

VIEWPOINTS

The poor are indeed getting poorer

Sixty percent of North Carolina families with children, comprising 1.6 million individuals, are not earning enough to meet their basic needs, according to a major policy report released by the NC Justice Center.

The report, entitled Working Hard is Not Enough, finds that, on average, North Carolina families with children need more than twice the income of the federal poverty level to meet their most basic needs. Even for small families with one or two children, this amounts to an average wage of \$10.60 per hour. More than 600,000 North Carolina families with children simply do not earn this.

Sorien K. Schmidt, co-author of the report and the non-profit, non-partisan Justice Center's Legislative director, says, "The problem is ... families are caught in a major restructuring of the economy. The manufacturing jobs that paid enough to support a family are permanently leaving the state and being replaced with a new economy that is divided into low-wage work and high-skill jobs. That trend did not start with the recession and it won't end with it either."

The report reveals that six of the eight fastest growing occupations in the state pay average wages less

than the Living Income Standard and less than average manufacturing wages. Some, like child care, pay only \$7.23 per hour on average. Other fast growing job sectors, such as registered nurses, pay more but require higher or different skills than those possessed by most manufacturing workers.

Neither the minimum wage (which has remained at \$5.15 for six years) nor real average hourly wages have kept up with rising family costs, especially child care and housing expenses. Also, wealthy households have seen a drop in the overall share of their income going to taxes, and the tax burden on middle and low-income North Carolina households has risen. This means that families least able to bear the cost of increased taxes are being asked to pay the largest share of their income.

Families are relying more heavily on unemployment insurance, the Health Choice children's health insurance program, food stamps and other government-funded services. These programs not only help families make ends meet, but they also add much needed revenue and economic activity to communities, especially in counties devastated by plant closings.

