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Deseret News - Advocates learn to live poor

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Advocates learn to live poor

Workers spend 3 self-imposed weeks at poverty-level wage

By James Thalman
Deseret News

A self-imposed, three-week stay below the poverty level has left two Salt Lake advocates for the poor counting some new blessings: The splendor of milk being poured on a bowl of cereal, the redemptive power of a new roll of toilet paper, the serenity of not going to bed hungry.

"Most of us can't even remember the last time we were hungry, let alone giving any more thought to food than what crosses our paths at the grocery store," said Shawn Teigen, who makes a "pretty modest" living by helping Utah's growing number of low-income residents help themselves.

He and Jessie Tregeagle, who is also a staff member at the Community Action Partnership of Utah, spent the past 21 days actually living like the 254,000 Utahns who somehow manage to permanently do without knowing where their next meal is coming from, where exactly they'll be living next month or if they'll ever have a job again.

Teigen, his wife and 2-year-old daughter lived on \$298 the past three weeks, or at federal poverty level for a family of three, \$18,310. Tregeagle made it on \$141, the amount she would have earned for that time at the \$10,830 federal poverty level for a single person.

"I don't think I'd have been able to survive much longer," Tregeagle said, noting that the first thing on her list if she survived living on \$6.73 a day is to get her hair done. "If I faced being poor permanently, I honestly don't think I would survive. I don't know how people manage it, but my appreciation for those who do is much deeper."

Teigen said the experience was an education, not in academics of being poor but in getting a real feel for it. A lot of people caught in the economic downturn are getting a hint of what it's like. But however hard it is for people who have less but are still



Shawn Teigen bikes home from his work at the Community Action Utah Partnership in Salt Lake City last week. Teigen and his family voluntarily lived at the federal poverty level for 21 days. He helps low-income Utahns for a living.

MIKE TERRY, DESERET NEWS

OBITUARIES

Jan Grayson Eyring *Celebrating A Life*



Jan Grayson Eyring, our son, brother, friend and playmate passed away May 19, 2009 as the result of a motorcycle accident.

Born January 9, 1990 in Mercer Island, Washington. He grew up in Magna, Utah and was a graduate of The Academy of Math Engineering and Science. Grayson was strong willed, passionate, and very loving. His interests included; music, z cars, gaming, the outdoors, his friends and his family. His sense of humor and easy laughter made him fun to be around.

Grayson will be greatly missed by his parents Shelli Hutto Summers (wife of Gus Summers) and Gary Eyring (husband of Karen Tuff); brother Simon Poulson; sisters Trina Eyring and Kristen Cox; grandparents Bonnie and Buck (D'Aure) Hall, Edward and Sylvia Hutto; extended family and his High School Sweetheart Tara Ann Valiant, and his dog Jax. He was preceded in death by his step-father W. James Poulson and his grandparents Anthony and Janet Eyring.

We would like to thank the many friends and family who filled his brief life with love, joy, laughter and adventures beyond compare. Special thanks to his "other mothers" Jenni Openshaw, Coco Leedy, Suzanne Peeleman, Wanda Bishop and Marcie Wardle.

"We could have loved you better, but we could not love you more."

A service will be held at 1425 Saratoga Road, Holladay Utah, Saturday, May 23, 2009 at 3:00 p.m. A small repast to the family.

among the haves, it's nothing like just trying to survive day to day with next to nothing, he said.

"What things cost becomes an obsession," said Heather Tritten, director of CAPU. "Being poor is this abiding feeling like you're always in or near a crisis. There's never enough time to do what you need to do and never enough resources to get what you need to buy."

Then to add insult to the injured, people who have never been poor or ever wondered where their next meal is coming from seem prone to blame the poor for being poor, Tritten said.

They can list assistance programs and services that they think are ready, willing and able to help, when in fact obtaining that assistance ranges from extremely difficult to impossible. The notion that all kinds of help is just waiting out there for anyone ambitious enough to ask may make a lot of people feel better, but it's more hope than reality, she said.

A quick way to get a feel for what it's like to be poor is to give up communication and transportation, Teigen said. Getting along without a cell phone or car adds significant time and hassle to your day, he said.

All in all, being poor — even pretending to be poor — makes about everything in life

a lot more work, he said. He was quick to note that making more effort isn't all bad.

"We found ourselves spending a lot more time together and being a lot more engaged in mundane tasks," he said. "Because things took more time and attention and because we had no money, we spent more time and attention on one another, the things they say money can't buy. Well, they're right."

Tregeagle said although she had believed prior to the experiment that being poor was rough, "now I know it. It's a trap that anyone can fall into, and one that can be impossible to get out of. Just the slightest thing going wrong — an illness, a car breaking, no gas money, being late to a job interview — will keep the cycle going. I really don't understand why people label the poor as idle or lazy. Being poor is the opposite of taking it easy."

She also said she now has a new word to describe hunger — relentless. "I'm not a big eater anyway, and maybe it was because I couldn't afford more to eat, I felt hungry all the time, and food became the center of everything," she said.

"And going without feels a lot different if you don't eat because you're dieting than not eating because you simply can't afford to."

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