



The Annie E. Casey Foundation

# Moving Up is a Steep Climb

*Parents' Work and Children's Welfare  
in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jobs Initiative*



*Roberta Rehner Iversen*

**April 2002**

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In Seattle: the Mike Jeremy family; the Lucky Miracle family; the Teresa Russell family; the Isabell Smith family; and the Maya Vanderhand family.

These families' impressive strengths and continuing needs demand our close and immediate attention.

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### Participants

*Randy Jackson*

*Mike Jeremy*

*Tasha Jones*

*Kevin McDonalds*

*Lucky Miracle*

*Teresa Russell*

*Tisha Shanks*

*Isabell Smith*

*Maya Vanderhand*

*Hard Working Blessed*

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### INTRODUCTION

Despite the robust economy in the 1990s, by 2001 one in six children under age six in America still lived in poverty (National Center for Children's Poverty, 2001). Distressing increases in poverty were experienced by families with *two* working parents (City Kids Count 2000, 2001). Worse yet, economic recession and the aftermath of September 11th's tragic terrorism led to increased layoffs and unemployment among parents in the low-wage labor market.

At the same time, two public policy changes have radically affected how poor parents get, keep and advance in jobs. First, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) replaced the 60-year old Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program with the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. TANF limits receipt of public assistance to a lifetime maximum of 5 years and also requires that recipients engage quickly in work. Hence, programs under TANF, generally described as "rapid attachment" or "work first," allow minimal to no pre-employment education or training. Second, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) replaced the Jobs Partnership Training Act (JTPA), the nation's main workforce development policy since 1982. WIA ushers in a new, local "one-stop" approach to the delivery of post-employment education and training services. Because of cuts in funding and a broadening of the target population beyond those JTPA defined as "economically disadvantaged," local WIA boards are able to award more training dollars to dislocated and incumbent workers than to low-income or unemployed workers.

Both policy changes were spurred by reports that human capital and skill training programs did not lead to sustained employment among those most disadvantaged (Friedlander & Burtless, 1995). Launch of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jobs Initiative in 1995, an 8-year, 6-city workforce demonstration program targeting poor, inner-city men and women, was also spurred by those reports—but in the opposite direction.

**The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jobs Initiative.** The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jobs Initiative (JI) was designed to improve the futures of poor, inner-city men and women who were disadvantaged in their previous work efforts by inadequate education, immigrant or refugee status, incarceration, racism, substance abuse, or work experience that did not utilize their competencies or potential: in short, the unemployed and under-employed. These men's and women's neighborhoods yielded few jobs, their service supports were distant and inadequate, and their education and training providers were fragmented and under-funded. In response, the Jobs Initiative oriented its efforts to change in *both* individuals and systems. The Initiative provides support and assistance to community-based organizations (CBOs), city agencies, local foundations, and other groups that help low-income workers secure living-wage jobs with benefits and advancement opportunities (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2000). Workers are generally considered "low income" when their income is below 200% of the federal poverty line (Greenberg, 2001). The long-term goal of the Jobs Initiative is to generate reforms of public and private jobs-related services and systems that impact local labor markets more broadly (Abt Associates and New School University, 2000). At base, the Jobs Initiative aims to improve children's welfare by increasing their parents' earning power and mobility.

By design, the Foundation invested in a wide variety of Jobs Initiative projects across the sites. A few followed a "work first" model, emphasizing job access with post-employment follow-up. Most countered the rapid attachment trend by investing in customized hard and soft skill training, curricular and job placement partnerships with employers in promising industry sectors, and collaboration between regional education and human service institutions. The Jobs Initiative is guided by the premise that skill training, increased language competency, institutional and organizational collaboration, and post-employment services *together* can provide real opportunity for poor

urban residents. Recent reports that education-focused versus rapid attachment welfare-to-work programs result in longer work periods and higher earnings (Freedman et al., 2000; Hamilton et al., 2001) reinforce the Initiative's emphasis on education *and* employment.

The Jobs Initiative's clear goals of "good jobs"—jobs with good wages, benefits, retention, and career mobility—set it apart from earlier job training programs (Gewirtz, 2001; Giloth & Phillips, 2000; Giloth & Gewirtz, 1999; Harrison & Weiss, 1998). The Jobs Initiative required starting wages of \$7/hour or higher [in 1995 dollars]. In fact, the average placement wage was \$9.13/hour (Fleischer, 2001). The Jobs Initiative's implementation methods set it further apart. A regional intermediary in each city channeled Foundation funding and technical assistance to its network of local partners and held them accountable for placement and retention targets. Projects developed and refined customized skill training curricula with continuous input from area employers and industry representatives. Community-based organizations, educational institutions, and employers developed service delivery partnerships to "cover the bases" of JI participants' needs. Sites also pursued changes in city and state policies through advocacy and formal relationships with legislators and government representatives.

National evaluation of the Jobs Initiative produced rich information about participant characteristics, site activities, and outcomes during the start-up and capacity building phases (Abt Associates & New School University, 2000; Fleischer, 2001; see also [www.aecf.org/jobsinitiative](http://www.aecf.org/jobsinitiative)). Briefly, by December 2000 almost 12,000 poor inner-city residents had enrolled in the Jobs Initiative as a whole. Per program design, Jobs Initiative participants were severely economically disadvantaged. One-third had less than a high school diploma. Close to 20% spoke languages other than English as their primary language. Just less than half (45%) received public assistance and almost two-thirds (59%) had annual incomes of less than \$9000 (Fleischer, 2001:7). Over 5500 male and female Jobs Initiative participants were placed in jobs with significantly higher wages and benefits than their previous jobs offered. Importantly, most of these jobs were full time, full year. A variety of program supports complemented pre-employment skill training or direct job placement to help workers stay employed and move toward family-sustaining wages. Of those not placed in jobs, some dropped out of the Initiative before placement, others have not yet reached the starting wage requirement and are thus not counted as official placements, and a sizable number is still in training.

Two major questions emerged from the evaluation data that the Annie E. Casey Foundation chose to pursue through ethnographic research at Jobs Initiative sites in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (MJI) and Seattle, Washington (SJI). These questions are conceptually based on examining how human, social, and cultural capital affect families trying to "move up." Human capital is viewed here as pre- and post-employment education and training; social capital as the trusted and reciprocal relationships between individuals, organizations, institutions, policies, practices, and supports; and cultural capital as developmental enrichment and resources that families provide for children.

**Question #1: How does Jobs Initiative training and employment affect the participants, their families, and their communities?**

**Question #2: In particular, how does a parent's participation in the Jobs Initiative affect his or her children's welfare?**

**The Jobs Initiative through an Ethnographic "Lens:"** A key challenge for public policy has been the scarcity of rigorous research into the diversity of paths to workforce success among low-income parents (Strawn & Martinson, 2000:10). Large-scale evaluations have yielded valuable information about *what* effects different programs had on

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women's welfare receipt and work entry (Hamilton et al., 2001), but they have not told us *how* poor workers—men and women—move up in the labor market (Nightingale & Mikelson, 2000). Rigorous national surveys have documented that poverty is associated with poor child outcomes, but they have not told us *why* and *how* poverty or parents' work affects children's development (Corcoran, 2000). In response, this research uses ethnography to illuminate "*how*" and *why*" poor parents' work affects children's welfare.

As we know, people's lives do not come in discrete "bits." Lives evolve dynamically over time in conjunction with other people, events and conditions, and in specific geographic locations. Because ethnography is a research method that studies people's lives intensively, over time, and in their natural contexts, it can reveal "inside" information about how and why work and family life intersect, capturing the impact of unsettling transitions as well as more stable periods. Ethnography also invites multiple perspectives on the lives and situations being examined, thus assuring a "rounded" as well as inside view.

In short—ethnography can show us the "whole family" in its "whole context" over time, not just its parent, child, or employer at a single time point. In this study, parents' and children's strengths and needs are elaborated through the observations, descriptions, points of view, and beliefs of Jobs Initiative participants and other people and systems important to their work and families. We spent several days a month with parents and their children, extended families and neighbors, experiencing first-hand the struggles and resilience in their day-to-day work and family lives. We accompanied parents on 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. and other work shifts and talked with their co-workers, managers, and supervisors. We spent many days in children's childcare facilities and elementary, middle, and high schools, following the youths to classes and talking with their teachers, administrators, and peers. We spent other days in churches, therapeutic settings, and community enrichment facilities. Finally, we spent many days with Jobs Initiative intermediary staff, project staff, and community partners learning in detail about their curricula and support services and about how the new workforce systems functioned under the Jobs Initiative.

Essentially, we talked with and observed enough people (over 400) who were associated with ten Jobs Initiative families in Milwaukee and Seattle over a long enough time (18 months in 2000-2001) to learn valuable new information about how parents' work and children's welfare intersect [See Appendix A for site descriptions and details of the research design]. As a result, ethnography's special "lens" reveals here *how* parents' work affects parents and children, *how* children's needs affect parents' work, and *how* other relevant people, organizations, and policies affect parents' work and family worlds.



## Summary of Findings from the Jobs Initiative Ethnography

**How did the families fare *before* the Jobs Initiative?** Some of the men and women who headed the families in our study had made mistakes as youth or young adults—serious mistakes that resulted in years of incarceration or residential treatment. Despite having “paid-in-full,” the family heads struggled unsuccessfully in the labor market, unable to obtain jobs that would last or provide future possibility. Other family heads fled besieged home countries and sought political asylum in the United States, leaving valuable credentials, identities and family members behind in Africa, Asia or Central America. They had also struggled unsuccessfully to forge work futures in a land with foreign language and institutions. Still other family heads were too young, too old, or perhaps too dark-colored to access their American dreams.

These family heads struggled for five to twenty years before Jobs Initiative enrollment with reliance on public assistance, crushing debt, chronic health problems, periods of depression, legal problems, racism, jobs that paid minimum wage and did not offer benefits, jobs that only lasted a few months, jobs that did not use their education or skills, and not enough education to find a better job. The families had also struggled, with varying degrees of success, to provide for their infant, preschool, and school-age children. Some children did well in school even though schools and student progress were limited by inadequate resources. Other children had struggled with chronic health problems and developmental deficits, unsafe neighborhoods where dodging bullets and drugs was common, too little space in their homes, not enough food, foster care or guardianship, periods of separation from their parents, erratic medical care, and poorly-funded schools. The study parents’ non-resident children received less contact and financial support during their parents’ hard times as well.

**How did the families fare *after* the Jobs Initiative?** The Jobs Initiative launched men and women into “good jobs” that gave them new options, directions and financial stability. Their children benefited accordingly. Yet a “steep climb” remains. For most, reaching a family wage takes much longer than anyone originally estimated. Earlier research identified that many welfare-receiving parents needed to take small, incremental steps over a period of two to five years to reach sustained attachment to jobs and approach adequate incomes (Herr & Halpern, 1994). This research found that *it takes three years or more for parents with any employment challenge in their background to approach financial security through work*. Children need a similarly long time to overcome family separation, poor school starts, and financial insecurity

We learned that parents’ work impacts their parenting through income, benefits, safety, stress, resilience and time. We learned that making enough money means increasing one’s wages and skills and that these goals take time away from children. We learned that some employers enact “family-friendly” policies and practices that facilitate meeting children’s needs and that other worksite conditions make meeting children’s needs more difficult. We learned that some public policies help families make ends meet, allowing children to be fed and clothed, and others are unknown or withdrawn too quickly. We also learned that crushing debt, family separation, refugee experiences, and not enough education slow or derail wage progress. Children then reflect these negative influences in their school behavior and performance. We learned that some urban schools punish children for their parents’ long work hours and others provide rich resources despite inadequate funding and teacher burnout. We learned that supportive relationships mediate many of these stresses over time, but not all of them. And we learned that as families gain income and stability, they become more involved in their communities.

### Key Lessons and Remaining Challenges from the Jobs Initiative Ethnography

- The Jobs Initiative resulted in “good jobs” with higher wages, health and other non-wage benefits, and advancement possibilities for poor inner-city men and women who had been disadvantaged in previous work efforts.
- Education and skill training definitely mattered to getting and keeping a “good job.” Human capital development “launched” even economically disadvantaged individuals into good jobs. Jobs Initiative “legitimization,” as a form of social capital, also contributed.
- “Good jobs” mattered directly and indirectly to the children of Jobs Initiative parents, at times dramatically. Gains in children’s grades and behavior, neighborhood safety, therapeutic resources, and family climate were generally sustained, despite sometimes-precipitous ups and downs in parents’ employment.
- Getting a “good job” also increased families’ connections and participation in their communities. Children’s connections increased alongside their parents’. Good jobs also increased parents’ interaction with their children’s schools.
- At the same time, regardless of what kind of labor market disadvantage parents suffered before Jobs Initiative enrollment—be it welfare receipt, immigrant or political refugee status, former incarceration, former substance abuse, depression, racism, or not enough education—reaching a family-supporting income was many years away. Even after three or more years of steady, hard work, Jobs Initiative parents did not earn family-supporting incomes.
- Notably, we discovered a “*life-stage mismatch*” between Jobs Initiative workers and their employers. A “*life-stage mismatch*” was characterized by wages, policies, practices, and conditions in the workplace that did not match the worker’s age, family status, physical condition, and persistent life challenges. Children’s well-being often mirrored this mismatch.
- Jobs Initiative parents engaged in many strategies to meet the challenges of staying employed, making more money, and moving up. Working overtime or taking a second job produced more family income but often diverted parents from meeting children’s developmental needs. Subsidies, income supplements, and community resources were helpful but not sufficient to assure families’ financial stability. Importantly, supportive relationships were often needed for two years or more—far longer than they are generally available in workforce programs. Children’s well-being often paralleled the receipt or absence of public and program supports.
- The difficulty of getting more education and skills remains the steepest barrier to achieving a family-sustaining income. Pursuit of college education or apprenticeship training was generally halted by untenable opportunity costs for Jobs Initiative workers who had children to raise and were saddled with debt and other life burdens.
- Multiple efforts are necessary to help economically disadvantaged parents move up: effort by the worker; effort by the workforce program; effort by the employer; and effort by those making public policy.

**Utility of the Findings.** In addition to ‘fleshing out’ findings from national surveys and evaluations, this research extends knowledge gained from earlier ethnographic or qualitative analyses of women receiving or leaving welfare or men and women in low-wage work (Dodson, 1999; Edin & Lein, 1997; Newman, 1999; Shirk, Bennett, & Aber, 1999) by its inclusive focus on how workers’ lives, workforce development systems, employers, and public policy intersect to affect parents’ work and children’s welfare. In particular, this study amplifies how workforce development—specifically, education, skill training and post-employment support—contributes to the job mobility of low-income workers, and how that mobility or its absence affects the workers’ children.

The family stories in this monograph are representative of the life situations of many of the 2300 Jobs Initiative participants and their families in Milwaukee and Seattle. Because of the rigorous design, study findings may be transferable to countless other struggling, low-income working families in America as well. The experiences of Jobs Initiative participants may also represent the next steps facing welfare-leavers in their work and family worlds.

As national attention turns from reducing welfare caseloads to helping low-income workers keep and advance in jobs, lessons from the Jobs Initiative may be increasingly salient. The depth and extent of information about parents’ work and children’s welfare from the Jobs Initiative ethnography can contribute to decisions about how to allocate workforce development and welfare dollars so that low-income earners keep jobs and advance to family-supporting incomes. This research also reveals how workforce programs, employers, and public policymakers can help low-wage workers move up the job ladder in ways that improve rather than hinder children’s immediate and longer-term well-being.

**Organization of the Monograph.** This monograph presents findings from ethnographic research about parents’ work and children’s welfare in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jobs Initiative. Chapter 1 amplifies key lessons about the Jobs Initiative. Chapter 2 uses excerpts from Initiative participants, partners, children, trainers, employers and others, selected from the complete family narratives, to illustrate how work and family intersect—for good and ill. The chapter elaborates challenges that economically disadvantaged families face trying to reach family-supporting incomes, strategies they employ to keep and advance in jobs, and how these challenges and strategies impact children. Chapter 3 presents conclusions from the Jobs Initiative ethnography, and implications for public policy follow in Chapter 4. Details of the research design, the sample, the Jobs Initiative sites, and the workers’ job and wage progression over time appear in Appendices A through D. Ten family stories constructed from the study data are available through the Annie E. Casey Jobs Initiative web site at [www.aecf.org/jobsinitiative](http://www.aecf.org/jobsinitiative).

CHAPTER 1

**LESSONS ABOUT PARENTS' WORK AND CHILDREN'S WELFARE FROM THE  
JOBS INITIATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY**

**“Good Jobs” through the Jobs Initiative Resulted in Better Wages and Benefits and  
Some Asset Accumulation**

**T**he Jobs Initiative launched parents into “good” jobs—jobs with wages and benefits far surpassing what they ever achieved before Jobs Initiative enrollment. Nine of the 10 family heads in our study got jobs through the Jobs Initiative; the tenth had not yet been placed and remained employed at his pre-JI worksite.

Before they enrolled in the Jobs Initiative, study participants' wages averaged \$8.07/hour in Milwaukee and \$7.75/hour in Seattle, similar to the average \$8.07 pre-enrollment wage across the six Jobs Initiative sites (Abt Associates and New School University, 2000). While these wages may seem relatively adequate, they generally came from jobs that were part time and part year. In contrast, Jobs Initiative placements were full time and full year, producing increases in the family heads' annual incomes of \$3,350 to \$19,800 relative to their *potential* full-time annual incomes from previous jobs or public assistance [See Appendix D for job and wage progression data]. These increases are dramatically larger than those reported in reviews of earlier job training programs (Bartik, 2001) and had equally dramatic impacts on the families' children. Although subsequent wage progression was far more limited than these initial “jumps,” as discussed in Chapter 2, because Jobs Initiative intermediaries were regionally located and involved, they were able to influence wage progression at some employers. JI project-employer partnerships were particularly well situated to impact employers' wage practices. For example, Milwaukee Jobs Initiative's printing project persuaded companies to increase their starting wages by 50-cents to \$1.50/hour.

In addition to good wages, a core expectation of the Jobs Initiative was that employer partners would provide employee benefits, even though this expectation ran counter to the national decline in benefit provision over the past decade (Nafziger, 2000). In contrast, the family heads' pre-JI jobs had seldom offered health or other non-wage benefits.

All the Jobs Initiative placements offered health and other benefits, either immediately or after a 90-day probation period. It must be added however, that while family heads generally utilized employer benefits for themselves, most kept their children on Medicaid as premiums were exponentially more expensive when they covered partners or children. As Gerstel and Clawson's (2001) research underscored, affordability is key to taking advantage of benefits that are offered. Jobs Initiative workers did not use employer health benefits, even if that meant they were left uncovered, when their contribution to the premium went beyond about \$15/month. On the other hand, as parents' wages increased, several moved their children off Medicaid to their employer's health policy. Partners and spouses were variably covered by their own employment or by extended Medicaid where available, as in Wisconsin.

Better wages and benefits also allowed the Jobs Initiative workers to begin to build savings and assets. Indirectly, employer benefits helped Jobs Initiative parents think more expansively about their children's futures. For example, when one family head changed jobs, tuition reimbursement benefits and inexpensive life insurance led her to think long-range for the first time about new options for the college futures of her middle-school children. More directly,

Jobs Initiative wages allowed four families to buy cars, albeit old ones, and five to begin or expand savings accounts. Three families moved to upgraded rental housing or safer neighborhoods and four started thinking seriously about purchasing homes. While savings and housing plans were frequently interrupted by more immediate needs, seeds for future mobility were sown.

### Jobs Initiative Skill Training Mattered to Getting a “Good Job”

The amount and quality of the skill training that participants received through the Jobs Initiative directly influenced getting and keeping a “good job,” although to different degrees as the family stories document. Essentially, human capital development mattered. Customized training in manufacturing, automotive services, office occupations, printing and construction was preceded or augmented by instruction in soft skills, Adult Basic Education (ABE), English as a Second Language (ESL), and GED [See Appendix A].

Important to the aims of the Jobs Initiative, even when skills learned in training were not used directly on the JI job, workers drew on them in later employment or pursuit of new career directions. Even the family head that did not get a new job through the Initiative felt that aspects of his training contributed to a later job change.

Jobs Initiative training also acted as a platform upon which the new workers built additional skills at the workplace. Skill accrual led to promotion opportunities—although not always to initial acceptances—or to subsequent jobs that offered broader responsibility and higher wages. Jobs Initiative workers taught their new competencies to co-workers, raising the overall skill level at the worksite.

Jobs Initiative skill training also mattered indirectly through increasing worker confidence. The new workers felt proud of their new abilities and more hopeful about the future. At the same time, all felt strongly that they needed more training to move further forward; particularly more computer training. Their views coincide with the fact that most of the employment gains among workers over age 25 during the 1990s were for those with at least some college experience. Employment declined for workers with a high school diploma or less (Martel & Langdon, 2001). Immigrant parents wished for longer and more intensive ESL and GED training, having been hindered by the lack of academic certification in earlier work efforts [The role of post-employment education and training is discussed more fully in Chapter 2].

### Jobs Initiative “Legitimization” Mattered to Getting a “Good Job”

Access to a good job that the individual could not have gotten otherwise was a similarly important benefit of Jobs Initiative training. The Jobs Initiative conferred “legitimacy” on the trainees’ efforts that served as important social capital in the labor market. Jobs that were “guaranteed” up front, in conjunction with JI training, illustrated the most powerful aspect of the Jobs Initiative legitimization function, one that developed out of the Initiative’s focus on systemic partnerships between programs, trainers, education institutions, and employers. The more intimately the employer felt connected to Jobs Initiative staff, and the longer the Initiative-employer relationship, the more positive the employer felt about the new worker. Although employers said that the new workers’ “skills” influenced their hiring decisions, it seemed that the Initiative’s sanction was equally influential. Employers’ comments about workers’ skills were always followed by effusive comments about their relationships with Jobs Initiative projects and staff.

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Jobs Initiative legitimization was particularly critical for participants who had been in prison, as job prospects of former felons have long been poor (Western, 2001). The study's formerly-incarcerated family heads were among the nearly 500,000 prisoners released each year (Marshall, 2001) who had experienced employer rejections due to their patchwork post-prison work histories or in stereotypical response to their history of incarceration. Equally important, Jobs Initiative legitimization withstood job changes. Subsequent employers prioritized work experience gained in the initial JI job over concern about the worker's former incarceration. The Jobs Initiative's legitimization role for former felons is particularly critical now that the imprisonment rate for African Americans and Hispanics is over 8 times and 3 times higher respectively than the rate for European Americans (Oliver, 2001) and 83.7% of all JI participants are African American or Hispanic (Abt Associates and New School University, 2000).

Jobs Initiative legitimization also bridged educational deficits in accessing good jobs—either lack of a high school diploma or GED or the inability of immigrants and political refugees to gain recognition for education that took place in their native countries, significant education in several cases. Notably, in contrast to the experiences of former felons, the legitimacy conferred on individuals with educational deficits was not portable. Individuals without a recognized diploma or GED were relegated to staying in exploitive non-JI jobs, remaining in jobs with little wage progress, or passing up promotion opportunities potentially achievable through changing jobs.

### Supportive Program Relationships Mattered to Getting and Keeping “Good Jobs”

When most of us reflect on our challenges and successes, we can identify a person who helped us move forward. The Jobs Initiative workers were no different. Regardless of whether the Initiative project offered formal or informal “case management,” new workers in both cities emphasized that having a staff “person” who helped with their struggles often made the difference between staying at or leaving a job, particularly during tumultuous life or work periods.

The Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) designed two years of formal case management support. Although Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJI) projects did not initially include formal case management, staff increasingly found themselves filling this role, often over similarly-extended periods of time. In contrast, the most extensive TANF programs provide 90 days of follow-up for new workers, far too little according to earlier research (Herr & Halpern, 1994), recent analyses (Strawn & Martinson, 2000), and the ethnographic findings.

