

# American Poverty

*Savannah Paz*

An essay contribution to  
*Conversation 2014*

garyhubbell  consulting

## GHC Conversations

Annually, Gary Hubbell Consulting convenes and hosts a small hand-picked group of social sector professionals for three days of intense dialogue and critical thinking. We strive to create a thought-provoking, mind-opening, and stimulating conversation about the social sector, philanthropy, and leadership. This deep exploration of the nature and challenges of the environment is intended to engage, inform, and inspire senior leaders to be catalysts for change in their own organizations and communities of influence. With each GHC Conversation, we seek to establish the seeds of a continuing and enriching network that nourishes us as individuals and helps each of us change how we converse, inspire, and seek new dimensions of impact.



## Participant Bio

### Savannah Paz

Community Development Major, Portland State University

My name is Savannah Paz and I am a community development major with an emphasis on social change at Portland State University. In my experience through higher education I have had the opportunity to work as a student advocate at the Women's Resource Center and volunteer with the anti-gentrification project Not in Cully and the Campaign to End the New Jim Crow. I currently serve on the board of trustees for Trillium Family Services where I am also a spokesperson for their community program Chrysalis. I am passionate about achieving social justice and consider myself an agent of change. I am the mother of two amazing little boys who bring so much joy to my life and keep me very busy. In my free time I enjoy spending time with my family, reading books, watching documentaries and enjoying the company of friends. After graduation, I look forward to a career that allows me the opportunity to work from within communities so that we can collaborate and rise together. In the future I would like to return to higher education to pursue a master's degree in public policy.

This is Savannah's first GHC *Conversation*.

## American Poverty

*Savannah Paz*

In America we are taught that we have unlimited freedom and are encouraged to prioritize our individual identities. We are taught that if you work hard and take care of your family, America will reward you with a good life you can feel proud of. The kind of life that allows you to feel pride in your job, where you live, the school your child attends, what car you drive, how much you own and, of course, infinite opportunity to access the best opportunities America has to offer. This creates a rat race between American people who are constantly competing against each other for the highest quality of life and access to the best resources because-as the privileged few are privy to know- there is only room for few at the top. America teaches us that those on the top deserve to be there and that those that fall short simply didn't work hard enough, and should be satisfied with what they have earned. Growing up in American poverty reveals a vast contrast to this myth of meritocracy. This dominant ideology has never been my reality, and much of American culture has acted as a powerful illusion used to keep me from understanding my own truth.

Like many American children, I was born into poverty. Born into a dark and gritty world, filled with fleeting dreams. Poverty has been the defining factor in my lived experience and perception of America. Living in American poverty had a profound impact on my emotional and physical well-being as a child, in ways that are unimaginable to most comfortable, class-privileged people. These experiences continue to affect my emotional, physical and mental health. Children are born into poverty everyday in this country and America is plagued with stories similar to mine; stories of so many children who will spend their entire lives trying to escape poverty's powerful grip. These are stories of entire neighborhoods and communities that face displacement, unsafe housing conditions, inequitable public school systems, and limited access to basic needs like food and health care. Communities of color and areas where poverty is extreme remain the places where our American people face the most institutionalized and systemic oppression. While parents work their bodies sick just to scrape by, our children are left to be raised up by the streets, and exposed to crime, violence, drugs and abuse. Some of these children will be lucky to find the support they need to survive. Too many will become victim to the harsh and cruel environment that poverty creates. This may leave them locked up in the prison system or dead on the streets, because there is no way out. American poverty is the reason why entire communities are suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, trauma and abuse, not only at the hands of each other but-most directly-at the hands of America's capitalist system.

Our children and youth that are born into American poverty continue to be criminalized by the very institutions that claim to serve and support them in developing into productive adults. Yet we continue to punish them for a life that they did not choose. Have you visited a public elementary school in some of the poorest neighborhoods in our cities? I have had the opportunity to visit one of the poorest elementary schools in our state capital,

Washington, DC, and I was horrified at the lack of resources and investment in some of America's most vulnerable children. The cold hard truth is that schools in America's poorest neighborhoods are preparing our students to enter the prison system instead of investing in opportunities to help them rise out of poverty. The school-to-prison pipeline is not to be trivialized as a theory or assertion. This process is an intentional and brutal one that continues to oppress and profit off of our Youth of Color nationwide. In fact public education has become so underfunded by the American government that schools in middle-class neighborhoods are beginning to feel the negative effects across the country. Programs that make learning fun and enjoyable for children and youth continue to be cut while we put more pressure on children to pass tests so we can prove that we are the best. In reality our children have no outlet for creativity, civic engagement, personal growth, and self-reflection. Instead they are forced to fit in a one size fits all box. I know of the high rates of high school dropout in this country and when I look at the disproportionate amount of Brown, Black and low-income White people who are being locked up in our growing for-profit prison system, my mind begins to spin as I connect the dots. The school to prison pipe line and the amount of our poorest youth who are being charged as adults so for-profit prisons can make a higher economic gain is truly disturbing. There is no justice for people victim to American poverty as the system is designed to leave them immobilized. The amount of institutionalized racism that plays out in American poverty is enough to drive a person insane. I cannot stand by and watch America treat its own citizens this way so that a mere few at the very top can make a profit.

