

## **Habitat Talk:**

**Good afternoon I am very excited to be here with you today as you contribute to the work of housing families. As a person of faith I am encouraged by your witness. During my childhood I experienced homelessness and so I know how important your work is. Not having a home is more than not having cover from the elements, it also means not having access to education if you're a child, it means not having a place to share family dinners; a home means so much, your work means so much. As an intern at The Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies I reviewed applications for emergency assistance.**

**Overwhelming people requested assistance for housing, so I know how vulnerable the homes of NYC residents are. In our time together I will introduce organizations such as The Poverty Initiative and others who are advocating and organizing for justice. I will share how faith motivates my work, we will take a look at Rev. King's Poor People's Campaign to learn valuable lessons for our work today and I will then end with practical suggestions for how you can build on your current work with Habitat by advocating and organizing for housing justice.**

### **Poverty Initiative Introduction**

The average age of a homeless person in our country is 9 years old, 35.9 million people live below the poverty line in America and in New York City alone there are almost 38,000 homeless people, in response to these statistics the Poverty Initiative was established *to raise up generations of religious and community leaders dedicated to building a social movement to end poverty, led by the poor.* The cornerstone of the Poverty Initiative is the Poverty Scholars Program in which Willie Baptist has served as the Scholar-in-Residence since its inception in 2004. This program is unique because Mr. Baptist is a formally homeless father who has over 40 years of organizing experience. One of Willie's organizing actions was planning and

participating in a church takeover led by homeless mothers and their children who had no where to go. So I would like to share a podcast by The Philadelphia Student Union (an organization that is apart of the Poverty Initiative) in which Willie Baptist and Liz Theoharius discuss the takeover.

### **Play Takeover Clip**

As you can hear from this clip the faith community played an important role in this action, what you may not know is that students at Eastern University, a Christian institution outside of Philadelphia found out about the takeover and organized other students on campus to join the families by proclaiming **Jesus is being kicked out of the church, because in Matthew 25 Jesus says what you do to the least of these you do to me!** Some of these students moved to North Philadelphia to continue to work alongside these families and a Christian Intentional Community still exist today that was birthed out of the takeover. Some families were housed as a result of the takeover but what Willie and other organizers realized is that for every family they housed two more would end up homeless shortly thereafter, in response to this they established The **Poverty Scholars Program** is a leadership development and training program for over 160 low-income, church and community leaders from over 40 organizations nationwide, the Program enlists leading grassroots organizers with proven success winning campaigns on issues of unemployment, housing, homelessness, immigration, ecological devastation, eviction, foreclosure, healthcare, low-wage workers rights and grassroots media production. Beyond strengthening the skills of men, women and youth, veteran and emerging organizers, the Program serves as a network for ongoing exchange, study, and joint activity that unites existing efforts across lines of race, religion, geography and issue-focused organizing into a social movement to end poverty. As a poverty scholar I have been able to receive mentoring and leadership

development from Mr. Baptist which has personally and vocationally impacted me. So I would like to share another clip of Willie Baptist discussing leadership development because it is essential that the poor not only be assisted but developed into leaders that can impact their communities for long standing change:

### **Play Clip of Willie discussing Leadership Development**

#### **Pause**

I joined the Poverty Initiative in 2007 because my faith gave me a great desire to work towards ending poverty and organizing in an urban context. I was born and raised in ENY, Brooklyn one of the 12 Communities in NYC that sends the highest number people to NY State prisons, but at 14 I had a powerful conversion to Christianity. My faith restored the dignity that poverty had stripped away and this dignity fuels my justice work, all of the worlds religions speak to the dignity of humanity and as people of faith our work is to help protect and restore dignity when it is under threat. Through my work with the Poverty Initiative I have been able to network with antipoverty activist and allies, which has been very empowering to me because I not only have the tools and ability to affect change but a community to do this work with. I know that poor people do not need charity, but justice. Charity (though important) can diminish dignity but justice can restore it. I believe that we will burn out if we try to tackle justice issues alone and so I would encourage you all to stay plugged into Habitat for Humanity and into your faith communities so that you can endure in this work. As a Christian I draw inspiration from the scripture Isaiah 61:1-4 which speaks of the Gospel being good news to the poor and a few years ago I learned from NY Faith & Justice why the gospel is good news for poor people. It is good news because the poor will rebuild their cities and restore the devastations. I found out that I had a role to play in rebuilding my community. My faith has given me the ethic that informs my

work which is that people of all races, religions and socio-economic classes can come together to deal with the scourge of poverty. In history we see examples of this diverse coalition building in almost every major social change movement: 1) The Civil Rights Movement-included African-Americans, Whites, men, women, college students and sharecroppers 2) The Coal Miners Strikes in West Virginia included both White and Black men and one of the major social movements of history The Abolition of Slavery included **William Wilberforce** a 26 year old British politician, Quakers, Evangelicals, the free, and enslaved. Though many thought that the institution of slavery was too big to abolish through coalition building and unique protest members of the British parliament were moved to action. The abolitionist movement is a prime example that major social change can take place and that EVERYone has an important role to play.

## **PAUSE**

**Before Clip-**The time of the PPC campaign was ripe with the possibility for change and a period of crisis similar to the time we now find ourselves in. So I would like us to take a few moments to look back in history to draw lessons for our work today. Personally I visited Marks, Mississippi with the P.I. and was greatly impacted by hearing the story of Bertha Burres: Queen of the Mule Train who rode a mule from Marks to D.C. to assist the PPC. Burres, a poor mother helped the movement by taking notes at meetings. Her example showed me that we can all contribute to ending poverty; you don't have to be Buno, a clergyperson or a politician to make a difference.

