



OFICINA DO CES

ces

Centro de Estudos Sociais
Laboratório Associado
Faculdade de Economia
Universidade de Coimbra

DORIS FRIEDENSOHN

**RECYCLED FOOD, RECYCLED LIVES:
TALES FROM “THE OTHER AMERICA”**

**Dezembro de 2007
Oficina nº 292**

Doris Friedensohn

**Recycled Food, Recycled Lives:
Tales From “The Other America”**

**Oficina do CES n.º 292
Dezembro de 2007**

OFICINA DO CES
Publicação seriada do
Centro de Estudos Sociais
Praça D. Dinis
Colégio de S. Jerónimo, Coimbra

Correspondência:
Apartado 3087
3001-401 COIMBRA

Doris Friedensohn

Professor Emerita of Women's Studies
New Jersey City University

Recycled Food, Recycled Lives: Tales From “The Other America”

Abstract: During the last quarter of a century in the US, as wealth has grown, the poor have suffered increasing hardships. Deindustrialization, drugs, ghetto gangs, failing schools, more single parent families, and harsh criminal sentences (especially related to drug use) have all taken their toll on the least advantaged Americans. Among the slogans of recent years is “job training,” for the unemployed (or under-employed) poor who would become low-wage workers. This paper examines the operation of a job training program in the field of food services. It looks closely at the experience of four different students, two African-Americans and two Latinos, who attempt to change their lives by learning to cook.

In 1962 Michael Harrington shocked complacent Americans with his pathbreaking study, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*. Harrington, a democratic socialist and political activist, “discovered” poverty in the land of plenty. Dramatically, and some of thought unforgettably, he put the US poor on our scholarly agenda. Indeed, many researchers and writers have been inspired by his work – and many have forgotten it as more trendy issues claimed their attention.

Of course, much has changed in the US in the half century since Harrington published *The Other America*. We've had The War on Poverty, the civil rights movement, feminism, open admissions in higher education, and new immigrants invigorating the labor force; we've had globalization, the internet revolution, organ transplants, irrational exuberance in the stock market and out-of-control corporate greed. We've had deindustrialization, the end of Big Unions and the end of Welfare-as-we-knew-it. We've had epidemics of AIDS and crack cocaine, and now the costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. On balance, America's poor remain stuck, ill-served, and too readily forgotten.

Since November of 2003, I've been a traveler in "The Other America." My destination, less than 30 minutes from home, is The Community FoodBank of New Jersey. The FoodBank, under the umbrella of America's Second Harvest, is a charitable hunger-relief organization. It secures, stores and distributes surplus food to the poor. Located in Hillside, NJ, about five miles from Newark Airport, the FoodBank is a vast warehouse the size of seven football fields. Last year it recycled 25 million pounds of contributed food to 600,000 hungry New Jerseyans.

* * *

On a cold winter morning about three years ago, I followed two large ShopRite trucks, belonging to a rich supermarket chain, into the FoodBank's parking lot. As the trucks backed into the loading docks, goose bumps raced up and down my arms. Thank goodness the tax deductible donations were rolling in! The press had been reporting a dramatic increase in the numbers of people who were turning up hungry at food pantries. Lines at soup kitchens had grown longer. The parking lot, like a mirror of this need, was jammed with vehicles bearing church and social service agency logos. I squeezed my car between two beat-up vans, one marked "Center for Food Action" and the other "Iglesia de Dios."

The corporations give and the charities receive. FoodBank workers unload the supermarkets' bread, rice, soda, beans, dried cereal, packaged cheese, frozen franks and chocolate chip cookies. Other workers help drivers fill their vans with food destined for day care and rehabilitation programs, soup kitchens and shelters for the homeless. Some of the dry goods and canned goods may be slightly dented. Most of the fruits and vegetables look fresh enough. Nothing is rotten – except the System that requires this constant battle to keep hunger at bay.

Inside the FoodBank, I trek down to the well equipped professional kitchen which is the hub of the Food Service Training Academy. The Training Academy – I like to refer to it, more generically, as a cooking school – is a free 14 week program for ex-convicts, recovering addicts, and low income people. There are jobs in America for individuals who can cook and do kitchen work. Students completing the training program will be directed to food service jobs in hospitals, schools, corporate cafeterias, social agencies, bakeries, and occasionally restaurants.

