me clean and cook. It's hard for me to know what Sawyer wants to eat. Because sometimes I'll fix hamburgers and mashed potatoes or hamburgers and fried potatoes or string beans or pork and beans or something, and he won't eat at all. So sometimes I have to fix broccoli. He'll eat it right out of the freezer. And he'll eat like bananas or apples. That's the hardest thing, knowing what to fix.

Lois Yes, it can be a challenge to learn how to feed children. You know Extension has some nutrition education programs that could help. You might want to have your grandmother drive you to their office at the courthouse and find out about those classes. Tell me what you find out when you come in next week.

<Kaelin exits. Joanne steps up to the counter. Mrs. Martin steps up right behind her—within hearing range.>

Lois Howdy, Joanne. How's the school year starting out for your kids?

Joanne Oh, all right. Good thing they're getting breakfast and lunch at the school. Wasn't easy having all four home, growin' and eatin' for the summer.

Lois And you, how about you?

Joanne Well, the doctor's working to get me on disability cause of me being, you know...well...*<glances at Mrs. Martin>* anyway, the medicine helps but with my back, my asthma, my weight, my heart, ah, it's constant, non stop. The only thing that scares me *(pause)*... is my heart...*(pause)* is dying and no one there to take care of Jeff or my kids. My mom can't. Mentally, she can do it but physically she can't. She had a real bad car wreck years ago and is disabled.

Lois Oh, Joanne, I didn't realize your problems were so serious. I'm sorry.

Joanne Yeah, well, I just pray...I'm praying He'll *<looking up>* help us find another place of our own. Right now, we're living in a tuna can in the middle of ah field. *<Pause and hands over her heart>*. I gotta go. You know, I paid a friend to bring me shoppin' thinkin' I could get all the groceries I need but after we got here, he told me he had to get home soon! So, all I could get was tonight's supper.*<Walks off saying,>* Why didn't he tell me that sooner? Now I'll have to pay him again or find someone to bring me again.

<Joanne exits; Mrs. Martin who has been listening, steps to the clerk, speaks to the clerk but looks at Joanne who is leaving>

Mrs. Martin You know, Joanne's a mental case like her mother and Joanne's son who live together over in the next county. Seems to run in the family. What's it called, bi-something...bi-polar. One time you talk to her, she's all down, crying 'bout her problems; another time, she's bouncing off the walls. My husband always said those folks of hers are crazy and lazy. Why I doubt if the doctor put her on disability. If he did, she ought to be getting disability assistance. I think I'll check with my cousin to see if she is. She works over at Social Services and she'll know. I thank God I come from better folk!

Lois *<Matter of factly says>* That'll be \$89.63. *<Mrs. Martin pays and leaves. Lois watches as Mrs. Martin leaves, shakes her head slowly and sadly>*.

Scene 3 September, 2002

<Mike enters, checks out the counter and goes to desk. Lois enters, says good morning to Mike and goes to her station putting on her apron. Mrs. Martin enters and goes around the shop. Caressa enters pushing a baby stroller, gets a basket and strolls around the shop. Lois fiddles with cash drawer. Caressa comes to counter. Mrs. Martin comes to counter almost immediately and stands close by. Kaelin enters.>

Lois Hello, Caressa, boys. Let me look at your sister. She's so cute. What's happening with ya'll?

Caressa Oh, I'm getting Jeremiah ready to go to Head Start and Jahan to Early Head Start. An' we're gonna move soon.

Lois Oh, are you leaving us?

Caressa No, just a larger apartment a few blocks away.

Lois Well, that's good. Have you been able to get a job yet?

Caressa No, I haven't really looked. With three children at home, it would cost too much for child care. Besides, who'd you trust to take care of 'em? But I am thinking about going to school myself.

Lois Really? For what? when?

Caressa Yep, for hair dressing. I've called the college and I can start next year when all three are in school. The baby will be eligible for Early Head Start, Jahan for Head Start and Jeremiah will go to kindergarten. Then, I'll go. You know, I worked before I had these three and I want to get back to work. I was 21 when Jeremiah was born. It's time to get earnin' again.

