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Poverty and the Poor Whites

By [Emily Greenwood](#)

Donna M. Beegle, PhD, is spending her career explaining to audiences that there is poverty in America, that the solution to poverty is education, and that too often poverty prevents people from getting educated. A few weeks ago I heard Beegle speak at the high school where I work. While the impact of most motivational speakers lasts only a few days, this one was different.

You can get an idea of her qualities as a speaker from excerpts available on [YouTube](#), and from a [trailer](#) for "Invisible Nation," a one-hour documentary about Beegle and her family that is in the works for PBS. Beegle comes from four generations of what she calls "generational poverty" and has an undergraduate degree in communication and a doctorate in educational leadership. When she talks about poverty she knows both sides, living it and studying poverty as an academic.

Beegle grew up a poor white American, part of the last group society openly insults, as "trash." Her message is not racially divisive, but she does say that poverty and race issues in the U.S. are often confused. People focus on the percentage of blacks and Hispanics living in poverty, which is higher than the white percentage, and overlook the absolute numbers. According to the 2005 census, there were some 9 million poor blacks in the U.S., 9 million poor Hispanics, and [17 million poor whites](#).

Beegle's research about people from deep poverty who have managed to graduate from college shows that the most important factor for almost everyone was a mentor, sometimes several mentors. Her own life is no different. Beegle grew up in the 1960s and 1970s in a family that included her parents and five brothers and that worked in agriculture, traveling from Arizona to Oregon and back picking various crops. Most of her extended family was illiterate. Her mother, who had finished eighth grade, was the most highly educated. The family had lived this way, working in agriculture without owning land, with very little education, for four generations.

Though her parents and the children worked, there was never enough money, and the family lived in cars, in the woods, or in rickety shacks, constantly having to choose between paying for groceries, rent, or utilities. School was difficult. Her clothes weren't right, and she wasn't right, lacking the middle class language and context to understand much of what was taught. Beegle married at fifteen, and at age 25, found herself divorced and trying to support two children through minimum wage jobs and government aid.

Her life changed in 1986 when she happened upon an Oregon pilot program called Women In Transition. The staff encouraged her to complete her GED and continue on to college. A housing voucher was the key that made this financially possible. Beegle made the decision to begin working on a two-year college degree in 1988 even though it meant a reduction in her welfare payment from \$408 per month to \$258 per month (since as a full time student she was no longer available for work).

By this time Beegle's brother Wayne, who had spent most of his adult life in prison, was the most literate member of the family. From prison, he helped her understand her textbooks, often writing long letters explaining them in language she could understand. After the two-year degree, she continued on at the University of Portland working toward a bachelor's degree. It was here that she met her most important mentor, Dr. Bob Fulford. A language specialist, Fulford interpreted his mandate broadly, and spent untold hours giving extra help to Beegle and other students like her. He taught her to speak and write standard English, helped her expand her vocabulary, provided moral support and advice, and introduced her to other professionals who became mentors as well. In 2000, she earned her PhD.

Beegle now consults for organizations interested in improving the way they work with people in poverty through her firm, [Communication Across Barriers, Inc.](#) Her 2007 book *See Poverty... Be The Difference!* is a workbook of sorts for social service organizations and also tells her story and explains key aspects of her research.

Beegle seeks to explain life in the "invisible nation" of poverty to professionals who are supposed to serve the poor. As she writes in the introduction to the book, "It is important to remember that if you are judging someone's behavior, you cannot build a relationship. Relationships are built on understanding the 'why' behind that behavior. What would bring a student--or adult for that matter--to respond the way he or she does?" Children who have been living in a car, or in a small apartment crowded with extended family members, or in a house that just had the utilities shut off, are not likely to get their homework done, she explains.

Other insights include that people in poverty tend to experience life as a series of crises and are thus not in the habit of planning ahead. Poverty causes isolation--people in deep poverty usually do not know people who have benefited from education, or who have careers. Work is seen as hard, often humiliating, and usually, as it is unskilled, as not paying enough to make ends meet. Lack of literacy can be a great obstacle in navigating complex and fragmented social services. People in poverty may care deeply about their children but never come to school conferences because they feel out of place. People who have grown up in poverty--as opposed to those who temporarily fall into poverty through a job loss or other problem--often internalize their situation and think of themselves as worthless and incapable.

Beegle encourages all professionals who work with the poor to carry a "full resource backpack" to be able to connect people with other community resources. She also teaches the very basic: in order to work effectively with someone, first, make a personal connection.

The Beegle story is compelling for a number of reasons. It is a rags-to-(not quite)riches story. It features family love and loyalty. Beegle was loved and supported by her mother and brothers throughout her life, and her educational odyssey was motivated by her desire to provide for her own children. It is a story about meeting the threatening "other" and discovering that other is only a different form of ourselves. It is a story about the Golden Rule, and in a way, too, it is the joke about the guy in the tuxedo who slips on a banana peel and falls in the puddle -- bringing us all to the same level. It is the plot of every Dickens novel and of countless other 19th century novels that showed us that we are brothers under the skin.

But where are we when, forty years into the war on poverty, more than two hundred years into public education, we -- or our extensions, the social service bureaucrats -- must be told to show respect and understanding for the poor? Yes, the great messages such as the Golden Rule must be delivered again and again to erring humanity. But shouldn't we by now have developed organizational structures to compensate for our human foibles?

This is yet another story that the mainstream media has not covered. Is the welfare bureaucracy working well anywhere in the laboratory of the states? If so, how, and why?

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