There is so much internalized racism, classism, self-hatred and mental illness that develop out of poverty. American culture puts so much of an emphasis on materialistic items and economic status to define our self-worth. We value items and possessions over people and human relationships. I always felt less-than, and hated myself while growing up in American poverty. Much of it had to do with the have-nots and poor living conditions but most of it had to do with the way I was treated. It seems that no one believed in me or felt optimistic about my abilities and progress. My teachers always labeled me the problem child and never taught me to believe in myself. The police in my neighborhood refused to acknowledge my presence and showed no empathy for me and the other children who lived in my complex when they were called there, which was quite often. Parents-who were overworked, stressed, and tired- just wanted us out of their way so they could take time to catch their breath, leaving our emotional needs neglected. American poverty is painful and dehumanizing, leaving millions feeling forgotten and invisible to their own country. This must change because America is plagued with poverty and those who fall victim need to be visible and have a voice.

The impacts that American poverty has on our own people and society are dangerous to this country. We continue to run and hide from poverty, doing everything we can to make enough money to temporarily buy our way out but we know that we can only run for so long. The gap between the poor and the wealthy continues to grow while our middle class begins to shrink more and more. We are seeing mental illness, violence, abuse, and crime creep into our middle class schools and neighborhoods as funding and resources diminish. Finally, issues that people in poverty have been struggling with for centuries are coming into the limelight, now that our middle class is beginning to feel the strain of inequitable distribution. Only the private dollar can gain you the access needed to a good education, ample resource, and a quality of life that every American deserves. We are so caught up in trying to survive in our own country that we lack the ability to live, to stand up for ourselves, to fight for what is right, to teach our children to demand what is rightfully theirs and to love and support one another. We are too busy competing to serve our own

self interests and fighting for scraps from the powers that be, that we have forgotten the importance of human connection, human capital, and strong communities. Somewhere in all the chaos we stopped holding ourselves, our institutions and government accountable. We fail to recognize our connection to one another and the fact that our society is a reflection of us all and that we are a reflection of our society.

Growing up in poverty has taught me many important lessons that will stick with me for the rest of my life. As much as America tries to make me forget and deny my experiences growing up in American poverty, I will never forget. I refuse to believe that was just a piece of my past that should be left there and that I should take every opportunity to leave poverty behind me. How can I celebrate my own success of escaping poverty when in the process it required me to leave so many behind? How can I celebrate my own accomplishments when I have lost so many loved ones to the hands of poverty? I refuse to forget the lessons poverty has taught me and the people who instilled such powerful values and ethics in my young soul. I refuse to place my self-worth on what I can buy and access with money. I know that this would be a mistake as American poverty has shown me things that privileged eyes can't see, that their hands cannot touch. Lessons that are so entrenched in my soul that my heart and mind could not forget even if I tried. American poverty has taught me that people and community matter because when you have everything else working against you those are the only things that will keep you safe and bring tomorrow. Poverty has made me resourceful, resilient, and strong. It has guided me to have the courage to evolve from victim to survivor. Poverty has taught me to stand up and fight and that loyalty to your people is the most important and respected trait one can possess. Poverty has showed me the importance of working together, building partnerships and forming coalitions. Poverty has taught me to question those in power and not to fear the unknown. Poverty has taught me to find the beauty in the darkest of places. Beauty is there, waiting for light to reveal its true potential.

What living in American poverty has taught me the most is to never give up and to never stop fighting for justice. It has taught me to fight for my neighbor, my community, my city, and my people. On my own I am just a product of American poverty, left with emotions so large that they often leave me overwhelmed and paralyzed. But when I am In Community I feel alive. I move from surviving to living my life. I feel empowered by those who I share relationships with and recognize that I have the ability to shift the direction of my world while being supported by others. My hope is that others who hold class privilege can learn to share my sentiment on the impacts of poverty and its impact on our country and our people, without removing the voice of the populations they are attempting to assist. It seems like America wants to keep people in poverty oppressed in order to produce short-term economic gain for a privileged few. For this reason we must be careful that attempts on the behalf of social service organizations do not further perpetuate and victimize people in poverty. Working in alliance with oppressed groups must be an intentional, evolving, and humble process, or effective community organizing will not occur. What privileged service professionals must realize is that oppressed communities and individuals have been lifting each other up for centuries, and that we have the capability to engage in social justice work. What these communities need the most is resource, support, and agency. These are the things that privileged professionals and allies can provide in their work to address and abolish poverty. I will never stop fighting for the justice of those who remain trapped in American poverty. I understand the importance of my work being done from within these communities so that we can rise together. In spite of America's dismissal of poverty, I am going to make sure these communities are no longer overlooked and give voice to those living in American poverty.



Planning ▪ Strategy ▪ Philanthropy ▪ Coaching

In order to strengthen adaptive organizations for inevitable  
change and greater impact

Offices in Milwaukee, WI and Hilton Head Island, S.C.

[www.garyhubbellconsulting.com](http://www.garyhubbellconsulting.com)

Corporate Office:  
3143 East Hampshire Avenue  
Milwaukee, WI 53211  
414-962-6696