

Servant Scholars

Mission Poverty: An Immersive Study of Poverty in Troup County

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Communion means accepting people just as they are, with all their limits and inner pain, but also with their gifts and their beauty and their capacity to grow: to see the beauty inside of all the pain. To love someone is not first of all to do things for them, but to reveal to them their beauty and value, to say to them through your attitude: "You are beautiful. You are important. I trust you. You can trust yourself." We all know well that we can do things for others and in the process crush them, making them feel that they are incapable of doing things by themselves. To love someone is to reveal to them their capacities for life, the light that is shining in them.(Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, 16).

Troup County sits at the bottom of Georgia's most impoverished counties. The senior project of the inaugural cohort, titled *Mission: Poverty*, aimed to mollify poverty in the local community. The poverty level in Troup County has risen from 14.83 percent in 2000 to 22.1 percent in 2012 (U.S. Census 2012). With such an alarming rise in poverty here, efforts toward the eradication of poverty must be made. This issue was made evident while we worked with those in poverty in our service during our junior year. We, the inaugural cohort of the Servant Scholars, through the philosophy of servant leadership, through building relationships, doing research, and raising awareness, have examined and exposed the difficult realities of alleviating poverty in Troup County. The components of this endeavor include a literature review, interview series, service efforts, and research into a case study.

Literature Review

According to Travis Smiley and Cornel West, 150 million people are living at or below the poverty line in America (*The Rich and the Rest of Us*, 2012). This alarming statistic motivated the Servant Scholars to research poverty in Ameri-

ca. Each Servant Scholar selected a book focused on poverty to read and study throughout the year. The authors of each book presented a variety of views and outlooks on poverty in America and presented similar and contrasting ideas on the definitions, causes, and solutions to eliminate poverty.

One of the central issues discussed in each text is the variety of beliefs as to the causes of poverty. Several of the books acknowledge that poverty is multi-causal and multi-faceted. Payne, DeVol, and Smith's *Bridges out of Poverty* (2001) discusses the mindset of the individual, exploitation of the individual, and the class structures with hidden class rules underneath communities as the root causes of poverty. Robert Lupton argues in his book *Toxic Charity* (2011) that programs which intend to assist those living in poverty by simply handing out goods do more harm than good. Despite these programs' benevolent intentions, this practice objectifies those living in poverty and does not enable them to become self-sufficient. Jonathon Kozol supports this argument about detrimental charity efforts among the poor in his book, *Savage Inequalities* (1991) – "Charity will not instill the poor with self respect" (157).

While these authors argue that charity involvement is harmful, Rick Bragg argues in *Ava's Man* (2001) that an absence of community involvement can be just as harmful. Bragg argues that shunning a person living in poverty only perpetuates the cycle. Both authors of *Broke USA* (2010) and *The Price of Inequality* (2013) present a contrasting argument about the causes of poverty. They blame entrepreneurs, companies, and businesses in America that thrive at the expense of the poor by taking advantage of their need for credit and quick money. Only by exploiting the vulnerable do these companies thrive.

Another main topic discussed in these texts is the proposed solutions to alleviate or eliminate poverty in America. Several authors believe that raising awareness about the challenges faced by those in poverty helps to gain more support in fighting against poverty. Ehrenreich, Vanier, and Payne argue that awareness and firsthand experience, though challenging, are the sole ways that one truly understand the challenges, trials, and obstacles that are everyday realities of the marginalized. Other authors argue that building relationships among the community is the best way to alleviate poverty rates. Lupton states that, "Authentic relationships with those in need have a way of correcting the we-will-rescue-you mindset and replacing it with mutual admiration and respect" (*Toxic Charity* 190). Laine Phillips and Echo Montgomery Garrett, authors of *Why Don't They Just Get a Job?* (2010), also support this community-based solution by advocating organizations that offer support and a "hand up rather than hand out" to those in need or less fortunate. In contrast, Stiglitz, Rivlin, and Kozol believe that economic, health care, and education reform are needed to reduce poverty rates in America.

