



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

by

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**Drama may be used for educational purposes. Contact Dr. Braun to request.**

*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 study<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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, *Living 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 dramatization<sup>2</sup>. 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?*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For additional information about the study and findings go to the team website:

<http://fsos.che.umn.edu/projects/rfs.html>

<sup>3</sup> 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 engagement<sup>4</sup>, 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.

**Drama Reviews:**

*Very touching.*  
*Right on, this really captures rural life.*  
*I can use this with my class.*  
*I'd like for my professor to use this in our class.*  
*I've never seen research presented in such a compelling way.*  
*Very entertaining and educational.*  
*Held my attention.*  
*We have a person in our community that's like Mrs. Martin.*  
*I want to go back and use with my community on zoning issues to get the council to see what folks might be thinking.*  
*I intend to use with my board to get them to feel how life is.*

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



**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.

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