Despite studies that showed mixed results about the influence of case management on retention (Rangarajan & Novak, 1999), this research found that training, a supportive relationship, and workplace practices were inextricably connected with retention. None was sufficient on its own, but this ‘package’ of supports helped Jobs Initiative workers move ahead in their jobs and lives. Ethnography further illustrated that many families need long-term program support—beyond two years in many cases—to compensate for multiple intersecting challenges to staying employed. Such challenges include holdovers from the past such as debt and language problems, family crises such as partner's unemployment and children's health problems, workplace injuries and racism, and public policy inadequacies such as precipitous subsidy withdrawal. Consumed by the challenges of a new job, family heads were not initially able to locate alternative resources to help them stay employed or advance. Over time, families learned new ways to locate resources. Thus, even in the Jobs Initiative, where new workers were *thought* to have fewer challenges than those who had been on welfare for many years, their challenges persisted well beyond getting a job and required sustained support.

Program-worker relationships supported children and communities as well. Families creatively and assertively used Jobs Initiative support to find or expand after-school activities for their children, guide selection of their children's schools, and provide volunteer opportunities for family members. These relationships also fostered community engagement; because of their Jobs Initiative involvement, the parents all wanted to "give something back" to others.

Program supports or case managers could not overcome "family-unfriendly" workplace and policy factors (discussed in Chapter 2) that influenced job decisions; nor should they. But when employer practices and policies were family-oriented and subsidies and supplements were in place, case managers provided essential "bridge" funds, encouragement, post-employment advice, re-employment help, service referral, and other such supports that markedly contributed to the new workers' abilities to manage work and family demands and move forward.

### "Good Jobs" through the Jobs Initiative Mattered to Children's Welfare

The Annie E. Casey Foundation was vitally interested in how the Jobs Initiative affected children's welfare because most recent research about children and poverty has been conducted among welfare recipients (Zaslow, McGroder, & Moore, 2000) and not among other low-wage workers, such as those participating in the Jobs Initiative. Ethnography revealed that children generally fared well under their parents' involvement with the Jobs Initiative, according to common indicators of child well-being such as health, home behavior, school performance and behavior, peer interactions, community involvement, and housing, despite backgrounds of poverty and family disruption.

Children's substance use or sexual activity was not reported or detected. All wore seatbelts or had safety seats, although one family used them irregularly. All homes had smoke detectors. All children had well-child and preventive medical care, except during parents' job-transition periods. None was diagnosed with a learning disability, although one was suspected and another was eligible for an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for special education. Most were involved, to varying extents, in after-school sports or cultural activities. None was in trouble with the law, although several had occasional suspensions from school. Several held part-time jobs, and most participated to some extent in a church or family religious activity.

Good jobs also gave parents more—although still not enough—time and money to address challenges to children's welfare that stemmed from prior economic disadvantage. These challenges included chronic health problems, periods of separation, new family formations, geographic moves, inadequate childcare, grade retention, and below-average grades. Reversing these problems often took *two years or more*, a period that was frequently lengthened by the paucity of help from healthcare systems and under-resourced, beleaguered inner-city schools. Nevertheless, the Jobs Initiative at least launched parents and children on a compensatory path.

**The Jobs Initiative mattered to children of parents who were formerly incarcerated or in residential treatment.** Perhaps the most impressive benefits of Jobs Initiative training and employment for children occurred among parents who had been incarcerated or whose children were previously in foster care. These parents began to compensate for years in prison or treatment centers, completely cut off from their families, by becoming the main income provider through legal and respected means. The regularity of new work hours, income, and benefits let parents take part in children's school conferences, attend to their developmental and medical needs, help them with homework, and read them stories at bedtime; in other words, be a full-fledged parent. Time to undo the ravages of the past was limited, but parents sacrificed sleep, negotiated compatible work hours, and sometimes even passed up advancement to meet their children's needs.

## Moving Up is a Steep Climb

Some of the children's lives improved almost miraculously from their parents' Jobs Initiative involvement. Teen children of a former felon and his new wife were able to leave dangerous Chicago neighborhoods, poor schools, and the custody of less capable parents to live with their other parent and blended family in safer Milwaukee communities with better schools. These teens' grades eventually improved as a result, although that took two years. Other teens, some of the seven million children of parents in prison or on parole, slowly overcame the terrors of police involvement in their mother's life through the stability and security of her JI manufacturing career. Given the much higher rates of delinquency among children whose parent or close relative was in prison (Marshall, 2001), the Jobs Initiative helped these parents counter that outcome so far. In another case, a pre-school child in Seattle was retrieved from foster care and his mother was able to fully support him for the first time in his three years of life. After intensive developmental therapeutic services and a home life stabilized by his mother's employment, the former foster child and his younger brother, who spent his early years recovering from fetal drug damage, graduated to regular school.

**The Jobs Initiative mattered to children of young and single parents.** In cases where "parenting" had been constrained by below-poverty incomes, inconsistent job histories, and insufficient skills, the Jobs Initiative increased young and single parents' economic stability, which resulted in positive byproducts for their children. For example, a young parent in Milwaukee was able to move to her own apartment with her children, furthering the development of the family as an independent unit. Although the pride she felt initially from her Jobs Initiative training and job accomplishments was eroded by transportation problems, exhaustion, and the fact that her children needed continual medical care, she was able to keep her apartment by changing jobs with the help of a Jobs Initiative post-employment counselor. Purchase of toddler-proof safety appliances and more time to read to the children accompanied her job change. Another single parent's Jobs Initiative training and employment and intensive, sustained case management allowed her to adequately feed and clothe her fast-growing pre-adolescent son, expand his after-school and summer enrichment resources, and generally provide structure and stability in a household that had previously been unstructured and financially unstable. These parents were also able to begin to build cultural capital for their children in the form of greater knowledge about the world of work, occasional travel, more resources, and more understanding about the process of "career development."

**The Jobs Initiative mattered to children of immigrant parents.** Immigrant parents and their children had somewhat more complicated experiences in the Jobs Initiative. One parent gained ten hours a week through Jobs Initiative employment to spend with his pre-school and elementary-age children, earning more money and working fewer hours. He used some of the extra hours to participate in his African tribal group where his children gained cultural and social enrichment. Another parent who emigrated from a Central American country in her youth had not completed high school, yet Jobs Initiative training and employer connections leapfrogged her into a high-paying clerical position that enabled the family to move to a safer neighborhood with better schools. The children suffered lower grades in the short term because they were educationally behind from their previous schools, but greater school resources and higher student performance figures promised longer-term advantage. Other immigrants/refugees were somewhat less successful in Jobs Initiative employment, seemingly more hindered by language difficulty, lack of understanding about American social institutions, and uneven project implementation (Iversen, 2000). Two immigrant family heads were stuck in jobs with no advancement or with injurious work conditions. Their solutions were to take a second job or make a downgrade job change. Their children did not get the pre-school enrollment or at-home enrichment they needed to draw equal to more economically-advantaged peers, although more parent time and extended family supports ameliorated some of this lack.



**How the Jobs Initiative Mattered to Children.** Some research recently explored connections between welfare-to-work programs and children's behavior (Morris et al, 2001; Hamilton, Freedman & McGroder, 2000). Suggestive connections were found between certain program characteristics and children's welfare that varied according to the children's ages. For example, Morris and colleagues (2001) found decreased school achievement and increased behavior problems among adolescent, but not elementary-age, children of women leaving welfare for work. However, these researchers generally found it hard to identify particular "causes" of children's behavior. Moreover, these studies did not examine how parents' workplace characteristics and life situations might influence children's lives independent of the type of program the parent attended.

This research found that decreased school achievement and increased problem behavior among children occurred *across age and grade*. Children's problems were associated with a highly complex intersection of simultaneous factors: parents' jobs that were physically strenuous, unsafe, and exhausting, leaving little energy for children's development; insufficient wages that necessitated extensive overtime, which left little or no time to oversee children's school work; prior separation from parents that manifested in children as social withdrawal or acting out; transfer to more rigorous schools that demanded more parent-school consultation; and children's worries about parents' health that manifested in preoccupation and poor grades. Essentially and not surprisingly, the more challenges that parents experienced in their work and home lives, the more academic and behavior problems their children exhibited at school. This pattern occurred across the children in a family, regardless of their age, rather than only among some age groups and not others.

These findings raise questions for further research: Are the effects of parents' work on children embedded in the cumulative influences of the family situation across age or grade levels, as we found, or are they age- or grade-specific, as other research suggests. This research suggests that age is just one of many factors influencing children's resilience or struggle when they live in families who have persistent challenges and inadequate incomes, even many years after the parents have gotten "good jobs."

It must also be noted that in both cities, most children of JI parents attended schools that were below average, compared to other city schools, on fundamental academic dimensions such as reading, writing, and math. Whether and how workforce programs like the Jobs Initiative can counter such pervasive and incremental disadvantage to children's educational welfare will be addressed in a future publication (Iversen & Armstrong, in progress).

### The Jobs Initiative Increased Community Connections

The Jobs Initiative designers were also interested in whether attaining "good jobs" allowed workers more time and energy for community participation, and whether success in the labor force led to a greater sense of being part of the larger community. At first contact, we found it surprising that most of the families were relatively isolated from extended family and neighbors. There were a number of reasons for this isolation. They lived long distances from extended family, particularly if they were immigrants. They mistrusted the 'world at large' and tended to focus inward on their nuclear family group. They concertedly avoided family members who had been abusive in earlier years. Extended family members themselves were struggling to make ends meet. In partial compensation, the Jobs Initiative shored up the families' formal community supports via case management and referral to the Initiatives' human service partners. About two-thirds of the families were also involved to some extent with religious organizations that provided another source of support as well as an outlet for their service.

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Over time, as the Jobs Initiative workers sustained longer periods of employment and growing wages, they ventured out into their neighborhoods and communities. Children's worlds expanded alongside parents' worlds. One Jobs Initiative worker gradually began to trust people in her new neighborhood so that she allowed her 4 children out to play. The children then made new friends, reducing the isolation they had suffered under, and found valuable computer and tutorial resources for their school assignments from a willing neighbor mentor. Other parents had new opportunities to practice and model civic responsibility through voting and involvement in community mediation and advocacy activities. Their children then participated in school and civic rallies against race discrimination. Another JI worker had new time and energy to develop an ethnic dance group that included his children. Subsequent recitals culturally enriched his children's school community. Finally, several Jobs Initiative workers gave motivational speeches at Jobs Initiative training orientations or classes and others wanted to do so.

Jobs Initiative parents also sustained a higher level of participation in their children's schools than they had been able to do before the Initiative. They regularly went to parent-teacher conferences at schools where barely 10% of parents attended, they chaperoned field trips, and they facilitated children's charitable school activities, such as singing at nursing homes. They also actively consulted with teachers and administrators to maximize school quality for children transitioning to a new grade level and responded more readily to school summonses for conferences to improve children's performance, although not without major costs in lost wages and sleep.

Jobs Initiative workers did not utilize community stores or banks more frequently than they had before enrollment, largely because of perpetually tight budgets. Nearby stores were either too expensive or unavailable, which meant that parents still needed to spend hours of precious time seeking economies and bargains. One family's children had to walk half a mile past boarded-up buildings to find a store that sold soda. Immigrant families patronized local ethnic facilities but also traveled to distant neighborhoods for sales. Parks and community centers were used fairly liberally in Seattle with its "outdoor" ethos and legislative support, but were generally underutilized in Milwaukee where they were also less easily accessed.

## CHAPTER 2

### REMAINING CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR RETENTION AND ADVANCEMENT FROM THE JOBS INITIATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

The premise underlying the Jobs Initiative was that it would provide skill training and access to jobs with family-wage potential. The new workers would then be able to get upgrade education and training, accept advancement opportunities, and progress to economic self-sufficiency. Ethnography illuminated the complexity of this premise. Despite the sometimes exceptional and almost always significant “plusses” of Jobs Initiative training and employment, many factors caused strain for parents and problems for children, even as the family also experienced better times. Importantly, these factors were generally beyond what individual families or even path-breaking workforce programs like the Jobs Initiative could counteract on their own, drawing our attention to the role and responsibility of employers and public policymakers in making work pay. The remainder of this monograph uses excerpts<sup>1</sup> from the “family stories<sup>2</sup>” to illustrate how the following challenges to “moving up” influenced both the workers and their children, and what strategies families used to try to overcome the challenges:

*Challenge #1: Trying to make enough money*

*Challenge #2: Trying to stay employed (Retention)*

*Challenge #3: Trying to move forward (Advancement)*

#### Challenge #1. Trying to Make Enough Money

Having gotten a “good job” through the Jobs Initiative—importantly, one that was full time, full year—families thought their struggles might be over. The parents rapidly discovered that being able to support one’s family on earnings requires more than a good job. Most could not build steady savings and assets, purchase homes, move to safer parts of the city, or afford enriching resources and experiences for their children like home computers and summer travel. Families often had trouble paying rent, affording quality childcare, and some ran out of food by the end of the month.

#### *Many factors limited families’ efforts to make more money...*

Wages and incomes were dramatically higher than before the Jobs Initiative, but they were still not fully adequate for the families’ needs. Wage progression was variable. Two incomes were necessary, but seldom consistent. Income was reduced by debt, unpaid workdays, and a “*life-stage mismatch*.”

#### **Initial wages were good; annual incomes were even better—but neither was sufficient**

The study workers’ base wages after Jobs Initiative training and placement far surpassed their wages from pre-JI jobs. In both cities, family heads’ base wages increased 27% on average: from \$8.07 to \$11/hour in Milwaukee and from \$7.75 to \$10.68/hour in Seattle. Because most pre-Initiative jobs were not full time or full year, changes in annual incomes through Jobs Initiative employment even more dramatically illustrate the increases possible in moving from welfare, poor employment, or under-employment to “good jobs.” Milwaukee family heads’ annual incomes increased from 117% to 160%; Seattle’s from 144% to 380% [the latter was from TANF to a full-time “good job”].

<sup>1</sup>The brief family stories in Chapter 2 were excerpted from the full stories to highlight a particular challenge or strategy. The complete family stories illustrate the larger context of multiple, overlapping challenges in which the families were embedded.

<sup>2</sup>All family members’ names are pseudonyms chosen by the family.

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Despite these increases, the family heads' lived experience of not enough income was corroborated by comparing their incomes to the federal poverty guideline (FPL). After 1½ to 3 years of work, annual incomes of the Milwaukee workers averaged \$32,550 *when overtime was counted*, resulting in 195% federal poverty level. Without adding income from overtime, which was frequently irregular, MJI workers' wages averaged \$28,074 or 156% FPL. Similarly, after 1½ to 2½ years of work, SJI family heads' annual incomes averaged \$24,668 or 150% FPL [See Appendix D]. It also must be emphasized that these figures represent *potential annual incomes*, not necessarily actual incomes. Some family heads changed jobs or got raises too recently to have the full income yet, and others would lose or leave their jobs before the income was realized.

### Wages increased at varied rates and paces

“Good job” wages increased at varied rates and paces after the initial hire, even in union jobs with mandated, regularly-scheduled increases, as a Jobs Initiative retention analysis reported as well (St. George et al., 2001) [See Appendix D]. At some employers, wage increases were given annually, straining family budgets in the interim. At others, irregular wage increases meant that the workers' incomes were strained further, especially when the increase came after 18 rather than 12 months' employment.

After placement, the wages of the Jobs Initiative workers increased \$1/hour per year on average [based on full-time work and adjusted for length of time employed], the equivalent of an additional \$2000 in annual income per year. While this seems notable, and tallies with the Initiative's aim of wage advancement, the range was large: from a low of minus-\$.70/hour per year due to a job change and demotion, to a high of \$4.70/hour per year that is misleadingly high because it compensated for an earlier omission in the union raise scale.

In percentage terms, Jobs Initiative workers who remained in their initial JI-jobs averaged an 8% annual increase— notable compared to related research that reported an average increase of 1% among lowest-income families and 2% among middle-income families during the 1990s, but virtually half the 15% increase experienced by high-income families in that research (Simpson & Kaminski, 2001). The benefits of an 8% increase were also diluted when the raise was given at 18 rather than at 12 months. Among those who changed jobs, only one realized a sizeable increase of 12% from the move. Other job changes were essentially lateral, producing from 0% to 3% wage increases (the anomalous 22% increase due to a worker's taking a second full-time job was omitted from these calculations). The average increases underscore the importance of the starting wage, as did other Jobs Initiative analyses (Abt Associates and New School University, 2000). This research suggests that starting wage *and* the rate and pace of wage increase are both critical to reaching a family-supporting income level.

Given that these advances resulted from “good jobs,” it was striking and discouraging that workers who had been employed for up to 3 years were still not able to command wages that made ends meet. It is also problematic that job change resulted more often in stasis or income reduction than in “moving up.” Further complicating the assessment of wage sufficiency, individual wage figures mean little without also considering size of family, extent of needs, and ability of the wage-earners' partners, if any, to augment family income. Annual income figures mean little without considering how long the job lasted or is likely to be held.

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### Two incomes were necessary—but inconsistent

If and when they were employed, the Jobs Initiative workers' partners' or spouses' wages raised family incomes above 200% of the poverty line. In reality, similar to other families in low-wage employment, partners and spouses were frequently laid off or unemployed, making the JI family head's income critically important. In other cases, truly "single" parents or partnered sole wage-earners had no second adult wage and thus remained persistently below 200% of the poverty line. Two incomes were obviously necessary to make ends meet according to either the FPL or Self-Sufficiency Standard (Wider Opportunities for Women, 2001), yet the second worker's income could not be counted upon to do this.

### Incomes were often reduced by unpaid work days and debt

Unpaid workdays and persistent debt significantly reduced how much money was really coming in or available to the families. Jobs Initiative participants took time off work to tend to their own or their children's health and school needs, to go to court, to relieve depression and stress, and to resolve childcare and transportation problems. On the plus side, some "family-friendly" employers understood their workers' needs and allowed them time off. On the minus side, some employers did not allow time off for family needs. In addition, even "family-friendly" employers did not pay for time off and most did not offer options to make up missed time for pay. *Missed work resulted in as much as \$3000 to \$4000 less annual income.*

Debts that carried over from the pre-Jobs Initiative period or emerged after JI employment also magnified the inadequacy of the family income. *These debts ranged from \$5000 to \$20,000—a crushing and persistent burden on everyone in the family, as Kevin McDonald's experience typifies.*

**Kevin McDonald's Story:** After 2 years of employment in the printing industry, 29-year old, African American Kevin McDonald was about two-thirds of the way to making enough income to support his family of three children: one in pre-school and two in elementary school. After six months at an initial, "guaranteed" placement, his Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJI) project referred him to a new employer that offered more advancement opportunity and subsidized upgrade training. Kevin was promoted once at the new job, enrolled in upgrade training two days a week after 3<sup>rd</sup> shift, and worked diligently to parent the children he had been separated from during his pre-MJI incarceration. Many days he worked his 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. shift, went to an upgrade training class, and then to a children's school conference without sleep. Still, he was grateful for his MJI opportunity:

*"For a convicted felon, it was hard to find a job. MJI made it easier. In my new position as jogger, I'm motivated at work."*

Kevin McDonalds

For a time Kevin took on a second job for more discretionary income and to try to save money, but gave it up when his children's school behavior and grades worsened in parallel with his unavailability. His first-grader was retained in grade and his younger daughter's promotion was threatened. Kevin's extra work hours reminded these young children of the painful earlier years of separation, and they expressed their distress in the only way they knew—by misbehaving so that the school would demand more time and involvement from the parents. Savings plans went on hold.

At our last meeting with Kevin in May 2001, he was nearly despondent about a punishing tax debt that he just learned about:

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*“There I am, doing the right thing, and whoa! Here I am, trying to get it right and I’m in another hole that I’ve got to fill up.”*

Kevin McDonalds

Eight years earlier Kevin had filed income taxes incorrectly and was only recently informed that he owed the IRS \$9,000. Kevin’s wages were now garnisheed, leaving 15% less income to provide for his family. Compounding this income loss, future overtime hours would be reduced because of an industry downturn.

In addition, because Kevin’s income still looked high “on paper” and debt is not a criterion in subsidy eligibility, Kevin and his fiancée were threatened with withdrawal of the valuable childcare subsidy that enabled their 3-year old son “Fireman” to attend a quality, licensed facility where he received developmental instruction and an eye exam that revealed he needed glasses.

### A “*life-stage mismatch*” between workers and jobs limited families’ efforts to make more money

Earlier research documented a “spatial mismatch” between inner-city workers’ homes, distant urban jobs, and few or costly transportation links (Jargowsky, 1997; Wilson, 1987; 1996).

Ethnography revealed a new kind of mismatch—in essence, a “*life-stage mismatch*” between workers and jobs that severely limited families’ efforts to make enough money.

The age, physical condition, health challenges, marital status, and family size of Jobs Initiative participants, like those in most other workforce programs, was very different from the youth, fitness, and single status of “traditional” entry level workers. *Life-stage mismatches* resulted in physical injuries, unpaid sick days, slowed performance, and stress. In addition, many Jobs Initiative placements were with employers where the length of industry career ladders, the pace of wage increase, and entry-level wages were set according to one—at most two—persons in a family, not families of four or five who came to their jobs with burdens of debt, prior distress, low self-confidence, and some kind of family disruption, internally or with social institutions, that they were trying to overcome—simultaneously. Hard Working Blessed’s experience was one of many such *life-stage mismatches*.

**Hard Working Blessed’s Story:** Hard Working Blessed came to the Jobs Initiative in 1998 at age 38, an African American man recently out of prison. Earlier in his life, Mr. Blessed completed high school and attended two years of college in Chicago, married and fathered 4 children, and experimented with drugs. He held a series of construction, manufacturing and truck-driving jobs during these years, but none offered career development or advancement. Mr. Blessed’s graduation into drug selling led to the end of his first marriage, alienation from his children, and eventual imprisonment in the state penitentiary on felony charges of controlled substances and drugs.

After release from prison and a period of residential rehabilitation, Mr. Blessed tried to turn his life around. Although he did all the “right” things to compensate for his past mistakes, the felony conviction blocked his progress in the labor market. In early 1998 a friend told him about a manufacturing position at Steel Company. At the time, Mr. Blessed was

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stacking boxes at a Food Store for \$6.50/hour. He went to the Steel Company Open House to apply for the position, but was frozen out because of his criminal background. At the Open House, Mr. Blessed fortuitously met the retention specialist from the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJI) manufacturing project who told him about the Initiative. When Mr. Blessed was unable to get the Steel Company job on his own, he recontacted the retention specialist and enrolled in a 2-week project-sponsored training course that included essential hard and soft skills education for a manufacturing setting. Most important, Mr. Blessed was guaranteed a job at Steel Mill & Foundry when he finished the training class, illustrating how the Jobs Initiative provided the crucial entrée to those unable to attain positions without such legitimization.

During this period, Mr. Blessed met and married Mrs. Blessed who had just completed her own rehabilitation for drug use. Because of the income and benefits of the Jobs Initiative job, Mr. and Mrs. Blessed were able to bring two of their Chicago children to live with them and their new baby in Milwaukee. After years of separation, Mr. Blessed's top priority was "to be back in my kids' life."

*"I was away for 5 years. I didn't see Tank [his 15-year old son] from the time he was 7 or 8 until he was about 13. After I got myself together—I went back to Chicago to see Tank. I met him outside the house. I said 'Are you Tank?' He said yes, 'who are you?' I said 'Your father.' He said, 'What's your name?' I told him—and asked if he wanted to see my ID. He started shaking and tears were rolling out his eyes. He hugged me and tears were coming out of my eyes too. We've been inseparable since that day. I thought my leaving would be better for the whole family. I shouldn't have cut the contact. Not a day went by that I didn't think about them, worry about them. It was goofy—I thought they'd be better off not knowing where I was, what was happening to me. But I know now that they'd have been much better off knowing I was alive and that I still loved them."*

Hard Working Blessed

Mr. Blessed retrieved Tank from a less adequate parent and a dangerous Chicago neighborhood of gangs, gunfire, and poor schools. Mrs. Blessed retrieved her 14-year old son The Rock from a loving but restrictive grandparent and a similarly unsafe Chicago neighborhood with poor schools. Tank told us that he particularly "appreciated" the fact that his new parents had high academic expectations for him:

*"In Chicago, I knew I wasn't going to get nowhere just getting all D's and F's. My grades are better here. [Why?] They [parents] are always on us about our grades, so that is good, and they want us to work extra hard."*

Tank Blessed

When we met the Blessed family in March 2000, the family had been together for a little over a year and Mr. Blessed had been working at Steel Mill & Foundry for 20 months. His hourly wage had progressed to \$13/hour. Liberal overtime allowed him to bring home about \$600 a week, but he had learned by this point that there were no advancement opportunities at his job. While the \$2/hour wage increase meant nearly \$4000 more annual income, this 'boon' did not last long. In a physically taxing entry-level job at age 40, Mr. Blessed suffered two herniated discs, got the flu repeatedly, and had pneumonia twice. A foreman told us that Mr. Blessed's branch of the company was known for "back injuries from lifting," like Mr. Blessed had.

