

It's your turn to live in poverty

Role-playing exercise
exposes challenges
of surviving unsafe
living conditions

By **RYAN SANDERS**

Rebecca Walls wants you to know what poverty feels like. Several times each month, Walls gathers a few dozen willing participants for a role-playing exercise aptly named COPE: the Cost of Poverty Experience. If you go, you'll be assigned a temporary identity complete with occupation, level of education, relationships, employment status, personality type and dozens of other tidbits.



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In the span of two and a half hours, you'll "live" a month under that new identity, buying groceries, going to work, picking up the kids from school. You'll also encounter obstacles and frustrations that are less common outside of low-income environments: predatory lenders, uninsured illness and unsafe living conditions.

COPE is a program of Unite Greater Dallas, a nonprofit that seeks to connect houses of worship with the needs of the city. Walls founded Unite in 2010. She brought COPE to the program in 2016.

"Our heart is to see the church step into these places where our neighbors really need us," Walls said. "I see schools all the time where they have zero partners. Zero volunteers."

COPE takes place in a large, empty room at Mockingbird Community Church on Ellsworth Avenue near Mockingbird Station. The room is surrounded by smaller rooms that have been converted into common community locales: school, church, homeless shelter, health clinic, pawnshop, corner store, bank, courthouse and gas station. Earlier this month I visited this imaginary community myself. On a short tour before the simulation, Walls confided a few secrets to COPE-ing. Participants tend to take transportation for granted and they spend too much time at the bank. "Middle-class people think the bank will solve all their problems," Walls said.

I experienced COPE's role-playing alongside 65 employees of Forest Lane Academy, an elementary school in northeast Dallas where, judging by their performances, the theater program is very strong. Assistant principal Casandra Lott-Woods was right at home in her role as a county judge, telling newly arrested perps, "Crime does not pay!" And "Are you raising your voice at me?"

In a mock classroom, school counselor Alexandra Hines put her career experience to use in the role of a troubled preteen. "I'm not afraid of you!" she shouted at Jamie Coleman, lead pastor of Nexus Community Church who was filling the role of teacher. I witnessed a theft — a teacher dashing across the room with a fistful of fake money — and a heartbreaking scene in which a couple hocked their antique lamp at a pawnshop to pay for groceries for their family, only to discover that the bus schedule didn't afford them time to deliver the check to the bank before it closed. They weren't alone. During the five-minute debrief at the end of the first "week" of the simulation, facilitator Anna Blake asked how many people managed to feed their family. Only five hands went up.

Blake said this group was calm compared to most. When people are put in an experience of scarcity and insecurity, even a simulated one, nerves fray and tempers flare. "There are tears every time we do this," Blake said. "And crime. We even had a shooting once."

Though it has a Dallas address, Forest Lane Academy is part of Richardson Independent School District. It's the third RISD school to put staff through the COPE program, says Angelia Lee, director of equity, diversity and inclusion for the district. And 10 more are scheduled to participate during the 2019-2020 school year.

"It is our goal to equip all staff to better serve our students and families who are living in poverty by helping them better understand the day-to-day obstacles, stress, anxiety and trauma that come along with circumstances," Lee said. At Forest Lane, 91% of students are on free or reduced lunch, the criteria public schools often use to identify students living in poverty.

Lott-Woods said COPE will influence the way she cares for students.

"I was heartbroken," she said. "It felt very hopeless. When the reality set in, just realizing what parents face and being able to understand what students feel, it was heartbreaking. It will affect the way I do my job."

COPE isn't designed to break hearts but rather to inspire them. Bill Beamon, Unite's director of engagement, has facilitated the program for more than 3,000 people. For public school teachers, he said COPE reignites empathy.

"The fact is teachers are inundated with so much," Beamon said. "One teacher told me that if she took everything home that she saw at school, she would cry herself to sleep every night. So she compartmentalizes. But when she went through COPE it was a way to reengage that empathy."

Coleman was one of the few participants in my group who is not an educator. He explained why Nexus Community Church, which meets in an apartment complex near Forest Lane Academy, is joining forces with public schools and a nonprofit like Unite. "The heartbeat of our church is serving people on the margins," he said. "We think that if Jesus were here today, he would be focusing on people on the margins."

COPE was created by Think Tank, Inc., an anti-poverty nonprofit based in Dayton, Ohio. Walls dreams of extending the program to hundreds more schools, churches and other groups.

"When I met the people from Think Tank, I asked if they would help us make COPE available to 7 million people," she said. "I think everyone in DFW should experience it."

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