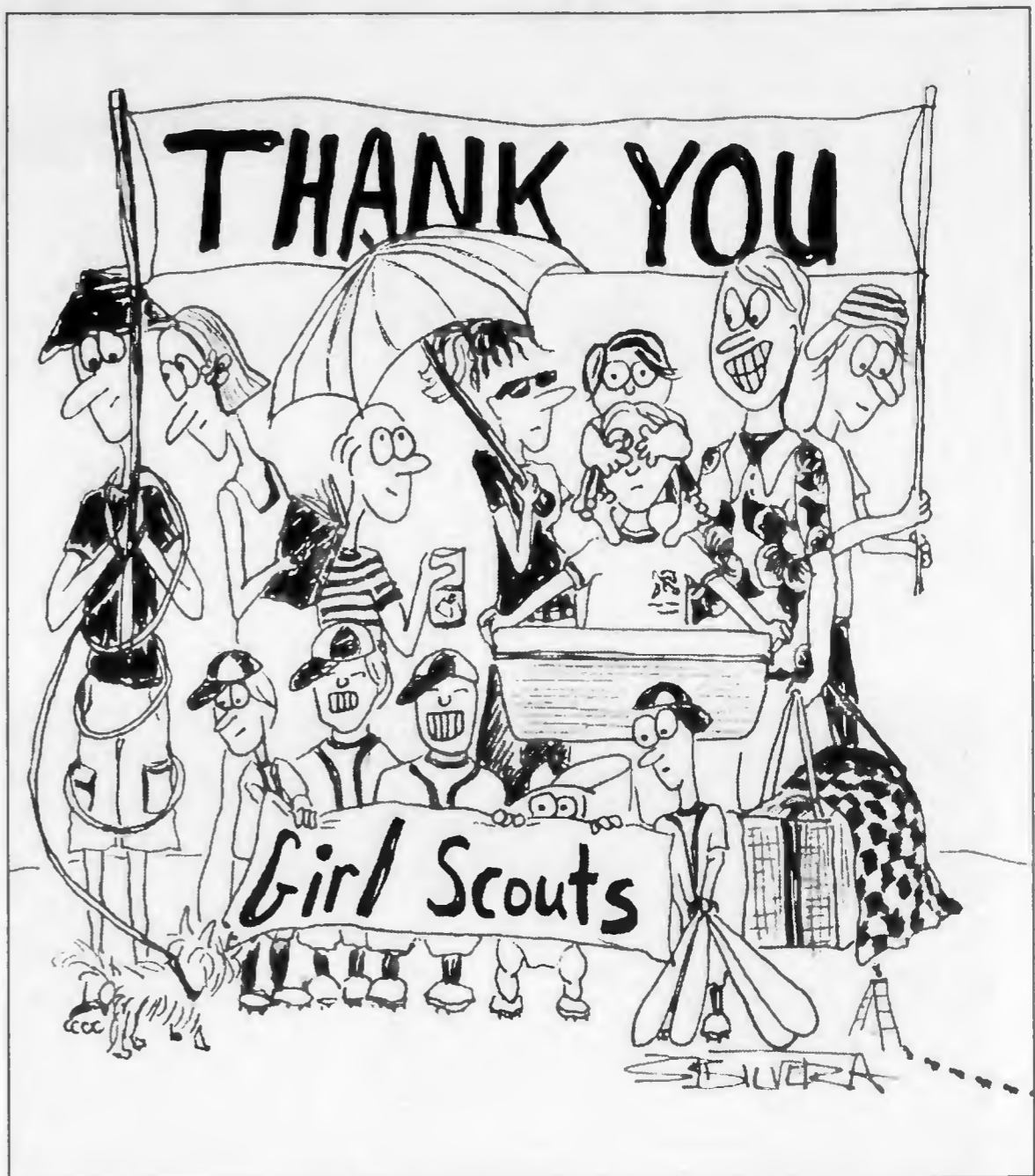
"Since the recession began it

appears that middle and low-income families have lost the income gains made in the 1990's, while the wealthy are still experiencing income growth," says Elizabeth Jordan, fiscal policy analyst at the N.C. Budget and Tax Center and co-author of the report. "Rural counties are also falling farther behind the urban. The middle class appears to be moving downward, rather than the poor moving upward as we would hope."

Jordan says it is good news that the report provides state leaders and the public with the information they need to define issues facing families and to deal with them. "It lays out a blueprint for addressing the issues that are holding back the majority of families and ultimately, the entire state," she says.

Among several recommendations in the report are raising the minimum wage and ensuring all public school students receive a sound basic education.

"Ultimately, state leaders, advocates, workers, employers and families must come together in a concerted effort," says Schmidt, "to bring the state through this economic transformation and craft an improved 21st Century economy so that all hard working North Carolinians can meet their basic needs and have hope for the future."
But will they do that?



Can't remember where the years went

There is an advantage to having a poor memory — you have less to forget.

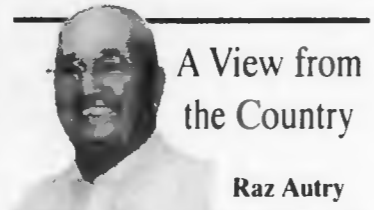
Spoken like a man who knows what it is to have many senior moments. If you don't think people have good memories, try repeating a joke you told them a month ago.

I really am not interested in writing a column about memories; in fact, I forgot why I started it. I am not responsible for what I do during peach season.

Usually I can blame my failings on the preacher, but we now have a new one and I don't know if he likes to sing those long songs or not. If it proves to be so, I will write more about him later.

Each spring I usually get an invitation to attend class reunions — that is if I was the principal when they were in high school. They don't invite superintendents. Most of them didn't even know who the superintendent was when they were in school.

Nevertheless, I received an invitation to attend the 50th reunion of the 1953 class in Gibsonville. Fortunately I could go. I was the football, basketball, girls and boys and baseball coach



A View from the Country
Raz Autry

in Gibsonville, without any assistants. My supplement was \$50 a month for nine months.

In the summer I worked for the county school system, painting school rooms, mostly windows. If I remember correctly, the pay was \$1.25 an hour. Big money, a lot more than I got paid for coaching.

Gibsonville was a great little community, I really wanted to stay there for some years. No, I didn't get fired; my wife was pregnant and I needed a job that paid enough money to rear a family.

I didn't get it, there wasn't a school job around that paid enough money to rear a family. I took my first principalship and it paid good money. My pay for being the principal of a union school, grades one through 12, was \$400 a month for nine months. In addition I taught four

classes, started a football team, talked the community into building a gym (we didn't have one). It was strictly a community project. When we had it nearly complete, along came Hurricane Hazel and blew it down. Thankfully we had insurance and rebuilt it.

The reunion was a grand affair. The class rented a building near Elon University, only two miles from Gibsonville. Folks in Gibsonville said that when Peahead Walker was the football coach at Elon you could hear him cussing in Gibsonville.

The youngest member of this class was 68, I am still trying to figure out where those 50 years went. The class had a lot of highly successful folks. The preacher in the crowd was my quarterback. He gave me this senility prayer.

"Lord, grant me senility to forget the people I didn't like much anyway, good fortune to keep running into those I did, and enough eyesight to tell one from the other."

My parting thought — The reason that people remember the good old days is that there were such few of them.

We Get Letters

Saddened by angel's theft

Dear News-Journal

I was only 13 years old when I lost my 8-year-old sister, Cricket, to brain cancer. My mother was devastated, as any mother would be, but she helped my brother and me get through it. One way she helped us cope was by taking us to several different gardening stores to find just the perfect angel statue to place on her grave.

We looked for months until we finally found her. She was beautiful. She was a child with wings sitting on a cloud and looking up to heaven. Her presence at my sister's grave somehow gave us peace of mind and helped us see that my sister is, indeed, in a better place and is no longer suffering.