While food banks fight hunger, they are not, much as they would like to think otherwise, social change institutions. But programs like the cooking school are designed to change the lives of participants: to free them from an anxious, bitter existence in The Other America.

Selim, Vicki, Alberto and Ruby – students I’ve come to know over these past three years – all know the taste and privations of poverty. For each of them, the cooking school is an intervention: a promise of new beginnings, self-improvement, and hope which is inseparable from fear. As their stories make clear, change is elusive, demanding, and not necessarily responsive to what they see as their best efforts.

* * *

On one of my first visits to the school, as I wandered around the kitchen, a handsome male student with a shaved head framed by a heavy gold chain asked, “What’s your job here?” “You a cook?” others wanted to know. When one of the FoodBank’s administrators subsequently referred to me as the school’s “writer-in-residence,” I latched onto the title. From the beginning, staff members have welcomed me and tolerated my endless questions. Taking their cues from the staff, students chat with me as they work in the kitchen, before class and during lunch breaks.

The four stories that follow are shaped by the accidents of personal chemistry. I’m drawn to subjects who want to be open about their lives; and to others who are thoughtful or quirky or in terrible pain. I rarely pursue students who make a point of avoiding eye contact or avoiding me. I relish the mysterious ways in which life tales unfold and come to be retold. Moments of conflict and stress can open the door to new revelations; ditto moments of unexpected success. I don’t use a standard interview. I follow my hunches. Drawing conclusions about lives in flux and the cooking school as an “intervention” is more art than science. I’ll return to this matter at the end.

1. Selim Saladin Steps Up to the Plate

“Listen up!” Chef Jimmy bellows. In the kitchen, all chatter stops. “I’ve got a sick sous chef, and I need a volunteer replacement pronto.” It’s 9 am, and the morning drill involves preparing a full, cafeteria-style lunch for 100 FoodBank workers. As part of their training, student sous chefs take responsibility for planning menus, making assignments, and supervising the cooking and presentation of the meal.

The first to step up to the plate, as the chef likes to say, is Selim Saladin. The unlikely volunteer is a trim African-American of medium height, wearing a Muslim skullcap. A cluster of male students cheers; they pound on his shoulders and back. At 54, Selim is the oldest person in his class. And an innocent about food. More than most of his classmates, he struggles to memorize cooking terms, meat cuts, sanitary regulations, temperature settings, the uses of tools, and long lists of unfamiliar spices, sauces, vegetables and herbs. During the first few weeks of the course in the Spring of 2004, he takes refuge in the wash-up room, relieved to be scrubbing pots and pans. "Someone's gotta do it," he says. He doesn't say how much trouble he is having dicing onions and slicing tomatoes or how awkward the paring knife feels in his hand.

For the better part of a decade before coming to the cooking school, Selim worked as an orderly in ER at St. Michael's Hospital. Then, one stormy day, two cops appeared at the hospital and carried him off in handcuffs. His ex-wife in California had charged him with ceasing to pay court-ordered child support. She was lying, Selim insists. She couldn't bear to see him happily re-married and "on the right path."

For eleven months Selim was incarcerated, lost in the New Jersey criminal justice system. Finally, he was cleared and released. However, at St. Michael's, the damage was done. His job was gone. An ex-offender rarely gets a break. Behind the arrest and sentencing for failure to pay child support was Selim's earlier criminal record: fifteen years in prison for robbery and the death of a "victim" from a head injury in which the robbers had no role. He was a youngster at the time, he says, running with a hard-living gang in Los Angeles. I comment, foolishly, that his court-appointed lawyer must have been overworked and harassed. He responds with a helpless shrug of the shoulders. Then he moves a step closer to me, smiles and touches my arm. The system is not my fault, his body language tells me.

* * *

One morning when Selim is chopping hard boiled eggs for egg salad, I ask him when he acquired his name. Behind bars, I expect him to say – like so many African-Americans who convert to Islam in prison. "I was born with it," he tells me. "My grandfather came from Sudan, and his name was Abdul Selim Saladin." His grandfather and his Cuban-born grandmother raised him, Selim says. His own mother was 16 when he was born, "still a child."

