



The Philip Weinberg Forum
American Dream:
Three Women, Ten Children and
a Nation's Drive to End Welfare
Presented by Jason DeParle

November 17, 2004

Richard P. Nathan:

My name is Dick Nathan and I'm proud to be the director of the Rockefeller Institute. It's my honor to welcome you to this Weinberg Forum. We have a wonderful and interesting speaker and I will introduce him. He's on a bit of a tight schedule, so we'll move right along and try to have some time for Q & A. *American Dream* is Jason's book, which many of you know and have heard about. Jason DeParle is a senior writer at the *New York Times*. He's written six articles in the *New York Times* magazine. He was nominated twice as a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize. He won the George Polk Award for reporting on welfare systems. He is a very well known and important person in the field of social policy.

His new book is very typical of Jason. Jason believes that people aren't just statistics. You have to get inside their lives and know them and think about what they are really doing and facing and what the world looks like to people who need help. I mean this in the kindest way, but Jason was an early practitioner of journalists being embedded with the troops. In the most polite way and the most dignified way, he was immersed with the three families he's going to talk about. It's not the first time Jason has done this. He's always felt that you need to feel and really take in a sense of what public programs are all about when they hit the ground, which is very much of interest to all of us at the

Rockefeller Institute. We are honored to have him here. His new book has been well and widely received. It has what I call, and Jason may not or may be interested in hearing me say this, something of a surprise ending. In Washington, Jason is a key person who lots of people talk to, including the man who said we should end welfare as we know it. Jason will tell you about his work, his book, and his thoughts about this period. Jason, we welcome you.



Jason DeParle:

Thank you so much. When I first started the poverty beat at the *New York Times* years ago, Dick was, if not the first person I called, then the second person. So this is work in some ways grows out of 15 years of conversations with Dick. When I decided to follow some families, I was trying to decide which city to go to and Dick was very encouraging and pointing me towards Milwaukee. In honor of you, Dick, I have to tell my Milwaukee story. I decided to set the book in Milwaukee for obvious reasons. Milwaukee was the place where the welfare experiment was the boldest. I was trying to figure out a way to get there and spend a lot of time, day after day, rather than just intermittent visits. I had the idea that we at the *New York Times* should do a yearlong series of stories based in Milwaukee on the welfare system to look at post welfare life. I had to sell the idea to my boss, who was initially a little skeptical. He thought if we were going to do that much on one welfare program, we should do it in our readership area. But I tried to persuade him that world history was being made in Milwaukee. The rolls were falling faster than anybody could have imagined and it would be to his credit to have a reporter there to capture this moment. He finally said, “Okay, okay.” Joe was my hero in journalism. He escorted me out of his office, put his arm on my shoulder, and he said, “You know, I’ve been to Milwaukee.” And I thought this is going to be this tender moment with the wise

man where he was going to say, “I’ve been to Milwaukee and I know this story will try your soul” or “I’ve been to Milwaukee and I know you’re going to make great Midwestern friendships that will last a lifetime.” Instead he said, “You know, I’ve been to Milwaukee so I know your motives are pure. It’s not like you’re trying to go to Honolulu.”

With that my great adventure began. The book’s called *American Dream*. It takes its title from an obscure line in Bill Clinton’s first speech about welfare as president in which he said, “I think we all know in our heart of hearts that too many of our people never get a shot at the American dream.” I’ll give you a quick overview of the book and then I want to talk about the main character, a woman named Angela Jobe. The book begins in October 1991 with two coincidental but alternately colliding events. The first is that the long shot candidate for president, Bill Clinton, gives his first domestic policy speech 13 months before the election in which he says, “In the Clinton administration, we are going to put an end to welfare as we know it.” Nobody notices. The *New York Times* didn’t cover the speech. The *Washington Post* focused a very short piece on the speech but on a different phrase: “Clinton’s promise to create a new covenant.” A quickly forgotten phrase. But over time, this is one of the interesting things about the book: to see how often the poverty reporter for the *New York Times*, among others, missed the big story at the moment and was focused on the wrong stuff. This phrase, “to end welfare as we know it,” over time took on a life of its own and ended up upending six decades of social policy.

Another thing happened by coincidence that same month. Two women got on a bus in Chicago and moved to Milwaukee to start a new life on welfare. One of them was named Angela Jobe, one was named Jewell Reed — two cousins. They had been on welfare in Chicago, but the real way they were paying the rent was through their boyfriends who were selling drugs. Rents were so high in Chicago and the grant was so low that you couldn’t rent an apartment on the entire grant. In Milwaukee, just 90 miles up the road, the arithmetic was reversed. The rents were lower and the grant was higher. You could rent an apartment and still have a little bit of money left over. That’s all they

knew about Milwaukee when they got on the bus to go. Their boyfriends had gone to jail. They needed to find a place to live. They moved up the road to Milwaukee. They certainly didn't know they were moving to the place that would become the first city in the country to end welfare.

So, you've got two parallel narrative lines: The political drive to end welfare and their attempts to start this life on welfare. They collide in the middle of the book. They brought up a third cousin, a woman named Opal Caples. So, the book becomes a story of these three women in one extended family. Two of the three, Angie and Jewell, quickly got off the rolls and became full-time steady workers. Their story is really a story of low-wage work and what kind of rewards that brings in both economic and noneconomic terms. Opal was the cousin I thought was going to be the success. I really thought the book was going to be about Opal. She was the smartest of the three. The most charming, the only one with a high school degree. She had gone to community college. She was a very engaging woman who was addicted to crack cocaine. I didn't know that when I first met her. She had a more tragic, calamitous really, fall through the social services bureaucracy than I would have guessed possible. I'll come back to that.

