

UB REPORTER

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NEWS

‘Poverty simulation’ teaches harsh lessons

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Lauren Semisa was trying to live right. An incoming master’s student in the School of Social Work taking part last week in the school’s poverty simulation, Semisa was playing the role of a young boyfriend of a woman with a 2-year-old from a previous relationship—trying to find a job, hoping to stay out of trouble and debt, and being a partner in a household typical of low-income people she would meet when she begins her career as a social worker.

What she, the other 40 or so incoming social work student, and even the school administrators taking part in the poverty simulation didn’t know was the orientation exercise was being played with a stacked deck. Everywhere the students turned, the low-income people whose lives they were occupying for a few hours faced harsh obstacles they never expected and did nothing to cause.

Semisa and her partner’s few valuables—cards with the names and cash values of possessions such as jewelry and appliances—were stolen while they were away from their home “at work.”

Police officers (played by United Way of Buffalo & Erie County volunteers who do this poverty simulation for different groups) refused to investigate the crimes until the victims gave them money.

People from their neighborhood (more United Way volunteers) skulked around their “homes,” selling drugs and sometimes their bodies.

Pawn shops bought their few possessions at a fraction of their true cost. Social services offices designed to help them closed abruptly, leaving them without help until the next week. Landlords showed up weeks before the rent was due, trying to collect money from Semisa, then threatening eviction if she didn’t pay up immediately,

Financial institutions took payments but “forgot” to issue receipts. The agencies then charged the students again, unless they could produce the receipts they never got.

“A lot of us were trying to make light of this and treat it like a game

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“They were living lives filled with barriers and challenges about things we just take for granted.”

Lauren Semisa
School of Social Work
Student

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because it would be so difficult to accept the reality to actually think this is what it is like for these people day to day," said Semisa, 22, a Long Island native pursuing a career in family and marriage counseling.

"They were trying to overcome so much," said Semisa, whose "partner," Marjorie Quartley, field education coordinator for the School of Social Work, sat nearby clutching a doll to simulate her 2-year-old as the couple tried to find ways to get to work, buy groceries and pay utilities.

"They were living lives filled with barriers and challenges about things we just take for granted," Semisa said. "We think 'Let's just sit down for dinner,' and they have to think 'How am I going to acquire things we take for granted every day?'"

"Moving" is the word Semisa used to describe the simulation—the first undertaken by the School of Social Work as part of its orientation.

Diane E. Elze, associate professor and director of the master's program, sat at her Talbert Hall classroom station playing an 85-year-old widow who lived alone. Halfway through the three-hour exercise, she said she felt "like crying."

"I was in fairly good health, but I did have arthritis, which made it very painful to move around some days," Elze said. "I was a bit disorganized because I was very upset that week, and I did not plan as well as I usually did, and I found myself stuck in my home without a bus ticket to go shopping for food and my medicines. I was out of bus tickets. I used my last bus ticket to get to the store, but they closed just before I arrived, and the young woman at the door would not let me in, even though I told her that I was totally out of medicine.

"I felt so powerless and vulnerable, I nearly cried."

And even as director of the program, Elze experienced firsthand what it was like to be a victim without protection or an effective way to fight back.

"I also had the experience of the utility company claiming that I did not pay my bill when I had paid," said Elze. "Luckily, I kept that receipt, but I did not have the receipt to prove that I had paid a small loan at the bank, and the bank kept harassing me. I was on a fixed income and what recourse would I have had to prove that I had paid that loan payment?"

Nancy J. Smyth, dean of the School of Social Work, said the primary goal of the poverty simulation was to sensitize participants to the everyday realities faced by low-income families in America. "These people comprise a large proportion of the people served by social workers in a multitude of settings," said Smyth. "A poverty simulation provides participants with new perspectives on poverty and how it impacts American families."

But students and administrators alike seemed to get more than they expected. The mood of cheerful anticipation typical of college orientation—the students had just come back from a friendly lunch reception where they had met their future classmates—clearly changed to nervous laughter, and then frustration and anger.

"For the people navigating these systems, they face this dishonesty every day," said Semisa. "The people doing this simulation were trying to get us as social workers to experience that."

It took awhile, Semisa said, but the lessons and messages that the United

Way volunteers and UB administrators wanted to get across to incoming students were painfully clear.

"While it was happening, I didn't know how realistic it seemed," Semisa said. "But after it was over, there was this overwhelming feeling I had of anxiety and a feeling it was realistic because it stayed with me. After I left, I kept thinking about it. You know, it really did work.

"We were constantly running around. We had to imagine people doing this every day and the difficulty it brings to their lives," she said.

Elze, who teaches social policy and the structural reasons for poverty and who—like her students—was taking part in the simulation for the first time, said this would "absolutely" be offered to future incoming students, except next time there would be more of them taking part.

"This really had us sink into our roles as people living and struggling with low incomes," said Elze. "It was very powerful."

Reader Comments

Brijhette Farmer says:

I like the way the author points out the stark differences between a light hearted orientation and the element of harsh reality that comes with living in poverty. I just began here at UB pursuing a dual degree in Architecture and Urban Planning, and feel that all new students should get a snippet of this (or a similar) moving and impactful reenactment. It is far too easy to become overwhelmed by the small things that accompany everyday life and new transitions, but just reading this makes me stop and think: I am grateful to be able to get an education! Now, how can I work within my discipline and daily life to ensure things are not like this forever, for everybody?

Posted by Brijhette Farmer, Snippet Should Be Offered to All I, 3 days ago