Worse yet, Mr. Blessed's injuries resulted in a job demotion and wage reduction so that he struggled to make enough money for his family. The only means to more money were to work many overtime hours or change jobs. He tried overtime for a while, but found that having even less time with his son compounded Tank's school problems. Tank's worries about his "new" father's health manifested in preoccupation and lower grades at school.

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Ultimately Mr. Blessed changed jobs, taking a forklift operator position at Printing Company on the basis of his MJI training and job experience. His felony background no longer thwarted his job pathway. He was hopeful about this new position, even though it was an initial setback in terms of wages. The new job offered more benefits and a 4-day/, 12/hour schedule followed by 3 days off—a schedule that Mr. Blessed thought would give him more time with his children. But he was exhausted by 12-hour days plus usually 1 day a week overtime. Adding to their stress, the family still struggled with \$20,000 debt from Mr. Blessed's previous loans, schooling, child support, and unpaid bills, in addition to their normal expenses. During this stressful period, both sons' grades remained lower than desired or expected. The Blessed's level of burden is not experienced by new workers whose life stages “match” their employers' working conditions and entry-level wages.

In sum, Kevin McDonald's and Hard Working Blessed's stories are two of many that show that even in the Jobs Initiative where the program aimed for higher level, higher wage jobs, the variable pace of wage growth together with debt and *life-stage mismatches* meant that the Jobs Initiative workers struggled to support their families. Families like these need sufficient time, energy and resources to compensate for earlier separations and build sufficient cultural capital such that their children can compete in school with more economically-advantaged peers. It is worrisome that even after more than three years of steady, hard work, Jobs Initiative workers might not move out of poverty, even when they employ multiple strategies to do so.

### ***What families did to try to make more money...***

As the McDonalds and Blessed family stories illustrated [above], parents tried to increase their income by working overtime and taking a second job, but these solutions had mixed effects on family welfare. Families also used income supplements and subsidies to make their incomes go further, but these enhancements were often cut off as soon as families made a little more money, but before they made enough money.

### **Family heads worked overtime to make more money**

Working overtime was a particularly complicated influence on family well-being. While overtime was beneficial materially, it took parents away from parenting, limited their ability to oversee their children's homework and developmental needs, and resulted in sleep deprivation. Parents often worked all night and then went directly to school trips, conferences, or medical appointments, sacrificing sleep to earn money and fulfill parent responsibilities at the same time. Sleep deprivation may also have exacerbated on-job injuries.

Even more problematic for the long run, some employers offered overtime *instead* of base wage increases. Although bosses described this overtime as ‘voluntary,’ much of it was actually mandatory, which raised the question of employer adherence to Fair Labor Standards legislation. Increasing income through overtime is also less stable and less transferable than increasing base wages, resulting in a persistent barrier to moving up.

### **Family heads took on second jobs to make more money**

Some family heads tried to make ends meet by taking on a second job. While this increased discretionary income or resulted for a time in a family-sustaining wage, additional work hours were hard on the family heads and drastically reduced the amount of time and attention parents could devote to their children. One family head worked over 70



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hours a week, including Saturdays, leaving only Sunday for time with family members and sleep. Another worked a 40-hour/week main job, added 3 hours of upgrade training twice a week to his 8-hour workday that often included overtime, and 15 additional work hours a week at a second job. This work week also totaled at least 70 hours. Children in these families openly lamented their parents' absence and their school performance suffered in parallel.

### Families relied on subsidies to make their money go further

Income-enhancement subsidies are intended to make low incomes stretch further. But Jobs Initiative families, similar to welfare-leavers (Dion & Pavetti, 2000), often did not know about subsidies for which they were eligible. Jobs Initiative case managers and program staff informed trainees about subsidies to some extent, but employers rarely gave such information to their workforce. While none of the Jobs Initiative families made full use of available subsidies, their use increased over the study period [see Appendix B]. It may be that welfare reform led Jobs Initiative projects to emphasize subsidy information more over time.

Almost all the families retained Medicaid health coverage for their children rather than use employer coverage that required co-pay. At the time, eligibility standards for state- or city-funded children's health insurance had been raised to include more needy children (Wysen & Curtis, 2001), and in Wisconsin parents also became selectively eligible. The families with infant children used WIC, the Special Supplemental Nutritional Program for Women, Infants, and Children aged one to five.

Consistent with the extremely high cost of housing in Seattle, three of the five SJI families utilized Section 8 housing subsidies. In one situation however, an immigrant refugee did not know that his radical wage reduction meant a parallel decrease in his housing co-pay. He would have continued to pay over 50% of his income to housing without the on-site researcher's alert. In contrast, the Seattle Housing Authority's Family Self-Sufficiency Program helped one Jobs Initiative worker move toward asset development through payment-matching that built an equity account for home purchase.

On the down side, stringent eligibility criteria meant that the Jobs Initiative families earned just a little too much money, "on paper," to be eligible for some subsidies. This family head succinctly expressed the sentiments of all the study workers:

*"The trouble with advancement at work when you've been poor is that you don't earn more money because your benefits go away and your housing goes up. You get depressed. You can't help it."*

Isabell Smith

Food Stamps was the most notable "missing" subsidy. Here again, the "real" sufficiency of the families' incomes was not used to calculate eligibility, thus their incomes looked "too high," particularly under the low standard of 130% FPL set by welfare reform. At the same time, families often ran out of food at the end of the month and wished desperately that they could feed their children better, as Tisha Shanks's experiences underscore.

**Tisha Shanks's Story.** Tisha Shanks was a 33-year old Hispanic mother of three teenagers whose participation in the Jobs Initiative gave her an opportunity to earn a living legally, employ her talents, vastly improve her children's welfare, and make a positive impact on her community—giant steps forward from a past of drug selling and incarceration.

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After prison, Tisha worked 26 weeks in 1998 for a total income of \$6000. Better jobs were out of reach until she contacted the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJl) manufacturing project and enrolled in training. Her guaranteed job at Product Manufacturing Company at \$7.86/hour let her put at least part of her past in the past. Although she was saddled with almost \$9000 in debt, Tisha believed her new job “offered the best opportunity to survive and not struggle.” Tisha’s wage gradually increased to \$9.71/hour by the time we met her in February 2000, but was increasingly insufficient for her family’s needs. In fact, her \$19,420 annual income after almost 1½ years of employment equaled the poverty level for a family of five. Although she earned regular raises, she turned down an initial opportunity for promotion because she lacked self-confidence, which slowed her income progress. At the same time, the money Tisha earned went farther because she supplemented it with food stamps, Medicaid, free school lunch for the children, and used the Earned Income Tax Credit to pay down her debt.

At the 19-month mark, Tisha was temporarily laid off from Product Manufacturing Company due to a decrease in orders and production. Although she returned to work after one month, she felt her workplace was increasingly insecure. She enrolled in a dry wall apprenticeship and began to look for another job. This period was invigorating for Tisha, but also taxed her energy and left little time for family: “Home, school, and work—I was tiring myself out.” She quickly found a new job as a spot welder for Steel Company at a starting wage of \$10.93/hour—the only study participant whose job change resulted in a significantly higher base wage. Regular overtime raised her annual income to approximately \$28,500—*potentially* \$9000 more than her income at Product Manufacturing Company:

*“I’m working 9½ hours a day and 8 hours on Saturdays. All I can think about is dollar signs. At my previous job, I could barely make ends meet. I couldn’t do the things I wanted to do, like fix up the house and family activities.”*

Tisha Shanks

Tisha’s children relished new family outings that helped heal scars from their encounters with the police during their mother’s arrests and their separation from her during her incarceration. But they also needed her time. Their grades dropped when Tisha had to work 2<sup>nd</sup> shift (late afternoon to midnight) and they foundered under less after-school and weekend supervision. As a result, Tisha reduced her overtime work, cutting over \$3000 annually from her potential new income but greatly improving her children’s well-being. Their grades rose, they ventured into part-time jobs, they agreed to parent-supervised savings plans, and they became involved in more school and community activities. However, reducing overtime also reduced how far Tisha’s income went. Despite the notable increase, her \$25,000 income was below 150% FPL for a family of five. She resumed paying her bills piece-meal, made no progress on reducing her debt, and re-applied for food stamps. Because her new income put her \$43 a month over the threshold for food stamp eligibility, her application was denied. Tisha described the punishing subsidy loss that her wage increase produced—a step backward to financial ‘dependence’ on others that many families experienced:

*“\$43 can’t feed 5 people. If it wasn’t for Maine [her boyfriend], I don’t know how I would make it. If I had to do it myself, I’d have to call mom. We get up in the mornings to milk and cereal that Maine has provided.”*

Tisha Shanks

## Remaining Challenges and Strategies for Retention and Advancement

Most of the families used childcare subsidies to obtain quality, certified care for their children. The childcare subsidy was particularly critical in Seattle where the minimum cost for licensed care was \$850/month per child. As incomes rose, families in both cities faced actual or threatened withdrawal of this valuable income enhancer. In the worst cases, children were switched to lower-quality, uncertified in-home daycare where valuable services were lost and children's health and development suffered.

**More Hard Working Blessed Story.** The Blessed family lost their childcare subsidy when Mr. Blessed changed to a new job that made the family income look too high on paper. Before the loss, 1½ -year old Baby Miracle went daily to a high-quality, certified childcare facility that provided developmental stimulation, was clean and safe, and cost the family \$5/week because of a \$180/week subsidy. Baby Miracle's doctor emphasized that this bright, eager child needed such a quality facility. When the subsidy was withdrawn, the Blesseds switched Baby Miracle to an in-home daycare that cost \$75/week. Even this payment was barely affordable as the family income was far less than it looked. The Blessed's ineligibility had been calculated according to an estimated amount of overtime, but in Mr. Blessed's new job, overtime was *not* a regular or stable source of income. In the in-home site, Baby Miracle frequently came home with diaper rashes and did not receive much developmental stimulation. Several months after the switch, Mrs. Blessed's health problems increased and she ultimately resigned from her job to care for Baby Miracle herself. As a result, the baby's health improved but the total family income plummeted.

### Families used income supplements to make their money go further

Income supplements, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), were particularly valuable wage enhancers for JI families. The EITC is a tax credit available to low-income households with earnings. It offsets taxes and, because it is refundable, it supplements the wages of families whose taxes are smaller than the credit. Importantly, and in concert with Jobs Initiative families' experiences, similar research reported that income supplements have a positive effect on the employment of workers leaving welfare, particularly if they are combined with services to help individuals prepare for work (Strawn & Martinson, 2000). Nine of our ten families learned about the EITC from the Initiative or other support resource and used the refund to pay off educational debt, rent, other arrears, and buy school clothes for fast-growing children. Most also preferred to get the EITC refund in a lump sum rather than monthly as legislators recently proposed:

*"I've known about it [EITC] since my oldest boy was little. I use it every year; it's a wonderful thing. It makes a big difference in a little paycheck. I want mine at the end of the year, versus every paycheck."*

Teresa Russell

Greater income sufficiency thus paved the way for Jobs Initiative parents to attend more fully to the needs of their children. Similar outcomes were found among children of welfare-leavers when parents' incomes were supplemented (Morris, Duncan, & Chase-Lansdale, 2001).

In sum, the Jobs Initiative families had good jobs, but despite hard work and creative strategies to supplement family income, they did not have enough money. Trying to survive financially also influenced parents' decisions about keeping or leaving their Jobs Initiative jobs. Workplace conditions and policies also influenced their decisions.

### Challenge #2. Trying to Stay Employed (Retention)

Staying at a job is commonly called “retention” in labor market terminology. There is no common definition of retention even though it is an outcome goal of TANF and WIA legislation. In the Jobs Initiative, “retention” is defined as staying in the labor market, although not necessarily at the initial placement, with less than 30 days unemployment between jobs (Giloth & Phillips, 2000). According to that definition, most of the study parents’ retention rates were very high—approximately 90%. At the same time, rates alone obscure the fact that staying at a job was at times brutally punishing for both worker and family members, and changing jobs seldom moved the worker “up.” The policies and practices of some Jobs Initiative employers helped parents meet both work and family responsibilities; those of other employers did not.

#### Vulnerable periods for new workers

Consistent with other research, we found that six months and one year were particularly vulnerable periods for job change (Clymer, Roberts, & Strawn, 2001). Some parents held their initial Jobs Initiative jobs for 1 to 2 years or more. Others made or considered job changes around 6 and 12 months, often because they were overwhelmed and exhausted by accumulated demands at work and at home, as both workers and case managers emphasized:

*“I feel like I don’t have enough energy to do everything and feel like I should. We are supposed to be the ones teaching them [children] how to be and raising them to be good people and yet we are the ones that are not here. [This is] the stress your family goes through when you start working again. There is no such thing as down time in my house. . . the only time I have is when I pass out from exhaustion.”*

Isabell Smith

*“The one-year anniversary seems to be a pivotal period, often a tumultuous one. I suspect that individuals let down their guard at this time, maybe feeling confident that they have ‘made it for a year’ and now can resume earlier patterns, like substance use. It is also possible that family support systems weaken or family members’ needs surface after a honeymoon period of parental work.”*

CBO Case Manager

Workplace racism also influenced job changes around the 6- and 12- month time periods. Hard Working Blessed’s departure after 4 months in an otherwise-promising post-JI job epitomized experiences of other study parents:

*“At first I didn’t see it [race-related acts], but then. . . Other employees were rotten; they were jealous that I was in the position I was. They’d never had a person of color or a woman in that position. I had keys to every office; free rein in the building; a company car. At first there were covert slurs. A co-worker reported things that I wasn’t doing. I got nasty e-mails. The guy who had the job before me, he was white. He was never reported. It started to get to me real bad. One supervisor said the worst things in the world—blamed me for everything. He said the pumps were leaking now and they weren’t before I got the job. I’d leave the bucket, clean it, and the next day they’d be leaking again.”*

Hard Working Blessed

Mrs. Blessed graphically underscored how racism at work affected her husband’s interactions with the family:

*“During the last months at Printing Company, Hard Working put the weight of the family problems on his shoulders. It tears him up. He didn’t shave; he didn’t cut his hair.”*

Mrs. Blessed

### How Jobs Initiative workers decided to stay at or leave jobs

Leaving one’s job for a “better job” has traditionally been a strategy to earn more money and advance in one’s career, particularly for managers and professionals. Welfare research found that job change was also an important mechanism for wage growth among low-skilled workers, but only in moderation. One voluntary job change per year was associated with higher wages, but more and involuntary job changes were associated with lower wages (Strawn & Martinson, 2000).

As discussed earlier, job change was generally lateral for Jobs Initiative workers, at least in terms of wages and income. This research also found that the effects of job change depended at least equally on whether it was planned or unplanned as on how many changes took place. Very few job changes were part of a considered, longer-term plan, but when they were, wages and responsibilities advanced and benefit coverage was seamless or quickly reinstated. Most of the parents’ job changes were unplanned, and those that resulted from a precipitous response to harmful workplace conditions or immediate family needs resulted in a lateral or downward wage move. Periods between jobs were generally less than 30 days, but loss of health insurance coverage while job-hunting and on probation in a new job lasted up to 4 months, hurting children’s health. Randy Jackson’s wife illustrated this prevalent occurrence poignantly:

*“We don’t have any health insurance right now. It’s tough on the kids. The kids have been sick a while. We only have money for over-the-counter medicine. We spend a lot of money on that. We used to take them to the Private Hospital, but now go to the County Hospital. We still have bills coming. The kids got ringworm in school, but we couldn’t afford to take them to the doctor. The drugstore medicines didn’t work very well. It took a long time to go away. We had to take them to the hospital.”*

Shawn Jackson

Only one employer informed departing Jobs Initiative workers about bridge health insurance under COBRA, the 1985 Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, even though employers are legally required to do so.

Ethnography also illuminated *how* Jobs Initiative workers made decisions about staying at or leaving a job. Essentially, family was always “front and center” in the decision process. Although income was also a major reason parents stayed or left, income was never considered independent of family needs—particularly children’s immediate needs for parents’ time and attention. Both male and female parents made decisions this way; neither their sentiments nor their actions were gendered. Most of the parents’ “stay-or-leave” decisions ruefully but definitively prioritized children’s immediate welfare over the longer-term “good” that might accompany longer job tenure.

### “Family-friendly” workplaces generally increased retention

Workplace practices and policies were often the critical link between employee retention and termination or quitting. Examination of employers’ practices and policies illuminated the minefield Jobs Initiative parents negotiated in order to fulfill their responsibilities at work and at home. Most employers had strict official attendance and absence policies, but immediate supervisors exercised a broad range of enforcement practices. Jobs Initiative parents stayed

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at jobs that were only moderately optimal in wages and advancement opportunity precisely because supervisors were flexible about attendance, as Teresa Russell's story typifies. Teresa's manager interpreted and implemented workplace policy in a family-supporting manner, enacting a form of "street level" supervision (Lipsky, 1980) that can help workers manage work and home demands, absent the kinds of additional supports that more economically-advantaged workers have.

***Teresa Russell's Story.*** Teresa Russell was a 43-year old African American single parent whose diverse employment history spanned nearly 25 years before she enrolled in the Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI). Although her "heart-string" was to be a caterer, a vocation she continued as an occasional "second" job, she pursued SJI's 12-week automotive training and was hired immediately as a utility person in Rental Car Company's auto maintenance department. Teresa's starting wage in January 2000 was \$8.75/hour and was richly supplemented by a union-sponsored health, dental and eye-care benefit package that covered her own and her 10-year old son Tom's health needs, enabling Teresa to move him off Medicaid.

Expanding Tom's academic and enrichment options was Teresa's primary goal, one she felt acutely as she was Tom's sole parent. Because of the strong relationship between SJI, the automotive training program, and Rental Car Company, Teresa was able to negotiate an individualized work schedule of 30-hours a week during the school year, 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. This enabled her to deliver Tom to a friend before school and transport him after school to basketball, baseball, trumpet, and the community center. Her individualized work schedule also facilitated helping Tom with his reading and math difficulties and left time for dedicated service to their church community. Without SJI intervention, Teresa would have to work a 5:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. shift. Such timing would not accommodate most children's schedules and would be particularly problematic for single parents like Teresa.

Over time Teresa missed work because of childcare concerns, truck problems, and Tom's needs, but official and unofficial company practices significantly eased her family pressures. Teresa credited her union for its family focus: "My job is union. It's set up for families." For example, the union's official policy was that any illness that spanned two consecutive workdays was counted as only one absence. She also credited the exemplary understanding of her manager who "unofficially" overlooked consistent absences and lateness based on understanding her life, the quality of her SJI training, and her work:

*"Teresa is a really good person. Our company is innovative. Teresa takes a little more time than I'd like. We have a strict attendance policy—usually Teresa takes time without pay. She fits in good with the fellows. She was well trained and she's good at it—she makes few mistakes. The computer training at SJI helped a lot."*

Rental Car Company manager

Because the carefully-crafted work schedule and ample benefits maximized her care of Tom, Teresa had already stayed at Rental Car Company longer than she had at any other job over her 25 years of work.

At the same time, "family-friendly" workplace policies and practices were sometimes double-edged. Tasha Jones's experience illustrates how a worker can be penalized when higher-level managers and "street level" supervisors interpret and implement policy differently.

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**Tasha Jones's Story.** Tasha Jones was a 24-year old single African American mother of two who enrolled in Milwaukee Jobs Initiative's (MJI) manufacturing project's machine operator training in summer 1999. Following training, Tasha's assembly job at Manufacturing Company paid \$9.84/hour which enabled her to move to a rented house independent of her parents and establish herself as primary parent to her one- and two-year old children.

After several months' employment, Tasha began to miss work, largely because of her own and her daughters' poor health. Although Tasha's supervisor was initially understanding about her absences, Tasha worried that health problems might cause her to lose her job:

*"I'm worried about losing my job. I had the flu a couple of times this winter and I got bronchitis. After I gave birth to Nami I almost died of pneumonia. I had toxemia and high blood pressure and I still have chest pains. They've given me EKGs but can't find anything. If I turn left or a certain way, I have pain. I'm also short of breath. The doctor gave me an inhaler for when I'm short of breath. One big problem is that even though it's forbidden, my co-workers smoke on the job. This makes me more sick."*

Tasha Jones

Her children's health problems caused even greater concern and significantly impacted Tasha's attendance:

*"Nami is sickly—she's going to be part of a sleep study. She was born with a flat nose. She may need surgery. She breathes really loud at nighttime—like she's trying to catch her breath. I need to stay close at night because she can die in her sleep. I sleep good, but wake up a couple of times a night to check on her. The hard part is in the morning time, well first of all at night. I go to bed at 10:30 and wake up at 5:30. I can't really go to sleep until they both fall asleep. I will check her in the middle of the night to make sure she is okay. I have to get up early in the morning, dress them both, carry them both downstairs, come back up the stairs just to lock the doors up. I mean it is hard for me and I be too tired to get up any earlier and so that is the hard part."*

Tasha Jones

At the official level, Manufacturing Company developed a strict 12-point system to deal with absenteeism in a consistent, uniform manner. If an employee missed a day of work due to illness or childcare problems they received one point (reduced to a half-point with a doctor's note). One manager admitted, "you can use up a lot of points with kids." After seven months employment, Tasha had not worked a 40-hour week for the past five months, which significantly impacted her monthly take home pay and reduced her potential above-poverty yearly income of about \$20,000 to a real income of about \$16,650/year, near poverty level.

At the same time, several factors eased Tasha's concern about the points she accumulated. First, her supervisor seemed to understand her family situation:

*"Well, the new people have more family problems because they're younger and they have young people's problems, like childcare. But they're different, more are divorced than the old workers were. There are more single parents and that makes things more difficult for them, and that affects work. Absenteeism is greater than it was in 1975. More time is missed today for family life."*

Manufacturing Company supervisor

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Second, Tasha's supervisor had not warned her about absenteeism, even though workplace policy mandated written warnings at three and six months. Third, Tasha saw co-workers take personal leave to handle childcare or personal problems and later return to work.

Company enlightenment was double-edged in Tasha's case. The department head eventually restricted Tasha's supervisor's flexibility about absenteeism. The supervisor responded with new, rigid enforcement of the rules, seemingly without conveying the change to Tasha. When Tasha took personal leave to address Nami's worsened health, she expected to return to Manufacturing Company at a later point. Because Tasha never fully understood how the point system was being applied to her, because she did not know how to negotiate adequate terms for personal leave, and perhaps because she also felt a sense of relief from family pressures, she took no further action when she received an official termination letter in April 2000. While subsequent unemployment gave Tasha more time and energy for her children, her goal of enrolling them in a pre-school that would increase their developmental gains was no longer affordable.

### Workplace safety influenced retention

Workplace safety also emerged as a significant reason for 'stay-or-leave' decisions. At the time of our study, Jobs Initiative trainees were taught more about how to cope with mental than physical demands of a job. In fact, the stresses from pre-JI and persistent challenges, such as debt and partner's unemployment, compounded the physical demands on the new workers. Workplace injuries among immigrants were exacerbated by language comprehension and supervisory miscommunication. Immigrants often did not understand injury-report practices at their jobsite.

Half the study parents sustained serious injuries in their Jobs Initiative jobs, largely but not exclusively in manufacturing positions. The workers' injuries included burnt hands, herniated discs, flu, pneumonia, aggravated food allergies (non-JI job), back injuries that became chronic, and tendonitis. Three of the five injured workers quit because of their injuries and located similar but safer employment, although one new job was at a substantially lower wage and responsibility level. The other injured workers remained at their jobs because changing jobs was more threatening or because the workplace accommodated their disability, as Maya Vanderhand's experience illustrates.