- Lois** That's just great. Life is working out for you isn't it?
- Caressa** Yes, thanks to you and Miss J and the church and Salvation Army and Miss V at Social Services and the WIC folks, we're gonna make it.
- Lois** I think you will. Good bye. Good luck with the move. Grab a box or two on your way out. Come back for more if you need them.
- Caressa** Thanks. Here, boys, carry a box for momma. *<Exits>*
- Mrs. Martin** *<Steps up to counter, speaks to the clerk but look out at Caressa.>* Well, I never thought she'd amount to anything. And those children of hers, each with a different father! They were so dirty when she came to town. But look at them now.
- Lois** Yes, look at them. That will be \$75.42. Have a good day.
- < Mrs. Martin leaves, Joanne enters, gets basket and moves around store. Kaelin comes to the counter. Lois addresses the unseen grandmother and grandson.>*
- Hello, Kaelin. I see your grandmother and Luke are here today. Is she getting your weekly food today?
- Kaelin** *<Answers so clerk turns to her>* Nah, she's not getting me many groceries today. She just brought me here. Luke got a raise and we movin' into a different house that costs \$50 a month less. So, I've been stretching food to fit the budget. It helps to have a little more money to spend. *<whistfully>* I'd like to learn more about eating well and bein' healthy but I can't go to the Family Center no more since Sawyer is too old. Sometimes they had classes on food and I was studyin' for my GED.
- Lois** Did you go check out those Extension nutrition classes and did you get your GED?
- Kaelin** *<Shaking head.* No, I'm studyin', just on my own at home. I'm usin' my weekly \$5.00 allowance from Grandmother to help pay for my books. Luke is helpin' to pay some, too. I found out that if you ain't got a diploma or GED, you can't get a job around here--not even in a fast food restaurant. Oh, say, put my groceries in paper bags today, will ya. I need them for packin'.
- Lois** Okay, good luck with the move, Kaelin. *<Kaelin leaves. Joanne comes to the counter.>*
- Hi, Joanne. Looks like you got all of your family with you today.

Joanne <*With enthusiasm*>. Yes, it's so exciting, Jeff passed his drivers license test and we were able to get a van so all of us could ride together. We even went over to the next county to see my son and mom last week. He's my boy by my first husband I divorced. He lives with my mom.

Lois Wow, you got a van. I'd be excited, too. I know you're tired of having to depend on someone else to drive you or having to walk.

Joanne <*Nodding, yes*> Yeah, when Jeff got his GED they said it would help me make more money but it didn't. He just has to work extra hours. He paid for the van doin' work for the neighbors on the side. But gettin' the license is helping. It doesn't make us more money, even costs us and the price of gas is ridiculous, but havin' it helps our life. Now he can drive to work, take me to the Head Start Center when it has the parent board meetings, I like volunteering, and of course, he can bring me here for groceries! Now, the next time the kids need to go to the hospital, he won't have to walk them there like last time.

Lois Yeah, having a car and one that runs is so important out here. It's so expensive to take it to the shop. I just had a big bill last week to get mine repaired. <*grimaces*>

Joanne Well, let Jeff know next time. He could probably fix it for you.

Lois Maybe I will. Say, I see you've got a cake mix in here. What's the special occasion?

Joanne It's my youngest's birthday. Jeff's makin' the cake, he always does. He's good at sweets. Good thing it's not the end of the month or I might not be able to get the cake AND food for supper AND a gift. You know, we never even have enough money to stretch through to the end of the month. We're taking the little one out to the dollar store for a toy and outfit before we have Jeff's folks over for dinner tonight...just like we always do when it's one of the kid's birthdays. Birthdays are special.

I'm just so blessed to have my family together...That's when I'm, happy. Life's too short, it's too short. Gotta take every minute you got and be happy. Life will be better. It gets better every year. I try to remember that everyday and thank God. <*Joanne Exits. Mike comes over to Lois who says to him*>

Lois You know, Mike, life's been tough for them but they seem to be hangin' in there. Not everyone with her problems would thank God.

End of Act One

Act Two Dishin' Out

Setting: Spring, 2003. Hat's Hometown Café. Harriet, who is called Hat, is the owner and operator of this long-time fixture in the local community. Folks have been coming here for years to eat and talk and catch up on personal and town business. Besides drop-ins, there are the regulars like the men who gather today.

Staging: Center door. Table & chairs on right will be occupied by town fathers. Tables and chairs on left by town mothers. Counter at back of room. Scene opens with Hat the owner & waitress behind the counter wiping it down.

Hat: *<Looking up from counter greets customer enthusiastically as she enters>*
Hi, Keri. Come on in. Nobody's here now. You're a little late for breakfast and a little early for lunch. But we can russle up something. What can I get you?

Keri: No food, just coffee, thank you.

Hat: *<Returns to counter, fills two mugs with coffee from a carafe. As she sets the mugs at the table and sits down beside Keri.>*

Here's your coffee and a cup for me. Have one of these biscuits on the house. I could use a break before the lunch crowd arrives. Haven't seen you for a while, what have you been up to?

Keri: I've been busy getting us moved again. I honestly think that if a member of the Health Department would come in and see our house, they would condemn it! *<speaking with frustration>* Haven't really had a place that's right for us since we lost the house we were buying then had that electrical fire two years ago. Community Action was real good to us and helped us find an apartment right after the fire so we have a place to live--but it wasn't really home. We're on a list for the Habitat for Humanity house. It's hard to find a place in this area we can afford that's big enough for the two of us and four girls.

Hat: Yeah, housing is hard to come by in this county. There's lots of expensive places going up around the lake for the outsiders but not much for us locals.