One other aspect of the book I want to mention, at least in passing, involves the family history. It's three women in one extended family. One day I was at Jewell's just hanging around the house when Jewell's mom came to visit. Her name was Hattie Mae Crenshaw. I asked, in a quite unsuspecting way, "Hello, Ms. Crenshaw. Tell me about your life. Where are from?" She answered with a sentence that stopped me in my tracks. She said, "Jason, I was born in Doddsville, Mississippi, in 1937 on Senator Jim Eastland's plantation. That's a time when black peoples were just beginning to come out of slavery."

The name James Eastland may mean a lot to a few of you and perhaps nothing to some of you. Eastland was one the last prominent, powerful segregationists in the south. He was chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee for 22 years during the Civil Rights age and used to go around boasting that he had a pocket in his vest where all the civil rights bills went to die. I thought, "Gosh, Hattie Mae, is she really from the Eastland

plantation? Could this be possible or is this something that she's heard in the family?" Reporters have a category for stories when you get a tip like that, "Good if true." We also have a category we don't talk about in public, "Too good to check." This got close. I did check it. I went down to the plantation in the summer of 2000. The plantation was still in the Eastland family. James Eastland's son, Woods Eastland, owned it and Hattie Mae's uncle, Mac Caples, was still there. He was 85 years old. He had been there since 1927 as a sharecropper and field hand. I got very into the family history. My book editor was not interested in the family history. She said, "You are not writing a book about the American south. Don't do this, you're writing a book about Milwaukee." I persisted and said, "I really need to do this. Give me a week, no more." So, a year and half later I called her back and said, "Wendy, I've got it nailed down. I traced it back six generations to a common ancestor who was brought into slavery in Mississippi in 1843." I thought I was I writing about Milwaukee in the late 1990s but the book now starts in Mississippi in 1843 and tells six generations of the family story from slavery through sharecropping to the move to Chicago and then ultimately up to Milwaukee.

I think that historical backdrop is important for a number of reasons. I will need some time to come back to that if you'd like. Mostly what I want to talk about is Angie. The best way I know how to describe her to you is just the way I introduce her in the book. With your indulgence, let me read a paragraph about Angie. She's coming to Washington next week. At least she says she is. We're supposed to do a radio show together. I'm sorry she can't be here today but I'll beam her in for you.

The month Bill Clinton announced that he was running for president, she stepped off a Greyhound bus in Milwaukee to start a new life. She was twenty-five years old and arrived from Chicago towing two large duffel bags and three young kids. Angie had a pretty milk-chocolate face and a fireplug build — her four-foot-eleven-inch frame carried 150 pounds — and the combination could make her look tender or tough, depending on her mood. She had never seen Milwaukee before and pronounced herself unimpressed. "Why they got all these old-ass houses!" she grouched.

“Where the brick at?” Irreverence was Angie’s religion. She arrived in Milwaukee as she moved through the world, a short, stout fountain of exclamation points, half of them capping sentences that would peel paint from the bus station walls. Absent her animating humor, the transcript may sound off-putting. But up close her habit of excitable swearing ... came off as something akin to charm. “I just express myself so accurately!” she laughed.

I’m a little worried about the habit of excitable swearing given the radio interview, but I’ve got my fingers crossed.

The cascade of off-color commentary flowing alongside the late-night cans of Colt 45, could make Angie seem like a jaded veteran of ghetto life. Certainly she had plenty to feel jaded about. She grew up on the borders of Chicago’s gangland. Her father was a drunk. She had her first baby at seventeen, dropped out of high school, and had two more in quick succession. She didn’t have a diploma or a job, and the man she loved was in jail. By the time she arrived in Milwaukee, she had been on welfare for nearly eight years, the sum of her adult life. The hard face was real but also a mask. Her mother had worked two jobs to send her to parochial school, and though Angie tried to hide it, she still bore traces of the English student from Aquinas High. Lots of women came to Milwaukee looking for welfare checks. Not many then felt the need to start a poem about their efforts to discern God’s will.

*I’m tired
of trying to understand
what God wants of me*

Worried that was *too* irreverent, Angie substituted “the world” for “God” and stored the unfinished page in a bag so high in her closet she couldn’t reach it with a chair.... Stories of street fights Angie was happy

to share but the bag was so private that hardly anyone knew it existed. “Don’t you know I like looking mean?” she said one day. While it sounded like one of her self-mocking jokes, Angie segued into a quiet confession. “If people think you’re nice, they’ll take your kindness for weakness. That’s a side of me I don’t want anybody to see. That way I don’t have to worry about nobody hurting me.”

Angie had this dirty, red vinyl bag with her entire inner life packed in it — journals, letters, papers she had written in high school. All stuck up way in the back of her closet. I didn’t know about it for years. I wrote a chapter about Angie’s adolescence and about her getting pregnant in high school. I never liked the chapter. I had asked Angie ten times, “What was it like to get pregnant in high school?” I always got some version of the same response, “It ain’t no big deal, you just get on with things.” She came off in the chapter as almost cavalier, with none of the emotional complexity or sensitivity I had experienced in her. I showed it to a friend and he said it got his inner “Archie Bunker” going. I didn’t know he had an inner “Archie Bunker.” I didn’t want to be the guy to get it going. I was really frustrated with this chapter. Finally, Angie lets on that she had kept a journal and that she wrote in it the day she got pregnant. And what she wrote was just the opposite of what she told me. She said, “I’m going to have to start a new life. I have a new life within me.” Just the opposite of what she told me of it not being a big deal. Here she’s telling herself at the time that it was a profound big deal. Angie was a real challenge to report on. Most people you meet they want to tell you their sensitive side. They put forth their most appealing face. Angie was the opposite. She was much quicker to tell me about pulling a switchblade on her stepfather than she would about keeping a journal or writing about her poetry or anything of that nature.