All of the above authors believe that numerous causes exist for the rapidly increasing number of people living in poverty in America. Several of these causes include attitude, self-respect, lack of connections and resources, and the

financial traps caused by businesses. Although there is not a single solution to solving poverty, there are several potential solutions to help reduce or resolve the amount of poverty in America. Until awareness has been raised, true relationships have been established, and economic and education reformation takes place, America will not see an end to this nationwide crisis known as poverty.

Interview Series

Part of our project in raising awareness was to get several perspectives on it -- to not just learn from those in poverty, but also those in leadership positions in the community who have seen it from a different angle. We wanted to find out what kind of misconceptions of those in poverty are common among the middle class, and what to do to dispel them. Our first interview, conducted on March 6, 2014, was with Sherri Brown, the Director of Circles of Troup County. Her connection to poverty is personal; Circles is there to form relationships, learn people's stories, give those in poverty a hand in establishing a network of contacts for social capital, and help with everyday skills such as budgeting and setting goals.

Myth: *getting out of poverty is as easy as finding a job.* **Truth:** *getting out of poverty involves changing your entire worldview.*

Mrs. Brown: "Certainly, you need a job, and you need to make enough money.... But frankly if it was that simple we would have solved the problem a long time ago. People in poverty are not middle-class people without money. They are people with a different way of viewing the world, and you have to change that mindset, and that's really huge. You also have a community, usually, that believes that mindset. So often you have to change your entire community, support system, and structure, and maybe even walk away from family members, and that's very, very difficult."

She continues, "Getting a job is important, and so is keeping that job, and knowing what to do with money. But then there are so many other issues: transportation, childcare, mental illness is huge, physical health, being a single parent, many of those things come into play."

The mindset of poverty is set on the immediate, which comes from living in a constant state of crisis. Constant crisis, over a long period of time, affects people mentally because it actually shuts down some of the thinking ability, physically from not having enough food or not enough healthy food, emotionally from constantly being anxious and on edge about how to make rent and feed kids, and even has consequences in a person's spiritual life.

"There are also people who prey on the poor, like the title lenders out on Highway 27. If a person in poverty needs to fix their car, but only has \$200 in their bank account, they can take their title to a title pawn and get \$300, if that's what they need. If a middle class person with a credit card needs to fix their car, they can just go down and pull out their card and pay the \$300 back later. Credit card companies charge around 20% interest. Title lenders charge around 400% interest

annually. That's a \$1500 repayment on a \$300 loan."

Last fall, Circles members spoke to a city council bill on limiting how many title lenders could occupy that particular stretch of road. Unfortunately, the bill was tabled and no more interest has been shown in passing it.

Myth: *giving to charities is the end-all solution for poverty. Truth:* *charities are a temporary help, and don't really help for long-term change.*

Mrs. Brown: "Frankly, it becomes easy for people to clean out their closet and donate their clothes, and think they're clothing the naked, or bag up some groceries or throw \$20 in for a ministry for the hungry. Ultimately, I don't know if that really has – I mean, that helps in an emergency situation, but that doesn't solve the issue of poverty; I don't think it's really moving us forward. The reality is, it's complex and takes complex solutions. I tell people that from my point of view, there are several things people can do. One of the most important things is to be aware. Educate yourself on the issues of poverty. Be aware of the challenges that we put up in front of people without thinking about it."

Mrs. Brown offers a few solutions to issues such as transportation as well; ridesharing is an alternative to expensive and unreliable taxis. More available childcare would help those on alternating shifts in industry jobs. Ultimately though, the solution has to come from the community.