As a teenager in Newark, Selim stumbled into a gym where he met an Italian-American boxing coach who became his "adoptive father." He won a couple of semi-pro

matches before injuries forced him to quit the ring. Then he fled to LA for an interlude of gang violence and crime.

"The men in our family are a mess," Selim says, "but the women, like my smart granddaughter, are fine." A self-described screw-up, he's the oldest of eight brothers. Two brothers, into drugs and crime, died of the virus and so did a third who was gay. I question him about the younger generation. Among his nephews, two are in prison for murder; and a third is about to be released. Another nephew, recently arrested, kept a dead body hidden in the trunk of his car for several days until the stench betrayed him.

"I may not be the man I should be," Selim continues, "but thank God I'm not the man I used to be." Lately, in his Newark household, Selim has assumed Abdul Selim's mantle. Along with his second wife, who works in a restaurant, he is raising his fourteen year old granddaughter and a nine year old retarded nephew. Inevitably, everyday is full of stress. For four months he had been waiting for his unemployment checks. Con Ed turned off his lights. His wife was rushed to the hospital for emergency surgery.

Still, Selim persevered. He passed the national, industry-wide Serve Safe exam. At graduation he received a certificate for "the most improved student." Shortly thereafter, he accepted a position as a cook at St. Barnabas Hospital.

Two and a half years later, Selim remains content with his job at St. Barnabas. And his boss is content with him. But he still lives in a section of Newark where gangs show their colors and shootings are common. When I spoke with him a few months ago, he said "I'm a lucky man to have another chance." Then his expression changed. His granddaughter had been diagnosed with leukemia, he said, and he doesn't know what the future will bring.

2. Vicki Strong: Fighting Hunger, Selling Success

Vicki Strong shifts uncomfortably in her chair. Her white chef's jacket and long white apron are freshly pressed for the occasion. Powerful lights trained on her pale brown face are making Vicki sweat. "You're going to do fine," the film director says. "Try to relax."

It is 7:30 on a mild Saturday morning in March 2006. The student cafeteria where Vicki works as a cook/supervisor is not yet open for business. But Vicki is already working overtime, in a role she is surprised to be playing. Her former instructors and current supervisor have chosen her as their model cooking school graduate-and-employee: an African-American single parent on public assistance, who studied hard, earned outstanding

grades, and landed a job in foodservices paying twice the minimum wage. Vicki's road to success will be the focus of a five minute promotional film made by the Sodexo Foundation to launch their 2006 "fight against hunger."

Sodexo, the film's sponsor, is a mammoth food service provider to schools, hospitals, and corporations. The billion-dollar company, which employs 120,000 people at 1,800 sites, is also a benefactor of the FoodBank. Sodexo makes money feeding ordinary citizens and the corporate elite. The Foundation, in the American philanthropic tradition, gives a percentage back, polishing the corporation's image and reducing its taxes.

The film director knows the outlines of Vicki's story. He has seen her photo on a Foundation brochure, sent to managers, urging them to enroll in payroll deductions for hunger relief. The quote above the photo reads, "Being a single mom of six children makes it very hard for me to live out my own dreams. After graduating from the Sodexo sponsored Community Kitchen, I am now able to fulfill a long overdue wish to start a career in the culinary field. Now that I am a Supervisor Cook for Sodexo, I am able to provide leadership and service in the company and in my community. It is very empowering!"

At 48, Vicki is not only the mother of six but also a new grandmother. Her two oldest (daughters) are married, have college degrees, and are living in the South. Her third daughter, also down South, is about to complete a degree in culinary studies. Her fourth child, her sister's son whom Vicki adopted, now lives with her oldest daughter. The children remaining at home are a wise and beautiful thirteen-year-old girl and a "special needs" nine-year-old with misshapen feet and lively gestures but no spoken language.

Vicki's job at Montclair State University, as cook/supervisor, provides some of the flexibility she needs to deal with her youngest child's health emergencies. In the interview, she does not say that her position is for nine rather than twelve months or that it comes with benefits she can't afford. Nor does she complain that the \$11.50 an hour she earns for nine months adds up a poverty level \$18,000 a (9 month) year. Vicki knows that she hasn't been chosen to knock the system or embarrass the sponsors. She also knows she can do better professionally; and she trusts that the film will somehow open a door.