Keri: *<nodding in agreement>* It's just so hard to feed the girls and keep them in clothes, pay for their school fees, rent, utilities and me and my girl's medicines on Blair's income. He was makin' \$10 an hour, which in a rural community like this, people think that's a good amount of money per hour. But when you have four children, one's a teenager, one's a pre-teenager, that doesn't go anywhere. Then, there wasn't any more work so he lost that job. He got right on at another mechanic shop and I'm really thankful for this job but it's three dollars an hour less. *<speaking with frustration and emphatically>* I mean it's a big drop! Blair busts his butt but financially, it's a struggle.

Hat: Yes, jobs that pay well are hard to come by.

Keri: Especially for me with my anxieties. I've worked a lot of jobs but not for long. I do a lot of volunteer work. A lot of employers won't hire me because I don't have the education, the experience. I finally passed my GED. Did it for my girls. I wanted...*<pauses and drifts off as if thinking about a future for the girls>*.

I've been trying to get disability benefits. I think for the most part, higher ups think that I'm just lazy or I'm trying to take advantage of the system somehow--which personally, I wouldn't do because I'm not the type of person. My counselors have said, "Keri, mental disorder is just like diabetes. With diabetes you have to take medicine." Well, that's all great and wonderful, now tell the public that! It's hard when you know that there's people out there who know you have a mental disorder and you know they are looking at you like you belong in a psychiatric ward for the criminally insane!

To be truthful with you, I think sometimes, the reason I volunteer so much, and I do so much through Head Start in this community is because, it's kind of like an escape from reality. Even my husband sees the positive difference when I'm with the workers and children at Head Start, has said, "When you're around them you're not the woman I know."

Hat: *<Nodding, getting up and taking mugs to the counter>*. Let me warm up that cup of coffee. *<returning with coffee>*. Tell me about those girls of yours. They sure are bright and sweet.

Keri: *(Brightening up and smiling)*. Oh my God, my girls make me so happy. All four of them are beautiful, beautiful little girls. I'm absolutely blessed with that. My psychiatrist has interviewed them and he told me that all four of my girls are gifted intellectually. My number one wish for them is that they grow up happy and healthy... and I don't emotionally scar them too bad.

And oh, I have a wonderful husband. I'm very blessed in that area too. One of the most loyal, faithful, true men. Blair's so hardworking. He's always tried his best to make sure his kids have what they need. But, there's a lot of stress and I don't think it would be there as much if there wasn't as much financial burden.

<Mike enters door and goes to his table>

Hat: *<Rising as Mike enter>*). Sounds like you have a lot of blessings mixed with your problems. You just stay put, Keri, and I'll be bringing a bit of lunch on the house. Now, don't protest—it's the other half of my sandwich. I never have time to eat the whole thing. Stay as long as you like back here. Help yourself to coffee if you want more.

Hat: *<Approaches Mike at the table with a coffee cup>*. Howdy, Mayor. Shall I bring you the usual sandwich and pie? Wilma's got your favorite today, mile-high chocolate pie.

Mike: Sure, but you can but wait until the rest get here.

<Chandra enters, looks over at Mike's table, back at Keri's and then looks at Hat who greets her>.

Hat: Hi, Chandra, we don't see you in here much. Have a seat. *<points to table on left of stage>* What can I get you? We have a good vegetable soup and turkey sandwich today.

Chandra: That will be fine and I'd like a glass of tea—I feel summer comin'.

Hat: *<Finishes Chandras order as Pastor Jim enters>*. Hello Pastor Jim, Mike's already here. Want your regular, easy on the mayo?

Pastor Jim. Yes, thank you, Hat. You doing okay? *<Hat nods as Pastor Jim seats himself as Mike welcomes him. Charlie enters shortly after Jim>*.

Mike: Good to see you Pastor Jim. *<looking up sees Charlie, the local employment center director waves him over. Charlie is seated, shaking hands with Mike and Pastor Jim>*. Hey, Charlie, it's about time you got here. The pie will all be gone if you don't put your order in!

<Men appear to be talking intently but silently as Hat brings food to Chandra, then goes to the table to silently take Pastor Jim's and Charlie's orders, leaves going back to the counter. Talks silently with Keri. Taffy walks in from right stage past the door then spies Chandra sitting inside who motions for her to come in. Taffy enters>.

Chandra: Hey Taffy, come sit with me. We don't get to see each other much.

Taffy: *<Sits down, saying>* Naw, Chandra, you're always workin'. What you up to now?

Chandra: Oh, I'm between jobs today. I just finished cleanin' ...and I've gotta go out to the butcherin' shop. They need extra hands this afternoon. So, I decided to treat myself to lunch at Hat's.

Hat: *<Returns to Chandra's & Taffy's table.>* Welcome, Taffy, what can I get you?

Taffy: Oh, nothin', I wasn't comin' in for lunch. I just saw Chandra so stopped to talk. *<Hat nods and goes to back of restaurant. Taffy turns attention back to Chandra>.*

Chandra: It's so good to see you. You know, we're all sure sorry you were in that accident and the hospital. I heard the car that hit you totaled your car. And it's so sad about your friend's baby getting killed. *<hugs Taffy>* Are you back working at the youth center?