Mrs. Brown: "We need to say, 'It's my responsibility; I have that power, I have an education, I have social capital, I have the knowledge, the voice, the ear of people who can make change,' so step up and do it. Is it easy? No. Is it going to get fixed just like that? I wish. But... the more people who move down that road, the better the community is for everybody. We are fooling no one but ourselves if we think that poverty doesn't affect us. It affects... your community, your school, your housing, everything. We need to be there for each other."

Second Interview

Our second interview, conducted on March 12, 2014, was with Jeff Lukken, former mayor of Troup County for 16 years (1997-2014). His connection to poverty is from a governmental side, but like Sherri Brown, his view inevitably became more personal. Starting out as mayor, he said "I didn't understand the world of poverty, and I still don't have a handle on it, not really.

"Poverty has even more complexities; if you can't manage money, that usually leads to a bad credit score, which really impacts the ability to borrow, rent a house or start up with utilities. If there's only one parent in the home, then that parent is responsible for both mother's and father's roles. That usually causes a loss of time to invest in his/her children: reading to them when they're young, going to their games, showing up for parent/teacher conferences, helping them with homework, all can be lost because one parent is trying to do the work of two. If they simply don't have the time to invest in their child's future because they're keeping a roof overhead, that can impact the overall health of the community.

“When families are healthier economically, they become healthier as far as a family unit in the care and love they are able to do and in the education they provide, and in the development of children as they grow into productive members of society. It lowers crime, it lowers the social services needed in the community, it lowers the mental health issues that we see throughout our community. It makes neighborhoods stronger. As you’re taking care of those neighborhoods that are on the edge of falling into disrepair by putting in homeowners instead of renters, it helps with the development, with growth, taxation, crime, social issues, education. It helps with our industries who are looking for hardworking people who want to learn the skills to come work for them. So whether your job is with McDonald’s or you’re a well-paid executive, everybody benefits when you find a way to help everybody find a job in those skills or trade.”

Mayor Lukken also discussed possible solutions as well: one is the city rounding up utility bills to the next dollar, and the change is given to organizations that help citizens who are struggling to pay their own utility bills. Another is supporting the organizations that get kids involved in sports and other extracurricular activities, like United Way and the Boy Scouts. In the end, the bulk of the effort has to be made by the families themselves.

Mayor Lukken: “It’s a challenge and a requirement for those that are in poverty to understand that they have a responsibility. The greatest challenge and the hardest work is on their shoulders. Those that help out will come and put in two hours or maybe a weekend or one night per week, but the real responsibility and challenge falls on those families... to go to lengths they’ve never thought capable before. Second responsibility is on the community. Let’s say everybody in the region understands that even if I can’t meet that wonderful family to help them directly, I can donate funds if I don’t have time. But I can certainly begin to have a new awareness and understanding of the problem. It’s not just ‘that man needs to get a job,’ or ‘that man just needs to pay his bills,’ or ‘that family just needs to show up with their little girl at school and help more.’ It’s much more complicated than that.”

Speaking with these leaders has been eye opening for us. Although we have been seeking to understand poverty, it has become clear that unless we are the ones experiencing poverty, we can never truly understand the complexities of it. Poverty is as much a mental state as it is a financial one, and the forces that act on poverty are widespread: the prejudice and misunderstandings that arise from different mindsets, the lack of education and information available, the constraints that low-wage jobs put on families, and the predators that have made it a business to make money off the poor. These findings are echoed in our readings on poverty. In his book *Broke, USA*, Gary Rivlin speaks about the legal but unethical payday loan:

I can remember the exact moment when my view started to harden in opposition to the payday loan. I was on an airplane streaking west toward

Dayton when I came across a report by the former Ohio attorney general... that included the testimonies of former payday employees like Chris Browning. As they told it, the payday loan wasn't an every-once-in-a-while product that customers reserved for emergencies, as their bosses would have people believe, but rather a monthly reality for well over half their customers. In that scenario, an annual percentage of 391 percent wasn't some theoretical number but a good gauge of the price too many people were paying for credit. (2010)

Joseph Stiglitz, in *The Price of Inequality*, also speaks about the unfair market as distorted by the top earners: "Much of the income at the top is instead what we have called rents. These rents have moved dollars from the bottom and middle to the top, and distorted the market to the advantage of some and to the disadvantage of others." Rents can include laws that make the market less competitive -- giving corporations a monopoly, or laws that let a CEO take a large part of corporate earnings, or the fees that credit and debit cards are charged (2013).