I'm 23 now, and I went to visit my sister at her grave on May 13, her 18th birthday. I was deeply saddened when I realized that her angel had disappeared. I've always heard the stories about people stealing from gravesites but I never thought they might actually steal from the grave of a child, especially in a community such as this that pulls together for everything. It broke my heart when I had to tell my mother, who now lives out of state, that our angel had been stolen. Since then I've been searching through every gardening store I came across for an angel statue like the one we had, but I've had no success. My sister's grave remains bare.... I do plan to continue my search, though and I'm sure that one day I will find the perfect statue to take its place.

I just hope that her new one will remain in its place beside her headstone instead of being the source of some childish prank. Maybe the person who stole her angel will return it, and maybe they won't. If they choose to keep it, I truly hope it means as much to them as it did to my family and I.

Sincerely,
Amanda Holloway

Worth Repeating

"They (Fort Bragg) don't care about us. We don't mean a thing. There's no fairness in this whatsoever." — Raeford resident Bill Moses speaking on the land use plan that would restrict development within a mile of Fort Bragg and Camp Mackall as well as plans for a 10-mile corridor between the two military reservations.

"I'd hate to see wall-to-wall subdivisions. It's an important part of our legacy to preserve the sandhills... It's not 'us and them.' They are us in a way. We need to protect Fort Bragg... We need to protect Hoke County as well." — Commissioner Jean Powell on the same subject.

Money and politics — our chronic fatigue syndrome

"So, what are you going to do about it?"

I have heard this question many times since I wrote a column recently that lamented the unhealthy dependence of American political leaders on "big money" to fund the ever-increasing costs of mounting winning election campaigns.

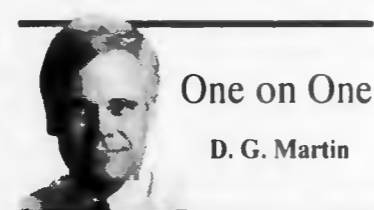
In my column, I promised to write about things we could do to make the system better. Reading a memoir by Laura Hillenbrand, the author of the New York Times best-selling book "Seabiscuit: An American Legend" the other day, I remembered my promise.

Hillenbrand suffers from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome ("CFS"), which almost destroyed her mentally and physically. The worst part of her illness was not knowing what was wrong with her. Doctor after doctor misdiagnosed her affliction, telling her there was nothing wrong with her physically and that she needed psychiatric help.

Finally, she found a doctor who diagnosed her illness. He told her that he could not cure CFS. But she was elated. First, because finally someone knew that her problem was real, not something she was making up. Secondly, because he told her that he could help her deal with the disease and make her life better.

As a result, she did those things to make life better, even knowing that she was probably never going to be really healthy again.

She worked on her writing, although she often had to work from her bed. The ultimate result was the popular best seller about Seabiscuit, the



One on One
D. G. Martin

unheralded depression-era horse that won the hearts of the American public.

Maybe, I thought, our campaign finance syndrome is the CFS of American politics. We are probably never going to cure it, but we can and must look for every possible thing to minimize its disabling impact.

Here are three of my ideas for attacking three of our worst problems.

1. Washington fundraising activity by our House Members and Senators.

It is intimately intertwined with the job they are elected and paid to do. In Washington, our representatives go from committee meetings to fundraising events and back to the Capitol to vote and make decisions that affect the same people they were asking for money a few minutes before.

Most of this activity is perfectly legal. But it should not be permitted.

So my proposed action is simple. Don't allow lawmakers to conduct campaign fundraising activities in or from Washington, D.C., while Congress is in session.

North Carolina state lawmakers are subject to a similar rule during their regular session. Believe me, it makes Raleigh a much better place.

2. Misleading, negative, 30-second TV ads.

They pollute the process of running for Federal office. They are unfair to the opposition and to the voters because there is no opportunity for contemporaneous rebuttal. Instead of a clash of ideas, our voters are hit with one-sided, misleading characterizations of candidates and their positions on the issues.

My proposed action is simple, but it will also be controversial.

During a Federal election campaign, anyone who produces a TV or radio ad commenting on the character or positions of another candidate would have to give that candidate one-third of the total time of the ad for a brief response.

This requirement to provide a short rebuttal would take the poisonous sting out of the 30-second ads. But it would not take away anyone's First Amendment rights. Candidates would be less likely to attack irresponsibly. And campaigns would immediately become more informative, a little bit more positive, and a lot less expensive.

3. The absence of balanced, comprehensive, comparative information about candidates for Federal office.

Given the millions of dollars that candidates spend on the election process, you would think it might be different. But, on Election Day, many voters still don't have enough information about the candidates available to them. So they don't go to vote. Or they make their decisions based upon impressions or guesses rather than facts.

It would be relatively easy to address this problem.

Each candidate for Federal office would be permitted to provide the Federal Election Commission with two

(See MARTIN, page 3A)

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