**Maya Vanderhand's Story.** Maya Vanderhand was a 32-year old Hispanic woman who immigrated in late childhood to California. Maya dropped out of school at the end of 10<sup>th</sup> grade, met and married Jesus, and moved to Seattle for work. By the late 1990s, Maya was a mother of four children, ranging from first to seventh grade, who had worked for two years as a lead cashier in a military office. Her top wage there was \$8/hour for a 20-hour workweek and an annual income of about \$8000. In early 1998, Maya left the cashier job, spent a few months at home with her children, and subsequently enrolled in one of the first cohorts of Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) office occupations training. Despite lack of a GED, SJI training catapulted Maya into the position of personal lines operator at Insurance Company where she started at \$24,000/year with benefits—a salary that was \$16,000 greater than that of her previous job and one that fortuitously covered her medical needs.

When we first met Maya and her family in March 2000, she had worked at Insurance Company for just over one year and her annual salary had increased to \$25,800. The Jobs Initiative thus gave Maya an opportunity to excel in her work and conduct herself professionally in a corporate environment—a far cry from being lead cashier. At the same time, a workplace injury threatened to derail her work progress and her family's economic stability.



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Ten months into her job, Maya developed an increasingly severe case of tendonitis in her wrists and hands that was ultimately declared an “on-job injury.” In response, the company brought in a specialist to set up her workstation to be ergonomically correct and her supervisor was authorized to provide any material supplies she might need:

*“My boss came in and said, ‘anything you need, you let me know. I am in charge of supplies, just order it.’ [He] also says he’ll do anything he can do—100%. I can delegate my job duties. I’ll need to train someone.”*

Maya Vanderhand

These workplace supports allowed Maya to keep the job and income that were essential to her family, as Jesus had several periods of employment over the same period. Although Maya’s company may only have been complying with legal requirements for employees with on-job injuries, its response enabled her to remain a model of work responsibility for her children. Maya’s children drew on this model when they had problems adjusting to a more academically demanding school, as the details of the elder daughter’s career goals suggest:

*“I want to be an interior designer [showed us a 2-page Internet description of how to become an interior designer]. I designed a dream house with a tennis court, swimming pool, more rooms, an escalator, and a ‘secret room.’”*

13-year old Iesha Vanderhand

As a result of workplace supports, Maya continued to provide the family’s main financial support, build confidence in her work, remain a model “worker” for her children, and reward the company with loyalty.

### Supportive program relationships helped workers stay at jobs

Listening, active outreach, individualized attention, orderly service transfer, resource provision and referral, and sustained relationship were key program support strategies that helped Jobs Initiative workers negotiate new work and family responsibilities and stay employed, as Isabell Smith’s story dramatically exemplifies.

**Isabell Smith Story.** Thirty-one year old Hispanic-American Isabell Smith’s ability to seek and utilize supports was a critical feature of her success in the Jobs Initiative. Lacking family supports, Isabell created a network of service providers and select friends to counteract the ravages of former abuse and heroin use and dramatically improve her children’s well-being.

Isabell left home at age 18 after years of physical and sexual abuse and obtained a series of low-wage or low-level managerial positions because of her “reliable” reputation. Isabell connected her work ethic with the non-abusive part of her past: “I come from a family that always worked very hard. They do a lot and you just don’t complain about being tired, you just keep going.” In her early twenties, Isabell was diagnosed with Blackfan-Diamond syndrome, a rare and often fatal blood disorder, that she interpreted as certain death:

*“I felt like somebody had just stamped an expiration date on my forehead. They told me I was going to die within ten years.”*

Isabell Smith

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As a result, Isabell “went off the deep end for a while,” which meant showing up to work sporadically and often “high.” Isabell eventually worked for a fishing company in Alaska, a seasonal position she held for about five years, where she discovered her desire and ability to work hard, a pattern that repeated itself at her Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) job: “I got to be a trailblazer.” At the same time, she also discovered her “sea of self-hatred” which she connected with her vulnerability to drugs, including heroin.

In October 1995, Isabell’s first son, Batman, was born addicted to heroin, placed in the custody of Children’s Protective Services (CPS), and eventually placed with her partner Dominic’s relatives. In September 1997, five years into her addiction, and eight months pregnant with Dominic’s son, Scooby-Doo, Isabell entered a rehabilitation facility in order to prevent foster placement of her second child. Although Scooby-Doo was born with methadone and heroin in his system, Isabell was permitted to keep custody of him on the condition she remain in the residential facility. During this period Isabell arranged for 11-month old Scooby-Doo’s acceptance into Childhaven, a highly-reputed therapeutic child development agency for at-risk children with special needs. Isabell’s observations about Scooby Doo, that “He was far behind other one year olds. He couldn’t walk, he could not talk at all, not even a word,” were confirmed by Childhaven staff:

*“Scooby-Doo was like many floppy drug-affected babies; we wondered if he would walk.”*

Childhaven social worker

After 18 months of rehabilitation—Isabell’s first experience of sustained support—she moved to an apartment that was affordable because of a Section 8 rental subsidy. At the same time, Isabell and CPS staff advocated successfully for Batman’s return to her. For various reasons, Isabell saw Batman only sporadically during his years in foster care and so his “return” to her care at age 3½ was more aptly their introduction to one another. Batman’s entrance into the family was the biggest adjustment for all four family members during Isabell’s transition to work. Its challenge was exacerbated by Childhaven’s assessment that Batman had been abused while in kinship care, as his initial responses to maternal discipline suggested:

*“When he first moved into the house and the first time he had ever got in trouble he says ‘are you going to lock me in the bathroom?’ ‘We don’t lock people in the bathroom in this house,’ I said. He said ‘are you going to hit me then?’ and I said ‘we don’t hit people either.’”*

Isabell Smith

Recognizing his needs as she had Scooby-Doo’s, Isabell also negotiated Batman’s enrollment in Childhaven. With their help, Isabell understood Batman’s behavior as stemming from his experience: he rarely cuddled with her, was often confused about her parenting role, tested limits, refused the help he needed (for example, to tie his shoes), protested leaving child care and engaged in long crying spells before Isabell left for work in the morning. Batman’s behavior commanded capacities for time and patience that rarely exist under the best of circumstances. For Isabell, struggling with a demanding new job, it was often overwhelming:

*“I get so frustrated because I talk to Childhaven and I talk to a therapist and I talked to this lady who taught my parenting classes and Batman is really a difficult child.”*

Isabell Smith

## Remaining Challenges and Strategies for Retention and Advancement

Isabell consulted with Childhaven's teachers and case manager at will: several times daily during times of greatest need. With this help, she was able to parent less reactively, even under stress. Recognizing the vulnerability that stemmed from her abusive background, Isabell and Childhaven staff viewed these contacts as critical to preventing a further generation of abuse.

Supportive relationships were as critical to Isabell's training and employment as they were to her children's development. In March 1999, one month into her new home and family of four, Isabell considered SJI Office Occupations training. Isabell's SJI-CBO case manager helped her cope with multiple, concurrent transitions:

*“L” was my original case manager, she was so awesome. I was trying to do everything and I was moving, getting my son back for the first time, supposed to start school at the same time and I called her up freaking out. She was great, and she told me, ‘girl, you are nervous, but don’t worry about it, school will still be there, you can do the one in June.’”*

Isabell Smith

The case manager's validation calmed Isabell's quickly escalating sense of failure and allowed her to prioritize her commitments. As a result, Isabell postponed training for several months.

As part of the 12-week office training, Isabell worked for five weeks as an intern with Dot-Com, an internet-based distributor of books and sundry products. Isabell credited the skills she gained in training with her ability to get a job there as a Customer Service Representative:

*“I haven’t worked in many, many years [since 1996]. I never would have gotten a job like I have today if I hadn’t had the opportunity to go to school. I’d still be stuck at 7-11 or McDonalds.”*

Isabell Smith

Getting the job was only the first hurdle. Isabell described her early days at Dot-Com as “so scary, especially when you are now talking to real people.” While under the best circumstances transitions are stressful, Isabell's job became more intense as the company prepared for the holiday retail season. Within the first two months of employment, Isabell's work schedule changed three times. By late November she was working fifty-five “mandatory” hours per week, over ten hours a day on the phone with mostly disgruntled customers:

*“It is very high pressured job especially because I got hired on right before the holiday season and we ended up being on the phones ten hours a day, just phone call after phone call. It was just nuts and people were upset and they were screaming at us.”*

Isabell Smith

Creating routine and structure for herself and her family was new enough, as was the ability to make mistakes and move forward; having to do so within a consistently shifting framework and under duress was, as Isabell described it, “like going into a war zone.” Isabell's strain was exacerbated by a history of negative family ‘messages’ about performance:

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*“I was raised that if you did anything wrong you deserve to die for it. I mean that is what was embedded into my brain so that whenever somebody tells me ‘you are not doing this right,’ I completely fall apart. I am working on it.”*

Isabell Smith

The fact that Isabell survived her first few months of work, when demands were highest and her training, preparedness and confidence lowest, was testament to her resilience and sustained supports. When she was home with the children, they often competed for her attention and threw tantrums that she had little energy to resolve. The tumult of this period was confirmed by Childhaven staff who observed that the children were more aggressive in the classroom and Isabell had much less time to communicate with them about the children.

Burdens accumulated before SJI posed additional challenge to Isabell’s work stability and burgeoning self-confidence:

*“I got Batman, moved, went to school, got a job, and here we are. I have a job, I got car, I got my kids, I got a nice home. I got everything I always wanted. [Sense of accomplishment?] I am working on it and you caught me at another trying period because now I have got Child Support after me for child support I didn’t know that I had to pay.”*

Isabell Smith

Just as Dot-Com and Isabell regained balance after the stressful holiday period, Isabell received a distressing call at work from the Child Support Enforcement Office, a call that set her apart from her coworkers and challenged her ability to keep work, family and history separate. She learned that she was being held retroactively responsible for the cost of Batman’s years in foster care. Having to address it at work, in a public forum comprised of few workers with families, increased her burden:

*“This guy calls me at work and he said I owe \$14,000 and he wanted to garnish me. He kept wanting me to say at work that the reason why I didn’t have my kid is because I was a heroin, he wanted me to say ‘junkie’ on the phone and I was like ‘I am not going to say it because I am at work.’”*

Isabell Smith

Once again Isabell marshaled her supports: a new caseworker at Child Protective Services, a counselor at Scooby-Doo’s high-risk health clinic, and for the first time her new SJI case manager. After a laborious documentation process, these services helped Isabell demonstrate poverty status during Batman’s time in care and reduce the amount she owed from \$14,000 to \$900.

Isabell emphasized how her particularly attentive case manager’s listening helped her remain stable during such tumultuous times:

*“The more I talk about it the less power it has because [until] I outlet it, I don’t see the good stuff. I sometimes just see all the bad things that are happening and the more I talk about it, it is like ‘you know, things are pretty darn good.’”*

Isabell Smith

But Isabell also needed her workplace to listen. Because the company valued innovation, it hired employees who were willing to devote their full energies to the company—primarily young, single individuals without families:

*"I am the only one in the group who has children. No one understands what I go through—when a kid fell down the stairs or I tripped on the way to the car. It gets a little frustrating sometimes. I don't go home to my cat like they do. It's my hardest job ever—a challenge—but I like it. I've got to make them more family-oriented though."*

Isabell Smith

By our last contact with Isabell in June 2001, the contribution of her supportive relationships was evident. She had sustained 19 months' employment at Dot-Com, she had been promoted once, and her wages increased from \$11/hour to \$13/hour. Her children's gains were equally impressive. Batman "graduated" from Childhaven in September 2000, after fifteen months of treatment, and his carefully chosen childcare facility confirmed and reinforced his gains in ways that translated into more positive behavior at home:

*"He acted out a couple of times, but after that we talked about it and he has been pretty good since at school [child-care]. His getting in trouble here [at home] has toned down a lot too. He used to get in trouble daily and it has gotten a lot better."*

Isabell Smith

Similarly, by Spring 2001, Scooby-Doo had progressed from an initial diagnosis of "Developmentally Disabled" to "Developmentally Immature." Childhaven professionals predicted that he would eventually be able to enroll in a mainstream kindergarten class.

Perhaps most important for policy consideration, Scooby-Doo's gains were consolidated by the fact that although he was past his state-allotted 15 months' treatment, he was able to remain at Childhaven to receive the care that not only helped him but Batman and Isabell as well. Isabell's case management was informally extended beyond the 2-year mark as well, which similarly consolidated family gains. A "success story" to be sure—but one that depended on sustained supportive relationships and resources that remain necessary, to some extent, as Isabell was facing permanent layoff and threatened withdrawal of her vital childcare subsidy.

### Some new workers need post-employment supports and resources for more than two years

Mike Jeremy's story, like Isabell Smith's, highlights that some new workers need supportive post-employment relationships and resources for more than two years.

**Mike Jeremy's Story.** In 1991, then-33 year old Mike Jeremy immigrated to the United States as a political refugee from an embattled African country. Mike had studied road/property surveying for three years at a technical college in Africa, but his minimal English language skills and lack of American educational equivalency certification prevented him from continuing his former trade in the United States.

After returning to Africa in the mid-1990s for his bride, and subsequently becoming a father, Mike needed a more productive career direction than the Certified Nursing Assistant position that paid \$8.65/hour. He was referred to the Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) through African friends who had participated in SJI. Ideally, SJI offered Mike access

## Moving Up is a Steep Climb

to a formal network of employers that offered higher wages and benefits than his informal network in the African community could access.

At age 40, Mike began a three-month SJI training program in Computer Numerical Control (CNC) for machine tool operation. Unfortunately, CNC employers were suffering an industry downturn and eventually withdrew from the Initiative network. As a result, Mike took a production assembly line position at Equipment Manufacturer for \$11.50 per hour that at least offered health benefits and potential wage increases and advancement.

Equipment Manufacturer's motto emphasized heavy lifting, which characterized both the nature of the company and Mike's work. On-site observations underscored Mike's work experiences: "Impersonal; hard work; tough work; very fast paced; a dangerous environment; and more Asian than African." By January 2000, after almost one year at the company, Mike suffered from debilitating back pain attributed to an on-the-job injury and the daily strain of alternately lifting heavy objects and standing in place. Mike's schedule of four ten-hour days per week, 5:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., and harsh working conditions also took a toll on his family:

*"I was sick. The day before I quit, I had another accident. It's hard to put screwdrivers in; sometimes the hand turns. I hurt my hand and they took me to the first aid office. I couldn't stay there any longer. My family is my first priority."*

Mike Jeremy

Mike's workplace injuries resulted from multiple, interrelated elements: his physical condition, language comprehension, and supervisory practices—elements that signaled the need for long-term case management intervention and advice. Had Mike not been past his allotted year of CBO service, and nearly past the second year of less intense post-employment contact, a case manager might have learned that the family was in dire need of intervention. Mike needed safer work and his 3-year old needed pre-school, but school was one of the several American social institutions that Mike and his wife did not know how to access.

Instead, left on his own, Mike quit Equipment Manufacturer in April 2000 after 16 months' employment. His reemployment was thus relegated to the African-community network of job seekers who found him an attendant position at Parking Company in downtown Seattle. The new position paid \$8.50 per hour, almost \$4/hour less than his JI job wage, no benefits, and a schedule of 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. five days per week. Illustrating its long-term *non*-potential, Parking Company would never offer benefits, even for a full-time position.

Mike's views about this research underscored the utility of a supportive relationship well beyond even the two-year mark:

*[Researcher] What was it like for you being part of this study?*

*[Mike Jeremy, 2½ years after SJI training and employment] It's ok. It's good. We learn a lot of things—get a lot of help to talk; suggestions to do. To ask is information. Otherwise, there aren't any persons helping. We are sharing our problems together and that's a help.*

### Retention support means family assessment

The new Jobs Initiative workers were part of an intricate web of family relationships that influenced what and how they thought about their work futures. Getting and keeping a job is not a simple act of an individual; it involves family members' needs and the worker's family roles at the same time. Family members encouraged or derailed the new worker's job efforts in ways that might have been supported or averted by formal assessment of the entire family's needs. Having an unemployed spouse, a partner forced into low-paid underground work because of legal problems, children with special medical or health needs, or children who were trying to overcome past separation and challenge signaled viewing job pathways in the context of the family.

Immigrant workers particularly needed family assessment, as Mike Jeremy's experience exemplified [above]. Many immigrant families did not know how to navigate American social institutions such as the housing authority, subsidies and benefits, schools, courts, and medical facilities, as Mike expressed succinctly:

*"My problem is the American way to live and even to join the community, for example."*

Mike Jeremy

Some immigrant parents did not know at what age American children normally start school or pre-school. And even when families knew how to access institutions, it took an enormous amount of time and skills to negotiate effectively with them in a second language. These efforts were clearly associated with retention through their impact on the worker's fatigue, job satisfaction, and job attendance.

Jobs Initiative support groups provided a valuable resource for immigrants' acculturation:

*"He found it useful. A lot of immigrants use the space to get understanding of culture. They listen to what others say—get clues to what others are doing."*

CBO Case Manager

Post-employment seminars and workplace mentors might similarly help families navigate American institutions.

Family assessment among immigrants and non-immigrants alike can encompass the obvious barriers to sustained employment so that workers or their partners do not inadvertently derail each other's work efforts. Felony backgrounds, substance abuse histories, mental health concerns, and lack of education are just a few such barriers highlighted by CBO case managers:

*"There's so much that needs to be done with people just to get them prepared for training. I now say, 'you're not ready.' This 'xxx' issue—handle that first; then come back. With this economic market, if you don't have any issues, you've got a job. The people coming in now are harder, more complex."*

CBO Case Manager

King and Elliot's (2000) recent report offers valuable models for family-centered employment strategies. Outreach to partners might contribute to the retention and advancement of Jobs Initiative workers by extending *both* adults' career pathways so that one parent does not carry the whole burden.

### Retention support also includes transportation

Transportation dilemmas were not the most difficult problem for Jobs Initiative workers, but were often the “straw” that tipped the retention balance. Even though most of the study families had the “luxury” of a car, the cars were 10-15 years old and vulnerable to breakdown and unplanned, unaffordable costs:

*“It’s hard to maintain quality of life. Every penny is accounted for. We shelled out over \$900 last week on Mrs. Blessed’s car. I have \$1.35 to last for 2 weeks—and half a tank of gas in the car.”*

Hard Working Blessed

Gas and bus vouchers had been an important material support during Jobs Initiative training and continued to be available on request. The Jobs Initiatives worked on inner-city transportation problems systemically as well, advocating and partnering with city agencies to get graduates to employment sites. New bus routes and extra hours of service were added and creative van service-employer arrangements were crafted. But cost and access were only two of many complex ways that transportation problems complicated Jobs Initiative workers’ lives, as Isabell Smith’s experiences typify.

**More Isabell Smith Story.** When she was hired by Dot-Com, Isabell Smith located a licensed home-based facility for morning and afternoon childcare that was carefully selected to reinforce the gains her children made in the therapeutic development program they attended earlier each day. In Isabell’s first months on the job, she drove to work and parked downtown at a cost of \$11 per day. During the holiday season when she was forced to work extra hours, parking cost \$20 per day. Realizing she could not afford this cost, Isabell began to take public transportation. Unfortunately, the misfit between her work demands and an erratic bus schedule frequently made her late for childcare pick-up. At a cost of \$2 for every minute late, this was an extra cost she could ill afford. Childcare fines up to \$60 a day were untenable extra costs to a family whose income was well below self-sufficiency.

A secondary “cost” of public transportation was the fact that it robbed Isabell of her only “alone” time—time she took in her car to sing, cry, and make the transition from her extremely stressful work day to an often similarly stressful home where her two small children let off the steam they had accumulated during their long day of therapy and daycare. Isabell suffered indirect transportation dilemmas also in the form of \$7000 debt that was partly due to fines for unpaid tickets that her ex-husband accumulated before she took her name off the car title. Similar problems with fines have been documented in welfare-to-work research (Nightingale & Mikelson, 2000); these other problems have not been documented.

### Challenge #3. Trying to Move Forward (Advancement)

“Good jobs” started Jobs Initiative workers on upward job pathways. The problem of making enough money slowed their progress, but policy supports, family-friendly workplaces, and post-employment supports kept them moving forward. But to a one, Jobs Initiative workers said they needed more education and training to *really* move up.

### Advancement means getting more education

More education generally means more money. Related research among welfare-leavers found a strong positive link between education and wages over time (Strawn & Martinson, 2000). Other research found that welfare-leavers with



## Remaining Challenges and Strategies for Retention and Advancement

skills comparable to women with some post-secondary education, or even to high school graduates in the lower half of their class, could move up to jobs that pay up to \$10,000 more by investing in 200 hours (1 full semester of courses) of education and training (Carnevale & Desrochers, 1999). In the experience of one Jobs Initiative project, a GED was worth about \$2 additional wages per hour (Parker & Nichols, 2001), a sizeable \$4,160/year.

The Jobs Initiative's valuable pre-employment skill training helped trainees access good-paying jobs. But getting more education and training proved to be well beyond what most of the families could do, even three or more years into "good jobs." Parents were exhausted after long days at work and wanted to spend what little time they had with their children. The children sorely needed parent time to compensate for previous separations, new family configurations, inadequate urban schools, and language challenges. More education and training also meant more expense. Even when employers reimbursed enrollment fees, few families had up-front money for courses. Goals of professional or college education were even more unrealistic, as available grants and stipends did not begin to equal foregone earnings. Access to education was also difficult because work hours and course times rarely coincided. Earlier research underscored that community and vocational colleges seldom offer off-time and weekend courses, few provide child-care, and many are of questionable quality (Carnevale & Desrochers, 1999).

**Without basic education and GEDs, workers cannot move up.** The first step in the education-equals-money chain is a high school diploma or GED. In contrast to how Jobs Initiative "legitimization" was portable for felons, it was limited to initial job access for workers without a high school diploma or GED. Despite varied reports about the value of the GED compared to a high school diploma (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Cao, Stromsdorfer, & Weeks, 1996), this research found that family heads could not advance far in their JI-attained jobs, change jobs, or pursue further education and training without one of these crucial credentials. In this study, immigrant workers most starkly exemplified the penalties of no credential, as Lucky Miracle's story highlights.

**Lucky Miracle's Story.** After decades of revolution, dislocation, political persecution, young adult emigration, and adult readjustment, 43-year old Lucky Miracle and his family were living a comfortable life in a Seattle exurb. The children were beautiful and well adjusted, both parents were employed, and family supports abounded. At the same time, byproducts of Lucky's life cataclysms persisted in subtle ways, limiting both his work pathway and development of cultural capital for his children.

Many years earlier, after high school completion, army service, and several years' work as a retail clothes salesman on his way to having his own clothing manufacturing business, Lucky and his parents fled their Asian home country when Communist insurgents took over. They were interned in a refugee camp in Indonesia for 16 months that Lucky described as "Terrible. It was a jungle. We had to chop the trees to build a house."

Lucky eventually reached Los Angeles by boat in 1980 at age 26, knowing no English at the time. He soon moved to Washington state, enrolled in ESL classes, and thought about getting a GED, but work demands prevented enough study time. Lucky also worried that the test would be difficult:

*"Some people say the GED is pretty easy. I said, 'Well I don't think so.' High school I think was easier. GED is not that easy."*

Lucky Miracle

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Lucky wanted to become a policeman, but lacked official certification of his Asian education because he was forced to leave his important belongings when he fled the country. This was particularly unfortunate because Lucky's Asian high school education was an elite one—paid for by scholarship and parents who scrimped to do so. Pursuit of sales work in the U.S. was also stymied by no certificate, as well as by the need for a license, language limitations, and no American sales track record. After a decade of menial jobs, in 1991 Lucky was hired by Food Company's shipping and receiving department where he remained employed, during and after Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) training, in a position with decreasing benefits, minimal wage increases, and no way to advance.

