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Region's impoverished beating the odds through "Bridges out of Poverty" sessions

February 22, 2013

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There is no one quick way to end poverty in America.

If there were a lone barrier between the impoverished and a single solution to the multitude of problems that surround the poor, that wall would have been torn down many years ago.

"Poverty is a multifaceted problem," Jodi Pfarr told a crowd of concerned community leaders in Starkville on Friday.

Pfarr knows a little bit about the poor.

Raised in a poor Minnesota family, Pfarr made an early career working for charities and non-profits. She has experienced life in the Middle Class and life in poverty.

While she's not the first person to have ever crossed from poor to Middle Class, Pfarr's experiences and education in social services allowed her to pick up on some often overlooked but key differences in culture and vocabulary between the poor, Middle Class and wealthy.

"When it comes to employment, people in poverty have jobs, and people in the Middle Class have careers," Pfarr said. "There is a big difference."

The difference is subtle, but it is often lethal when people are trying to reach out to those in poverty.

This is why Pfarr says that it is crucial that when addressing poverty, all classes give input.

"All three classes are at the table, and they all have voice," Pfarr said. "What we tend to do is develop a program or department that comes from one viewpoint. No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship."

The city of Starkville has been a participant in the Bridges program for quite some time. It is the only one of its kind in the Golden Triangle.

As of right now, 30 percent of the participants in the Bridges program in Starkville come from Clay County.

Many from this community travel to Starkville for a 17-week, two-and-a-half hour session each week, learning valuable skills that lead to better money management and careers.

The program focuses on building relationships with the individual. It's not a matter of just telling someone what to do. It's making that change mean something to that person.

Relationships are key according to Pfarr in actually convincing someone to make a change in their life.

"You have to make the change meaningful to that person," Pfarr said. "You can't just talk at them. Relationships impact so dramatically what you do."

Pfarr says that one of the keys to understanding generational poverty is taking into account what resources the person has access to as they grow older.

She mentioned an example of those who had access to the GI Bill after WWII. Land that was bought with that money is still being passed down to families today, including her own.

Many who came out of the war who did not have access to the program's benefits have descendants who are still not landowners.

"We believe that poverty is systemic," Pfarr said.

Pfarr says that it is not just individual choices, ineffective institutions, ineffective policies or under-resourced communities.

"All of these contribute," she said.

Clearly the participants from this community in the program show that there is not only a need for Bridges here, but there is a demand for it.

Anyone who is interested in helping to bring this program to Clay County, contact Lynn Phillips-Gaines at 1-662-418-3100 or email the group at bridgesoutofpoverty@gmail.com [3]

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