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EDITORIAL OFFICES

320 W. Eighth Street, Suite 216
P.O. Box 7888
Bloomington, IN 47407-7888
Email: kappan@pdkintl.org

ADVERTISING

Gerry Woodworth
gwoodworth3@juno.com
607-264-3362

PERMISSIONS

Terri Lawson
kappan@pdkintl.org

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The editor's note

Joan Richardson

Father knows best

Generosity and a sense of community support and participation should extend further than one's own neighborhood.

"Very often a lack of jobs and money is not the cause of poverty, but the symptom. The cause may lie deeper in our failure to give our fellow citizens a fair chance to develop their own capacities."

— *President Lyndon Baines Johnson, State of the Union, Jan. 8, 1964*



I was still in grade school when President Johnson launched his War on Poverty. In my home, Johnson was a hero, maybe because my parents had both grown up poor and never forgot what deprivation felt like. They saw Johnson as someone who understood what they understood about poverty: Nobody chooses to be poor.

The other hero in my house was my Dad, a larger-than-life figure who had scabbled his way up to a good middle-class life. He had "developed his own capacities" in large part because he had access to the G.I. Bill, which inspired him to return to high school after dropping out and then go on to college and earn an engineering degree.

One of my favorite childhood memories was watching my dad ring the bell for the Salvation Army at Christmas. Dad ran the largest construction company in the area, which meant that he knew most of the movers and shakers in our town. During the holidays, he volunteered to ring the bell downtown on Friday nights because he knew that was when all of the local leaders went out with their wives.

He would position himself on the main street corner in town and make quite a show of strong-arming a businessman and convincing him to separate himself from a wad of cash. His technique was very simple: He loudly extolled the man's success. "Now, Charlie, I know how good you're doin'. Why, I know you bought Marian that beautiful fur coat last year because you had such a year. So, how about leaving a little here in this bucket for the folks who haven't had it so good?"

Charlie would laugh and begin pulling bills out of his wallet. He and Dad would laugh and shake hands and off Charlie would go, feeling like a million bucks. And Dad would wait for the next fellow to come along and go through the same routine. I'm pretty sure there were men who deliberately managed to walk past him in order to get the full treatment. At the end of the night, Dad would count up the cash and write his own check to match the total that he had collected. Hank Richardson never forgot how it felt to be poor.

The message in my home was always clear: Because you have a lot, you are expected to help anyone who doesn't have as much as you do. Not everybody is as lucky as you are.

My dad believed that most people want to give and support good causes. You just have to figure out how to ask them in the right way, and they will open their wallets and their hearts to help others.

If he were still alive today, he would be amazed at how selfish America has become. We'll pay taxes but only if the money comes back to our community. We'll generously support our local schools, but we don't want to support schools attended by poor children. We want health care for our families, but we don't want to spend any public money to provide health care for families who have none. We live in fear of losing our jobs or our homes, but we don't believe we should provide benefits to anyone who's unemployed or homeless.

As I listen to the political rhetoric that shames and blames the poor, I am tugged by the lessons of my youth. I want so much to believe that my dad was right and that Americans really do want to give and support others. — **JR**