Service Efforts

As we learned about the different causes related to poverty, we also ventured into the community to address these issues. We did this through raising awareness and taking action by serving the impoverished in our community. All twelve Scholars chose a site to serve during their junior year. These sites included Ethel Kight Elementary School, the Downtown Authority, the Habitat for Humanity ReStore, Harmony House, the LaGrange Symphony Orchestra, Florence Hand Senior Living Facility, the Troup County Animal Shelter, the Troup Cancer Clinic, the First United Methodist Church Soup Kitchen, and Circles of Troup County. All of these sites addressed some important needs of the community; however, throughout our junior year, the Scholars became drawn to the idea of hunger. We decided that this aim would serve for a year-long project for twelve people, so we expanded this idea to poverty. This still spoke to us from our experiences through our individual sites -- especially the Soup Kitchen and Circles. We then focused on the different types of service that we wanted to affect within the community. We wanted to do more than serve; we wanted to raise awareness about the issues we were working to alleviate, so we decided to direct those efforts toward three main groups: the college community, the greater Troup County community, and the community leaders.

We targeted the students of LaGrange College separately from those in the community by organizing a film series that explored the ideas of Servant Leadership, the commonalities between strangers from different walks of life, and actual poverty in America. We included a display with each of the three films to help illustrate the ideas presented in each film.

The first film we showed was *Life as a House* (2001), a film that portrayed

a father, recently diagnosed with terminal cancer, who builds a house with his troubled son in order to grow closer to him. As a display to accompany this film, we made an exhibit of available opportunities for students to get involved both on campus and in the community. We took donations and gave the students the opportunity to donate to three different Troup County-based non-profit organizations that work to assuage poverty. Later in the year, we showed *The Human Experience* (2008), which depicted how a band of brothers sought to understand human nature by traveling around the world and interacting with those marginalized by society. We created an interactive display that allowed students to experience life without a home. We also collected donations for Heifer International, which allowed us to purchase gifts like a goat, milk, baby chicks, and blankets for those suffering from poverty worldwide. For our final film, *Poor America* (2012), a documentary showing British reporter Hilary Andersson traveling across America to find out how the poor survive in America. We designed a life-size board game based on statistics of Troup County from the 2010 Census that illustrated real life struggles in poverty. In continuation of our first film, we raised money for those same three organizations. This last film served as the event that kicked off Poverty Awareness Week, which was the true culmination of our exploration of poverty in Troup County.

Poverty Awareness Week

Poverty Awareness Week consisted of several events that strove to enlighten the community on ways in which to escape and address poverty in Troup County. The Servant Scholars were responsible for three of these events: first, the final installment of the film series; second, the Empty Bowl Lunch; and third, a Readers' Theater.

The Empty Bowl Lunch was a year-long project in which we were responsible for producing over 100 handmade ceramic bowls in which soup was served during the lunch. The attendees could also keep the bowls as a token for coming to the event. To make the bowls, we teamed up with the LaGrange College Art Department to host a bowl-making event. Our student body came together and helped create the bowls to be donated. The purpose of the Empty Bowl Lunch was to gain participants and supporters for Circles of Troup County, an organization that works alongside individuals to move from a survival mindset to one of stability.