The Jobs Initiative aimed to compensate for the gap between Lucky's competencies and his attainment. Lucky's CBO affiliate categorized him as under-employed [job content and wages that do not reflect attained education and skills], and referred him to the Initiative's general manufacturing training program. A complex constellation of events prevented Lucky from getting placed by the Jobs Initiative, but lack of a GED remained his largest employment hurdle. Lucky lamented that he was not able to complete GED training through the Initiative, as his earlier GED training had been confusing and discouraging:

*"That would have been wonderful! Because I would try to contact SJI, I try to go to Goodwill, they have a GED training but it takes long, long, long time because one night for school. The most of it you study by yourself, instead of study by yourself they want you to go to school. Like that book, I try to go, I want to get a GED package since I would say fifteen years ago, but I don't have any clue how to get them because history in the U.S., I don't know that much. You have to pass them, the math, I can't do that."*

Lucky Miracle

Lucky urged workforce programs to be more actively involved in trainees' GED attainment and issued a similar mandate to immigration policymakers as well:

*"If they can help people get a GED, they can get the other job. I would say in the future the policies for the country for all the new immigrants will be to try to let them easier to get a GED. [What would make it easier to get it?] In general the language and some of the stuff could be a little bit easier. Because I know a GED is not easy to get, you have to pass this and pass that and if you fail just go back again because people can, all the immigrants can get a GED. You know most of the people when you come over, like I come over this country my age is over, I cannot go to high school, but by that time I didn't know about GED until I found it out a few years too late."*

Lucky Miracle

Had Lucky been able to transcend cultural and educational hurdles to better employment, he might have reached his goal of providing his children with resources and opportunities, such as a home computer and summer enrichment programs, that give economically-disadvantaged children the edge in life attainment.

**Without upgrade education and training, workers cannot move up.** Two basic routes are available for employed workers to further their skills: on-job and off-job. On-job upgrade training is presently available to about two-thirds of the workforce nationally, but is mainly offered to managers, supervisors, the sales force, technical workers, and professionals (Wever, Berg & Kochan, 1994). Jobs Initiative and other workforce program graduates do not usually hold such positions.

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Some employers in this study offered “Learners’ Centers” for on-site advancement, particularly in the manufacturing industry where unions encouraged upgrade opportunities for all employee levels. Although staffed by technical instructors, the centers more commonly offered personal enrichment activities over lunch and break periods, such as yoga and tai chi, rather than skill instruction. Because employers did not give release time for upgrade instruction, attending a skills class before or after work meant additional and unacceptable time away from children. As a result, none of the JI family heads made use of on-job training:

*“Some of the advancement could take more hours and more days and I don’t think I would be able to do that because the more time I spend with my [pre-school] children is the best time I could spend with them.”*

Tasha Jones

Off-job education and training was a “luxury” that few could afford. Even when courses were subsidized or reimbursed, off-job training imposed parent time and financial penalties on children. Apprenticeships posed a unique set of problems for the Jobs Initiative families. Relatively low wages in the early apprenticeship years did not coincide with workers’ need to support their families. This was another example of a *life-stage mismatch* between traditional industry pathways, where young, single individuals are the usual apprenticeship students, and the more complicated life situations that Jobs Initiative workers bring to such positions, as Randy Jackson’s experience illustrates.

**Randy Jackson’s Story.** Although he earned a Bachelor’s of Science degree in biology at his African country’s premier university, 40-year old Randy Jackson worked in maintenance management for his first 9 years in the U.S. because employers did not recognize his African university education. The Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJI) moved him into a high-paying construction position that allowed him to spend daily and weekend time with his two young children that the maintenance job had not allowed. The “family-friendly” schedule also left more time for school conferences and teacher consultation to resolve the behavior and academic problems of his 6-year old son.

At the same time, Randy deeply wanted to pursue a career in law or medicine, building on his African science training, but his family could not afford the cut in income. Randy’s wife did not work outside the home, and even if she did, her earning power would be low. Instead, Randy pursued electrical apprenticeship at the MJI construction project. He just missed passing the industry apprenticeship exam because he had no experience with American “test-taking skills:”

*“I went to the first questions, they were the hardest, and I did them all. I finished 29 out of 36 questions. I didn’t look ahead to see that the easiest questions were at the end. I should have looked at the whole test and answered the last questions first then gone back and answered the first questions, then I would have got them all done.”*

Randy Jackson

Although he could retake the exam, he learned that he would not earn his current income (\$16.40/hour) as an apprentice for at least two years. As the sole family wage earner, Randy could not afford this opportunity cost. Thus, he remained in a construction position that offered regular wage increases in the short run, but a limited wage ceiling in the long run. Randy’s family’s *stability* was enhanced by the Jobs Initiative, but its *mobility* was constrained by financial barriers to career development.

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### Advancement means helping new workers learn about “career development”

Realistically, career knowledge is cumulative, accrued over many years through different contacts and examples. Jobs Initiative workers lacked this kind of social capital. Most did not understand how to move up and what it would really mean to them and their families to “develop a career.” They generally characterized “advancement” in terms of wage increase rather than in terms of incremental skill attainment, additional responsibility, or identified “steps” toward a career:

*“At Printing Company the money was \$100 better. I’d say I advanced.”*

Hard Working Blessed

It was also striking that Jobs Initiative staff, employers and workers perceived advancement differently. Jobs Initiative staff perceived advancement as “time-” dependent: “If she finds the time to get training, she can advance.” Employers viewed advancement as “skill-” dependent: “Advancement depends both on openings and skills.” In contrast, new workers perceived and weighed “advancement” in relation to family priorities and life values:

*“I don’t think I’ll ever want to be a manager. I like my hours. Like the flexibility. Like the low-key environment. Money is not all that is important to me. What people have to realize is that there is nothing wrong with being a worker who just likes to do what they know and then put their time into things that they care about—like church.”*

Teresa Russell

Advancement strategies ideally mean helping new workers understand the steps of career paths, as Kevin McDonald’s experience illustrates.

**More of Kevin McDonald’s Story.** Kevin McDonald was one of several who castigated urban high schools for restricting knowledge about “career” options and processes:

*“When I grew up, for Blacks and Latinos there were only two things pumped—college and the armed forces. We were not told about different apprenticeships, different skilled trades. We were just told if you didn’t have college, you couldn’t succeed. If the high schools had information about the trades, a lot more people would do it. They could introduce us to what was going on. We could have seen more things we could do. If we didn’t want to go to college, or to the armed services, we had the sense that there was nothing else we could do. With information about these other possibilities, it would not have seemed just like a dead end.”*

Kevin McDonalds

Kevin believed that he might have sought an apprenticeship out of high school if he had known about that route, since he did not view himself as college-bound, and rued the time lost between high school and his connection with the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJI):

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*“I probably would have done it. I don’t mind going to school, but I’m not a college-bound type of person. I tried it—but I was discouraged. If you’re not good at school—then what! You don’t feel like there are any options. Now I’m in school at [MJI Printing Project]. But it would be much better if the program [MJI] were going to the high schools. Tell them about the possibilities beyond college and the armed forces. Give them choices, options.”*

Kevin McDonalds

Importantly employer- and advancement-oriented, Kevin’s MJI project taught him about career “steps.” Kevin attended 3-hour printing classes for “jogger” and “press operator” at the project one to two mornings a week after his all-night shift. He planned next to take computer classes for the press, showing new understanding that skill expansion was critical to developing a printing career. He also began to understand more about the portability of his skills:

*“You can really get ahead in this business. There is a lot of opportunity to do that. You can just keep moving up by taking classes. I don’t know if I want to stay in it, but you learn a lot of things that will help. The classes are easy. Except going there after work.”*

Kevin McDonalds

Kevin also learned that career paths are influenced by industry particularities. Advancement in the printing industry depends on staying with one employer, an increasingly rare job pathway in today’s labor market but one with major implications for retention. He also learned that advancement was contingent on open slots that might take years to reach.

*“I’m something like #27 now on the list for the next promotion. It will probably take 3-4 years until the next position, 5 at most.”*

Kevin McDonalds

### Advancement means helping new workers resolve alternative career interests

Learning about “career” processes was further complicated by the fact that none of the Jobs Initiative workers were doing what they said they really wanted to do. Having alternative life and employment goals emerged as a significant influence on “moving up,” delimiting some workers’ interest in learning how job “A” may lead to job “B” and ultimately to career “C.” Although mobility was a Jobs Initiative goal, participants were essentially guided into new job pathways with the projects’ industry partners.

In this research, the auto service worker wanted to be a caterer. The manufacturing workers wanted to be a journalist, social service worker or office worker. Only one wanted to stay in manufacturing and work eventually for Harley-Davidson. The construction worker wanted to be a doctor or lawyer, a reasonable goal considering his university education in Africa. The printing industry worker wanted to own a club that provided music, safety, and community for inner-city African Americans. The customer service worker wanted to pursue music and the arts, and the insurance worker wanted to work in government service. Importantly, these goals were not random “pipe-dreams.” The workers all had previous education or experience in their goal area that might have provided a foundation for pursuit of their professed desires, had they been fully assessed.

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The gap between life goal and current job was jarringly evident among immigrants and political refugees, as understanding American “careers” was particularly difficult, linguistically and structurally, for families raised in countries outside the U.S. At Jobs Initiative intake and pre-training testing, immigrant participants regularly emphasized that reading, writing or speaking English caused no difficulties. In contrast, case managers emphasized that immigrants’ verbal proficiency often obscured the more subtle deficits that ESL-speakers experience: for example, knowledge about how to access social institutions; knowledge of American advancement procedures; and fear about changing employment environments:

*“Their English. It seems OK, but it’s not good enough to do more than at present.”*

CBO Case Manager

While career assessment is not easy or straightforward, more intensive vocational assessment and guidance, before and after employment, might be considered for future Jobs Initiative projects and other workforce programs. It will also be important for future research to examine how knowledge about “career” processes, having alternative goals, and wrestling with immigrant status influence advancement over time.

## CHAPTER 3

## CONCLUSIONS

Moving Up is a Steep Climb...  
Many People's Efforts are Needed to Get There

Using ethnography to study work and family life in the Milwaukee and Seattle Jobs Initiatives illuminated how the Annie E. Casey Foundation's innovative demonstration program helped parents from impoverished urban neighborhoods obtain jobs that helped them be adequate providers, good parents, and community citizens.

Customized skills training, program legitimization, and carefully-crafted partnerships between the Jobs Initiative and employers *together* launched parents into "good jobs" with good wages, benefits, and advancement opportunity for the first time in their lives. Post-employment support from Jobs Initiative projects aided parents' adjustment to challenging new work and family tasks. Children's welfare improved accordingly, either immediately or over time. Most dramatically, children reconciled with absent parents, moved to safer neighborhoods, were more adequately fed and clothed, became more integrated into their communities, had more opportunities for enrichment, and eventually improved their grades and behavior in school. In essence, the Jobs Initiative helped parents begin to compensate for ravaged pasts and provide social and cultural capital for their children's futures.

At the same time, the family narratives reveal the extent of life events, characteristics and needs that Jobs Initiative families confront simultaneously, the length of time it may take to overcome their former and persistent challenges, and the recognition that multiple players are essential to helping families move up. This research also reinforces that "rapid attachment" only is not the solution for most families with employment challenge, be it from years on welfare, years in prison, being a political refugee, not having enough education, or teen or single parenthood. Such families need education and training, hospitable workplace policies and practices, and sustained post-employment support in order to reach the steep and distant goal of family-supporting incomes. These needs are shared by other Jobs Initiative families, and likely by low-income families working outside the Jobs Initiative.

As national attention moves from welfare dependency to the increasingly pervasive plight of low-income workers, new effort can be spent on ways to provide sufficient human, social and cultural capital for parents and for the 'next generation' of workers and community members, their children. Even though the particular kind of disadvantage may differ, families need a multi-pronged effort to overcome it: Effort by the worker, effort by the worker's family, effort by workforce programs like the Jobs Initiative, effort by employers, effort by community institutions, and effort by public policymakers. No single effort is enough by itself.

The conclusions at this point in the 8-year demonstration program, and for this continuing ethnographic research, are that the Jobs Initiative is making important contributions to workforce attachment, retention and advancement; that customized skill training pays initially but more education and training is needed to reach self-sufficiency; and that employers and public policymakers are key players in whether workers in America remain poor or can earn enough money to live and raise their children well.

### CHAPTER 4

#### PUBLIC POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR PARENTS' WORK AND CHILDREN'S WELFARE<sup>3</sup>

##### Implications for Income Sufficiency Policies

###### Make work pay by lengthening and increasing subsidy eligibility

This research found that subsidies and income supplements are as critically important to the income adequacy of low-income workers as they are to the income adequacy of welfare leavers. Short of a sea change in employer wage practices or a thriving national economy, low-income workers in America will need state and federal income assistance for the many years it takes to reach a family-sustaining wage. Many low-income workers phase out of eligibility long before their wages can support family needs, as this research illustrates.

If phase-out eligibility rates for Medicaid, Section 8, childcare, and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) were dramatically slowed, these income assists could reach the growing cadre of somewhat 'higher' low-income workers and, at the same time, provide richer and longer benefits to those currently eligible. Such assistance might improve both groups' abilities to stay employed. Washington and Wisconsin provide two examples of such expansion. Washington raised the TANF eligibility level from under 175% to 225% of the federal poverty level (FPL) in January 2000. Wisconsin TANF eligibility was set at a liberal 250% FPL at the end of 2001, although eligibility for children's benefits was set at a lower 185%. Larger and more sustained subsidies could improve children's welfare by reducing or eliminating periods of financial insecurity, reducing the need for parents to work overtime, and by increasing disposable family income for capital-building enrichment in the short run and asset development in the long run.

###### Make work pay by revising the index used to calculate subsidy eligibility

State, local and federal government should revise eligibility standards for low-income programs currently indexed to the federal poverty level, such as food stamps, housing and children's health insurance, in light of self-sufficiency standards such as the one developed by University of Washington Professor Diana Pearce (see Pearce 2000; 2001; Wider Opportunities for Women, 2001). Income, relative to family size, is the only criterion for programs whose eligibility is indexed to the federal poverty level. In contrast, programs indexed to a self-sufficiency standard assess eligibility according to the monthly, local cost of basic needs such as housing, food, childcare, transportation, healthcare, and taxes, in addition to income. Self-sufficiency standards also require differential assessment of family needs according to children's ages. As this research suggests, calculating 'how many' children a family has does not account for differences in the cost of certified childcare or pre-school compared to public school or differences in the cost of feeding an infant compared to a teenager. Use of a national formula based on 'number in family' does not account for significant geographic variation in these costs. By 2001, 14 states used Pearce's Self-Sufficiency Standard for at least some subsidy calculations and by the end of 2002, 35 states will have a standard available for use (Wider Opportunities for Women, 2001).

Workforce development efforts like the Jobs Initiative and its community partners could consider active support for the Self-Sufficiency Act (H.R. 3667) introduced in the House of Representatives on January 29, 2002 by California Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey. Woolsey's bill proposes that all states use self-sufficiency standards (like Pearce's) to measure their success in moving families toward economic self-sufficiency under PRWORA. The bill also proposes

<sup>3</sup>Julie Strawn, senior policy analyst, and Mark Greenberg and Steve Savner, senior staff attorneys, generously contributed policy comments that I have incorporated here. Final interpretations and errors are mine alone.



to hold states accountable for determining what public and programmatic work supports forward the goal of self-sufficiency.

### Make work pay by using innovative new practices to maximize subsidy enrollment

As this and other reports have revealed, income assistance subsidies are severely underutilized, due in part to fragmented services and faulty information. In 1999 for example, although 80% of eligible individuals and families in the state of Washington used EITC, a mere 15% of those eligible used childcare, 60% used health insurance, and 55% used food stamp subsidies (City of Seattle, 2001). In systemic workforce efforts like the Jobs Initiative, employers and workforce development partners may be better positioned to inform families about subsidies and supplements and reduce underutilization. Seattle Office of Economic Development's "best practice" proposal, the *Public Benefits Portal* (Johnson, 2001), is one model that employers and programs could use to facilitate and maximize subsidy and supplement use. Johnson's proposal would establish a simple, integrated, electronic enrollment system to inform people about benefit eligibility and allow them to apply on-line at public sites such as libraries, senior centers, and employment offices.

### Make work pay by establishing between-job income support

Low-wage workers frequently do not have earnings that are large or sustained enough to meet the Unemployment Insurance (UI) earning base period or workforce connection tests. In addition, parents who leave employment to fulfill family responsibilities are often not UI-eligible (Strawn & Martinson, 2000). Public assistance re-enrollment currently provides between-job income for some new workers, although TANF time limits will likely end this strategy. Moreover, the higher—albeit still insufficient—incomes of other new workers leave them ineligible for TANF.

Given the family demands and job conditions of low-income workers illuminated in this research, workers who are not eligible for TANF or regular UI need an alternative type of unemployment benefit for short periods between jobs (see Greenberg & Savner, 1999 for one example). One-stop centers established under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) are a logical site for an alternative benefit program, as Greenberg and Savner (1999) noted. Whatever the program's form, the eligibility cap for between-job income support should be set high enough to reward attempts to sustain work, fully recognizing that Jobs Initiative jobs, and even more so those attained by welfare leavers, are vulnerable to layoff, harsh physical conditions, and slow wage progression such that job change may be a response. "Reason for unemployment" and specified base periods should be eliminated as eligibility criteria, based on the fact that job pathways of welfare leavers and "work returners," like those in the Jobs Initiative, are often sporadic in the beginning. Eliminating "reason for unemployment" would also accommodate the range of family and workplace reasons for between-job unemployment demonstrated in this research. Periods of coverage could parallel "retention" definitions in workforce programs like the Jobs Initiative and allow automatic coverage for 30 days between jobs. An additional period of coverage could be based on demonstrated—and supported—re-employment efforts that take local employment conditions into consideration.

WIA funding would need to be increased to cover the cost of alternative unemployment benefits and re-employment assistance, but bridge income support could help individuals persist and advance out of the low-wage work market rather than resort to welfare re-enrollment or risk deeper family poverty.

### Implications for Workplace Policies

This research suggests that if workplace practices officially accommodate workplace and family needs, new workers and supervisors will not be caught in impossible binds that lead the worker to be terminated or quit. In a recent journal issue about time and the employment relationship, Golden (2001) and others called for the development of a national work hours policy that bears serious consideration. Based on experiences of European labor markets, Golden found that a full continuum of time and schedule options at work pays big dividends via improved retention, productivity, and job satisfaction, which parallels this study's findings.

Discovery of the *life-stage mismatch* in this research also suggests that workforce programs and employers need to address physical health and conditioning so that workers and workplaces "match" better. Instruction about ergonomics and physical conditioning should be part of all workforce training. At the same time, the Jobs Initiative and other workforce programs must carefully evaluate the safety and physical conditions of their employer partners. Implications abound for the ways in which workforce development programs could intersect with employers to improve retention and reduce turnover: advocacy for heightened workplace safety; instruction about contemporary parents' life demands, especially those of single-parents; and development of more ways to make skill advancement an integral part of the job position.

### Implications for Immigrant and Political Refugee Policies

In this research, the multiple dislocations of immigrant and refugee families and resultant language and cultural issues compounded their hesitancy to change jobs and disrupt the status quo. Current policies exacerbate such hesitation. Home-country educational attainment is not recognized by most institutions and employers. GED attainment is not mandated in refugee centers, community service centers, or workforce programs. Work program staff and employers generally know little about contemporary immigration policy and legislation. At the same time, increasing numbers of immigrants are coming to the United States to work and stay. These disconnects suggest the need for:

- 1) National examinations and standards for foreign degrees instead of English-based equivalency examinations that penalize those whose English is limited. Equivalency standards, like interstate and international licensing boards, could give immigrants and refugees a fairer chance at adaptation and recognition in their new host country.
- 2) Increased funding and support for ESL education and GED attainment in refugee camps, community resettlement centers, and workforce programs.
- 3) Administration of whole family, versus individual, assessments with immigrants and political refugees. The family's particular emigration or refugee experience and language needs are salient to both immediate and future employment actions and possibilities.

### Implications for Workforce Development Policies

WIA funding for 2001 was a low \$3.64 billion compared to \$16.5 billion for TANF and the additional \$10 billion in state maintenance of effort funds, \$7.6 billion for Pell grants, and the estimated \$232 billion that American businesses spend annually on workforce training (Worthen, 2001), largely for high-level employees. Worse yet, only about one-

third of WIA funding (\$1 billion) supports workforce development services for adults (Clymer, Roberts, & Strawn, 2001). At the same time, millions of new and returning full-time, full-year workers earn below-poverty incomes and need more education and skills to advance to jobs with family-sustaining incomes (Clymer, Roberts, & Strawn, 2001).

Findings from this research underscore that more rather than less TANF and WIA funds should be allocated to workforce development. Businesses could receive tax breaks for contributing part of their vast training budgets to providers of training services under WIA. Businesses could partner with these providers to craft training curricula and guarantee post-training job opportunities, as modeled by the Jobs Initiative. In the long run, to lift the nation's workers out of poverty, workforce development funding must cover *both* basic and upgrade education.

### **GED and basic education:**

Research has documented the need for a high school diploma or GED as the bare minimum for job attainment and retention, yet basic education courses are often poorly funded, poor quality, and not supported by federal student aid (Strawn, 1998; 2000). This research underscores that despite the best efforts of program and participant, without policy changes lack of a GED is likely to severely curtail long-range wage gains and employment efforts of Jobs Initiative and other workforce program graduates, particularly those who are immigrants. In contrast, more funding for GED education would pay dividends through providing a base for subsequent education and training that could lead to advancement opportunities otherwise out of reach (Strawn, 1998).

At present, programs funded by TANF and WIA minimize training and prioritize employment. Although some states have recently relaxed their restrictions on education, in 2000 the Wisconsin state legislature approved \$1½ million for customized training that did not include basic skills education. Restrictions on how much education counts toward satisfying the TANF work requirement should be relaxed further during TANF reauthorization deliberation in 2002—ideally, two years of pre- and post-secondary education should be counted as “work.” WIA funding for basic as well as upgrade education should also be increased so that the expanding cadre of low-income workers have a real chance to get employed, stay employed, and eventually “move up.”

### **Post-employment upgrade education and training:**

In contrast to single individuals in “traditional” work pathways, economically-disadvantaged workers often have family demands and responsibilities that they put before upgrade activities: essentially, the “*life-stage mismatch*” documented in this research. Program and policy changes could minimize these conflicting goals and improve family well-being.

At the program level, Strawn and Martinson (2000) urged workforce efforts like the Jobs Initiative to negotiate with employers to provide low-wage workers with at least 8 hours per month of release time to participate in on-site work-supporting activities. Release time would eliminate the wrenching “work-family” conflicts experienced by families in this research. In addition, the Jobs Initiative could be used as a “best practice” model to increase targeted post-employment as well as pre-employment training through crafted partnerships between community colleges and local industries and businesses.

At state, local, and federal government levels, funds for workforce development and academic institutions must be expanded so that individuals can pursue upgrade training or college education without placing their families in the

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dire economic straits that befell families in this research. Across the nation, states spent less than one percent of the TANF block grant in 2000 on education and training (Savner, Strawn, & Greenberg, 2002: 12). Two far-sighted proposals could be used as models for broader funding and implementation of upgrade training under WIA and TANF.

First, the *Washington State Earned Family Supplement Program (EFS)*, an economic opportunity agenda proposed by Mark McDermott (2001) of the City of Seattle's Office of Economic Development, is designed to help low-wage working parents earn expanded financial aid for post-employment education and upgrade training. Essentially, individuals who have worked at least 5000 hours in the previous 5 years, but whose family incomes are still below 200% of the federal poverty line, would be eligible for a family supplement to the federal financial aid program that would fund up to 6 full-time quarters in community or technical college. Participating parents would be eligible for full-time subsidized childcare through the state childcare program during all school hours and related work-study, internships, or other employer-based training component. The EFS is structured around retaining eligibility for financial aid and other federal subsidy programs (McDermott, 2001:3).