Taffy: Nah, they fired me 'cause I missed so much work after the accident. I have problems with depression and child care. I've gained a lot of weight. I wear a size 18-20. I told my doctor that's a big difference when you're used to wearing a size 10. It ain't right. It's hard to get clothes for me. I have to let myself go for the kids. I have to wait. And how am I to get around without a car? For now, I got another job and I use their bus.

You know, Chandra, I may leave the area because there's not opportunities for me here. I'll go wherever the road takes me. Maybe move near my brother. There's a lot I want to be. I made a list of the things I want to do before I leave this earth. All I'm doing is going down the list of things I plan on doing before it's time for me to say goodbye so I can say I did it. *<looks wistfully out the window>*

Chandra I understand but we'd miss you.

Taffy Enough about me. How about you? How about the kids, where are they? How's your daughter Reena feeling?

Chandra Reena's doing ok. Her gettin' diagnosed with a heart problem on top of

her asthma is frightening. With her seizures, no one else can take care of her so Arman's takin' care of the kids and some of the cousins. When he was gone through the week for that job, it cost me too much for child care, when I could get it. We just decided it wasn't worth havin' him away so much. He tried to find something here but work is mostly seasonal. I was able to keep on cleanin' cabins and houses and pickin' up other work so we decided he'd take care of the children 'til they're all in school. He's still tearin' down barns and makes about \$5000 a barn. Has done four barns this past year. There's just not jobs paying enough for a man to work full time and me not to have to work too.

Hat: *<Takes food to the men>*. Here you are guys, eat up if you can between all your gabbin'. What's on your minds today?

Mike: Oh, we've been talking about the next town meeting what to do with the plant closings. We're hoping that with the new Walmart coming to town, folks can get jobs.

Charlie: Yes, but we're not sure if those jobs will pay as well as at the plant. The good paying jobs may require better education and skills that some of our folks have. We've just got to do something about our high school graduation rate and getting folks into trade training. And we've got to get jobs here that pay. Anymore, it costs too much for folks to drive to the better paying jobs.

Pastor Jim: Right now, folks are in a world of hurt. The other pastors in the ministerial association are having a run on the emergency funds and the clothing closet. I've heard the food bank is havin' a hard time keeping up with requests for food. The closing of the plant is sure hitting our congregations hard. We try to help but there's more need than we can supply.

Hat: Yeah, I know, not as many folks are coming to eat as before. But I'd better take care of the customers I've got.

<Goes to the table with Chandra and Taffy.>

Say, Chandra can I get you anything more to eat?

Chandra: No, thanks, I need to pay and get back to work.

Hat: Here's your check, hon. Now both of you take care. Maybe I'll see you at the local festival.

<Chandra leaves the money on the table. The mothers exit. Hat goes to the table with the men to deliver the checks. Pastor Jim and Charlie pay and exit. Before Mike can leave Hat speaks>.

Hat: Mike, have you got a minute before you go back to that store of yours? I'd like to talk to you about that next town meetin' comin' up.

Mike: Sure, Hat, what's on your mind?

Hat: You know I hear most of what's said in here <Mike chuckles & nods> and I've been thinkin'.... You and the rest of the town council are talkin' about economic development and jobs. Most of the moms I see in here are as well. They've got some ideas but don't think anyone wants to hear them. They tell me they don't have a voice and no choice in matters like what's needed so they can work and so their families can make ends meet. They don't think that you and the town council want to hear from them.

Mike: <Defensively> That's not true! Our meetings are open to everyone!

Hat: Yes, they are, but how welcoming are they to everyone? You have them on school nights and there's no one to take care of the children. You run the meetings all fancy-like with that gavel and rules of order...

Mike: <Interrupting>. Well, yes I do--that's parliamentary procedure. And we've always had our meetings on Tuesday night. That's the way we do town business here!

Hat: I'm just saying, if you want to hear from the mothers, you may want to think about another time and day to meet and about providing child care. And maybe there's a different way to run the meetings if you're wanting ideas and not making final decisions.

I heard the local Extension Educators talkin' one day about how they've been doing deliberative forums over in the next county. Maybe they'd do one for us. And maybe a special invitation in the local paper, *The Progress*, <holds up the paper> would help. I'll do my part and encourage them to be there if you'll reach out as well. And I'll put a poster on the window here. Maybe you could put one in your grocery store and get others to put up posters as well oh, and get an announcement on the local radio.

These are just my thoughts, you're the mayor. It's up to you to decide. You're a good mayor and a good man, Mike. I know you'll think about these ideas and about what this town needs as you head back to that store of yours. Let me know if I can help. <Mike exits>

Hat: <Going back to Keri> Keri, don't I recall that you've been to a few town meetings.

Keri: Yes, I have and written a couple of letters to the editor too.

Hat: I'd like for you to consider going with me to the next town meeting and sharing some of your ideas about what's needed for a hard working family like yours to feed the family and keep a roof overhead.

