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Faculty Profile: Michele Wakin - Understanding Homelessness in America

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Faculty Profile: Michele Wakin

Understanding Homelessness in America

BSC's second-year sociology professor Michele Wakin is motivated to do her research by people like "Louie." A former jewelry store thief who spent some time in jail, Louie is one of thousands of California's homeless who has been both served and challenged by the state's complex system of regulation. Jail offered him the opportunity to participate in an elite diving school, yet it also led to fierce physical competition which resulted in chronic neck and back problems. Once out of prison, fifty-three year old Louie began to get his life back together. He applied for supplemental security income and pursued a solution to his most pressing problem: housing. Like most homeless people, Louie did not feel safe at the local homeless shelter, where one has to "watch himself." With some assistance, Louie applied for supplemental security income and eventually bought a used RV, joining the ranks of California's "outdoor" vehicle dwellers. Several years later, he also received a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Section 8 voucher and moved into his first apartment. "He's one of the few people from my research who made the full transition from homeless to housed," Wakin notes. "Once he got into an RV, his mentality completely changed...he found some peace."

Michele Wakin has spent the past five years of her life studying the problems of the homeless in America, whose numbers have been estimated recently to be between 2.1 and 3.5 million. A native of New England, she went west, to the University of California at Santa Barbara, where she completed a Ph.D. dissertation in sociology in 2005. Originally intent on pursuing graduate work in literary and cultural studies, she received an interdisciplinary Master's degree from Boston University. During this time she worked as an ESL teacher in a men's shelter in Boston, a pivotal experience. "It was extremely eye opening," she says. Her current scholarship centers on the sources and scope of homelessness, but even more particularly the disconnect between needs and solutions. There is an endemic problem with supportive services for the homeless. Regulations are



too rigid, shelters are too few and inadequate, and the homeless have developed a culture of resistance. "It's a CATCH-22. Homeless shelters are the most publicly acceptable places for homeless people yet homeless people themselves do not find them acceptable. Shelters often serve to further marginalize an already fragile and vulnerable population."

Dr. Wakin's 2004 PhD dissertation is an ethnographic study of the homeless community in Santa Barbara. To get at what can be an evasive subject, she employs several methods, both qualitative and quantitative, from basic population counts to reviews of licensing and regulation frameworks, "ridealongs" with local police officers, surveys, and personal interviews. Perhaps the most pathbreaking part of her research focuses on vehicle dwellers, the "mobile homeless" who are neither on the street nor sheltered and are less visible as a result. Her findings are many and various, but she identifies two that stand out more than the rest. Her most central finding is plain but profound. "There is no one unified solution to homelessness that will work always and everywhere. Yet place-based solutions are the essential first step." All strategies for serving the homeless have gaps, and the gaps have much to do with local conditions and the challenges involved in serving such a large and diverse population. She also argues that we should think carefully about the meaning of vehicle dwelling

to the “unsheltered.” “People want a place of their own, however modest; that brings privacy, autonomy and respect.”

Dr. Wakin walks a sensitive line in her research. Studying the homeless is fraught with political and ethical concerns and there was, at least at first, a general wariness about her motives and potential uses for her findings. “Municipal service providers and policy makers don’t always see academics as people that can help. They can be skeptical of outsiders who do not seem to have a real stake in the outcome of their work.” Still, over time, she breached that barrier and worked closely with city and county officials to develop a safe parking program for people living in their vehicles. In Santa Barbara, Wakin notes, once people saw that she was willing to talk to all parties, wariness started to abate. On the other side, establishing trust with homeless people was even more difficult and arguably the most important hurdle to get over. Professor Wakin did that by making contacts with homeless people while volunteering at a local shelter and developing trust with a handful of people who became willing to be interviewed for her study. “There is a tendency among the homeless to see the world as ‘Us versus Them’,” Wakin notes. Yet many of them have developed a deep sense of community. “They really do take care of one another.”

Professor Wakin has not kept her scholarly conclusions to herself, presenting her findings at a variety of venues, from large academic conferences such as the American Sociological Association to smaller venues like the Society for the Study of Social Problems to meetings with local audiences and community organizations concerned with homelessness. She has published

some of her work on vehicle dwelling in a 2005 article in *American Behavioral Scientist*, which established her as a national authority on the subject. And in April, 2006, Dr. Wakin was quoted in a *New York Times* article on the phenomenon of vehicle dwelling in America. “That was a nice surprise...it’s great to see that this issue is getting attention and hopefully that story will help spread a greater awareness about the plight of homeless people nationwide.”

One of the most important conclusions Professor Wakin has drawn is that there is much more work to be done on this subject. She has constructed an ambitious agenda for researching the problems of and solutions



to homelessness in America. With the help of a CART Faculty and Librarian Research grant in Spring 2006, Dr. Wakin spent large parts of summer 2006 in California, broadening her study of vehicle dwelling to include three other cities, conducting 30 interviews in the course of three weeks. Her goal is to assess the typicality of Santa Barbara against the experiences of other cities. In addition, in concert with Dr. Robert Amey of BSC’s Geography Department, Wakin is design-

ing a project for understanding the spatial dimensions of homelessness by mapping out the locations of service provision, shelters and makeshift dwellings. “The aim is to find out which models for local service provision to the homeless work, why they work, and how they can be replicated.” Moreover, in the near future, she plans to shift her research focus eastward. “The problem of homelessness in California is different than it is here, because of the weather and differences in local culture and regulation. I’d like to study those differences more intensively.”

Professor Wakin's faculty colleagues and students at Bridgewater State will be the beneficiaries of her timely research as well. In the coming year, she has agreed to be the co-coordinator (along with the Chemistry Department's Ed Brush) of BSC's new Center for Sustainability, a unit that seeks to coordinate teaching, research and outreach activities concerning human relationships and the natural environment in southeastern Massachusetts. As important for her, she plans to share her knowledge of and enthusiasm for understanding the problems of homelessness with her students. In 2007-08, Professor Wakin will be offering a First-year Seminar on "Home and Homelessness." She



hopes to involve students in field work and to develop internship partnerships with local agencies combating the problem. Finally, she hopes to be able to bring those who have experienced homelessness into her classes here, as she was able to do as a graduate student teacher at UC-Santa Barbara, when she invited Louie to class. With his cutting humor and willingness to share stories of his misfortune and his achievements openly and honestly, Louie "put a human face on the problem of homelessness, which really helped my students to relate."

The research of Professor Wakin helps us to understand a serious and saddening problem in our midst and one that is increasingly hard to ignore.

—Andrew Holman.