Second, the *Career Ladders Fund*, a research and demonstration project proposed by Steve Savner, Julie Strawn, and Mark Greenberg (2002) of the Center for Law and Social Policy is designed to improve low-wage workers' opportunities for better-quality jobs. Welfare recipients, other low-income families, and noncustodial parents would earn access to Career Training Accounts by sustaining employment for a period of time (Savner, Strawn, & Greenberg, 2002:13). The fund would also provide technical assistance and Career Ladder Grants to states to identify and replicate "best practice" training approaches that help those with lower skills, limited English, and/or other challenges to obtain higher-quality jobs (Savner, Strawn, & Greenberg, 2002:13). Training would be available to non-high school graduates and graduates alike, as was the case in the Jobs Initiative. Certificates or other credentials would be created to maximize training portability, potentially providing the kind of "legitimization" for a "good job" that this research found so effective in the Jobs Initiative.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Research Design

**Background: The local economy in Milwaukee and Seattle.** During the period of this research, economic conditions in Milwaukee and Seattle were roughly similar. In February 2000, Milwaukee was riding the crest of the nation's economic improvement, yet as early as June 2000, Wisconsin was officially declared a "low-income" state, meaning there were high numbers of vulnerable low-wage workers. By May 2001, Milwaukee experienced substantial economic downturn, especially in the manufacturing industry. Over the same period, Washington rode the crest of the "dot.com" boom. At the same time, the Washington economy was not creating enough living-wage jobs for all those who needed them (Northwest Policy Center, 2001). A few years earlier, 72% of all jobs in the state economy paid less than the requisite living wage for a single adult with two children (Northwest Policy Center, 2001). Essentially, the riches remained at the high end of the economic spectrum, trickling down very little to the low end. Thus, we expected to see increased layoffs among the study workers over the course of the 18 months—and we did. The cities' worsening economies also meant that re-employment was more difficult. Not only was moving up nearly impossible, re-employment often meant taking a wage cut.

**Site Description: Milwaukee Jobs Initiative and Seattle Jobs Initiative.** Jobs Initiative sites developed differently according to the nature of the city and the auspices and character of the regional intermediary (the central Jobs Initiative organization). [See Abt Associates and New School University, 2000 and Fleischer, 2001 for more detailed descriptions of each city's Jobs Initiative] The Milwaukee and Seattle Jobs Initiatives shared essential components but were also marked by differences. Applicants in both Initiatives received initial assessment and industry orientation, customized skill training, soft skill classes, job placement or referral, and follow-up. Both Initiatives also made some direct job placements without skill training. The research team purposively only examined individuals who participated in skill training to ascertain how families fared with skill training plus extensive follow-up services, as nearly all other programs at the time had eliminated training in favor of immediate work and followed-up for 90 days at most. Some Jobs Initiative enrollees were "guaranteed" jobs upon completion of skill training; in other cases the Initiative helped them find jobs. Hard skill training took place at the partner organization, the employer, or the local vocational institution and included a soft skill component as well. In both sites, employers and other industry representatives designed skill-based curricula in active partnership with the intermediary, the projects and training institutions. In Milwaukee, manufacturing, printing, and construction, and in Seattle, manufacturing, automotive services, and office occupations comprised the primary Jobs Initiative industry sectors and were the placement sites for study participants.

The scale and structure of the two Initiatives differed. The Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJl) was an independent intermediary with strong ties to labor and the Center for Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), a research and advocacy center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. MJl projects were similarly independent, free-standing consortia of unions, management, and training facilities that were organized according to industry. These consortia had provided upgrade training for incumbent workers long before the Initiative partnered with them to initiate pre-employment training and placement for the new target population of low-income inner-city residents. Customized pre-employment skill training lasted from one to eight weeks, depending on the sector and union partner, and was reflected in high initial wages for the MJl graduates, extensive benefit packages, and frequent possibility of union membership. MJl's formal post-employment services consisted of connecting new workers with worksite mentors, upgrade train-

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ing that was tied to union-management wage progression, and re-employment consultation and referral. Case management was informal, although formal prototypes were being developed at the end of this study.

In contrast, the Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) intermediary was an official department of the City of Seattle's Office of Economic Opportunity, which led to increased scale from the outset. Located in an office outside the government center, SJI partnered with independent community-based organizations (CBOs) that were either vocational or human service-oriented. The CBOs provided enrollment, referral, placement and follow-up for SJI participants. Case management was the "signature" component of the SJI-CBO partnership, offered intensively by the CBO during training and for one year after employment, and less intensively by the SJI intermediary for a second year. The SJI intermediary also employed brokers and sector managers who consulted regularly with CBOs and employers to develop and refine program elements, develop new industry partnerships, and develop jobs.

Initial wages in Seattle were lower than in Milwaukee, but support services were more extensive. These differences allowed us to examine the relative importance of wages and supports to the job pathways of new or returning workers with backgrounds of labor market and other economic disadvantage. In fact, *both* were critically important to workers and families and *neither* was sufficient alone. Wages were an essential start but not a finish. Case management was both crucial and circumscribed in effect.

**Selection of Key Informants.** The research design consisted of longitudinal ethnographic study of five families in Milwaukee, five families in Seattle, and multiple auxiliaries per family. The key informants were men and women who had participated in Jobs Initiative training and were employed or in the process of being employed through the Initiative. They were selected purposively as follows: 1) Staff from the Jobs Initiative intermediary and its project affiliates recommended potential informants who completed sector training, were placed or ready to be placed in jobs, and had resident children; 2) I culled this array of about twenty "potentials" per site for varied ages, ethnic backgrounds, education, training and employment sector, amount of time employed, gender, and number of children; 3) After JI staff gained permission, I invited potential informants to participate in the study, aiming for as much demographic variation as possible. Consistent with case design, willingness to participate was the key factor for inclusion in the study (Stake, 1995). Seven invitations in Milwaukee and six in Seattle resulted in the cohorts of five families per city. The ten families remained for the initial study period of 6 to 8 months, February 2000 through October 2000, and for a follow-up period in May-June 2001, roughly eighteen months after study onset. Families were given honoraria for their study participation. The key informants and their family members selected the pseudonyms used in the narratives and overview. I selected pseudonyms for the employers and schools. Jobs Initiative project and community organization names are real [Auxiliary contacts are described in Data Collection section].

**Research Team.** The field research team consisted of the principal investigator and three on-site researchers in the two cities, all of whom are experienced academic or independent researchers. Several interview protocols were used consistently with all key informants during the study period, particularly at the initial and final interviews. The involvement of multiple interviewers increases the reliability of the data.

**Data Collection.** The research team gathered both prospective and retrospective data, made possible by the study design. The primary methods of data collection were: 1) In-depth ethnographic interviews with key informants, members of their immediate family, Jobs Initiative intermediary and project staff, employers and co-workers, staff at community organizations, and children's teachers, and 2) Observational shadowing at the key informant's workplace,

children's schools and childcare facilities, and social institutions that played a significant role in the families' lives, such as churches and therapeutic facilities. "Shadowing" also included interviews with personnel at these sites. The data set also included administrative data, organization documents, and statistical data on children's schools. Triangulating the data using multiple sources of evidence increases the validity and potential transferability of the findings (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

The research team interviewed 43 resident family members and over 400 auxiliary persons. The team contacted key informants several times a month and observed and interviewed salient auxiliary contacts twice or more over the study period, resulting in over 1,000 hours of in-person contact. The data set consists of more than 3,000 pages in the form of transcribed audiotapes, field notes, and documents, yielding "massive detailed descriptions" (Becker, 1998) of Jobs Initiative families and their work and family worlds.

**CES-D.** At initial, 6-month, and 15-month family interviews, I administered the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) to the key informant (Radloff & Locke, 1986). The CES-D is an assessment tool for evaluating individuals' current levels of depressive symptomatology in relation to current levels within the general population. This short, noninvasive tool of 20 questions allowed us to examine the general emotional condition of this group of new workers in relation to employment transitions. The CES-D is used more frequently in recent work and family study, given research findings that depressive symptomatology and clinical depression interfere with coping, job performance, and family welfare, especially in economically disadvantaged families (Lennon, Blome, & English, 2001; Jayakody, Danziger, & Pollack, 1998). I hoped to administer the CES-D to key informants' partners, but was unable to obtain a full set of responses during the initial 6-month study period and discontinued this effort at follow-up. Group CES-D scores at study onset and 15-month follow-up are reported here [See Appendix B]. Findings about depressive symptomatology and the Jobs Initiative are reflected generally in the family narratives and will be reported further in a future publication (Iversen & Armstrong, in progress).

**Child well-being.** As we considered how to evaluate children's welfare, we recognized that prosocial indicators were limited in large surveys of children, especially those conducted among adolescents (Hauser, Brown & Prosser, 1997). We reviewed formal measures of child well-being, but found them too clinical for the purposes of this study, as have other researchers (Furstenberg, et al., 1999; West, Hauser, & Scanlan, 1998). Accordingly, we culled common indicators of child well-being from child development and poverty literature (Child Trends, 1999; Furstenberg, et al., 1999; Hauser, Brown, & Prosser, 1997; Magura & Moses, 1986; Parcel & Menaghan, 1994; Scheuren & Wang, 1999) for ethnographic attention. These indicators included children's health, behavior at home and at school, school grades, peer interactions, safety measures, community involvement, and housing conditions.

**Data Analysis.** The "case," or unit of analysis was the key informant, the technical term for the individual selected as the MJI or SJI ethnographic study participant. We organized all interview and observational data around the cases. We conducted analyses throughout the study period, which resulted in our ability to follow-up emergent themes and questions (Becker, 1998; Moffitt, 2000). We coded the ethnographic data using the computerized qualitative program N-Vivo, which yielded broad categories for analysis and further exploration. The core analytic strategy was the use of multiple data sources to develop case descriptions that documented the range and complexity of effects and pathways between living-wage employment and family and community welfare. We called these the "Family Stories." Three researchers analyzed data for each case study: the principal investigator, a graduate research assistant, and the on-site researcher, reducing potential bias. We increased validity through family review of the case study narratives

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(Yin, 1994). This step is a recent contribution to qualitative rigor (Duneier, 1999) that also forwards the conceptual premise that families are the primary experts on their lives. Changes resulted through a discussion-and-resolution process. Where disagreement remained, it was identified as such in the narrative.

Use of multiple sources and levels of data as well as multiple researchers and analysts, also called triangulation, increased the reliability of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Use of ethnographic interviews and observations as reciprocal influences progressively and developmentally particularized and deepened study findings. Administrative data from Jobs Initiative sites provided environmental background for the family context leading up to and during the period of study. Supplemental use of these data in the analysis ensured methodological triangulation. Quantitative cross-site data from the national evaluation team, Abt Associates, Inc. and New School University (2000), and a synthesis of evaluation and early ethnographic findings (Fleischer, 2001) rounded out the data sources.

**Utility of the Findings.** Ethnographic research findings are not intended to be generalized in the way of empirical research that uses random samples and control groups. Nevertheless, on any substantive measure, the participants in the ethnographic study sample were similar to other participants in their home Jobs Initiative [See Appendix C]. Thus we can say with considerable confidence that the findings in this monograph pertain to many of the 2300 low-wage workers participating in the Jobs Initiative in Milwaukee and Seattle, extending the utility of the study findings. Because of the rigorous design, study findings may be transferable to other low-income workers as well. Discovering how complex even selected workers' lives were make the study implications even more critical for those in the Jobs Initiative and related workforce development programs who may have more challenged backgrounds and current lives or less sustained pre- and post-employment support. Together with knowledge gained from earlier research, findings from the Jobs Initiative ethnography can advance knowledge about parents' work and children's well-being in ways that can be used to inform the design and content of workforce programs and public policies.

Although the monograph overview periodically compares the ethnographic findings to those from recent welfare-to-work research, the Jobs Initiative population was both similar and different. Many individuals exited welfare through the Jobs Initiative. The most entrenched welfare recipients, however, might not be eligible for all Jobs Initiative projects. More important, welfare research provides information mainly about women. This research provides information about *both* men and women. Still, given limited research addressing the intersection of low-wage work, workforce programs and children, welfare studies offered a body of current, relevant research with which to compare the ethnographic findings.

Workforce program implications were reported to the Milwaukee and Seattle Jobs Initiative sites in separate publications (Iversen, 2001b; 2001c).



Appendix B: Sample Description

Characteristics of the Ethnographic Sample at Study Onset (2/00)\*\*

Characteristics	Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJI)	Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI)	Total (MJI+SJI)
Gender	2 female 3 male	3 female 2 male	5 female 5 male
Race/Ethnic Identification	3 African American 1 Latina American 1 African-country origin	1 African American 1 Latina American 1 African-country origin 1 Asian-country origin 1 Latin-country origin	4 African American 2 Latina American 2 African-country origin 1 Asian-country origin 1 Latin-country origin
Age (Range 24-43) Mean: 35 1/2	3 in JI target group 2 older than JI target	2 in JI target group 3 older than JI target	5 in JI target group 5 older than JI target
Marital status at study onset (as categorized at JI intake)	2 Never-married single parents (both had resident partners) 2 Married 1 Unmarried, living w/ partner	1 Never-married single parent (no partner)  3 Married 1 Unmarried, living w/ partner	3 Never-married single parents (2 with, 1 without partner) 5 Married 2 Unmarried, living w/ partners
Partner employment status	3 Employed full time 1 Temp. unemployed 1 Out of labor market	1 Employed full time 1 Temp. unemployed 1 Out of labor market 1 Non-labor market employment-FT	4 Employed full time 2 Temp. unemployed 2 Out of labor market 1 Non-labor market employment-FT
# Months associated with JI (Range 2-20; Mean=13)	1 (1-6 months) 1 (6-12 months) 3 > 12 months	1 (1-6 months) 2 (6-12 months) 2 > 12 months	2 (1-6 months) 3(6-12 months) 5 > 12 months
Jl training and employment sector	3 Manufacturing 1 Printing 1 Construction	2 Manufacturing  2 Office 1 Auto	5 Manufacturing 1 Printing 1 Construction 2 Office 1 Auto
# Persons in household (including self)	Range 2-6 Mean = 4.6	Range 2-6 Mean = 4.0	Range 2-6 Mean = 4.3
# Resident children	Res. Total = 13 Range = 2-3 Mean = 2.6	Res. Total = 11 Range = 1-4 Mean = 2.2	Res. Total = 24 Range = 1-4 Mean = 2.4
# Non-resident children	Non-res. Total = 10	Non-res. Total = 4	Non-res. Total = 14
TOTAL # CHILDREN	TOTAL = 23	TOTAL = 15	TOTAL = 38
Ages of resident children	1 Infant < 1 year 4 Pre-school < 5 3 Elementary School 2 Middle School 3 High School	1 Infant < 1 year 4 Pre-school < 5 4 Elementary School 2 Middle School	2 Infants < 1 year 8 Pre-school < 5 7 Elementary School 4 Middle School 3 High School

Appendix B: Sample Description (continued)

Characteristics	Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJI)	Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI)	Total (MJI+SJI)
Highest degree (years of school Key Informant completed)	1 GED/HSEquiv (10) 3 H.S. Diplomas (12)  1 B.A. (16) (foreign)	1 GED/HSEquiv (>12) 3 H.S. Diplomas (12) (2 foreign; not recognized in US)	2 GED/HS Equiv 6 H.S. Diplomas  1 College 1 No degree
Primary language (Key Informant)	4 English 1 African Country	2 English 1 African Country 1 Spanish 1 Asian Country	6 English 2 African Country 1 Spanish 1 Asian Country
CES-D Score (KI-Study Onset) Mean Gen. Pop = 9-10	Mean = 9	Mean = 17	JI Mean: 13
**CES-D Score (KI-15-month follow-up)	Mean = 7	Mean = 5	JI Mean = 6
Criminal history/incarc.	3	0	3
Public assistance pre-JI (TANF; Food Stamps; Medicaid)	1	4	5
Public assistance at study onset (KI + family)	1 Medicaid 2 Food Stamps 2 W-2 Childcare subsidy	4 Medicaid 0 Food Stamps 2 Childcare subsidy	5 Medicaid 2 Food Stamps 3 Childcare subsidy
**Public assistance at 15-month follow-up (KI + family)	3 BadgerCare-children 2 W-2 childcare subsidy 5 EITC 4 School lunch subsidy 2 WIC	3 Medicaid (children) 1 Childcare subsidy 4 EITC 1 School lunch subsidy 1 WIC 3 Housing subsidy	6 Medicaid 3 Childcare subsidy 9 EITC 5 school lunch subsidy 3 WIC 3 Housing subsidy
Pre-JI “Disadvantage”—Ongoing (KI):	2 Adult health 3 Debt 1 Stressed partner relationship 3 License problems/no car 1 Language	2 Adult health 2 Debt 1 Stressed partner relationship  3 Language	4-Adult health 5-Debt 2-Stressed partner relationship 3-License problems/no car 4-Language
Over (KI):	1 Former drug use	1 Former drug use	2-Former drug use
JI-period new “Disadvantage” (KI)	2 Workplace injuries & conditions 2 New debt 3 Partner unemployed 2 Transportation/accidents/un-insured 1 Court demands	2 Workplace injuries & conditions 1 New debt 3 Partner unemployed 1 Transportation/accidents/un-insured 1 Court demands	4-Workplace injuries & conditions 3 New debt 6-Partner unemployed 3-Transportation/accidents/un-insured 2-Court demands
Children’s chronic health & other problems	2-Asthma 2-Grade retention 1-Breathing problems 1?Learning Disability	2-Developmental delays 2-Allergies 1-Head banging	

\*\*Selected characteristics refer to 15-month follow-up (5/01).

**Discussion of Appendix B:**

Appendix B shows the demographic characteristics of the MJI and SJI study participants at ethnographic study onset (2/00) and selected characteristics at the 15-month follow-up period (\*\*5/01) using administrative data from MJI/SJI Intake and interview data. “KI” in the “Characteristics” column stands for “Key Informant.”

**Appendix C. Jobs Initiative Site Comparisons**

**MJI Ethnographic Study Participants Compared to All Placed MJI Participants in 3 Projects (Construction; Manufacturing; Printing); SJI Ethnographic Study Participants Compared to All Placed SJI Participants; MJI Ethnographic Study Participants Compared to SJI Ethnographic Study Participants. All data pertains to information available at ethnographic study onset (2/00).**

Characteristics	MJI: All Placed Participants in 3 Projects (Construction; Manufacturing; Printing) (n = 721)	MJI: Ethnographic Study Sample (n = 5)	SJI: All Placed Participants (n = 1575)	SJI: Ethnographic Study Sample (n = 5)
	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
<b>Age:</b>				
<b>In target group</b>	60	60	53	40
<b>Other</b>	40	40	47	60
<b>Gender:</b>				
<b>Male</b>	68	60	51	40
<b>Female</b>	32	40	49	60
<b>Difficulty with English</b>				
<b>Yes:</b>	5	20	21	40
<b>No:</b>	95	80	78	60
<b>Public Assistance at Jobs Initiative enrollment</b>				
<b>TANF + Other</b>	52	80	38	80
<b>No</b>	48	20	62	20
<b>Ethnicity</b>				
<b>White, non-Hispanic</b>	5		21	
<b>Black</b>	82	80	41	40
<b>Hispanic</b>	11	20	9	40
<b>American Indian or Alaskan Native</b>	1		4	
<b>Asian, Pacific Islander, or Filipino</b>	1		21	20
<b>Other</b>	0.4		4	
<b>Family Income at Jobs Initiative enrollment</b>				
<b>&lt; \$3000</b>	16	20	30	
<b>\$3000-\$5,999</b>	16	40	19	40
<b>\$6000-\$8,999</b>	14	20	17	20
<b>\$9000-\$11,999</b>	13		12	
<b>\$12,000-\$14,999</b>	12		8	
<b>\$15,000-\$19,999</b>	9		8	20
<b>\$20,000-\$24,999</b>	7		3	20
<b>&gt;\$25,000</b>	12	20	2	

Appendix C. Jobs Initiative Site Comparisons (continued)

Characteristics	MJI: All Placed Participants in 3 Projects (Construction; Manufacturing; Printing) (n = 721)	MJI: Ethnographic Study Sample (n = 5)	SJI: All Placed Participants (n = 1575)	SJI: Ethnographic Study Sample (n = 5)
	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
<b>School/Highest grade completed</b>				
<8	2		3	
8	4		1	
9	5		3	
10	11	20	4	20
11	19		11	20
12	38	60	43	60
13	12		10	
14	8		10	
15	1		3	
16	1	20	9	
17 or over	0		3	
<b>School certification</b>				
No certification			10	20
High School diploma	50	60	48	60
GED	20	20	11	20
Technical certificate	8	(20)	7	
Vocational/Occup. Skills	12	(20)	7	(40)
Associates Degree	2		5	
B.A.	0.9	20	7(+1)	
<b>* Average start wage/hr. MJI</b>				
Construction	\$13.48	\$16.40		
Manufacturing	\$9.74	\$9.84; 7.86; 11		
Printing	\$8.78	\$9.76		
Overall Average	\$10.67	\$10.97		
<b>Average start wage/hr. SJI</b>				
Automotive			\$9.07	\$8.75
Diversified Manuf.			\$8.00	\$11.50;***
Office Occupations			\$10.14	\$11; 11.54
Overall Average			\$9.07	\$10.70
<b>** Aver. wage/hr. 2-00 MJI</b>				
Construction	\$13.29	\$16.40		
Manufacturing	\$10.16	\$10.01; 9.71; 13		
Printing	\$ 8.86	\$10.61		
Overall Average	\$10.77	\$11.95		
<b>Aver. wage/hr. 2-00 SJI</b>				
Automotive			\$9.07	\$8.75
Diversified/General Manuf.			\$9.65;\$8.85	\$12.43;10.70 (not SJI-job)
General				
Office Occupations			\$9.49	\$11.53; 11
Overall Average			\$9.27	\$10.88

Source: Milwaukee Jobs Initiative Interim Progress Report: Indicators of Progress Report #5b (Cumulative) by Project (2-16-00) and MJI Quick Progress Summary (cumulative wage statistics) by Project (1-10-00; Seattle Jobs Initiative Indicators of Progress Report #5b (Cumulative “Characteristics of Placed Participants” 2-00) and Cumulative “Placement, Wages, and Benefits Report” 2-00) representing data from 9/96 through 12/99.

\* The “Average start wage/hr” category represents initial wage at the time of placement, which occurred anywhere from a few months to almost 2 years before ethnographic study onset [See Appendix D].

\*\*The “Average wage/hr 2-00” category represents wage levels at the onset of this research in February 2000.

\*\*\*The second SJI study participant in the manufacturing sector remained at a non-SJI job that he began in 1991, thus his starting wage has been omitted here.

### Discussion of Appendix C:

The fact that the ethnographic study participants were selected, in part, according to the fact that they were known to MJI and SJI staff suggests that these individuals might be “model” examples. We used contingency table analysis (Chi-square) to assess this possibility and compared:

- 1) MJI ethnographic study participants in the 3 relevant industry sectors compared to all MJI participants placed in those sectors;
- 2) SJI ethnographic study participants compared to all placed SJI participants;
- 3) MJI ethnographic study sample compared to SJI ethnographic study sample.

We do not report here on the comparison between MJI and SJI participants as a whole [see Abt Associates and New School, 2000; Fleischer, 2001], as our interest is in how each study sample compares to its city’s Initiative and how the two cities’ study participants compare with each other. There were a few statistically significant differences at the .05 level or less between characteristics of MJI and SJI participants as a whole, but they were not substantive differences [details available from author].

Each city’s ethnographic study sample was remarkably similar to the full set of participants in its home Initiative. Moreover, with one exception there were no significant differences between MJI and SJI ethnographic study participants on the set of characteristics. Because one MJI study participant completed college, schooling of MJI compared to SJI ethnographic study participants was different. But similar to education level in the Initiatives as a whole, MJI and SJI study participants generally had 12 years of education.

