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Sr. Amata Miller IHM
St. Catherine University

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**Talk for St. Catherine University Voices of Homelessness Oral History Project
Public Event 3/21/13 - Sr. Amata Miller, IHM**

Wow! After those powerful real-life stories we need to take a bit of time to reflect on what we have heard. I know I need it. So just take a deep breath and let all your mixed feelings, whatever they are, come to the surface within you! Face them – the ugly and the beautiful! Then I'll say a few words. (Few Minutes of Silence for Reflection)

I promised Louise I would introduce myself after the time for reflection. I am Sister Amata Miller, a member of the Economics faculty. After I first heard these stories, and again tonight, I just had to stop and spend a few minutes letting my feelings come to the surface – naming them and recognizing them in myself. [As I worked on my remarks for tonight I found that doing this set the stage for what I want to say to you.]

These were my feelings, and they came in this order....

- **Guilty** – for not knowing, for being insensitive to this reality among my students, -- and for being one of those who have always had a home
- **Sad** that this insecurity is part of so many people's reality, that so many young people experience the pain and stress of housing insecurity, that at even at SCU we have not found enough ways to help
- **In awe** of the resilience of those persons who have experienced housing insecurity, have found ways to deal with it and have come here to St. Kate's for their education
- **Angry** that our American social, economic and political systems neglect the poor so consistently, and so hypocritically in our nation that promises "liberty and justice for all".
- **Determined** to do more to assist and somehow, working within my own sphere of influence, to bring change in social systems – national priorities, employment with living wages and benefits for all who want to work, enough affordable housing so everyone can live in dignity and freedom.

The kind of housing insecurity we have learned about tonight is just WRONG.

It is wrong MORALLY as we know from basic ethical teaching:

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948 and accepted as the code of ethics for the world's 194 nations says in Article 25:

"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, **housing** and medical care and necessary social services..."

The tradition of Catholic social teaching, expresses what many other religious traditions also espouse, when it says that

Basic economic rights indispensable to human dignity include the right to life, food, clothing, **shelter**, rest, medical care, basic education...(EJA #80) [PT 11 says necessary social services]

A MORALLY JUST society is one which makes it possible for every person to live in fundamental dignity, to have their basic needs met.

Housing insecurity is also WRONG according to American law:

The Housing Act of 1949 promised “a decent home and a suitable living environment” for all Americans.

-In 1988 the National Housing Task Force wrote: The paradox of housing in America is that “For most, housing is a dream fulfilled; but for too many others, housing is unavailable, unaffordable, or unfit.” (Report, p. 2)

As Americans we know that economic inequality is an inevitable part of our kind of economic system, but **our laws** also recognize that when people among us do not have adequate housing, that is not the kind of society we want to live in. That is excessive inequality, it is **INJUSTICE**. However, we all know that having a law on the books is not enough by itself. We also need an ethos which puts the common good of all people first. Sometimes we have done this. In one of our better moments President Roosevelt reminded us in his 2d inaugural in 1937 :

“I see one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad and ill-nourished. The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.” FDR – 1937 -2d Inaugural

And our Minnsotan national leader, Hubert Humphrey, made the necessary priorities clear when he said “The moral test of any society is how it cares for people – in the dawn of life – children; in the twilight of life – the elderly; the sick and the disenfranchised

I believe that moral teaching and American legal tradition show that injustices like the housing insecurity are the true obscenities in our society. Housing insecurity is counter not only to what is right, but also to what our nation promises to provide for everyone.

Tonight we have learned some uncomfortable truths about housing insecurity – for members of our own community, here within our midst at St. Catherine University.

We have learned specifically from a work of social history envisioned and implemented by Louise Edwards-Simpson and her colleagues. It has made articulate *in their own words* the voices of the unheard among us who have experienced housing insecurity – as they, along with us, juggle all the demands of college, of work, and of family life.

And so now we have the “burden of knowing” – now that I know, what am I doing about it?”