The Readers' Theater was an event designed to offer a more personal look into the lives of local people who experience poverty in their everyday lives. The night consisted of three testimonies by people with whom the cohort has worked closely. In addition, seven Scholars read quotes from our Literature Review that had had a powerful impact on them. The first speaker was Dr. Randall Adams, a sociology professor at LaGrange College and avid support of Our Daily Bread Soup Kitchen. Dr. Adams spoke about the Scholars' efforts at the soup kitchen

and his experiences with the patrons. Second, Bill Simmons, an Ally with Circles of Troup County, spoke of his time working with that anti-poverty initiative. The last speaker was Inetha Hatton, a Circles graduate who awed the audience with her testimony about what it was like to live in poverty in Troup County and then work herself out. As a conclusion to the Readers' Theater, we presented the idea that one way to alleviate poverty is through service, a truth we have discovered through our own experiences volunteering with Our Daily Bread, a soup kitchen started by the Servant Scholars, and Circles of Troup County.

Several Servant Scholars and other students started Our Daily Bread in 2013 as its own entity. This was an outcome of the previously stated desire to develop a senior project centered on hunger. However, the goal was not to create a soup kitchen that would last a year and then cease once those who had created it had graduated. The goal was to make it a sustainable effort by inviting other college students to be a part of it. Volunteers of all ages come to help regularly at Our Daily Bread. After several months of running the soup kitchen, we noticed the significant impact that our efforts had on both the patrons and volunteers. Because of this, we decided to include it in our project, Mission: Poverty. We are responsible for buying, cooking, and serving the food to those who would not otherwise have something to eat. This soup kitchen is different because after we have served everyone, we share lunch with the guests. We do this specifically to break down social barriers between those people with whom we otherwise would not typically interact. By working with rather than working for those in poverty, we have found this to be an effective method to build relationships for the benefit of all involved.

Circles of Troup County utilizes its philosophy through its "allies." It pairs people from different walks of life who work with and support those individuals seeking to remove themselves from poverty. For some Scholars, working with Circles was a continuation of the service they did their junior year. We are responsible for the childcare every Thursday during the meetings. Education majors within the cohort created a detailed set of lesson plans aimed at helping the children develop important life skills that many children experiencing poverty never learn. Skills that the lesson plans cover include soft skills, such as eye contact and hand shaking, to more meaningful lessons such as goal-setting. These plans were collected in a notebook, which was left with both Circles and the Servant Scholars Program. Our intentions in leaving behind this book are for the continuation of these lessons for future classes at Circles. The lessons are based on the philosophy of Servant Leadership, and will help the kids grow and prepare them for opportunities later in their lives.

Case Study

Title: Mission Poverty: Is Cancer Related to Poverty in Troup County?

Introduction

Over the past year, the senior Servant Scholar cohort has analyzed different facets and effects of poverty throughout Troup County. Through an individual project at the West Georgia Health Systems during the junior year of service, it was revealed to a Scholar that local cancer incidence, specifically breast and colon, seemed to be more prevalent in the lower and working classes of African-Americans. This led to the hypothesis that at the local level in rural Troup County cancer rates positively correlated with the poverty rates.

Previous studies, for example an analysis of Idaho performed in 2012, revealed that cancer rates do seem to correlate directly with poverty levels. In this study, when all sites of cancer incidence (i.e. breast, lung, and colon) were combined, the survival rates varied by 13.6% between the lowest and highest poverty levels, with the latter seeing the most favorable outcomes (Johnson, Fink & German 2012).

Another study, performed in Detroit, Atlanta, and San Francisco spanning the time gap from 1990-2000 revealed intriguing results about poverty and how it related to social class. This study produced results showing that cancer rates all in all for the high and moderate areas of poverty throughout the cities were declining, but the odds of late-stage diagnosis remained high for this triad of cities. Finally, this study revealed an equally intriguing insight that non-Hispanic white women faced lower odds of a late-stage diagnosis when compared to non-Hispanic black women (Barry, Breen, & Barrett 2012).