The film director wants to stress the challenge posed by food service training for a single mother of six on public assistance with no prior experience in the field. He wants to celebrate Vicki's achievements: graduating from the program and being hired as a cook in a Sodexo-run university cafeteria. In fact, the food service program was not difficult for Vicki. Among its best-qualified students, she entered with almost three full years of undergraduate

studies, more than two decades of work experience, computer skills, work-place habits, strong motivation, and maturity.

“The important thing,” she tells the director, “is that it was a free program. I didn’t have the money to do this on my own.” Speaking plainly, Vicki locates herself among the deserving poor. She was different, she says, from many other students, who came with histories of incarceration or addiction or both. Vicki hasn’t revealed in the interview that her five biological children all have different fathers or that the last of the men, and the only one she married, turned out to be the most troubled. Nor has she made a soap opera of her role as the sole breadwinner and caretaker of her kids. Her dignity is clothed in restraint.

* * *

Like many African Americans, Vicki believes in community service. “I’m Eastern Star,” she tells me proudly, referring to the mostly female service organization, modeled after the Masons. What would the filmmakers have thought, I wondered, had Vicki shown them a photo of herself in a long white dress, taken at an Eastern Star cotillion just a week earlier. How would they have linked this bourgeois Vicki with the single mom and low-income Sodexo employee who requires State of New Jersey rent support to survive? The market price for her three bedroom apartment – on a street that is too dangerous for her 13 year old daughter to walk down alone – is \$1100 per month. Vicki pays \$300.

To get to her job, Vicki takes two buses and travels an hour and a half each way. In addition to a difficult commute, the work itself is routinized and frustrating. “I have lots of responsibility for other workers who want to do as little as possible. And I don’t have much chance to develop cooking skills or be creative. I’m approaching 50,” she comments wistfully, “and I haven’t got time to waste” – especially on jobs that don’t pay a decent wage and don’t offer a decent challenge.

* * *

Coda: Just a few months ago, when my phone rang at 5 am, I was awake and reading *The New York Times*. My first thought was that somebody in my son’s family in Nepal had been abducted; then I wondered which of my friends, suffering from a heart attack, had been taken to the emergency room. But no. It was Vicki, calling from Exmore, Virginia, where her car had broken down. She had a new job at a Children’s Hospital and a new apartment about an hour further south; she was making her final trip, with a loaded car, from New Jersey when

her clutch failed. She had cash, she said, but had hidden it somewhere in the depths of her belongings. Could I wire her some money, Vicki wondered, via Western Union. She didn't know who else to ask.

For a moment, I was surprised that the call came to me. Vicki and I are not personal friends. She is close to her adult children and many relatives. Was there no one in Vicki's family – people with jobs, cars and college degrees – who could manage a loan of \$200?

3. Alberto Moreno's "First Achievement"

"Except for my children being born," Alberto says, "this is my first achievement." He stands at the podium in his white chef's jacket and tall chef's hat facing 200 graduation guests. Short and pale-skinned with green eyes, he has the big neck and sloping shoulders of a weight-lifter. An arm-length tattoo of a naked woman hides beneath his jacket. Seated behind Alberto, twenty other graduates of the Food Service Training Academy clap appreciatively. In the third row of the audience, a group of black men from his halfway house cheer and stamp their feet. A smile, not his characteristic expression, seems determined to escape from Alberto's lips. He's smiling inside, I know.

It's been a tough 14 weeks for this graduate. Thirty-eight years old and a high school drop-out, Alberto has trouble holding onto what he reads. I wonder if his bad memory is a consequence of doing drugs; or of the medications he now takes for his bipolar disorder. Alberto spent 18 months in prison for assault. Now he lives in a halfway house where regulations make attendance and studying difficult. He enrolled at the Food Service Academy with no money to his name, no winter jacket and very few clothes. Fortunately, the school provides free bus passes and books; students who are still in good standing after six weeks get a free chef's jacket and pants; those like Alberto, with no resources, get a pair of sturdy shoes. All students are eligible for monthly homecare packages with toothpaste, soap, razors, deodorant and shampoo. If they or their children are hungry, they receive emergency food boxes. In addition, the program offers a free breakfast before classes begin and a complete hot lunch.

