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EDITORIAL

Finding Your Voice

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All of us have strong feelings and opinions on the way our society works. I hear folks at cafés or restaurants complaining about our government and different social services. One of the biggest changes in history has been TANF, or welfare reform. The legislation that authorized those changes is coming up for reauthorization in the Federal year 2001-02. Heading the House committee will be our own representative Wally Herger. This is a crucial time for Representative Herger's constituents to express their opinions. It's time to quit complaining over coffee and put our ideas down on paper.

A vocal group of Berkeley graduates have formed a grass roots nonprofit organization to empower low-income families to obtain higher education. The question they pose is a good one: Are we simply reducing the welfare roles, or are we reducing poverty? This organization; LIFETIME, Low-Income Families' Empowerment

through Education, encourages Congress to expand access to higher education and training. The old adage, "Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day, teach a man to fish, and he will eat for a lifetime," is central to their philosophy.

The group was created by student mothers at the University of California at Berkeley who completed college degrees while raising their families on welfare. Now that they are self-sufficient, they want to empower other low-income parents enroll in, continue and successfully complete higher education and training—a long-term investment in poor families with lasting results.

LIFETIME quotes statistics that state:

- Upon earning a college degree, 90 percent of parents receiving welfare get jobs earning enough to exit the welfare rolls.
- A year later, 90 percent are still employed, earning average wages of \$25,000 per year.
- Up to 11 percent earn over \$30,000 a year.

• 23 percent go on to get graduate degrees.

By contrast, less than 50 percent of parents who complete work-first programs get jobs. Average wages are only \$6.64 an hour, and a year later, half are unemployed and back on welfare again. They state that higher education is the critical resource that enables low-income parents to become educated, employed and economically secure.

Granted, not all low-income parents are interested in obtaining higher education. Those that aren't are given many opportunities to attend job skill training workshops. The issue is for those who choose a Self Improvement Program. Dolores Sawyerr is one of those parents. When Dolores was 18 she enrolled in college and was earning a 4.0. During her first semester she was raped in broad daylight. This incident threw her life into a downward spiral. She quit school, trying to deal with the emotional repercussions. Now a 33-year-old mother of a 6-year-old boy, Dolores has

finally re-enrolled at CSU, Chico. Dolores has been a welfare recipient since her son was born. During that time she has held various jobs, at \$6.25 an hour. She has the self-confidence now to get her life back on track and earn a higher wage to support herself and her son. She is petitioning the system for a waiver so that the 18-unit load she is carrying at college will satisfy her 32-hour work requirement. Her case is still pending. Dolores has received much help from the Re-entry program and the EOP (Extended Opportunity Program). She is convinced that she will make it. She knows that her life was derailed, but now she's on the right track. "I feel confident and I have hope in my life," she said.

Dolores's story is just one of the many I've heard from parents who are struggling to become self-sufficient. In my estimation, helping families further their education

rather than moving them quickly from welfare to work in low-paying jobs, is an investment in not only the parent's future, but the child. Watching parents working long hours to better themselves shows the child a real life lesson that education is the key to success. I encourage those who have strong feelings on this issue to express themselves by writing to Wally Herger. He needs to hear the stories from people who are living it. Write Representative Wally Herger, 55 Independence Circle #104, Chico, CA 95973, or call him at 893-8363. We need to make our voice heard in the reauthorization of welfare reform. ▲

LIFETIME

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