Each of the cases observed revealed interesting information about poverty, cancer, and their relationship, but none of the studies performed previously were directly related to the logistics of Troup County. The goal of our senior project was to study the effects of poverty in Troup County, Georgia. The previous studies spanned either an entire state (which takes into account urban areas) or urban cities in general. Because of this, we set out to determine the correlation in just Troup County, a mostly rural area, hoping to produce data pertinent to our county and the other counties of similar socioeconomic status scattered throughout the southeastern United States.

Materials and Methods

Data Collection

Luckily, during the spring 2013 semester, relationships had been cultivated between the Servant Scholars senior cohort and the Enoch Callaway Cancer Center, specifically with Dr. Charlene McClanahan, Oncology Services Director. This relationship granted the Servant Scholars with data from the West

Georgia Health Cancer Registry Database, which had also been reported to the National Cancer Data Base. The data, spanning the years 2003-2007, is susceptible to the following criteria:

1. Patients are over the age of 18 years
2. All patients are female
3. They may only have one diagnosis of cancer
4. Cases where stage of disease is unknown have been excluded

Specifically, information regarding stages of breast cancer along with information pertaining to insurance status of each case was provided. Four entries in the data were truncated due to the patient being male or the residence being outside of the Troup County area.

In order to complete our study, math majors of the Servant Scholars cohort identified specific poverty data about Troup County through online sources focused on local data collection, specifically information relating poverty and cancer from the American Cancer Society.

Statistical Analysis

Using MATLAB, an interactive environment for mathematical computation, the Servant Scholars created visual representations of data collected as well as statistically analyze correlation coefficients for different sets of data.

Data

According to the American Cancer Society, “Much of the disparity in the cancer burden among racial and ethnic minorities largely reflects obstacles to receiving healthcare services related to cancer prevention, early detection, and high quality treatment, with poverty as the overriding factor” (American Cancer Society, 2011). This suggests that due to the social inequalities of poverty, a strong correlation in race and cancer instances may give light to a correlation between poverty and cancer instances. Figures 1, 2, and 3 show cancer rates in relation to race.

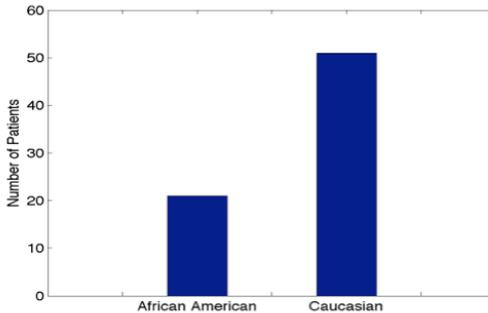


Figure 1: Number of Cancer Instances in Troup County by Race

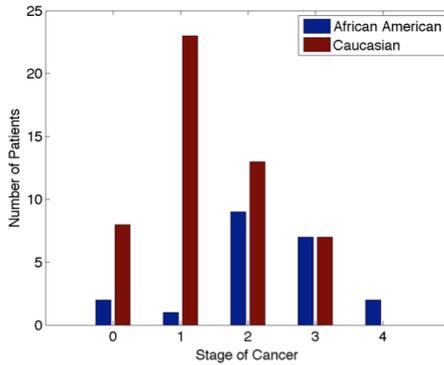


Figure 2: Number of Cancer Instances by Stage Diagnosed by Race

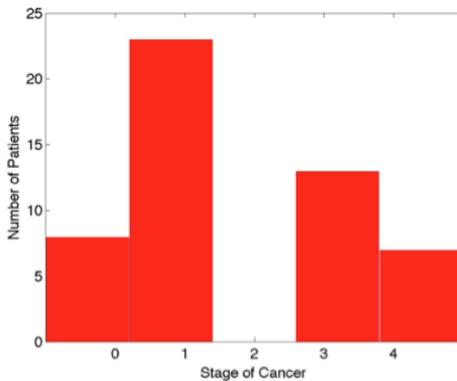


Figure 3: Number of Cancer Instances by Stage Diagnosed for Caucasian Patients

Results

The data collected shows the possibility of a relation between race and cancer, which can represent the idea that poverty and cancer may be related for the Troup County area. However, since only a small amount of data was able to be collected, it can only be suggested with graphical interpretation that they are related. There is not enough data to statistically say that the two are correlated. To improve future research, the Servant Scholars suggest that large data companies take a look into smaller regions for data collection and work towards making that data readily available to researchers.