Alberto's four children are his inspiration. "I wanna make good," he has said more than once, "so that my kids can be proud of me. I want them to know that it's possible for a man to make bad mistakes and still change his life." The kids live with their mother on a street run by drug dealers. He longs for something better for them and for his year old granddaughter.

“No es facil,” he tells me when, on occasion, we chat in Spanish. “Siempre hay alguna complicacion” There’s always a problem. Although Alberto is a fluent English speaker, my Spanish reduces the distance between us. It puts me in another neighborhood, emotionally closer to his.

Among Alberto’s problems are the cooking school’s attendance requirements. Only three excused absence are allowed. Lateness counts as half an absence. Alberto sought permission in advance, for several court-mandated “appointments” and for trips to Northern State Prison to have his medications checked. He takes the cooking school’s rules seriously: no drugs, no cheating, no cell phones, no stealing from the FoodBank, no cursing, no rudeness, and no backtalk to the chefs. He’s tired a lot. And discouraged. He sometimes asks for a hug. But in comparison with prison, the cooking school is an oasis. People care about him and encourage him. So he’ll cope with all of the rules, the steady pressure, tedious labor, repetition, and hierarchy; he’ll cope with the fact that for every cooking task there seems to be one right way and many stupid ways.

When the pastry chef asks Alberto, at a pie crust-making session, to bring her a cup of water, he asks whether she wants ice water or warm water. A smart question, I think, an indication that the guy is serious about making pastry dough. Or is he just nervous, afraid of doing the wrong thing?

In fact, Alberto is good at doing what he’s told and weak on initiative. He almost fails his stint as sous chef. “I’m making my mom’s Puerto Rican arroz con pollo,” he announces, “and her empanadas”: potato balls stuffed with seasoned ground beef. While Alberto knows what he wants to achieve, he has a hard time being clear with his student crew of eight. In the end, the chicken dish, seasoned with multiple, aggressive shakes of sofrito, looks sadly monochromatic but tastes okay. However, the potato balls are dry, even more colorless and absurdly large. So focused is the sous chef on these items of nostalgia that he barely gives a thought to the required five salads and the desserts.

“What did you learn from this assignment?” I ask Alberto. “It’s not enough to know what you’ll make,” he says, “You gotta’ think about the steps; about what could go wrong.” I mention that he is lucky to have a cooperative team. “I’m a people person,” he says. “I get along with everyone. I’m there to help other people. I don’ stand around.”

The staff of the school appreciates Alberto’s work ethic and modesty. They wish he would make eye contact more often, wouldn’t always look so hang-dog and defeated. As graduation approaches, Alberto worries about getting a job. Without work, he would be

assigned to a Daily Reporting Center, where he would spend his days sitting around, going crazy. Linda, the school administrator, gives him some new shirts and an extra jacket. He hugs her and tells her he loves her. He asks about a position in the FoodBank warehouse, doing whatever is needed. Linda mentions two colleges and a hospital that are looking for Food Service graduates. She gives him the contact names and phone numbers. It's now two weeks since graduation, and Alberto hasn't made any calls.

4. Ruby Martinez Falls Through the Cracks:

It's 30 degrees at midday in the parking lot of the FoodBank. My right thumb and forefinger are numb from the chill. I'm standing with my arms around Ruby, searching for comforting words. Yesterday Ruby was dismissed from the school and barred from entering the building. "It's unfair," she says. "Why'd they do this to me? It's only three weeks from graduation? What am I gonna do now?"

The two of us in our puffy black winter jackets huddle together. Whatever will she do? Ruby lives in a shelter where residents are assaulted and robbed every day. At 28 she has no job, no work experience, no money and only \$50 a month in food stamps. Without the training provided by the school and the possibility of work when she graduates, Ruby is truly out in the cold. I stroke her soft black hair. "I wanna cry so bad," she says. A few tears escape down her face, and I wipe them away with my fingers.

"Does Ms. Linda know I'm here?" she asks. Linda Land, the school's administrator, has given the tall, strapping student clothes, pep talks and hugs. She has told Ruby that she, Linda, was also an angry, feisty rebel when she was young. Only last week Linda promised Ruby, "You'll graduate soon, but you won't graduate from me. I'll always be here for you."