Let me talk about Angie’s experiences as a worker. I want to talk about it through three lenses: what it meant to her personally, what it meant to her financially, and what it meant to her kids. Angie had been on the rolls for 12 years. She had no high school degree, four kids, no particular skills — exactly the kind of person that so many of us, me included, had concerns about what would happen to with this new law. Who was going to

hire her? What was she going to do? She's down to 12 years, what's going to happen with time limits? There's plenty of reason on the surface to be pessimistic about what would happen to Angie. Within six months, she was off the rolls and had become a full-time steady worker. This was under Jason Turner's work experiment in Milwaukee. Jason, as most of you know, later came to New York as the New York City welfare commissioner. Just an astonishing movement off the rolls and Jewell was the same thing. Jewell had been on the rolls for eight years and moved quickly into full-time steady work. That's part of the good news. There's good news in Angie's story. She was much more able to work than most of us would've predicted. She became a nursing aide. Some of you may have had reason to think about this line of work. I hadn't, in particular, but it is dirty, difficult, dangerous work. The dirty part is intuitive enough. They work with bedpans, trafficking in infectious fluids, constantly cleaning people up. Difficult you can understand. The dangerous was a surprise to me. Nursing aides actually get injured more often than coal miners. When I first came across that I thought that has to be wrong. I called the Bureau of Labor Statistics and they verified it. A week later, I was typing it up and thought that's got to be wrong. I call back to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Nursing Aide Injuries, "It's me again, is that possibly right?" I think I wore out my welcome over there. It's from all the lifting they do. They're constantly lifting people out of beds, out of wheelchairs, in and out of showers, spraying their backs. In the nursing home where Angie works, they sit around in the break room and they tease each other about the shooting pains and tell each other about the pains that they have shooting down their backs. It pays about \$7.50 an hour on average nationwide. One out of four nursing aides has no health insurance. So, they spend their days providing health care to others. One out of five lives below the poverty line. It's not at all unusual for a nursing home to have a turnover rate among nursing aides of 100 percent or more per year. It's a subject to a lot of scatological humor in welfare offices among recipients being sent on job searches.

It's a tough, unappealing job in many ways and Angie loved it. She loved almost everything about it except for the pay. She liked the brightly lit, clean nursing home, the facility itself. She liked her uniform. She liked thinking of herself as a nurse. She liked



the teamwork of patient care. She liked the gossip in the break room. She really liked her patients. She really connected with them. I used to tell Angie that she had more patience for her patients than she did for her kids. Angie would say, "Ain't no surprise. Look at my kids." Her work brought out a latent empathy in her, a real generous

streak that was a nice thing to see. Clinton used to talk about work being a form of civic connectedness, social glue. I was a little skeptical. It always sounded nice when Clinton said it, but I was a little skeptical. I mean work can be those things, but work can also be a form of exploitation or abuse. I think in Angie's case there were elements of both. But there are certainly elements of this kind of civic generosity that came out of her.

Early on in her experience as a nursing aide, Angie, a short African American woman, is bending over a frail, frightened elderly white woman who, I think, had soiled herself. Angie is cleaning this poor woman and the woman looks up at her and in her anger and frustration barks out a racial epithet. "Get your hands off me you" On the streets, Angie would've attacked back. In the nursing home, she just laughed at the woman, kind of cackled, and said, "Well, you know what is cleaning you up 'cause you can't do it yourself. So, you might as well let me." I asked her about it afterwards and she said, "Well, old people, they're stuck in their ways. They're in a tight spot and you have to make allowances." It really brought out a real compassionate streak in her. That's the other bit of good news. She could work and her work meant something to her. She really took pride in it.

The bad news is it didn't pay very well. Angie, Opal, and Jewell all released their welfare and earnings records. They signed a thing from the state so I could get their

records going back 12 years. I had a good administrative data look from when they were food stamps, welfare, and all that and also what their employers reported to the state for unemployment insurance. So, it wasn't just self-reports. If you look at Angie's last five years on welfare versus her first three years off welfare, average them, then adjust for inflation and all that, her income goes up about \$3,400 a year on average, which is about 15 percent. Not life transforming, but it's a step up. But that doesn't account for work expenses. Even if you take a modest estimate for just transportation alone you divide by about half that gain. She had some minimal child care costs, not a lot because she mostly left the kids to mind themselves. At one point, Kesha, her 11 year old, was taking care of three younger siblings. And Angie lost her health insurance for the better part of three years. My best guess is when you net it all together it was about a wash or an ever so slight increase, about \$500 a year ahead or something like that. An imperceptible increment up. She didn't lose ground I don't think. But she worked awfully hard and she didn't wind up demonstrably or visibly ahead in any way.

What really struck me wasn't so much the before and after comparison though. It was the amount of economic hardship in her life in either event. Angie out-earned nearly nine out of ten women who left the welfare rolls in Milwaukee. She was at the 85th percentile of post welfare earners. Nonetheless, she lost her electricity three times in three years. She went without health insurance. She also ran short on food more times than I could count, which was something that really did surprise me. It wouldn't have surprised me if you told me somebody leaving welfare for work was going to run short on food. I think it would've surprised me if you told me somebody at the top quintile would chronically be having problems keeping food in the house. This was another thing that was hard to report on because if I asked Angie directly she would deny it. She would say, "Ain't nobody starving in this house." But I slowly came to realize that a lot of the fights in the house were really fights about food. At one point, a big fight broke out between Angie's daughter Kesha, when Kesha was fourteen, and Angie's boyfriend, Marcus. The kids are running around the house. It's a big scene, screaming, everybody is yelling at each other. It ended when Kesha punctuates it by saying, "What do you expect, Marcus, it's nine o'clock and we haven't eaten all day." So, that's what the fight is really about.