**In this clip Willie Baptist discusses the Poor People's Campaign at The United Workers Justice Theater Conference Play Clip**

**While speaking show slide show**

In 1968, [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) and the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](#) (SCLC) organized the **Poor People's Campaign** to address issues of [economic justice](#). The campaign led to a worker's strike and march in [Washington, D.C.](#) demanding economic aid to the poorest communities of the [United States](#). The march originated in [Marks, Mississippi](#), a town so improvised it brought Dr. King to tears. "A multiracial coalition of the [poor](#)" was developed that would descend on Washington – engaging, if need be, in nonviolent civil disobedience at the Capitol—until [Congress](#) enacted a poor people's bill of rights. Prior to the completion of the campaign, Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968. The Poor People's Campaign did not focus only on poor African-Americans but addressed poor people of every racial group. Poor Latino/as, Indigenous peoples and poor Whites were included in the campaign. King labeled the Poor People's Campaign the “second phase,” of the civil rights struggle. The “first phase” focused on the segregation problem. Both phases were addressed in a non-violent manner. The SCLC and Dr. King (prior to his assassination) planned for the Poor People's Campaign to be the largest, most widespread civil-rights movement. They set goals high, such as aiming for 1500 protesters to lobby in Washington D.C. for an “economic bill of rights”. Under this bill the Poor People's Campaign asked for a \$30 billion anti-poverty package that would include housing for the poor. On May 12, 1968, the demonstrators showed up in Washington D.C. to start the Poor People's Campaign. For the next two weeks protesters campaigned at various federal agencies pushing for the EBoR. The campaign came to an end in mid-June and the EBoR was never passed. Though some would see this campaign as a failure I see it as a success with many lessons we can learn from; namely the creation of the Resurrection City where 50,000 people built with their own hands a community. In a similar way by building with Habitat for Humanity the work of your hands is a step towards ending poverty. Resurrection City was a place of interracial

harmony where they developed a Freedom School and a music exchange where bluegrass musicians from Appalachia shared music with African-American gospel singers. The poor people's campaign showed that we can unite to end poverty. Today the circumstances we find ourselves in are slightly different from the poverty of the 1960's because we are in the post-industrial information age, but the current economic crisis shows that we no longer can sustain our economic way of life and so in response to this The Poverty Initiative brought together 200 anti-poverty advocates and organizers to West Virginia for a weeklong conference to reignite the poor people's campaign. Participants included Shackdwellers from South Africa and officials from The Church of Scotland. This week consisted of workshops, plenary sessions, fellowship, worship and strategic discussion about the crisis we all face. The 200 participants were multiracial, multinational and multiclass.

Participants in this conference returned home to continue their organizing and one such group is DWU who successfully advocated to get a domestic workers Bill of Rights passed in NY State, which Governor Patterson signed into law. They started off as domestic workers organizing each other but courageously took on NY state government. Their work has set a national precedent for domestic workers and serves as an example of how everyday people can combine grassroots action with advocacy.

Some of you may say I can't camp out in D.C. or attend a weeklong conference, I am not poor or maybe you do find yourself facing economic instability and wonder what can I do? In response to these concerns I would like to give some practical suggestions for steps you can take to build on your service:

1. Stay informed about housing and other economic justice issues by following groups like Picture the Homeless and staying involved in Habitat for Humanity.

2. If you teach at any level or in your house of worship include books such as Nickel and Dimed about the working poor or include the history of the PPC campaign in your curriculum. Invite a speaker from a local antipoverty organization.
3. Reach out to your political representatives: vote, write letters and call their offices to let them know how important the issue of housing is to people of faith in NYC. Know that a visit to your representative's office is very impactful.
4. Continue to study and draw inspiration from the PPC and other social movements.

**And finally immediate charity is needed and important but don't stop there, support organizations that are seeking economic justice.**

I would like to wrap-up with sharing a story about a recent building attempt my roommates and I undertook. I think this story is an illustration of what happens when we set out to build with an incomplete set of tools. Now I am sure that everyone who has worked on a Habitat House knows the importance of having a complete set of tools.

I live in a Christian Intentional Community in Harlem and a few weeks ago Melissa moved in and needed assistance putting up a shelf in her room. The person who helped Melissa in the hardware store went on and on about these "special" nails that would hold her shelf up. Yet as we drilled and attempted to screw the nails in they didn't fit and actually began to destroy the walls. We gathered together a mismatched collection of anchors and tried to hang the shelf with them. We were able to screw three of them in but one did not fit, so we decided to "jimmy" the shelf as my roommate Beth said and tied a string to the fourth section of the shelf. We were tired, plaster was on the floor and we all just wanted to go to bed. After we "jimmied" the shelf together it seemed to hang well and we even tied the string into a cute bow. I looked at our work and said wow that looks nice and it's holding up well but just as the words left my mouth the entire shelf collapsed. I am sure that the hardware store employee truly believed the screws he recommended would work and we tried our best, but we just didn't have the complete set of tools. As you leave this training today and as you continue to contribute to the building of homes

for families I commend your work, but I would also challenge you to not stop there. Continue these trainings so that you can add the tools of advocacy and organizing to your toolboxes. With these tools you will not only build houses but a movement to ensure that no family in this city has to go without shelter. By building with advocacy and organizing you will build a house that stands on the firm foundation of justice.

**PAUSE**

And now I would like to end with some words of inspiration from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

**Dr. King audio clip**