Appendix D: Job and Wage Progression Charts

Chart D-1. MJI Employment Pathways: Pre- and Post-MJI (February 2000 through May 2001)

Participant	“Challenges” (Pre-MJI and in some cases ongoing)	Pre-MJI Employment & Wage (Pot. Ann. Inc)	MJI training: Project/Date	MJI Job #1 & Wage (Est. Ann. Inc)
<b>Tasha Jones</b>	Low-wage jobs Health & children’s health @\$5000 debt	\$ 7.60/hr 32-hour wk  (\$12,600)	Manufact. Project 7/99-8/99	8/99-3/00 Manuf. Co. \$9.84→\$10.01/hr (\$20,000)→ (\$16,650) Term.
<b>Kevin McDonalds</b>	Felony incarceration Low-wage jobs/ Frozen out of good jobs/ 3 kids \$9000 IRS debt (4/01) Children school problems	\$6.50/hr (\$13,500)	Printing Project 2/99-4/99	4/99-9/99 Bindery \$9.76/hr (\$20,300)
<b>Randy Jackson</b>	Immigrant Under-employed Sole wage-earner	\$13.50/50-hr week (\$28,000)	Construction Project 1/2000	1/00-2/01 Construction Co. \$16.40 hr→\$19/hr. (\$32,800→ \$39,520)
<b>Tisha Shanks</b>	Felony incarceration Low-wage jobs Single parent/3 ch. \$5700 debt→\$900 plus \$3100 new utilities debt	\$6.25/hr (\$13,000)	Manufact. Project 9/98	9/98-8/00 Product Manuf. Co. \$7.86/hr→\$9.71/hr (\$16,350→ \$19,420)
<b>Hard Working Blessed</b>	Felony incarceration Substance abuse Low-wage jobs/ under-employed \$20,000 debt	\$6.50/hr (\$13,500)	Manufact. Project 5/98	6/98-4/00 Steel Mill & Foundry \$11/hr→\$13/hr (\$23,900→\$27,000)

MJI or non-MJI Job #2 & Wage (Est. Ann. Inc)	Job #3 & Wage (Est. Ann. Inc)	100% FPL* 200% FPL* Self-Suffic. Standard**	Participant
2 mo. TANF 1 day School Dietician @ min. wage	(MJI→) 5/00 – 12/00 Distrib. Co. \$9.66→\$10. 36/ hr + 8 without OT  (pot.\$28,200) [\$21,548 without OT]	\$14,150 \$28,300  \$20.12/hr \$24,220/yr per adult	Tasha Jones
(MJI→) 9/99— Printing & Bindery \$9.76/hr→prom. →\$10.61/hr+OT (\$28,700) 10/00 → \$12.09/hr +OT (\$32,150) [\$25,150 without OT]		\$17,050 \$34,100  \$15.51/hr \$31,020/yr per adult	Kevin McDonalds
2/01 FFF Construction		\$17,050 \$34,100  \$21.10/hr (\$43,900)	Randy Jackson
8/00-5/01 Steel Co.		\$19,950 \$39,900  \$10.93/hr + OT → (\$28,500)  \$12.50/hr+OT (5/01) (\$30,600) [\$27,734 without OT]	Tisha Shanks
5/00-8/00 Printing Co.	8/00— Metal Co.	\$19,950 \$39,900  \$10.20/hr→\$11/hr+OT (@\$23,000) [\$22,000 without OT]	Hard Working Blessed
	\$11/hr→\$13/hr+3OT (@\$30,000)	\$15.81/hr \$32,900/yr per adult	

\* FPL = Federal Poverty Level. Calculated according to guidelines set 2/2000. Federal poverty guidelines are set according to Number of family members—e.g. Family of 3; Family of 4. Income figures for FPL are for MJI participant only.

\*\*Self-Sufficiency Standard for Wisconsin (Pearce, 2000). Calculated according to 1999 figures in Milwaukee, WI. Self-Sufficiency Standard guidelines are calculated according to number of adults, infants, and school-age children in family, local costs, subsidy potential, and two family wage-earners.

## Moving Up is a Steep Climb

Chart D-2. SJI Employment Pathways: Pre- and Post-SJI (February 2000 through May 2001)

Participant	“Challenges” (Pre-SJI and in some cases ongoing)	Pre-JI Employment & Wage (Pot. Ann. Inc)	SJI training: Project/Date
Maya Vanderhand	Lack of h.s. diploma or GED Immigrant	\$8.00/hr (20/hr week)  (\$8000)	Office Occupations 9/98-12/98
Teresa Russell	Single parent/ sole wage earner Long history of short-term, low- wage jobs.  2000: Close to 1 missed workday/ week (minus-\$3000 income)	TANF + occasional catering (\$4500 + \$1500)  \$7/hour (most recent job)	Automotive 9/99-12/99
Mike Jeremy	Immigrant/Political refugee Under-employed Sole wage-earner Serious health problems (some job-induced)	\$8.25/hr   (\$17,900)	Diversified Manufacturing/CNC 10/98-1/99
Isabell Smith	Childhood abuse Former heroin addiction Health problems Developmentally delayed children \$7000 debt	TANF  (\$3000-\$6000)	Office Occupations 6/99-9/99  5/01 Web Design (permanently laid off Dot-Com 5/01)
Lucky Miracle	Immigrant/Political refugee—multiple relocations Limited English Severe “under- employment”	6/91→  \$5.50→ \$10.70 (pre-SJI)	Diversified Manufacturing/ General 9/99-12/99



SJI Job #1 & Wage (Est. Ann. Inc)	SJI or non-SJI Job #2 & Wage (Est. Ann. Inc)	100% FPL* 200% FPL*  Self-Suffic. Standard**	Participant
1/99→ Insurance Co.		\$22,850 \$45,700	Maya Vanderhand
Est. \$11.53/hr (\$24,000)→ Est. \$12.40/hr (\$25,800)		\$12.22/hr. per adult \$51,630/yr	
1/00→ Rental Car Co. \$8.75/hr (30-hr week 9 mo; 40-hr 3 mo) (\$14,700)		\$11,250 \$22,500	Teresa Russell
→\$9/hr 10/00 (pot. \$15,100) +\$1500/yr catering			
→ \$9.50/hr 5/01 (pot. \$19,760) + \$1500/yr cater		\$12/hr. per adult \$23,352/yr	
1/99-4/00 Equipment Manufacturer \$11.82/hr (temp) 3/99 (perm) \$11.50/hr → \$12.43/hr  (\$25,850)	4/00→ (Non-SJI) Parking Company \$8.50/hr; no benefits; 30 hour/wk (\$13,300)  (10/00 40hr/wk; sometimes \$9.50/hr) (\$18,700)	\$17,050 \$34,100	Mike Jeremy
	5/01 \$9.75/hr (pot. \$20,300)	\$10.57/hr. per adult \$44,638/yr	
10/99→ Dot-Com Company Trainee (\$10/hr) Permanent (\$11/hr) (\$22,800 + OT → \$25,800)		\$17,050 \$34,100	Isabell Smith
→ \$12/hr 7/00 (\$24,960—no OT)			
→ \$13/hr 5-01 (\$27,040)		\$10.57/hr. per adult \$44,638/yr	
6/91→ continued at Food Company (Non-SJI job) \$10.70/hr + OT  (\$24,000)	9/00→ Second job (Non-SJI) School Custodian \$14.62/hr  (\$30,400)	\$17,050 \$34,100	Lucky Miracle
5/01 30-hr/wk (\$16,700)	5/01 40-hr/wk (\$30,400)	\$11.43/hr. per adult \$43,276/yr	

\* FPL = Federal Poverty Level. Calculated according to federal poverty guidelines set 2/2000. FPL guidelines are set according to Number of family members—e.g. Family of 3; Family of 4. Income figures for FPL are for SJI participant only.

\*\*Self-Sufficiency Standard for Washington (Pearce, 2001). Calculated according to 2000 figures in Seattle, WA. Self-Sufficiency Standard guidelines are calculated according to number of adults, infants, and school-age children in family, variation in local costs, subsidy potential, and two family wage-earners (except for the single-parent family).

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### **Discussion of Appendix D: (See also monograph overview text)**

Because the families had entered the Jobs Initiative at different times before the research period, we calculated their average wage increases according to the different amounts of time they had been employed. The ‘rule of thumb’ is that each \$1 increase in hourly wage results in an increase of \$2000 in annual income.

Three family heads’ wages grew by \$1 or slightly over \$1/hour per year, which meant that their average incomes grew \$2000 yearly for at least two years of employment.

Two family heads’ wages grew significantly more than \$1/hour per year: one grew \$3.13 and the other \$2.61, accounting for average annual increases of over \$6000 and \$5000 respectively. Because both increases were a result of recent job changes, they were *potential* not actual annual increases. Moreover, the positive effects of one increase were reduced by the fact that it was the sole family income and the positive effects of the other were muted by it being a second job.

In contrast, four family heads’ wages increased less than \$1/hour per year, resulting in annual increases of \$666 (2), \$1000 (1), and \$1332 (1) for one to 3 years of employment.

The final family head’s wages decreased \$1332 over 2½ years of employment due to a job change that resulted in a severe downgrade.

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# Moving Up is a Steep Climb

The “Hard Working Blessed” Family Story

*Parents’ Work and Children’s Welfare  
in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jobs Initiative*



*Roberta Rehner Iversen  
with Diane Michalski Turner and Mona Basta*

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## “Hard Working Blessed” Family Story

**Resident Family:**

**Hard Working Blessed:** a 40-year old African American man—ethnographic study key informant

**Mrs. Hard Working Blessed:** HW’s 37-year old African American wife

**Tank Blessed:** a 15-year old male in 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> grade, Mr. Blessed’s son from a previous marriage

**The Rock Blessed:** a 14-year old male in 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grade, Mrs. Blessed’s son from a previous long-term relationship

**Baby Miracle Blessed:** one-year old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Blessed

Mr. Blessed has four non-resident children: Jasmine, age 13 in 8<sup>th</sup> grade who lives in Chicago; a daughter age 18 and a stepson age 19 who live in Chicago; and a son age 22 who cannot be located.

Mrs. Blessed has one non-resident child: Blessed Daughter, age 16 in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, who lives with Mrs. Blessed’s mother in Chicago.

Study timeline: March through September 2000. Follow-up May 2001.

*“MJI helped me climb a mountain, not just a hill.”*

Through participation in the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJI), Mr. Hard Working Blessed and his family made significant progress in establishing their careers and in advancing their children’s well-being. Mr. Blessed’s MJI job at Steel Mill & Foundry enabled both parents to regain custody of their teenage sons and bring them to Milwaukee for better schooling, a safer environment, and a more stable family life. As a result, the sons, Tank and The Rock, improved to greater and lesser degrees in their performance and behavior at home and in school. In addition, the Blessed’s non-resident children received increased attention and financial support, and their infant, Baby Miracle, was proceeding extremely well developmentally. Mr. and Mrs. Blessed’s accomplishments were particularly notable considering their histories of drug abuse, interrupted parenting, and Mr. Blessed’s felony conviction and incarceration.



## Background and Pre-MJI History

Mr. Blessed’s early life was not atypical among inner-city youth, particularly those caught between racial and/or class values:

*“I had a nice life. I grew up in a middle-class family [in a working-class neighborhood]. My father worked for the city and my mother was an accountant. I didn’t have too many worries. I was given what I wanted and needed. Then I started to experiment with drugs. I don’t know how to explain it. People started to say ‘you think you’re better than us.’ I didn’t talk like the neighbors. I didn’t like to do what they did. I played tennis and baseball, not basketball. I played the trumpet, flute, clarinet, electric guitar, and saxophone. I felt alienated. I wanted to hang with a crowd, so I began drinking and experimenting with cocaine. All the things that they say happens as a course of this did happen. I had lots of prayers from my grandmother and my family—these plus my intestinal fortitude—I stopped in 1995. I talk now to other guys in the Halfway House and tell them my story.”*

Mr. Blessed completed high school, attended college in Chicago for two years, married, and fathered four children during his late adolescence and young adulthood. He held a series of construction, manufacturing and truck-driving jobs during these years, but none offered career development or advancement. Hard Working’s graduation into drug selling led to the end of his first marriage, alienation from his children, replacement of labor-market income by illegal income, and eventual imprisonment in the state penitentiary on felony charges of controlled substances and drugs.

When he was released from prison in 1998 he was strongly motivated to turn his life around. He moved into a Halfway House in Milwaukee and participated in rehabilitative counseling:

*“I took anger management and cognitive thinking—on the street and in jail. I stopped hanging with the same people. I stopped being in the old neighborhoods. I don’t jaywalk. I always use my seatbelt and carry my driver’s license. I stopped all the negative behavior.”*

In return, Mr. Blessed returned regularly to the Halfway House as a motivational “counselor.” To this extent, Hard Working’s Halfway House functioned as MJI anticipated—as a support system already in place and a site for community service as well. Turnover among fellow housemates and counselors, however, reduced his continued involvement and the organization’s potential for support.

Although Mr. Blessed did all the “right” things to compensate for his mistakes of the past, his felony conviction blocked progress in the labor market. For example, in 1998 a friend told him about a manufacturing position at Steel Company. At the time he was stacking boxes at a Food Store for \$6.50/hour for an annual income of \$13,500. At the Steel Company Open House he applied for the position but was frozen out because of his scattered work history and criminal background.

### **MJI Training: Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP)**

Fortuitously, at the Steel Company Open House Hard Working met the Retention Specialist from the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP) who told him about the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative. When Mr. Blessed was unable to get the Steel Company job on his own, he recontacted the Retention Specialist and enrolled in a 2-week WRTP-sponsored training course held at the Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC). The WRTP training model included essential skills education and 8-16 hours of soft skills for a manufacturing setting. Hard Working paid for his transportation expenses with money he saved from prison. Given his extensive post-prison debts, a training stipend would have been helpful. In addition to regular family expenses, both Mr. and Mrs. Blessed were paying off court fines for car accidents that occurred while they were uninsured. In all, Mr. Blessed was \$20,000 in debt due to previous loans, schooling, child support and other arrears, and unpaid bills. He repeatedly considered filing for bankruptcy and wished that MJI had given help in this area:

*“Financially, it’s hard to get back on my feet. I have a lot of creditors calling. Most people in my situation are in financial trouble or need to know how to file bankruptcy. I should have done it two years ago, but I didn’t know about it. That would be a good thing for MJI to teach about—how to file for bankruptcy.”*

Most important, Mr. Blessed was guaranteed a job when he finished the WRTP training class. In this way, MJI provides crucial entrées to those unable to attain positions without such legitimization.

### **MJI Employment: Steel Mill & Foundry**

In June 1998 one of WRTP’s partner firms, Steel Mill & Foundry hired Mr. Blessed as a crane operator. He soon also drove a forklift truck, mixed sand, and worked as a grinder. Most new workers started at an hourly rate of \$4.65, however because of earlier experience, MATC certification, and MJI sponsorship, Hard Working started at \$5.48 per hour with a \$250 bonus, resulting in a \$11/hour wage [base wages are doubled for actual wage figure]. At this wage, Hard Working’s annual income was \$23,000. He enrolled for medical benefits that covered his and the family’s medical needs except for his wife’s essential daily seizure medication.

When we first contacted Mr. Blessed in March 2000, he had worked at Steel Mill & Foundry for 20 months and his wage had advanced to \$13/hour. With overtime he brought home \$600 a week but had no career advancement opportunities. Although Mr. Blessed taught himself to use Windows and Word Perfect, he had no way of using these skills at Steel Mill & Foundry, as his department head also noted: “There’s another personnel problem that comes from the freedom here, from the opportunity to move up: Currently middle-production management gets promoted from within.” Worse yet, multiple work-related injuries related to the physical demands of his job resulted in demoted job responsibility and wage reduction. The MJI training class prepared Mr. Blessed mentally for the foundry work, which helped him stay on the job:

*“Its key is that it lets you know what you’re getting into. If I wasn’t mentally prepared for Steel Mill & Foundry, I would have quit right away. It helps you to know how to conduct yourself. How you can handle it. I can tell you I was mentally prepared for the foundry. If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t have come back the second day.”*

Ultimately, even good mental preparation was overwhelmed by physical aspects of the job. Mr. Blessed suffered two herniated discs while lifting heavy metal jackets to put over metal molds and the severe temperature changes in the foundry caused repeated bouts of flu and two of pneumonia. These injuries and illnesses plus a materials-connected allergic rash resulted in his being put on “light duty.” Although he received worker’s compensation, his total earnings were reduced to \$400/week and his job duties and jobsite radically changed.

Signs posted at the workplace underscored that on-the-job injuries were frequent:

*Workplace bulletin board listing (Suburb):*

*Notice 3: “Department First Aid Cases, Core = 22; Foundry-Indirect = 14, Office = 9.*

*Milwaukee: 2 = cumulative trauma and right wrist strain*

*Suburb: 5 = irritation OD, right groin strain, acute right shoulder strain, foreign body right eye, foreign body left eye infection.*

Workplace personnel confirmed that workplace injuries were common:

*Researcher [to 2<sup>nd</sup> shift foreman]: “How often are people hurt at work?”*

*2<sup>nd</sup> shift foreman: “Oh, lots of accidents. And different kinds at different places. At Suburb it’s eye injuries. Here in Milwaukee it’s back injuries from lifting. You had that didn’t you, Hard Working?”*

*Mr. Blessed: “Oh, yeah. My back.”*

*Researcher [to 2<sup>nd</sup> shift foreman]: “How often have you been injured?”*

*2<sup>nd</sup> shift foreman: “Mostly my eyes. I’ve been 5, 6 or maybe 7 times to the eye doctor for injuries.”*

Compounding their physical effects, Mr. Blessed’s injuries rendered his future at Steel Mill & Foundry bleak. The 2<sup>nd</sup> shift foreman told us that Mr. Blessed had little hope of recovering his original position and wage after the demotion and wage reduction:

*“The company has to worry about your condition. I can’t make that decision. Once you’ve got something they have to worry. The Vice President of Operations and the HR manager will determine if you can return. I have to protect my employees and the company is liable if anything happens to you. And once you’re transferred, even if you have a doctor’s certificate saying that you can return, the position may be filled.”*

Such conditions, combined with training older individuals for positions traditionally held by younger workers—the “life-stage mismatch” identified in this research—suggest that workforce programs conduct physical assessments and engage trainees in fitness preparation to maximize both the new worker’s safety and retention, as the on-site researcher noted:

*“Being a grinder is exceptionally dangerous work. If you miss, the casting skids off the wheel and would cut you immediately down to the bone. When I was at the foundry, one of the workers just touched the selvage to the wheel and sparks flew. Being at work in a less-than-100% condition [e.g. Mr. Blessed’s fatigue] is extremely hazardous.”*

In addition, workforce programs should monitor their partner employers and advocate for maximum occupational health and safety conditions.

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Notably, at follow-up in May 2001, MJI staff reported that Steel Mill & Foundry had gone bankrupt, largely because it fared poorly in environmental studies—not a surprising outcome considering Mr. Blessed’s experiences.

**Mrs. Blessed’s Job.** Before their marriage in 1999, Mrs. Blessed received Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) training through W-2, Wisconsin’s TANF program, and began work at a nursing home in January 2000 at \$7.35/hour plus \$1.45 “pride bonus” for being on time. After 8 months she earned \$9.50/hour plus about 4 hours/week of overtime which yielded about \$400/week gross pay or \$20,000/year. Despite significant workplace trials, she found enormous satisfaction in the content of her job. She also had the opportunity for a major promotion but refused it because it would take her out of the union. Her advancement hopes were notable for a future that was not completely clear:

*“I’d have been a team leader on the floor, but that’s not a union contract. I’ve been there now 8 months. I’d like to finish up 1 year and then get a job in a hospital or clinic with my CNA. I’d like to finish school towards my LPN. I’ve finished the college prerequisites at MATC. My job gives loans.”*

Mrs. Hard Working Blessed experienced severe racial problems at her worksite, but nonetheless was promoted and also became the union shop steward. She played an active role in advocating for other CNAs at the nursing home and trying to improve the conditions of the workers and patients. Despite these successes, Mrs. Blessed poignantly expressed the painful tugs and pulls of being a working mother of an infant:

*“I feel insecure about leaving her. I did that with the other kids—stayed at home in their early years. I was going to school.”*

Mr. Blessed wished that they could afford for his wife to stay home:

*“I’m going to let her quit. I don’t do backbreaking labor, I can do overtime. I did it before, I can do it again. The big man said the company will expand, ‘you’ll be in charge of your own department’ if I stick with them. I want a house. I don’t want to live paycheck to paycheck. I don’t want financial worries. I’d like to come home and see a smile on my wife’s face, see my children smile. I don’t want my wife to work. She’s had a hard life; I want to make it easier for her. She’s had children, bearing children is hard work; that’s enough.”*

### MJI-Job, Parenting, and Children’s Welfare

Hard Working’s ultimate goal was “to be back in my kids’ life. I had no idea how to be with them.” His son Tank described his former Chicago neighborhood as “bad” compared to his “very safe” neighborhood in Milwaukee:

*“We ain’t got that many gangs around here and it was a whole lot of gangs in Chicago. I can walk down the block without having to get in a fight with somebody.”*

Although he missed his grandmother and sister in Chicago, he was glad to be living with his father once again. Tank credited his new family make-up with scholastic improvement:

*“In Chicago, I knew I wasn’t going to get nowhere just getting all D’s and F’s. My grades are better here. [Why?] They [parents] are always on us about our grades, so that is good, and they want us to work extra hard.”*

He also felt his Milwaukee school was more attentive than his former school in Chicago:

*“It’s not so big. I can find my way around to the classes, and the teachers are kind of nice. They get on you too. They send letters home about what you are doing in class.”*

With their new marriage, custody of their two sons, and the birth of Baby Miracle, Mr. and Mrs. Blessed were functioning as a newly-blended family: a period of major adjustment for all family members. Accordingly, the parents opted to work different shifts in order to provide continuous at-home coverage for their children. Hard Working worked from 4 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. or longer if required, and Mrs. Blessed worked from 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Unable to drive because of an earlier uninsured accident, Mrs. Blessed needed to be driven to her job. Consequently, Mr. Blessed’s sleep schedule was irregular and insufficient. He slept an hour or so when he got home around 2:30 a.m. He then got up at 5 a.m. to take Mrs. Blessed to work and returned home at 6:00 a.m. to get the kids ready for day-care and school. Tank helped his father take the baby to day care and in return, Hard Working dropped Tank off at school. Hard Working returned home to make sure The Rock caught the school bus at 8:05 and then ate and went to sleep at 9:00 a.m. for four hours. He totaled five hours or less of sleep during this period of time. However, he could not take the night shift at work because “I had a newborn baby and Mrs. Blessed wanted to go back to work and I had only one car and somebody had to make a sacrifice and it was me.” He weighed 240-250 pounds before taking the Steel Mill & Foundry job but now weighed 210 pounds. Fatigue undoubtedly contributed to the magnitude of his workplace injuries.

### **First Post-MJI Job: Printing Company**

Mrs. Blessed’s job problems, marital strain, the teenagers’ school problems, and the baby’s repeated illnesses from daycare compounded the difficulty of, but did not derail, Mr. Blessed’s efforts to work and provide for his family. Cumulative jobsite problems, a spate of recent layoffs, and family needs spurred him to seek a new job after 23 months at Steel Mill & Foundry. Using a week of paid vacation to job search, he obtained the position of forklift operator at Printing Company in May 2000 without missing a paycheck. Essentially, Printing Company was a lateral move. Mr. Blessed’s beginning wage was \$10.20/hour with a 50-cent raise after the first week and subsequent raises after 30, 60, and 90 days. Mr. Blessed’s new schedule was three 12-hour days one week followed by 4 days off, and four 12-hour days the next week followed by 3 days off. After 90 days he received full medical and dental coverage and doctor’s visits cost \$10 each. Mr. Blessed’s son Tank was particularly enthusiastic about Printing Company’s gym and exercise area. Although the company also offered on-site daycare, the family never considered this. Mr. Blessed heard about the job on the radio. When he went for the interview, the interviewer said: “We have to have you.” Printing Company usually started new employees at \$8/hour, but gave him more because of his “experience and honesty.”

Printing Company’s improved benefit structure was a strong draw for Mr. Blessed in relation to the welfare of both his resident and non-resident children:

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*“I can get braces for Jasmine under Printing Company health coverage. When I found that all out, I said, ‘when can I start?’”*

Regrettably, Hard Working had not been informed about COBRA coverage, bridge health insurance legislated by the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985 when he left Steel Mill & Foundry, despite the legal mandate that employers do so. As a result, well-children doctor visits were postponed for 3 months until insurance coverage began at the new job.