It's a fight about people being hungry. At one point, Opal, the other cousin, moved in with Angie and kept her food under her bed and put a lock on the door. I stopped by the nursing home on Angie's 33rd birthday to wish her a happy birthday and she asked, "Where you going when you leave from here?" I said, "I don't know, why?" "Which direction you going?" "I don't know, why?" "Are you going by the Wendy's?" Piecing things together I realized it was her 33rd birthday, she had been at work all day, and she hadn't eaten.

Like I said, Angie went without health insurance for about three years. To me it was an abomination, particularly given she was working in the health care industry. It wasn't a crisis in that at least Angie was for the most part healthy. Jewel also lost her health insurance and also worked in a nursing home. She had bleeding ulcers and was hospitalized to have her ulcers treated and wound up having her wages garnished to pay off the hospital bill. Jewell didn't think that this was interesting enough even to tell me about. Just as a side note, it's interesting what they thought rose to the level of significance and interesting enough to note. And this was something Jewel, who I had been following around for a couple of years by now, didn't think this merited a mention. I got into the house and she was heating the house with the oven. I asked why are you heating the house with the oven? She explains she's having her wages garnished. I must have registered a look of surprise on my face because she looked surprised in return and said, "Well, everybody who goes to work in Milwaukee is going to have their wages garnished. Everybody owes a hospital bill." In other words, this was just to be expected in her worldview.

Let me step outside the story myself. I'll step outside this narrative now and import somebody, Newt Gingrich or somebody, to give the best face on this story. Here's somebody, I think, who is a supporter of the law and a way he might interpret this story. You could say Angie and Jewel were each 30 years old, they dropped out of high school, and they had kids. They had long stays on welfare when they started their new life as workers. Maybe it's unrealistic for us to transform their lives economically. Maybe they dug themselves a big hole due to whatever combination of bad choices, bad luck, and bad

circumstances. At least we've moved them now from welfare to work. That's progress. Now that they're in the workplace, they have the potential to move up. They haven't lost ground. We've stabilized them in the workforce, but what we really want from this law is for their kids to be on a better trajectory. Now that they're working, they can be role models for their kids. That would be a reasonable lens through which to see this experience. It's an intuitive thought.

A lot of working parents like to think that their work communicates something of value to their kids, not just monetary but some sort of model to follow. The question is whether it holds true, particularly for low-wage single mothers raising kids. There's a particular context here, low-wage single mothers raising kids in a dangerous inner-city neighborhood. I have to say this is the place where I thought the Washington policy narrative and what I saw on the ground most diverged. I did not see hardly any evidence that Angie's or Jewel's experience as workers was of any benefit to their kids. That their kids were inculcating any kind of new direction in their lives. I'm sure many of you know Alex Kotlowitz's political book *There Are No Children Here*. I sometimes thought about Angie's house as "there are no parents here." The more time that Angie was at work, the more time the kids were really just left alone. The night that big fight broke out between Kesha and Marcus, one of the younger kids went screaming across the street crying to a pay phone and put in a quarter to call Angie. The supervisor answered the phone. It was 9:00 at night and the supervisor said, "I'm sorry, she's busy with a patient. She can't come to the phone." Here you have this moment of chaos and hunger in the house and Angie's work isn't something the kids are experiencing as an uplift but as a removal.

The kids did have a role model. He was a guy named Ken Thigpen. He was Jewell's boyfriend at the time. He was also a drug dealer and a pimp. He was running hookers, but he was the guy who had status in the neighborhood. He had money. He had time. He was the one guy who actually doted on the kids at all, spent any time with them, took them to the park, bought them stuff, took them to the movies, took them to play ball. When Angie's oldest son, Redd, was in seventh grade, he was asked to write an essay about the American city he'd most like to visit. He wrote he wanted to go to Los Vegas

“because ho’ing is legal out there.” I think about some the conversations I had back in Washington, “Now that the mother’s are working, the kids have new values.” I think about Redd and his “ho’ing is legal out there.” When I talk to my friends who are affluent parents, we are always talking about how overscheduled our young children’s’ lives are. You’re running them from soccer to the birthday party to the piano lessons. Angie’s kids were just chronically bored. Really, there was nothing for them to do. One policy piece that I took away from this was that we need to be more sensitive to the importance of after school programs. I used to think of Redd, Angie’s son, sometimes as filibustering the walls. He walked around the house talking to the goldfish or talking to the wall, just talking, talking. These kids, it was like nobody was listening, to have somebody there to spend some time with them.

Let me leave aside Angie for just one second and briefly tell you about Opal’s experience, which was of a very different nature. This is a story about Opal’s addiction, but it’s also a story about the Wisconsin bureaucracy’s response. Let me give you a bit of background, which some of you already know. Milwaukee was a leading, if not the leading, experiment in welfare privatization. They took the city and divided it into six districts with five different private contractors running the city. They ran the gambit of privatization. A grassroots African American group called The Opportunities Industrialization Center had one contract. When you walk in there are Black Muslims in bow ties as the security agents and Nelson Mandela and Malcolm X up on the wall. The first day I walked in with Jason Turner I thought, “This is a Republican work program?” There were the blue chips of the nonprofit world — Good Will, YWCA — and there was a for-profit operator, Maximus, which many of you will know is contracting in almost every state and trades on the New York Stock Exchange. These were very, very different models of privatization. The idea was that they would compete with each other. Opal had six caseworkers at three different agencies over the course of three years. None of them ever realized or figured out that she was on drugs, although it was written in the old AFDC case files. All you had to do is read the old case file and you would know. None of them gave her any kind of work assignment or activity. Six times in a row, they sent her home and kept sending her a check. This was in a system that professed having universal

work requirements. If it had happened at one place with one caseworker then the caseworker wasn't paying attention or one agency wasn't doing very well. But it happened to replicate itself three times with three different agencies. It made me start to think that, "Gee, there's something going on here." At one point, Opal was binging, selling off her furniture for drug money really. She walked into OIC frightened, looking for help, begging really to be seen, and the receptionist sent her home and said, "I'm sorry, we don't take walk-ins. Go home and make an appointment."