End of Act Two

Act Three ~ Meetin' Together

Scene: Three weeks later. American Legion Hall on main street.

Setting: Door is on the right. Table at the front with chair behind it. U.S. Flag behind the table. Chairs lined up in rows with an aisle between. Flip chart and pen to left of flag. Mayor enters with Extension Educator who will serve as guest moderator. Extension Educator is carrying packets which she distributes as people arrive).

Mike: <Speaking to Extension Educator in a worried and anxious tone>.

Well, I'm sure glad to see you're here. I should have known to count on Extension to come through. Now I need to warn you, we may be the only ones here. We've never had a town meeting on Friday night. If folks do come and bring children, I don't know how it's going to work with the kids in the library at the back of the building. Someday we want to have a separate library but for now, you know, the town rents space from the American Legion Post who owns this building. Other than the church or school, this is our only big building in town!

The older 4-Hers said they'd keep the younger ones occupied out back in the playground and in the library. I hope so. This just isn't the way I'm used to doing town business. I hope it doesn't get too noisy.

Extension Educator Not to worry, I'm sure the 4-Hers will do a fine job. And I expect some folks will come after that invitation you put in the local paper. We'll likely have a reporter since tonight's meeting is news. I saw the notice posted at Hat's café and I heard her telling everyone to come.

Mike: Yeah, Lois has been saying the same thing to the folks at the grocery.

**Extension:
Educator:** Sounds like you've done all you can do. Sometimes folks don't come even when we invite them and try to make them welcome.

Mike: *<nods affirmatively>*. So, what do you want me to do tonight? I'm a little nervous about turning this over to you.

**Extension:
Educator:** You welcome folks as the convener. Tell them tonight we are going to share ideas and thoughts about helping the citizens of this town. Tell them we're going to talk about approaches to helping folks make ends meet using a deliberative forum but that we're not making decisions tonight. Introduce me as the moderator and I'll take it from there. Remember you agreed to record the main ideas from tonight's deliberation. Are you still willing to write on the flip chart?

Mike. I'd rather write than sit there, so yes. Oh, here comes a few folks now.

<Moves to door to greet people and stays there while folks enter mostly from Acts One and Two with some additional persons>. Shakes hands, speaks to each who then start to sit beginning at the back of the rows of chairs. The town fathers and most citizens sit near the door. The mothers sit on the other side of the aisle. First to enter is Mrs. Martin >.

Mike: Why, Mrs. Martin, you're the first one here tonight. Welcome to the town meeting.

Mrs. Martin: *<Emphatically>* Of course I'm here early, I wouldn't miss this for the world! Who ever heard of meeting on Friday?! We always have our town meetings on Tuesday. I don't know what you were thinking. I had to give up my knitting club to be here tonight. *<Mike listens and nods congenially. Mrs. Martin moves to claim a seat in the front row. As "those" mothers arrive, she eyes them with disdain>*.

Lois: *<Arrives and speaks to Mike>*. Hi, Mike, I told you I'd be here tonight and I've brought Joanne with me.

Mike: Thanks, Lois, I can depend on you. Welcome, Joanne. Good to have you here. Where's the kids and Jeff?

Joanna: They're out back playin' and he'll be waitin' in the van. He doesn't like crowds.

<Lois and Joanna move to the far left of the stage and take their seats>.

Mike: *<Pastor Jim and Charlie enter--with spouses if enough actors available>. Evenin' Pastor Jim and Charlie, ladies <if spouses on stage>. I'm really glad to see you here. At least we have a few folks here. Oh, look, more are coming. <Pastor Jim and Charlie go to their seats. Mrs. Martin immediately appears to be quizzing them>.*

Hat: *<Arrives with two mothers in tow>. Hi Mayor, you know Chandra and Taffy. (Mike smiles and shakes hands with the mothers who are a bit reluctant). We just took their children out back where the 4Hers have some games underway. Sure nice of you to set all this up. <Mothers stand to one side waiting for Hat to find chairs and then sit.>*

<Keri enters>.

Mike: *<Greets Kerri> Good evening, I'm Mayor Mike. Aren't you one of Tom and Millie's daughters?*

Keri: *Yes, I'm their oldest. Got four daughters of my own. They're out back. Good thing you had someplace for them to be while I'm here. I couldn't have come cause Blair's working tonight. <Hat sees Keri and waves her over to sit with the group>.*

Mike: *<looking at his watch announces> Well, it's 7:00 and time to get started. I'm mighty glad to see so many here tonight. I wasn't sure if you'd come on Friday night. I know you wouldn't if it was football season! <Crowd laughs>.*

The town council and I got to talking about the challenges of the plant closings and the challenges folks are having making ends meet and decided we needed to hear from more citizens before we make any decisions. So tonight, I'm not going to run this meeting as usual. Instead, I've invited our local Extension Educator, Sue Dryer, to serve as moderator for our forum. Let's welcome her *<Crowd claps>.*

**Extension:
Educator** Thank you, Mayor, for inviting me to moderate tonight's forum. Now moderator is a fancy name for the person that watches the time, encourages everyone to talk and helps to keep the talk focused. That's my job tonight.

