

## POVERTY

# Coach: I know how it feels to struggle — and how to help others

**C. Vivian Stringer** *Guest Columnist*

I was blessed to have grown up in a household with two proud parents and five siblings. My parents showed us what hard work, integrity, character, responsibility and family meant. We were loved, we had encouragement, we had each other and we all worked together to maintain a great family unit. Despite all of that, we struggled to make ends meet, to get ahead and at times it was not enough. Along the way my family and I had what I call “angels.” These “angels” were organizations and people who cared and walked the talk.

I remember my father saying many times, “As soon as I seem to get my head above water, bam, someone knocks me down again.” My dad risked his life each day working in a coal mine with soot on his face and in his lungs. Even though both of his legs had been amputated, he did not miss a day of work once he got his prosthetics.

As my parents struggled, somehow we managed to have food and clothing, yet sometimes when the miners went on strike to protest the poor and dangerous working conditions, there was no paycheck and we received government food. Many times my family and I would go to the coal dump to pick leftover coal and carry it back in buckets to use to heat our house. My mom had a job at a clothing store and then got a second job at the supermarket, and as soon as I was of age, she got me a job there as well.

Today, United Ways in 15 states are asking all of us to do our parts to help struggling families. A grass-roots movement that began in New Jersey, the United Way ALICE Project, is reminding us that these families living paycheck to paycheck are the backbone of our economy and need our help — like my family once did.

It is not about the titles we hold or the money and power that we may have, but who we are as basic human beings. It does not

matter where we are at this moment, where we come from, but it is where we are going. We are moms, grandparents, aunts and sisters who care deeply about our children and the women who care about their future. We see the people who struggle each day, trying to do the best they can to make ends meet, only to find themselves sliding deeper into what seems like a bottomless hole.

These families are the invisible, disenfranchised, who are seen by all of us every day but understood by only a few. United Ways call them ALICE — Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. They are challenging our preconceived notions about who struggles and why. ALICE families, just like my family, have the same hopes, dreams, desires and needs as all of us.

Through raising funds and awareness, United Way is helping those in the community who are facing financial insecurity despite working, sometimes two jobs, and still not affording basic necessities such as food and health care. Contrary to the federal poverty guidelines or the perception that people who can't pay their rent or provide food for their family just aren't working hard enough, we know better and have to do better.

This project is helping ALICE families feel they are worthy. It is providing a sense of self-respect and self-esteem to perhaps that mom who is trying to raise her family despite the odds. A person can say, “I can't change the world,” but through the ALICE project we can.

We can help so many people in this world by stepping up, standing up and lifting others beside us. Supporting the United Way ALICE Project is a perfect way to be an “angel” to make a positive difference in someone's life for future generations to come.

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