"She sent you something," I say, pulling out an envelop with money that Linda had asked me to give Ruby. Linda, who earns a very modest salary, deprives herself of manicures and other treats in order to befriend "her kids" at the school. I reach into my bag and thrust two \$20's into Ruby's hands. The money we give her is no match for the collateral benefits that students receive: the free meals, toiletries, emergency food, and access to the FoodBank's thrift shop where decent jeans sell for \$1 a pair. Our contributions will buy some groceries, but they can't give Ruby the company of other students; they can't provide the sense of purpose that derives from learning to cook and preparing to feed others for a living.

“Is there someone who can help you,” I ask, “maybe a social worker you could talk to?” Ruby's dark eyes register denial. There's nothing wrong with her performance, she says. “I was doin' what I was supposed to. Yeh, I get angry. But I'm a fighter. I gotta fight for myself.” True, Ruby can't lean on family members or a partner. With her mother in prison, her year old child in the custody of the state, and no home of her own, Ruby is falling through the cracks. At the shelter, Linda predicts, “someone will offer her ecstasy to ease the pain.” She'll end up in Clinton (the NJ State Penitentiary for Women) miserable and doomed.

For Ruby, as a student, getting by is good enough. However, the chefs are worried about her weak grades and her testy, short-trigger relations with peers and staff. “I've been watching you,” I say, “and you're often not paying attention. It's as if you're elsewhere, not here. I understand why you fight,” I say, stroking her hair. “But if you want to succeed, you have to play the game. You have to behave correctly even when you feel wronged. You can't just blow up.”

I hate saying this. I hate speaking to Ruby as if she were a twelve year old child. I hate dismissing some of the unfair hits she's taken from Will, the Production Chef. He works with a crew of students each day turning out quantities of stews, soups, and pasta dishes for children's dinners at after-school Kid's Cafes. A large, impassive man, Will enjoys treating women gruffly. “He thinks he can say anything he likes to me. Like I'm not a person, like I don't deserve respect,” Ruby told me after her last clash with Will. I remember seeing her respond when he ordered her to “get over here right now” – her hands waving, head jerking, shoulders back, a Latina street fighter in action. The senior chefs know Will's habits, but they are in the business of reality training. Students who can't tolerate harsh criticism or having their feelings hurt are in the wrong field.

Will is a villain in Ruby's story but not the cause of her release. Two male students, Puerto Ricans like Ruby, initially supported her and then participated in her ungluing. First Alberto flirted with Ruby. He sat with her at lunch and encouraged her to study; he consoled her when she was depressed. But then Alberto turned his attentions to Walida; and almost immediately tensions erupted between Ruby and Walida. In the meanwhile Ruby sought attention from Juan, an ambitious fellow, eager like Alberto to put his prison experiences behind him. He teased Ruby when it suited him but had no energy for her vast needs.

On the day of the incident that ended with Ruby's ouster from the school, Juan was sitting “in Ruby's place” during lunch at their regular table in the cafeteria. When she asked him to get out of her seat and he refused, Ruby threw a balled up piece of paper at Juan's face

and he cursed at her under his breath. She responded in kind, at the top of her lungs. Later, when questioned by the staff, Ruby denied throwing anything at Juan.

Among the many rules of the cooking school, “no lying” ranks right up there with no drugs, no stealing, no backtalk and no unexcused absences. Besides, Ruby had been a marginal student, restless and perpetually distracted. If she graduates, the staff speculated, would she be able to get a job. And if she were to find one, would she explode in a moment of frustration and walk out? How long will she show up after the first reprimand is meted out?

The cooking school works for those who work on themselves: who show enough self-discipline and focus to hang in for fourteen weeks. “Everyone was pulling for you,” I tell Ruby, who may or may not believe me. She's not the only student to arrive with huge deficits and needs. But, as an angry, acting out girl-woman, she didn't get much sympathy from her peers. When I asked a compassionate woman student about her view of the events that led to Ruby's expulsion, she said, “What happened was fair. Ruby had opportunities, like the rest of us. But she acted out. She didn't want to help herself. She didn't want to change.”