Yours will be to speak your mind, respectful of everyone else. We'll be considering the tensions and tradeoffs of three approaches your town might consider. By this I mean, what appeals to you about each option and what you're willing to give up to get what you think is needed for the citizens of this town. *[Extension Educator continues speaking on next page]*

Extension Educator: Here's how the forum will work. We'll tell a few stories about our experiences. Then, using the forum guide I gave you as you came in, *Making Ends Meet: Is There a Way to Help Working Americans?* We'll think and talk about the three approaches. I'll briefly explain each. I'm counting on you to each talk. When the talking ends, I'll ask you to fill out the feedback form. Mayor Mike has agreed to serve as the recorder so your ideas aren't lost. Any questions?

Mrs. Martin: Yes, can I go first? I have a lot to say!

Extension Educator: I'm sure you do. The floor will be open to everyone to speak. But first, we need to rearrange this room. Let's create a semi-circle so we can see one another's faces while we talk.

<Group rearranges chairs to create a semi-circle that's open to the audience and in the process the clusters of mothers and town folks are broken up and redistributed around the circle>

To get us started, let's hear a few stories from you. They may be stories of experiences you've had yourself or stories about others. Who will go first? *<Group is quiet then one of the town fathers, Pastor Jim, speaks>*.

Pastor Jim: We've got a lot of good, hard working people living out here. Been here most of their lives. I know many of them. *<speaking with emphasis>* From what I see and hear, they're struggling to make ends meet. Many are loyal and come to church and give an offering but it's tough. The other pastors and I had more requests for help last month than in a long time. The church can't do it all; maybe the government and especially local businesses could do their part.

Charlie: While the plant closing is a big problem right now, it's not the only problem. There aren't a lot of jobs here that pay much, us being reliant on seasonal work for much of the year. Some jobs pay well but not enough folks have the education needed. Some employers say they can't get good workers. Many aren't dependable. We need educated and dedicated folks to work once we get the employers here.

Allana *<Raises hand timidly, is acknowledged and timidly tells a story>*. Well, I may be one of those undependables but let me tell you my challenge. I live on the edge of town down a dirt road. In bad weather, I can't get out 'cause I'm at the end of the town plowing schedule. I gotta drive to work and it's hard to have a reliable car. Then there's the rising price of gas! *<others nod and murmur in agreement>* I have to make choices between paying the mortgage, the utilities, food and gas to go to work and it's hard!

Extension Educator: Anyone else have a story? <pause> It appears that there's a lot of knowledge and experience with the topic at hand. So, let's begin. We'll be using the National Issues Forum deliberative guide, *Making Ends Meet* which you received when you came in tonight. We'll examine three approaches to the challenge of making ends meet. The first approach is titled, *Stress Personal Responsibility*. People who like this approach say that people make too many bad decisions, don't get a good education, don't have good skills and work habits; that they need to do better. This approach focuses on individuals taking personal responsibility for their lives.

What do you say? It's your turn to talk. Remember, no one has to raise a hand to speak. Just wait for a lull and speak up

Taffy: I started workin' at fourteen with a work permit and worked a lot of jobs while I was in school; most were part time jobs. Then my senior year I worked half a day at the plant. When I graduated, I went to the Job Corps to get training. I've worked lots of jobs. I can get a job anywhere, somebody's going to hire me. That's how I look at it. But I get tired of being underpaid.

Joanne: I did drop out of high school and so did my husband, Jeff. But he got his GED and still he can't get any better job. He's workin' but only part time 'cause there isn't enough work.

Chandra: Well, I graduated high school. I've thought about going back to school and becoming a nurse cause it pays so much better but I'm waiting until my kids get older. I want to become a pediatric nurse. I work three jobs now. I just can't shut everything down and go to school. It's hard enough working several jobs. As long as people stay healthy and work stays good, then we don't have trouble making ends meet. It's just stuff like injuring my hand at work and having my daughter sick from seizures that affects our family. I've had to take days off work and I don't get paid when I do.

Mrs. Martin: Well, I say everyone ought to earn their way, feed their children and take care of them properly. My husband and I did. Why doesn't everyone?

Extension Educator: Our discussion tonight might help answer that question. It's time to shift to Approach Two, *Improve Employment Opportunities*. This approach focuses on increasing jobs and/or wages. It emphasizes both the role of private businesses in providing jobs and benefits and the government in setting minimum wage requirements. What's your thinking?