You could always say this is an anomalous experience. Through her was how I started to think, "Gee, what's really going on inside these agencies?" There's a chapter in the book about Maximus, which was the last agency where Opal wound up at. In the end, Maximus repaid more than a \$1 million to the state. The tragedy here was the agencies were awash in money because the rolls went down so fast they were really over funded. So, you had the rare opportunity where you could do all kinds of wonderful things. Opal is a hard case under any circumstance, no doubt, but it's a rare instance where you did have the money to do different things. Maximus spent more than \$1 million on stuff like bus ads, TV ads, and billboards because the National Governors Association was coming to town and they were advertising themselves around the city on golf balls, golf tees, fanny packs, and coffee mugs. They spent \$25,000 to bring in a Broadway singer, Melba Moore, to sing to welfare recipients. They hired professional clowns. There's a line item for \$2,600 for professional clowns to perk up an office party, along with tens of thousands of dollars in office entertainment. Just incredible misuse of money. The real disheartening thing to me though wasn't the waste of the money but the disarray in the casework among the caseworker staff there. This hasn't been publicized but it's in the book. One of the caseworkers at Maximus was arrested for extorting kickbacks from clients, one was quietly pushed out the door for impregnating a client, and another was quietly pushed out the door after his clients complained he was recruiting them into a drug and prostitution ring. Several of Opal's caseworkers were on drugs themselves. One of them was soon arrested for passing bad checks and one check was of a Maximus client. Maximus policy was to encourage the hiring of family and friends as a network for recruiting talent. The head of the office had his wife, his son, his niece, his mistress, and

his mistress' mother all on the payroll and put out a memo asking the staff not to gossip about his girlfriend in front of his wife because it was upsetting her. The number two person in the office had her son on the payroll until he went to jail for murder. The place was in complete disarray and they were also essentially falsifying the casework records. Wisconsin boasted of having 100 percent participation, that everybody had a work assignment. So the state comes in and does some kind of assessment. They just went through all these cases, people they had never met, and typed up work assignments and put them in the system. The state never talked to the clients or tried to see if anybody is doing anything. It was just a computer audit. This happened to Opal. There's a scene in the book where Opal at this point is homeless, pregnant, and living in a crack house. The caseworker tells me this story. He gets her case, it's literally got dust on it. He's a new caseworker. He's got a week to clean up the case because the state auditors are coming. He's blowing the dust off it, he's never met this woman, he says, "Opal Caples, okay sweetie, it's this for you." And he typed up this phony work assignment. He's never met her, she's never met him. She never gets the assignment, but with that they were passing the state audit.

In the course of this, as some of you may know, Wisconsin won the Innovations in American Government Award, one of the most prestigious awards in American government from the Ford Foundation and the Kennedy School. The two things they cited were its financial efficiency and the quality of its casework. I don't mean that as a cheap shot at the awards program because I think it's actually a deeper warning to people like me too. I didn't report this in the *New York Times* and I was there for a good bit of this. One of the lessons is that it's really hard to know what's going on inside a program. One of the things that Maximus was doing when reporters or other people came to visit was this thing called Max Academy, their motivation program. Inside the agency, they were always telling me that the group gripe was that clients would never show up. They had no clients coming to it. But when reporters came to visit, they made staff go in as clients to fill the room. They were good at putting on a show. A lot of us were slow to figure out what was going on deep down inside the system. Maximus has repaid \$1 million to the state. Good Will repaid \$1 million and withdrew from the program. The

head of OIC has now been convicted of federal corruption charges. For all the celebrity that's attended it, it wound up as a very troubled system.

Last thing, I wanted to say that I came out of the reporting thinking a lot more of the role of the fathers than I did before. The subtitle of the book is "Three Women, Ten Kids." None of the three women and none of the ten kids had grown up with a stable father in the house. All of them identified it as a source of grief, pain, loss, and regret in their lives. This sometimes can take ideological overtones about family structure. I didn't come to this through any kind of ideological ones, at least not consciously. I started thinking because the women and the kids kept bringing it up so often. It was a staple of after-dinner speeches. Generations of these kids grow up and they don't see anybody get up in the morning and go to work. There are no alarm clocks ringing in the central city. That's really not what I saw at all. It does not fit the picture. Angie, Opal, and Jewell all grew up with working mothers, hardworking single mothers. They didn't grow up with welfare mothers. They grew up with hardworking single mothers. They too became unworking then working single mothers. There were other people in the neighborhood who worked. The kids had definitely seen people get up and go to work. Not as much as after the laws passed, but they certainly had seen examples of workers. What they hadn't seen, really without exception, was an example of a father in the house providing economically for the family and also helping in the parenting. As I said, it's something that came out constantly in weird ways in the conversations.

When Kesha was 14, she had to pick a high school. Her father had gone to jail when she was 7. He was serving a 65 year sentence. She's now 14, it's been seven years, half her life. He's in jail in Joliet, Illinois. She's seen him three times in the course of seven years. She scarcely has a relationship with him anymore. They



write now and then. But she always told him she would get him out of jail. So, when she's choosing a high school, she chooses a high school across town that requires her to take two city buses, an hour and a half commute. This is a bad choice for Kesha. Kesha is not a good student. Kesha's chronically truant. Kesha missed half of seventh grade. She needs to live across the street from the high school or in the high school. She doesn't need to live across town from the high school. So why is she doing it? It's got a pre-law program and she always told her dad she'd get him out of jail. She's making a decision detrimental to her education out of some desire to honor or preserve or renew this bond with her father. She ends up dropping out of high school.