* * *

Two days after she was dismissed, the chefs decided that Ruby could enroll in the next class. The cooking school prides itself on being a place for second and third chances, and Ruby, they said, deserved another opportunity. She was there for orientation on March 19. When I asked her how she felt about trying again, Ruby said, “I almost didn't come. I'm a little scared.”

Recycled Lives: What Are We To Conclude?

These “representative” tales from “The Other America” are about people caught in traps. They have been failed by our schools, squeezed by our economy, beaten down by the criminal justice system, and humiliated by the social service agencies that should be their advocates. They have also been derailed by their own bad “choices.”

While the traps that ensnare the poor are familiar to us and predictable, the outcomes for individuals are often mysterious. Some, like Vicki, seize every chance to claim their human due; others, like Ruby, are too damaged to persist in the fight. Personal strengths are an amalgam of more variables than we can measure or account for. But chief among them are

family support, intimacy, education, talent, chance, biological givens, and what the therapists these days are calling resilience.

The Food Service Training Academy is imbued with the rhetoric of compassion. However, it is funded to serve people in need because others benefit from the arrangements: industry has more skilled and willing workers, middle class professionals have more jobs, taxpayers feel safer on the streets, and the economy has more consumers. In addition, student trainees provide free labor in getting recycled food into the bellies of hungry children and FoodBank workers. But what benefits exist for students? Minimally, the school provides an economic band-aid in the form of kitchen knife skills and a lip gloss of life skills. It's too soon in the history of this tiny institution to judge the effectiveness of the band-aid.

Staff members at the school, about whom I have said little, are hopeful, big-hearted people. In the seven years of the program's existence, there have been many personnel changes. The current staff is still developing the curriculum and discovering how best to teach the (generally) low skilled students it recruits. They are not magicians. But they do understand the mess that students are struggling with. And they do want students to succeed. In fact, the success of students – in graduating, finding and holding jobs – is the clearest measure of their own effectiveness.

Realistic in the extreme, the staff sets modest goals. First, they want signs of "industry" or a work ethic. Second, they want socially acceptable behavior (no cursing, drugs, rudeness, stealing, cheating, etc.). In 14 weeks they must "train" a mixed group of people – including culinary novices, social rebels and high school drop-outs – for a physically demanding routine that requires self-discipline and delayed gratification. The training, in which so much hope is invested, often reduces grown men and women to tears.

Certainly most students want to believe that their lives will be improved by the experience and credentials the school offers. Some speak dreamily of "a life-changing opportunity." They have suffered from poverty and racism – along with their mistakes, their losses, the cruelty or failures of others, and the unfairness of the system. In the rough sea of their lives, they have seized the oars of an economic rowboat. The street-savvy souls among them understand that the rowboat is only a rowboat and not a 21st century means of transport. Still, those students who hang in beyond the challenging first few weeks try to make do. They want to make do.

Fear is the other side of hope. At the end of the ordeal, students worry, will there be a job as promised? Will the pay be adequate to their needs? And their children's needs? Will

the position and salary alleviate the stresses of family demands, bad friends, isolation, a prison history, addiction, educational deficits and material yearnings?

With this heady infusion of hope and fear, no wonder so many students (more than 50% of each entering class) drop out or flunk out. No wonder some graduates panic and don't go for interviews. No wonder many don't hold onto the job that they get. No wonder the staff fudges the statistics. No wonder the successes are few and precious.

Selected Readings

- Edin, Kathryn and Laura Lein (1997), *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- DeParle, Jason (2004), *American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation's Drive to End Welfare*. New York: Viking Press.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara (2001), *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Gonnerman, Jennifer (2004), *Life on the Outside: The Prison Odyssey of Elaine Bartlett*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Harrington, Michael (1962), *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Hochschild, Jennifer (1996), *Facing Up to the American Dream*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Newman, Katherine S. (1999), *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City*. New York: Knopf and Russell Sage.
- Newman, Katherine S. (2006), *Chutes and Ladders: Navigating the Low Wage Labor Market*. Cambridge, MA and New York: Harvard University Press and Russell Sage.
- Shipler, David K. (2004), *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*. New York: Knopf.
- Venkatesh, Sudhir Alladi (2000), *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Venkatesh, Sudhir Alladi (2006), *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wilson, William Julius (1987), *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, William Julius (1997), *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York: Vintage Books.