- Charlie:** We're looking at bringing in another manufacturer to take over the space of the factory that's being shut down. We'd like to get someone who would run 2 or 3 shifts for full employment. What's important is having jobs in this community.
- Caressa:** Sure, we need work and shift work is fine, but not if you've got children. Who will take care of the children, especially at night?
- Taffy:** I'd be willing to work odd hours; I was at the factory that's closing. I left my girls with my mom for the night but not everyone can do that.
- Keri:** Yeah, and would they hire women? I applied at a place making transformers. I could have done the job. I didn't see any women on the floor. I guess they held that against me even though I've had factory experience. *<mothers nod in agreement>* What good will it do us to have a factory if we can't get hired? And will we get paid equal to the men?
- Mrs. Martin:** Well, why should they hire women, manufacturing is men's work! Always has been--always will be!
- < Pause in responses while folks let her remark hang in the air >*
- Chandra:** Lots of us have jobs. Me, I've got three. But I don't have any benefits. What would it take to let folks have full-time work with benefits? I work multiple jobs and my husband works so we put in the hours but we don't have the benefits.
- Allana:** And what good is it to have jobs if there isn't any safe and affordable child care? You know the town closed down that one center because of how the children were being treated. Maybe the town could create a child care center, maybe even here in this building. Maybe there's a way to help some of the local mothers get their child care certificate at the community college and then we'd have good quality, affordable care. Mothers can't work if they don't have good care for their children. Most of us use family but that doesn't always work too well.
- Taffy:** How about the jobs that are here already? Some of us have those but we need our bosses to understand that sometimes we need some flexibility in our hours or days because we get sick or our children get sick or school's out. And we need jobs that pay well. Who can make it on minimum wage?
- Allana:** And who's gonna make the price of gasoline go down? Most of us hafta drive long distances to work, to the doctor, even to get groceries... And what about the town and county clearing the roads faster in the winter so those with jobs can get out safely?

- Extension Educator:** We're going to have to shift to Approach Three, *Rethinking the Safety Net*. Changes in the economy have produced increased demand for public assistance like food stamps for those who are working poor. With conflicting ideas about where government spending should go, some turn to the private sector and the faith-based community to provide a safety net. Any thoughts on this approach?
- Pastor Jim:** I was recently reporting that the ministers in our alliance are all seeing more families asking for food and funds for emergencies. We're finding it hard to meet the needs of families coming to us. These folks need jobs that pay and some could benefit from learning how to make their food dollar stretch. Maybe it's time for the private sector, the public sector and the faith-based community to work together.
- Mrs. Martin:** Yes, yes, if fewer people asked for help, our church would have more money for projects like foreign missions. My husband and I came from poor backgrounds but we raised a family without help! Why is everyone always wanting someone else to provide for them?
- Chandra:** Well, I wouldn't have asked for help last year if we'd had health insurance. Is there any way to get us health insurance? I put off going to the doctor for 9 months. I dragged myself to work. Finally the pain was too much and I couldn't work. I had a growth. Once it was removed, I got back to work but not before we went without income for 2 months. We had to go ask for medical cards and public assistance to get by. Maybe others need public help because they don't have health insurance.
- Mrs. Martin:** Oh, I never thought about workin' folks not having health insurance. That could be a problem. Me and Mr. Martin always had good insurance from his job.
- Keri:** And besides having insurance, I think it would help if there was a dentist in town that takes the state health plan. I heard they don't get enough from the government to cover their costs of care for those using Medicaid. Why can't the government pay what it costs so our kids don't suffer from no dental care?
- Joanne:** Well, what I think we need is safe, affordable housing. If our house hadn't burned, we'd be doin' better and wouldn't have needed help in the first place. And what housing there is out here is expensive. Folks need lower cost housing. Who will help—builders, the government, the church, Community Action? Who?

- Allana:** It sure would help if we had some reliable, low-cost transportation to help us get to work. I heard Taffy saying she's using a bus the factory sends over from the next county to get to her work. Something like that would help.... And how about getting the roads cleared?
- Extension Educator:** I'm going to have to cut off discussion tonight. I'm sure you're wanting to get the children home and into bed. I can tell from your conversation that there are many perspectives about what needs to be done and what could be done. But what didn't we talk about tonight that might be talked about another time? Mr. Mayor, please record these ideas.
- Charlie:** We didn't talk much about getting a high school education.
- Keri:** Or about what the community college could do to build work skills.
- Joanne:** We didn't talk about public transportation for those without cars.
- Extension Educator:** Good ideas. Now, let me ask, "Who wasn't here tonight that should be part of the town conversation?"
- Mrs. Martin:** Members of my knitting club weren't here as this was our night to meet.
- Pastor Jim:** Our school superintendent.
- Lois:** Miss J from Social Services
- Chandra:** Miss V from the Health Department
- Hat:** A lot of the business people weren't here.
- Extension** Good, so next time, you'll want to reach out to those folks with a stake in the town and who could offer ideas to help take action. Now tell me, what needs to be done to take a first step to keeping the dialogue going?
- Keri:** Well, let's have another town meeting like this one and get more folks here. Maybe you could come back and be the moderator again.
- Charlie:** We could do a survey to find out what employers think about benefits, flexible time, child care and other barriers to employment that were discussed.
- Allana** I say we get that Department of Transportation Director here to talk about snow removal on the roads next winter!