I had to think a lot about why Angie was a nursing aide. Why did Angie like doing it? For years and years, I was trying to figure out Angie. What was it about this nursing home work that appeals to her. She could do other things that pay just as much or as little. I read a nursing home ethnography and there's a theory of nursing aides that they like to be caretakers for other people. It's kind of a fancy theory, that they have been caretakers for someone in their family or were motivated by something. I had lots of these fancy theories about Angie. She usually met them with derision or sheer abuse. Angie is 4' 11" but she has a 7' 3" voice. She said things like, "Did you really go to college?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "Is that the kind of crap they teach you there?" I was trying to get up my nerve to ask Angie about her inner caretaker. Before I could even get it out, she said, "I'll tell you why I became a nursing aide. It's because of my daddy." In her case, she hadn't been a caretaker for him. He hadn't been a caretaker for her. He was a terrible alcoholic. She scarcely knew him. She hadn't seen him in years. He came by to see her right before she moved from Chicago to Milwaukee. She was stunned by how much he had deteriorated. He was so weak he couldn't even take himself to the bathroom. They spent two hours together. She said it was one the most tender and nicest two hours they had ever spent together. She never saw him again. A month later he was dead and she moved to Milwaukee. She said by her admission that she felt so guilty about this that five years later she's becoming a nursing aide somehow to re-enact that caretaking scenario because it somehow makes her feel better about the relationship she hadn't had with her father. If I came up to the Rockefeller Institute of Government and

said, “I’ve done a seven year study of welfare recipients in Milwaukee and this is my conclusion,” I think you probably would laugh me out of the room, but it came from Angie herself. I can’t think of a more profound testament to the importance of that bond. It takes nothing away from the hard, hard effort of some of these single mothers in these dual jobs of providing for their kids and trying to raise their kids. It’s too much work really to expect out of any one person. Angie needs help economically and the kids want the bond emotionally with their father. In terms of future directions that certainly one place I’ve been thinking.

For all the hardship in the story, there is some hope in it, I think. There’s hope actually on a policy level. There has been creation of at least a rudimentary work-based safety net such as the Earned Income Tax Credit for child care. Angie eventually gets some subsidized health insurance. Even beyond that, I think there’s hope in the resilience, strength, resourcefulness, and creativity that Angie and Jewell showed through all of this. Moynihan was very focused on dependency. He used to talk about “to be dependent is to hang.” That was one of his sayings. Angie never thought of herself as depending on anybody or hanging on anything. She saw herself as a strong, self-reliant woman who did what it took to get by. I think there was more human capacity in her, and by extension in lots of people on public aid, than sometimes we acknowledged in the public debate.

Let me close with a thought. The welfare revolution grew from the fear that the poor were mired in a culture of entitlement, stuck in a swamp of excessive demands, legal prerogative, and social due. There certainly was a culture of entitlement in American life, but it was scarcely concentrated at the bottom as anyone following the wave of corporate scandals now knows. What really stands out about Angie and Jewell is how little they felt they were owed. They went through life acting entitled to nothing, not heat or lights, not medical care, not even three daily meals, and they scarcely complained. When welfare was there for the taking they got on the bus and took it. When it wasn’t, they made other plans. In ending welfare, the country took away their single largest source of income. They didn’t lobby or sue. They didn’t march or riot. They made their way against the odds into wearying, underpaid jobs. That does now entitle them to

something, to a shot at the American dream more promising than the one they have received. Thank you.

Richard P. Nathan:

Thank you. That was a wonderful talk and book and teaching device. It's also much to your credit that Jason is traveling around meeting people and talking to people about the thoughts that he expressed and exchanged with us. Robert Doar, who is the commissioner here and worked with Jason in Washington a long time ago, is out of the country and said how badly he felt that he wasn't going to be here. His new deputy, Russell Sykes, is here and I told Robert I would ask Russell to ask the first question and then we will have a little time for Q & A because we're pretty much on schedule. So we can have some conversation and we can still get Jason on his way through security and travel in these more complicated times. Russell?

Russell Sykes:

Just a quick question. I wonder, there are so many things to navigate with the prospects economically and about the cultural issue and the violence issue. You talked about the father being in jail in many instances. I think it is the next frontier of what needs to be done. But I'm curious if you would be willing to speculate a bit about some of the things that can be done?

Jason DeParle:

I feel like I'm a little out of my job description there. Sometimes I get asked if it isn't just purely economic. Don't these guys just need jobs? I don't know, but my gut tells me it's more than that. Certainly that's part of it. I mean, a jobless man isn't an attractive provider. But I did feel that there was a very strong cultural undertow against fatherhood in these neighborhoods.

I wrote a piece about a guy named Ken. I'm sorry, I left Ken out there as a drug dealer and a pimp. Ken, Jewell's boyfriend, is the real transformation surprise story in the book. Ken had been a drug dealer and a career criminal since he was 17, ten years. He spent half his life in jail and Jewell is deeply in love with him. Angie, the tragedy of the book, really bets her heart and soul on her ability to get ahead as a worker. She's constantly taking second jobs, getting cars, trying to get to a better paying nursing home in the suburbs. She really thinks she's going to work her way up and out of her predicament. Jewell worked but doesn't care about work. She really puts her heart in Ken. Ken goes to jail for two years. All of Jewell's girlfriends tell her forget it, he's not worth waiting for. She ignores them and writes him every other day. I'm certain that the book is going to end with Ken getting out of prison, dumping her, and going back to his street life. Here's Angie doing the right thing, betting on her ability to work her way out of her hole, and Jewell is caught up with this guy. Ken gets out of prison in the spring of 2000. I took Jewell up to the prison to pick him up. I'm thinking I'll save the directions, we'll be back here soon. This guy's spent half his life in jail. He gets back to Milwaukee and a week later some friend from prison brings him by some crack and it's suddenly Saturday morning cartoons with the angel and devil on each shoulder: Take it, don't. Sell it, don't. He decides he's just tired of being in prison. He gives up drug dealing. He ends up becoming a pizza deliveryman. They have a baby together. He's been out of jail for four plus years and no arrests. I think he's really gone straight. He's helping to raise the son. He's the one example in the circle of a responsible man staying at home.