Discussion

While the data is insufficient to determine a correlation between poverty and cancer, it still suggests that poverty is related to the stage of cancer with which the patient is diagnosed. Consider Figures 2 and 3. The number of patients for each stage diagnosis seems pretty uniform across the stages for Caucasian patients. However, for African-American patients, the trend is skewed left. This shows that patients related to poverty tend to be diagnosed with breast cancer in later stages.

This is important information to know when assessing how to help combat the issues of poverty. The later diagnosis for patients in poverty may be due to lack of healthcare available for these individuals. The lack of health care can mean that these individuals have fewer check-up visits or wait later to receive medical consultation upon realizing something is wrong medically. Thus, they are diagnosed at a later stage, reducing the likelihood of successful treatment. Therefore, one way to help combat the issues of poverty can be focusing on helping families to become self-sufficient enough to afford available healthcare, which in the end can facilitate in early detection of Breast Cancer and help save lives.

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Solutions

After our two years of study and action in various aspects of poverty, we have found that no single, universal solution exists that will bring poverty to an end. Moreover, we have found the most beneficial path to the alleviation of poverty to be contrived of three parts. These parts are one in the same; though independent of each other, they must work together to bring about positive change.

Engagement of the individual is paramount to this philosophy of service. This piece is essential and requires a substantial investment of time and self into those in poverty-- people helping people. In the case of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37, the passerby did not simply leave his cloak or give the injured man water; rather, he brought him out of the ditch to an inn, paying in full what this man could not pay himself. Though this paradigm does not mean giving of money, money in the parable represents resources and connections. By engaging people and knowing their needs, we can better serve them through empowering them to a life of self-sufficiency.

Progressing from the individual efforts, communal organizations that strive also for the reduction of poverty are necessary. Organizations like Circles of Troup County provide necessary resources and education that foster the growth of the individual in order to escape poverty. They raise awareness of the issues surrounding poverty and encourage other to join in this cause. Because poverty is a communal predicament, it requires communal efforts.

These two efforts are driven by a fundamental purpose; this purpose is found in many sources-- spiritual, moral, or whatever drives people to strive for the betterment of other individuals. This force undergirds any mission for alleviating poverty, uniting those involved in their cause. Being like-minded in such a cause compels people to work together, creating an environment for change.

Further, in light of our research, we examine how the above paradigm works in our own setting of Troup County. High cancer rates, lack of nutritional education, and the need of local organizations, which educate and inform citizens about the nature of poverty, leads to a toxic environment which breeds poverty. The ways in which our community is helping and can continue to help are through classes such as Cooking Matters, which informs attendees about eating healthy on a limited budget, and government programs, such as rounding up citizens' utility bills to the next dollar in order to raise money for local anti-poverty organizations. Organizations that work alongside people in the struggle to get out of poverty are necessary to help. More importantly, these organizations need people who work on an individual level to help impoverished people to ease this community-wide issue.

Conclusion

Through our efforts made over the past year, we as Servant Scholars have learned much about both poverty and our community. Research into this issue enlightened us in a manner that allowed us to more adequately serve the community. Putting our research into action, we created events which raised awareness, worked with Circles in their efforts, and provided a weekly meal to those who needed it. Through examining a specific issue related to poverty, we have identified one way in which our community needs help. Through the philosophy stated above, we have provided a mindset for people who are willing to aid in the alleviation of poverty. This philosophy is applicable to Troup County as well as other places dealing with issues of poverty.

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