<everyone laughs>

Extension Educator: Ok, you've come up with some ideas about what needs to be done. Perhaps some of you would be willing to serve on action groups to carry out the ideas that emerged tonight. If so, please put your name and contact information on the 3 x 5 cards and give them to the mayor as you leave or, you could just tell Hat you'd like to work with a group.

But before we leave, it's time for each of you to reflect on what you heard tonight. *<distributes forms>* Using the feedback form, please rate the options for action and note whether or not your thinking shifted as you heard different perspectives tonight. Then, give me your form, I'll compile the results and share with the mayor. There will be no names on the forms so be honest and open in your responses. Perhaps the local paper will publish the feedback information as another step toward an expanded community dialogue and deliberation on how best to meet our community needs.

Mike: Folks, while you're writing, let's thank our Extension Educator for doing a fine job of moderating tonight's town meeting deliberative forum. *<all clap>* I can see this get together can help the council make better decisions. Maybe we'll try this again. Thanks to all of you for coming and to the 4-Hers for taking care of the kids.

<As folks fill out the forms, the mayor speaks to Hat>.

Mike: Well, Hat, if I was a betting man, and I'm not, I wouldn't have bet these folks would come tonight and speak out much less offer to work on action teams! Thanks for suggesting we try the forum. I'm really encouraged about the ideas that came out. You're responsible for tonight and for getting those mothers here. What would the town do without you? What our town needs is more citizens like you who care and speak out. You may not be the elected major, but you make things happen. Imagine what we could do if more citizens cared and spoke out!

The End of the Dramatization ~ Just the Beginning for Public Policy Matters

###

*Cast and crew take bows
Drama host and playwright make comments.*

Playwright Notes:

Act Three can be presented using the above scripted method. Alternatively, it can be presented:

- 1) without scripting with actors from the drama speaking from their own voice but in character;
- 2) without scripting with some members of the class or audience, either those who volunteer on-the-spot or are pre-selected, adding their own voices to those of the actors in character.
- 3) without scripting engaging all of the class or audience with the actors in character;
- 4) without scripting engaging all of the class or audience with or without the actors speaking their own voice and not in character.
- 5) with real people who experience challenges to making ends meet.

Choice of method will depend on amount of time available; the kind of people present and the intent of the use of the drama—teaching about the content and/or about deliberation; raising awareness; using the deliberative process to move to action (particularly in the case of community-based dramatic presentation intended to address real problems for real citizens). The actors could be citizens struggling to make ends meet whose personal experiences add authenticity to the drama.

Table 1. Key Characteristics of Mothers in Drama

Mother	Marital Status	Children	Race	Education	Employment
Caressa MD101	Single	Three	African-American	GED	Unemployed
Kaelin MD105	Living with finance	One	White	Some high school	Unemployed-not looking
Joanne MD213	Married	Four	White	Some high school	Disabled
Keri MD 212	Married	Four	Native American	GED	Unemployed—applying for disability
Chandra MD 209	Married	Three	White	Some high school	Employed-working 3 jobs
Taffy MD 104	Single	Two	White	High School Graduate	Employed
Allana MD115	Single	One	African American	Some college	Employed

Source: *Maryland Rural Families Speak Research Basebook*



Background of the Playwright: Bonnie Braun was raised in rural Missouri. She graduated with a class of 18 then studied home economics, child and adult development, family relations and family economics achieving two degrees at Central Missouri State University, where she taught for four years, and her Ph.D. at the University of Missouri.

Dr. Braun has a 30 year career with Cooperative Extension with appointments in four states and at the USDA as Deputy Administrator for Home Economics and Human Nutrition. She's served in two state specialist roles, in two Associate Dean and State Leader roles and as Associate Director for 4-H, Family, Community Development, Agriculture, Programs and Organizational and Staff Development. She is author of numerous professional articles and curricula. She is currently an Associate Professor in the University of Maryland School of Public Health Department of Family Science and the Family Policy Specialist for Maryland Cooperative Extension. Throughout most of her career, her research and teaching interests have focused on rural, low-income families.

Dr. Braun has served the Maryland research team director for the *Rural Families Speak* study since its inception in 1999 and is the author of related articles and research briefs and director of numerous undergraduate & graduate research papers, theses and dissertations.

In Maryland, she serves on the Rural Maryland Council Board as Vice-Chair and is chair of the Health Working Committee. She served on the steering committee responsible for the 2007 Maryland Department of Health and Human Hygiene Office of Rural Health Plan. For 2007-08, she is President of the American Association of Family Consumer Sciences. She is a W. K. Kellogg Leadership Fellow.

For Dr. Braun, writing this drama was a way of translating and disseminating findings from research as a creative product that can be used by classroom instructors, community educators and other researchers. With the promise to the mothers of the study, this drama becomes another means for getting their voices heard.

Dr. Braun welcomes contact at: 1204 Marie Mount Hall, University of Maryland School of Public Health, Department of Family Science, College Park, MD, 20742 ~ P: 301-405-3581 ~ F: 302-314-9161 ~ E: bbraun@umd.edu
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