In answer to your question, he has now lost prestige and status in the eyes of the kids. They now mock him behind his back. The kids are now teenagers. They used to admire him when he was a drug dealer and a pimp. Now they roll their eyes and say, "pizza deliveryman." Ken's also trying to be a rapper. He's got some rap stuff in his basement and mixers or something. Ken's only 33 years old, the kids at 17 are thinking, "He's an old fogey." He's writing raps about his former life as a drug dealer and pimp and they're rolling their eyes thinking he's Frank Sinatra down in the basement. The old fart who's a pizza deliveryman. It's sort of sad because it angers him that he doesn't have the respect, which is a big thing in his world. I don't think it's entirely economic, but

there seems to be a real oppositional culture there towards fathers taking minimum wage jobs and doing what Ken's doing.

In terms of what to do, I guess I'd throw out a bunch of money, block grants. I'd have the father's block grant and let conservatives try the marriage counseling. Maybe that would do some good, I'm not against it. Government plays a role in the public education campaign, teen pregnancy, and anti-smoking. I don't see why it couldn't do some good in this area. I'd also try prison re-entry stuff. There are no programs you can point to and say that that's the solution. I think we're 20 years behind where we were with the women. So, put out some money and evaluate it and see if we can tease out some answers. It seems like it's such an opportunity to really have a left-right coming together on this. I mean everybody believes in fatherhood. The left wants to get these guys jobs. The right wants to get them taking care of their kids. I think any honest person would look at the evidence and say there is no great basis of evidence to move on. Everybody thinks it's really important, so why not make an investment and hire a bunch of great evaluators to find out what works. I hope it doesn't bog down in one of these destructive Washington ideological crossfires.

Richard P. Nathan:

Helen, you had your hand up?

Helen Desfosses:

If you had a chance to give a lecture on your book to the new Congress, would you have other policy recommendations?

Jason DeParle:

That would be the first one. Put out some money for fatherhood and maybe design in some ways that you have to try a few different things. The right definitely want to do this marriage education stuff. Fine, let them have a crack at it. Try at least three of four

different things and come back in five years and then have the argument about which one would work. The other things I think that flow out of Angie's story are in some obvious sense that no matter how hard she works she doesn't really become self-sufficient. Self-sufficient, I think it's a misleading word. She continues to receive government subsidies in food stamps. She needs subsidized health insurance. She now ends up taking in one of Opal's younger daughters. She's adopted the daughter. She needs child care for her. The intermittent income tax credit looms very large in her life, which is 20 percent of her income between state and federal. We need to preserve, strengthen, and increase some sort of work-based safety net.

Number two is the after-school programs. There was this terrible murder in Milwaukee. Some of you may recall this. A group of kids, some as young as ten years old, chased down a guy and beat him to death. It made the national news because the kids were so young. I was flipping through the *New York Times* and I saw a headline saying Brown Street, Milwaukee. What in the world? Angie lives on 2400 West Brown. That was on her block. When Angie is away working all these wacky hours in the nursing home, those kids are in a house or outside on the stoop and the kids are going by and this is what you get caught up in. Those kids need a safe place to be. There's a piece of social science on the New Hope Project that NPRC evaluated. The one thing that seemed to make a real difference was after-school care for the boys. It didn't seem to make any difference for the girls. It raised their school behavior and performance above how they behaved and how they did in school by the test equivalent of raising an SAT score by 100 points. It's a big impact. I can see it. You can see it in Redd filibustering the walls and writing essays about ho's. He needed to have someplace else.

Lorraine Noval:

Was there much conversation about marriage when you were around, or the lack of it, or why they weren't? Were they more amenable to it and the men weren't there? What was the marriage conversation? Would they have taken advantage of marriage education if we put it out there?

Jason DeParle:

Well, I didn't, the Bush administration did. One thing that leapt out at me was how much of it involved fears of infidelity, that there was a real lack of trust. Angie kept using the word "trust." You have to have a lot of trust to be married. It took me a long time to understand what she was really saying. Ken eventually translated it for me. If your woman or your man is sleeping with somebody else and you're not married, that's bad, but if you're married that's *really* bad. That was a part of it at any rate. A sociologist has written about inner-city communities that have a idealization of marriage. I actually did see some evidence of that. Ken and Jewell have been together, they have a baby, they're living together, why don't they get married? He says he's not going to have "no City Hall-ass wedding." If he's going to get married, he's going to have to do like the TV character, *Martin*, who did it on the beach with a black tie ceremony. It would have to be a big, elaborate thing. In his mind, at this point, there is a grandiose view about what a wedding would be and this fear that what if she cheats on me. I'd say, of the two, that the fidelity and suspicion ranked the higher to me. In terms of whether I think anybody would go to a marriage education program, probably not if you hung out a shield and said come for marriage education. But I did talk to Ken about this. Ken came out of prison with a bricklaying degree and he was really good at it. He was the TA and he had straight A's. He did well in prison in this bricklaying course. Let's say he came out of prison and there was a program for ex-cons to get them good paying bricklaying jobs. Then as part of it, if you have kids we have a fatherhood group. As part of this, we could start to talk about, "Were your parents married?" If he got into it that way, I don't think he'd walk in and say, "Yeah, I want marriage education," but he's certainly open to getting some help. If you bundled it in, then maybe.

Richard P. Nathan:

One of the big areas that we're working in here is the Faith-Based Initiative, which David Wright is directing. It's always struck me that if that's something you want to try and do, the churches may be an agent that we should particularly try to understand as doing this.