Since my role here now as Director of the Myser Initiative is to help make the mission truly alive in all we do, I naturally want to tie what we have learned here tonight to the

University's mission which is in itself a Call to use our knowledge to make our societies places where all people can flourish.

In our Mission statement we say we aim to prepare St. Catherine graduates to lead and influence, but not just to prepare any kind of leaders -- we challenge students to be **transformational** leaders. "Challenging students to transformational leadership" means leadership in bringing about a more just, humane and peaceful society for all people, one that is sustainable into the future. It means being people who will attend to the needs of their times, and made a difference in the world in which they live. Those are two of the characteristics of higher education in the spirit of the Sisters of St. Joseph, the foundresses of this University.

Our mission is to prepare graduates who are "ethical, reflective and socially responsible" leaders. And social responsibility in the religious tradition of this University means fostering **social justice in a spirit of love for each person** whom we believe is made in the image of God, with an inalienable dignity and right to life and all that makes for a good life. In our religious tradition social responsibility means giving a priority to the needs of the most vulnerable in society. We say we have a **preferential option for the poor**. (That has been noted often in the media in recent days as one of the characteristics of the newly elected Pope Francis.) This leads us to recognize that the basic rights of those who lack necessities (such as good housing) take **priority** over the desires of those of us who have more than enough.

Recognizing that new knowledge, such as we have received tonight carries with it new power and new responsibility is part of living out the mission of this University, part of the work of all of us in this University community – faculty, staff, administration, students and alums.

The great political theologian, Dorothy Soelle once said that

"There are three stages of response to injustice: mute and assenting, aware and lamenting, bonded for change"

First stage – "Mute and assenting" – That is probably where many of us were when we came in here tonight – unconscious of the degree of housing insecurity around us, and at least implicitly assenting to things the way they are now.

Tonight we have moved to the second phase – "Aware and lamenting" – we have become newly aware of the many dimensions of housing insecurity and the false stereotypes we have had, and we have been saddened by what we now know.

Our new understandings as well as our University's mission statement call us to move to the third stage "Bonded for change". We have a call to work together to assist those among us who are experiencing housing insecurity, and also to work with many others, like the Wilder Foundation, to address the local, state and national factors that are **causing** housing insecurity.

So, concretely, where do we go now? I have learned that there is no limit to the creativity of the very diverse people in this University community.

The leadership scholar, Margaret Wheatley, has written many books, one of her latest is titled, *Turning to One Another*. In it are some important words;

“I’ve seen that there is not a more powerful way to initiate significant change, than to convene a conversation. When a community of people discover that they share a concern, change begins. There is no power equal to a community discovering what it cares about.”

So we have already begun through the work of this study and tonight’s public event. I suggest briefly three levels of activity for our community in response to what we have learned about housing insecurity among us. You have some actions listed in your program.

First – Increased **sensitivity** to those around us – our assumptions, our conversations, our expectations. For example when we talk about pot-luck events, let us remember that some will not be able to bring some food, and to phrase the invitation in a way that is respectful of that reality

Let us try to find sensitive ways that we might make food available for those among us who have need of it. If you can, you might want to make a donation to the St. Catherine University Emergency Fund for students who are experiencing emergencies.

Second, we might choose some **Community Work and learning experiences** as a way to learn more about and assist with local needs and become aware of resources in the local community

Third, we are here in the State Capitol and we need to support **legislative** efforts to raise the minimum wage, to support programs for those in need that are facing the budget axe, but are frequently lifelines for people facing housing and food insecurity. Your program for tonight gives e-mail addresses and so you can send a message on your cell phone before you leave. At the legislature they are working on the state budget right now.

Through the work of Louise and the many others who prepared for this night, we’ve begun a conversation about housing insecurity. Our conversations tonight will inevitably lead to more efforts. So keep your ears and eyes open for opportunities to collaborate and widen the network of folks here at St. Kate’s and in your own spheres who are bonded for change work of many kinds.

And always remember the words of the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead who wrote: **“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.”**

Thank you and may God bless you.

