

SEEING THE INVISIBLE AMONG US

David K. Shipler, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, ISBN 0-375-40890-8

In 2003 a bit of a flap among some North Carolina industrial and legislative leaders was generated by the selection of Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001, Metropolitan Books) as the book incoming freshmen at UNC Chapel Hill were to read. There was some concern that focusing thoughts on the difficulties of the lives of those who work at low wage jobs might cause some unrest among those employees. After all, these low maintenance folks aid in the generation of a profit margin for their employers. Probably the selection committee at the university thought this title would assist students in gathering their resolve about why they were going to college. After all, that's why a lot of people go to college, to prepare themselves for greater success in the post graduation arena of life's chances.

Another recent book on a similar topic also has the work place connection to life in North Carolina. *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, by David K. Shipler, touches on the lives of several categories of low-wage workers, including an entire chapter on the lives of migrant farm workers in the eastern part of the state.

David K. Shipler is a journalist who spent a good part of his career working for *The New York Times*, first as a reporter, then as a foreign correspondent in Saigon and Moscow, and later as chief of the Moscow and Jerusalem bureaus. His book *Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land* (Time Books) was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction in 1987. Following a stint as a professor of journalism and public affairs at Princeton, Mr. Shipler became a freelance writer.

In recent years he has focused on relationships among groups in America, particularly those that have a history of conflict. He is concerned with motivation and behavior, rather than statistical data. Unlike Dr. Barbara Ehrenreich, he is not a sociologist, but is rather a journalist who observes and investigates, reports, and then goes a step further and suggests solutions for resolving conflicts.

Also in recent years, Mr. Shipler has tended to focus his research and writing on domestic rather than foreign groups. His 1997 book *A Country of Strangers: Blacks and Whites in America* (Knopf) examined how the racial groups perceive and react to each other.

And, unlike *Nickel and Dimed*, *The Working Poor* devotes some attention to agricultural laborers. Chapter Four, "Harvest of Shame," focuses on the lives of the people who now produce most of the field crops in eastern North Carolina, migrant workers from Mexico. David Shipler spent a good amount of time talking with the people who work in the tobacco and vegetable fields, as well as their family members and overseers, and also the landowners. The focus is on the Sampson and Wayne County area.

Shipler visited with Pastor Tony Rojas, the Catholic priest turned Episcopalian, who works with the Episcopal Farmworkers Ministry near Newton Grove, as well as an executive with the Mt. Olive Pickle Company, which buys cucumbers harvested by migrant workers. He visited the living quarters provided for the migrant workers by landowners and talked with the landowners about their sometimes precarious profit margins. He discussed the problems the Farm Labor Organizing Committee has had in unionizing laborers in a state where unionized labor is not in abundant supply.

The strength of this chapter, “Harvest of Shame,” as well as the entire book, is the vignettes Mr. Shipler provides, based on personal interviews and thorough research. The reader is comfortable that he is writing in a non-inflammatory manner about real people in true-to-life situations. Indeed, he does allow the reader to “get inside the head” of the subjects. The reader understands where they are coming from, even if the various groups whose paths cross do not necessarily understand each other.

Of course farm workers are not the only “invisible working poor” members of society with which Mr. Shipler is concerned. He writes extensively about the problems of people caught up in the aftereffects of the mid 1990s welfare reform legislation. Child care, transportation, and educational endeavor problems, particularly class attendance, as well as conformity to the traditional workplace environment such as in an office, are also discussed in this book.

Those interested in gaining some insights into the lives of the people who support the economy of our state and nation will be interested in reading *The Working Poor*. David Shipler suggests that if these lives are improved, so will the overall quality of life and the economy, the general welfare, so to speak. He encourages “holistic remedies” such as adopting “living wage” laws and providing more vocational training, access to health care, and early intervention program. It’s worth thinking about.

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