It's just a comment. A couple more questions and then you can have a little more time to talk to Jason before he has to go. George, you have a question?

George Falco:

In light of what you said about fatherhood and ??, do you think that there is any hope for a substantial federal EITC ???

Jason DeParle:

Any political hope? Gosh, I have no idea where Congress would be on that. I really don't, I'm sorry.

George Falco:

The point of the solution to low-wage work ???

Jason DeParle:

I assume one thing that would arise if you had that you would be at risk of having increasing the marriage penalty or marriage disincentive. I would imagine that would come up, I don't know.

Richard P. Nathan:

Robert Doar was saying to me that now they couldn't act when they had that \$6 billion on the table at the end of the last Congress, that would have been the 107th I guess, now heading into the 108th Congress. You wonder whether a continuing resolution, this is me speculating, may be better than a reauthorization for people who care about this set of issues and programs. I'm going to call on Karen and then Tom Gais.

Karen Schimke:

You raised the importance of work support, like the ITC and family shelter, but my question has to do with Angie and so forth. If she were to get further education, is there a good system of further education so she can move ahead in her career into, say, a nurse's aide, the next rung up or of course something else?

Jason DeParle:

That's been a real problem for her. I think that would be the fourth plank of the DeParle plan: workplace safety net, after-school programs, fatherhood, and some sort of skills ladder. Angie has been to four or five GED classes at least. She can't get through them. She's obviously a very smart, capable, resilient woman. For Jewell it is the same thing. As Jewell said, "I'm just not interested back then in 1976 when the Pilgrims came." It's just not her thing. She's not going to get through the social studies aspect. Jewell is a really talented hairdresser. She does a good kitchen table hairdressing business. But she can't work in a beauty parlor because she doesn't have a GED. Now, why do you need to know about the Pilgrims to cut hair? I know about the Pilgrims and you don't want me cutting your hair. It just directed my attention and made me realize that there may be places in the occupational code where we have false credentialing. The answer I got was that it had something to do with mixing chemicals or something. Jewell can be fine in a beauty parlor. Same thing with Ken. He came out touted by his prison instructor as a bricklayer but he can't get hired laying bricks. He winds up as a pizza deliveryman. It's true that Angie and Jewell don't have a lot of skills, but there are also things that are artificially keeping them from using some of the skills they have. In Angie's case, she's been at this nursing home now for eight years. It's a huge operation. It's got 300 nursing homes across the country.

I can't see why we couldn't have some tax incentive or some government subsidy to allow her to spend a half day a week, after a certain number years on the job, to do some on the job training, some sort of skills ladder to get her into medical records or something. There needs to be some more thought than I can give you in specifics about a

career ladder for people. Angie keeps trying and trying and she's just stuck. At one point she got a nine cent semiannual raise and she said it made her feel like she was an item at WalMart. She was up to \$8.99 and hour. She said she marched into her supervisor's office and said, "Where's my penny?" So, she could tell herself she made \$9 something. It's not just the money, it's that she feels I think that it's an assault on her dignity. It's ultimately taken some of the wind out her. She had this belief that work would pay it. That's one the saddest part of this. Jewell having bet on the guy is now in a better position than Angie having been in the workplace ending up feeling a little used by them.

Richard P. Nathan:

I'm going to call on Tom Gais as the last person. Tom is the head of our federalism studies group. The two of us together, but he did most of the work, did our implementation study on the Personal Responsibility Act. You met Irene Lurie who is also working on a frontline worker study here. We're doing a lot of work that we're delighted to be able to tell you a little bit about. Tom, we'll give you the last comment or question.



Thomas Gais:

I was just wondering, Wisconsin is very proud about how much they spend on child care and how much they increased in child care expenditures. It's obviously not all that important for the workforce and the people you're talking about such as Angie. I was wondering, why doesn't there seem to be something for households. Maybe it might not be useful, maybe the kids are too old so they're not at the right age? Is it because of the logistics of getting the kids to and from child care? What was wrong with this?

Jason DeParle:

This may be one instance where, inevitably, when you've got three people that they can't stand for everybody perfectly. Certainly, there are some people for whom child care was very important. I share your perception that it's one of those issues that's constantly talked about in Washington. In part this is because it's easy to understand. I didn't think it was the crux of the matter in Milwaukee. Yes, it's important for some people. In general, it's less of an important day-to-day issue on the ground than it is often perceived to be. That's not to say it's not important or crucial for some people. I think Angie, Jewell, and Opal, particularly since they lived together for a bunch of time, preferred to use each other and the extended family: boyfriends, grandma, grandma's uncles. They trusted it more, number one. That may not have been a good choice. I think there's some evidence that shows center-based care for the young kids is better. I don't think they had good child care. I don't think they had reliable child care, but they did have an abundant number of nearby people they could take them to. Keep it in the family. Clearly, I didn't hear this from Angie so much, but I heard it from other people in Milwaukee. There is a fear of sexual abuse in child care centers. Fear of leaving of your kids, particularly young kids who can't talk and can't tell you what happened. Just to balance that out, at the end of story Opal ends up losing her kids to the state. To keep one of her kids from going into foster care, Angie takes Opal's daughter in as a foster child. For her, she's now gets state day care and it's important. I'm not going to say it's not important. I don't think it was ever the reason Angie didn't work. It may have been the reason she lost a particular job, but it wasn't the thing that kept her from becoming a fulltime worker.

Richard P. Nathan:

At NDRC, we kept finding study after study. A couple times when I've been down in Congress to talk about different things that you could do to the law, this is always what people want to fight about: How much money for child care? Well, I think this was a wonderful talk and eye opening as a book and a way to bring people into a subject that hasn't been on the table very much. Your book will help people to not only have it on the table but also think about it in a very thoughtful way. Jason, thank you so much.