Mr. and Mrs. Blessed thought that Hard Working’s 3-day/4-day schedule would increase the time both could spend with their teenage sons whose school performance and behavior were problematic. Tank brought home 3 Bs, 3 Cs, and 2 Ds for his final 9<sup>th</sup> grade term, a significant improvement over 5 “U’s” in his Chicago school but not yet satisfactory to his parents. The Rock passed 3 and failed 2 subjects in his final 7<sup>th</sup> grade term. Extremely worried about their sons’ school performance, both parents made repeated school visits and enacted home disciplinary methods. The Rock was scheduled to repeat Math, English and Science in summer school. The parents also felt that school performance reflected transition difficulties of their teenage sons. One of the most significant and notable things about Mr. Blessed was his desire to use his MJI-facilitated life to compensate for past parental failures:

*“I was away for 5 years. I didn’t see Tank from the time he was 7 or 8 until he was about 13. After I got myself together—I went back to Chicago to see Tank. I met him outside the house. I said ‘Are you Tank?’ He said yes, ‘who are you?’ I said ‘Your father.’ He said, ‘What’s your name?’ I told him—and asked if he wanted to see my ID. He started shaking and tears were rolling out his eyes. He hugged me and tears were coming out of my eyes too. We’ve been inseparable since that day. I thought my leaving would be better for the whole family. I shouldn’t have cut the contact. Not a day went by that I didn’t think about them, worry about them. It was goofy—I thought they’d be better off not knowing where I was, what was happening to me. But I know now that they’d have been much better off knowing I was alive and that I still loved them.”*

In addition to his work efforts, Mr. Blessed made other legal and behavioral decisions to ensure the welfare of the family’s children. He gained official custody of Tank and he selected a neighborhood he believed would be positive for the children’s development and safety:

*“It costs a lot to live here in the suburbs, but I’m glad to pay. The kids can go outside and they don’t have to worry about gunshots.”*

Mr. Blessed stressed the importance of his fatherly bond with Tank:

*“My son’s my best friend. There aren’t any men hanging out here. We guys [in the family] male bond and watch sports. I have my wife to talk to. I know this sounds a little chauvinistic, but it’s true.”*

Mrs. Blessed expressed similarly strong desire to compensate her son, The Rock, for an 8-year period of drug use and parental unavailability:

*“I’m seeing some rebelliousness. We’re trying to establish security and stability. The kids were really unstable during the time I was on drugs. Sometimes they lived with my mother; sometimes with my brother. Most of the time I was living with them too. The Rock, he has become rebellious—but now he’s getting better. He didn’t have Mom or Dad. His Dad was having drug problems too. I’ve asked the school psychologist to evaluate him. Early on, The Rock was accident-prone. They’ll evaluate him for ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder] and where he’s at psychologically and emotionally. My past life has a lot to do with it—where he is now. I talk to the kids about it very freely. I want them to hear about the experiences—so they can see where I’ve been and not want to go there.”*

Importantly, the Blessededs were equally dedicated to parenting each other’s biological son. They had many serious talks with each son about school performance, expectations, and hopes for the teens’ futures. Tank’s attitude and health reflected this attention:

*“I felt healthier since I was doing all this exercising and last summer when I moved here he [father] got me riding a bike and it was like he is giving me really good advice.”*

As the summer proceeded the parents began to see some changes in both sons’ behaviors:

*“The Rock is calming down now—he’s just about normal. He said the other day, ‘I’ve turned over a new leaf. I was in rehab the whole day.’ This was one day where he spent 3-4 hours talking to me [Mrs. Blessed] and 2 hours to Mr. Blessed. Mr. Blessed took him for a ride then and they talked man to man. We think there’s been a difference in The Rock since then.”*

The Rock picked up socially and academically and in his home life. He finished summer school with Bs and Cs. The parents attributed much of the youths’ improvement to everyone’s hard work on family structure and stability. Throughout the year children were assigned daily chores and an hour of childcare after school before a parent returned from work. After that they completed homework, generally with a parent available to help, and often played basketball or other games with neighborhood friends. While chores were understandably not the boys’ favorite tasks, Tank averred that “the house is cleaner [than his Chicago house] and that makes me clean, a better environment. . . we get along better because of it.” The Rock noted the benefits of having a brother: “He is somebody I can talk to.” The parents also believed that their faith in God and weekly family Bible study strengthened family coping.

Two non-resident children also benefited from the Blessed family’s greater stability and improved financial situation as Mr. Blessed’s 13-year old daughter Jasmine and Mrs. Blessed’s 16-year old, Blessed Daughter, joined the family for the summer months. Although there were more mouths to feed, the daughters took care of Baby Miracle which enabled the family to save on daycare costs and allowed Baby Miracle’s health to improve. In addition, the family purchased a second car and Mrs. Blessed reinstated her driver’s license which allowed her to drive to work.

At the same time, financial concerns continued to make it hard for the family to get firmly on its feet. While Mr. Blessed potentially earned around \$35,000 a year, the maximum he could earn based on at least one day a week of overtime, and Mrs. Blessed earned around \$20,000, also with a half to one day a week of overtime, Mr. Blessed believed that an individual income of \$50,000 [for himself], together with Mrs. Blessed’s earnings would constitute a family-supporting income. Their potential \$55,000/year income was also eroded by temporary wage setbacks due to job changes. In addition, the overtime necessary to approximate this income eroded time they could spend with the children.

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Ultimately Mr. Blessed stayed at Printing Company only 4 months. While he perceived a technical “promotion” during this period, from forklift operator to assistant to the superintendent of supplies for the press room, his wages did not progress beyond regular increments. Further, this “promotion” also resulted in racial tension that became intolerable for Hard Working:

*“At first I didn’t see it [race-related acts], but then... Other employees were rotten; they were jealous that I was in the position I was. They’d never had a person of color or a woman in that position. I had keys to every office; free rein in the building; a company car. At first there were covert slurs. A co-worker reported things that I wasn’t doing. I got nasty e-mails. The guy who had the job before me, he was white. He was never reported. It started to get to me real bad—from the supervisor and others. One supervisor said the worst things in the world—blamed me for everything. He said the pumps were leaking now and they weren’t before I got the job. I’d leave the bucket, clean it, and the next day they’d be leaking again.”*

Workplace demographics corroborated Mr. Blessed’s perceptions and experiences: Of 30 pressmen, 1 was African American and 1 was Hispanic. Another MJI key informant, also African American, who had worked at Printing Company for 3 weeks described it as a place that “grinds people out and down.”

### Second Post-MJI Job (Metal Company) and Family Welfare

In August 2000 Mr. Blessed obtained his second post-JI job as a material handler at Metal Company. The reasons he left Printing Company were: “50% race; 50% hours. They’d run me from Suburb to Suburb to Milwaukee and back again. I’d never get more than 5 hours sleep.” Although Mr. Blessed did not contact WRTP for direct help in either of the two job changes, MJI’s influence on his obtaining the third position was consistent with Jobs Initiative aims for career advancement:

*“I filled out an application at Metal Company just for the heck of it. My MJI experience at a foundry was the reason I got the job. I know about the metal industry—know about metal. I got my fork life certification there; my license.”*

Mr. Blessed’s beginning wage was \$12/hour. He expected to work about 8 hours overtime a week at \$18/hour. If these conditions materialized, he would gross \$700/week (net \$502), surpassing his \$600/week earnings in his best period at Steel Mill & Foundry. Nevertheless, at the onset, Mr. Blessed’s job change produced horizontal rather than vertical wage and career advancement. While Mr. Blessed perceived advancement opportunity in his Metal Company position, he anticipated wage progression more than skill development. However, Hard Working additionally hoped that his work environment at Metal Company would contribute to family serenity, as the final months at Steel Mill & Foundry and the period at Printing Company contributed to considerable marital strain:

*“Well we don’t spend time together. A lot of times I am too physically exhausted to do anything. I will come in from work and sit on this couch and the next thing I know I am gone.”*

Mrs. Blessed added: “Hard Working’s depressed. And I’m affected.” Each rued this schism because as Mr. Blessed put it: “We are each other’s best friends—we’re each other’s NA/AA.” Their preferred relationship was far more interactive:



*“On Fridays, Mrs. Blessed and I talk. I didn’t marry her to hang out with other people. And we didn’t have kids to shuttle them off. We rent movies and pop popcorn on Saturdays. Or we play TV games. I play basketball with the boys and Jasmine; Mrs. Blessed and the girls walk around.”*

Both Hard Working and Mrs. Hard Working Blessed reported work stress-related, temporary “depressive” periods that affected their eating, sleeping, energy, and usual activities of daily life:

*“At Printing Company [because of the 12-hour shifts] I’d go to work, come home, eat, and pass out. Then I’d get up, go to work, and do the same thing. I’m much happier now—all the way around. Especially with Mrs. Blessed. She sleeps a lot better if I’m in the house. Like when there was lightening. I missed being here at night when I worked at Steel Mill & Foundry and Printing Company. I can breathe now. I’m not so tired when I come in; I have a pleasant look on my face. I’m not dead. I have time with my wife and children and my responsibilities.”*

Throughout our contact with them it was clear that the Blessed’s concerns were for the welfare of each other and their children. Mrs. Blessed expressed poignantly her concern about Mr. Blessed’s working conditions:

*“During the last months at Printing Company, Hard Working put the weight of the family problems on his shoulders. It tears him up. He didn’t shave; he didn’t cut his hair.”*

Mr. Blessed was similarly concerned about his wife and family:

*“I felt like I was letting them down. But finally I kept telling myself, ‘keep working; keep faith in God.’ I prayed more. Now with the new job, it’s less intense; I feel free. Last night I really slept.”*

**Advancement.** In keeping with the Jobs Initiative’s design to help participants advance to better jobs after giving them a start, Mr. Blessed also foresaw career advancement at Metal Company:

*“I worked yesterday (Saturday) because I wanted to. I love it. And the money is much better. I drive a fork-lift truck. They tell me: ‘we want you to retire from here.’ Don’t nobody bother me; I do my job. My effort is going to be there. Advancement? The sky’s the limit. Metal Company is a small company and it’s growing. The people who are there now, we’ll be management when the company expands. It’s not a union company. I don’t want to miss days. At Printing Company, I’d be so sleepy.”*

It is important for workforce development programs to understand that advancement aims are initially accompanied by family sacrifice:

*“During the transition from Printing Company to Metal Company, things got a little hard financially. The bills backed up. But we’re getting there. There were 2 weeks in between where I only got 1 check. But if you don’t take chances. . . .”*

Mrs. Blessed described even more graphically how job changes affect family’s goals, efforts, and ultimate welfare, illustrating that family- or program-provided supports are critical to counterbalance the potentially-dire costs of advancement transitions:

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*"He was not able to pay the rent, the light, the gas, the phone, buy the food and take care of three kids and me. My mother said, 'send the bills that have to be paid and I'll do that.' My uncle and aunt helped. We phoned Hard Working's ex-wife and drove to Chicago to get food from them. Hard Working's ex-wife and her husband get food stamps for the kids so they had food. [If people didn't help, if Hard Working hadn't gotten this new job, what would you have done?] We would have separated and gone back to our respective families. Me to my mother and him to his mother. We'd lose this apartment. We'd have real problems with the utility budget that we have to pay on. Some days, I don't know where we're going to get the next meal. God, he comes through with something."*

Adult medical care was an additional sacrifice during the job change transition. Again Mr. Blessed was told nothing about carry-over medical insurance, so the adults were uninsured for the 90 days it took the new insurance to begin. The children were affected as well, as the Blessed switched from their regular family practitioner to a free neighborhood clinic during this transition period. After the baby-sitting teens returned to school, Mr. and Mrs. Blessed moved Baby Miracle to less adequate, in-home daycare because it was affordable instead of returning her to the certified facility that maximized her development but cost \$185 a week:

*"Baby Miracle's in daycare now through someone we got through my aunt. I don't like it. It's not set up well enough. The house isn't neat. It's home daycare. The woman has teenage daughters. Baby Miracle is so dirty when I pick her up, even though I've sent along a change of clothes. She's had diaper rash. But it's \$75/week which is affordable. A really good facility would be \$185. That's what the last one cost. We may have to keep her in this one until she's potty-trained and off the bottle. I want one where someone will spend time with her; someone who will cultivate her mind. She understands nearly everything. I want a daycare with developmental instruction."*

In spite of the tumult connected with Mr. Blessed's third job change and persistent economic stress, the family remained impressively stable, evidenced in the comparison between spring and fall teacher reports about Tank and The Rock.

### Children's Schools

**Tank's High School, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades.** Overall, Tank felt good about himself, was proud and had high self-esteem. He also felt safer in Milwaukee than in Chicago where shootings had been common in his South Side neighborhood. At the time of the research team's spring 2000 school visit, Tank credited his two "D" grades to "hanging out in the back of the classroom, not paying attention to the teachers." Suggestive of the mixed impact of his parents' job tribulations together with his adjustment to a new city, school, and family, Tank attributed classroom inattention to his worry that both of his parents had jobs that were physically dangerous. He worried that his father had to "carry very hot stuff around" and that his mother had to lift people:

*“They both come home tired and my mom is sore when she comes home. The place where my father works is very hot. You can see sparks flying from outside the building.”*

Family job changes and increased parental attention over the summer were reflected in Tank’s early months of 10<sup>th</sup> grade: “My father and stepmother taught me things you have to do, what you could do up here [Milwaukee]. So that got me to feel like I can do those things.” Tank’s teachers noted his regular attendance, general helpfulness in class, willingness to ask questions, and strong verbal competence, although they also noted that missing homework remained a problem. One teacher echoed Tank’s parents’ observations about his improvement over last year:

*“He’s doing good. I had him last year. Last year he pretty much was a pain. He’s matured quite a lot. It’s just the maturation process. 9th graders come in from middle school, they pop paper wads, things like that. His classwork is good. His weakness is his writing. He needs to work on his punctuation. His grip on abstract concepts is very good. He verbally participates. [How about his homework?] I don’t give much homework. But what I give, he comes in with his homework.”*

Another teacher noted Tank’s parents’ involvement with his schooling: “When I have called, the father was very responsive.” The researcher observed Tank’s ability to give a story synopsis, his politeness, and his vocabulary competence [for example, “A caricature is an exaggeration; a synonym”].

At the same time, teachers’ comments reflected the inadequacies of urban Milwaukee middle- and high schools. In stark contrast to the Blessed parents’ involvement, one of Tank’s teachers reported that only 1 out of 162 students’ parents attended her last parent conference. Another noted that it was “unusual for students to do all their homework” and a third observed that “if kids don’t make problems, if they’re quiet, then they just go along...they’re not required to work much harder...not much is expected of them.” We observed a number of students sleeping in classes, considerable student conversation and inattention [14 students not watching a video], and significant absenteeism [in one class, only 10 of 34 seats were filled].

These observations about the inadequacy of Tank’s high school were validated by official Milwaukee school statistics (Milwaukee Public Schools, 2000). According to standardized test results, Tank’s school did not compare well with other Milwaukee public high schools. On the Tenth Grade Knowledge and Concepts Examination, only 3% of the students scored Proficient or above in Mathematics and 26% in Social Studies. Fifteen percent of Tank’s school’s tenth graders scored Proficient or above across all five subjects, less than half the average score for the school district. While attendance rates were high, so were truancy rates. One thousand forty seven truants and a rate of 80% made Tank’s school the second highest in truancy among public high schools. The dropout rate was close to average among area high schools. Even more important for Tank’s future hopes of being an electrician and his parents’ hopes for college education, his school had the fifth lowest graduation rate among the twenty Milwaukee high schools, with 138 graduates and 108 dropouts from the graduating class. The graduation rate was 56.1%.

Tank’s school offered an International Baccalaureate program “designed for college-bound students seeking a rigorous learning experience requiring successful completion of a comprehensive integrated curriculum. Participation in the IB program allowed students to earn advanced standing and/or college credits at many prestigious universities” (Milwaukee Public Schools, 2000). However, only eight students took a total of eight advanced-placement exams

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during the 1998-99 school year and none passed, while in the district overall, 559 high school students took a total of 756 advanced placement exams at a passing rate of 33%.

In concert with the observations of MJI study informant Kevin McDonalds about opportunities for inner-city black youth, we noted the presence of two black Navy recruiters in the Marshall cafeteria. The recruiters came to the school twice a month and talked with 40-50 students about opportunities in the service. They targeted freshmen “to give them an idea of what is out there.” Similarly, a bulletin board in the guidance counselor’s office offered career information under two headings: “college” and “military.” While a freshmen class introduced students to trades, a lack of follow-up weakened the message. In the absence of other possibilities, and perhaps aware of the school’s limitations, the military option was also on Mr. Blessed’s mind for his sons:

*“I told the boys they are signing up for the service when they are 17. They can pick the branch. The service will give them scholarships for college. They’re going whether they want to or not. They have no say-so in the matter. Not too many kids from their high schools go on to college.”*

**The Rock’s Middle School, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.** Visits to The Rock’s school illuminated the status of Milwaukee’s public middle schools. The researcher’s spring 2000 visit in The Rock’s final 7<sup>th</sup> grade semester was focused on an incident between The Rock and a teacher whereby his parents and the principal were involved in protracted mediation about proper teacher behavior. Having settled this incident proactively, Mrs. Blessed turned her attention to The Rock’s overall school disobedience and failures—at school through discussions with teachers and administrators and at home by increased disciplinary measures.

Under a “Rules” poster in the halls of The Rock’s school, a bright yellow sign heralded “Our Mission . . . School is committed to providing guidance and support to ensure that all our youth and adults will develop into outstanding scholars and productive citizens.” Milwaukee school statistics suggested that the school mission was not realized (Milwaukee Public Schools, 2000). The Rock’s school had the second highest rate of out-of-school suspensions among all the middle schools in the Milwaukee school district for the 1998-99 school year. Its attendance rate was 78% on average, the second lowest of all Milwaukee middle schools, and its truancy rate was second-highest. Four hundred thirty two truants at The Rock’s school during the previous school year (1998-99) resulted in a truancy rate of 83%, over twice the 34% rate for the Milwaukee public schools as a whole.

One teacher’s assessment of The Rock portrayed his behavior as more in line with Milwaukee school statistics than the school mission:

*“He likes to get in trouble. You have to stay on top of him. Let me see if I’ve ever had to call home. [She walked over to her desk and pulled open a metal box storing small index cards.] On this card it says, ‘Bad attitude,’ ‘9/14, gum chewing.’ I phoned but no parents responded to the call. ‘2/21, fooling around with computer; disrupting class. Rude to teacher.’ The Rock was messing around with the software program and I told him to stop. He said, ‘You care more about the computer than me.’”*

Mrs. Blessed reported that The Rock had been suspended from school because of behavior problems since he was in the third grade: “Somebody picking on him. The Rock is not going to let nobody bully him, hit him.” On the other hand, Mrs. Blessed also understood The Rock’s behavior in the more complex developmental and psychological con-

text of a newly-blended family. She felt that one of the primary psychological issues The Rock was dealing with was adjusting to his new stepfather. At first he would not recognize Hard Working as his father or let Hard Working discipline him, saying “you’re not my father.” Hard Working and The Rock had to establish their boundaries as stepfather and stepson; gradually The Rock was coming to see Hard Working as his father because Hard Working was taking care of him.

More worrisome than his behavior, The Rock’s academic performance was reported as below average. Some of the teachers and Mrs. Blessed were concerned that Attention Deficit Disorder might be impeding The Rock’s performance, although despite teacher recommendation and Mrs. Blessed’s formal request, The Rock had not been formally tested. Mr. Blessed believed that The Rock’s extra activity was a normal response to new-found freedom in the home:

*“You’ve got to understand, [in Chicago] The Rock was cooped up in the house all the time when Mrs. Blessed wasn’t there. He’s being a kid now—he’s enjoying his freedom—quality freedom. He’s so happy that he just can’t sit still.”*

Mrs. Blessed concurred that “the kids were really unstable during the time I was on drugs. Sometimes they lived with my mother; sometimes with my brother. We’re trying to establish security and stability now.” However, she also pushed school personnel to get psychological testing, summer school attendance, and family counseling for The Rock.

According to most of his teachers, The Rock was behind academically:

*“[doing] below average work. He doesn’t always comprehend what we’re talking about. And he doesn’t seem to retain information. I think he will fail the proficiency test that students have to take to go to the next grade. 85 students passed of 132 who took the test. Most of those who failed the test didn’t come from this school, weren’t here all the time. They came to us from other schools. Some came to us from out of state. The Rock came to us like that. The kids need 15 points to pass the class. They can get 9 points the first part of the year and 6 in the second part.”*

Although the teacher blamed out-of-state schools for faulty preparation, The Rock’s school did not compare well with other public middle schools in Milwaukee according to standardized test results (Milwaukee Public Schools, 2000). Students’ scores on the Eighth Grade Knowledge and Concepts Examination were significantly lower at his school than school district averages. The percentage of eighth graders scoring Proficient or above varied from a low of 3% in Math to a high of 34% in Social Studies. Twenty percent of students scored Proficient or above across all five subjects compared to 36.8% for the district. The percentage of students scoring Proficient or above in Science was also extremely low: 10% compared to 28% for the Milwaukee school district and 69% for the state—not auspicious for The Rock’s goals of being a scientist. According to one teacher, the worst-case scenario for The Rock was that “there’s a 75% chance that he’ll drop out of high school in his second year.”

By the end of the spring 2000 semester, however, some teachers presaged the “turnaround” noted and nurtured by the Blessed during the summer:

*“In the past it was pretty bad. Recently, it’s been a 100% turnaround. I guess he’s trying to pass. What his friends thought was more important than his future. [Now] He’s less concerned with his friends. One of his friends was whispering. I looked and The Rock was doing his work. His friend said, ‘why you doin that?’ The Rock said, ‘I don’t care. I’m trying to pass.’”*

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Another teacher felt The Rock's learning problems were more related to self-esteem than to comprehension and suggested a summer program to address emotional issues:

*"I think that The Rock has problems with self-esteem. If that can be corrected then everything else will change. I think that he could use AGAPE, it's a program that improves self-esteem. It's at a local middle school, it goes in the summer from 8:30 a.m. to 2:00. There's scholarships available, the kids eat three meals there. What they teach is life skills, they tell them about jobs, they do field trips. Each session they do 10 field trips, there are 5 businesses involved with AGAPE. They go to good places like Noah's Ark. We want kids to feel good about themselves."*

While The Rock did not attend AGAPE, he did well at his school's summer academic program according to Mrs. Blessed:

*"But we didn't do therapy. He didn't have to; he straightened out first. He wasn't doing his work. But he's better now. His homework now—he's doing it. He has books. He has As on his papers. Last year was a transition stage—we were all together for the first time; a new family. We had to set boundaries and guidelines. We've worked together toward disciplinarians. We set punishment, like no TV."*

At our fall 2000 visit to The Rock's 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes however, teachers gave mixed reports. One credited The Rock's higher participation that day with the fact that his "running buddy" wasn't there. This teacher was very concerned about how to motivate students living in home environments of hard-working parents:

*"Well, here you have to sell self-worth, believe you're making a difference. The m.o. with middle schoolers is that one day they're up and the next day they're down. Now the kids change. The level of their apathy increased for some unknown reason. A lot has to do with their home situations. At home they have grandparents. Their parents are working. There is not enough time in the day for the parents to attend to their professional activities and their children. We were supposed with our new technology to have more leisure time."*

Another teacher expressed similar sentiments to those of most of The Rock's teachers in the spring:

*"He never wants to cooperate, participate. Right now he's failing. I'm sending out the interim reports and I'll wait for them [parents] to respond. I'm looking to what they'll suggest to keep him on task. I look to parents for that help."*

**Inner-City School Deficiencies.** Focusing more broadly on inner-city school deficiencies, Mrs. Blessed and the teachers reflected parallel views about school quality. Mrs. Blessed associated poor school quality with institutional racism and insufficient funding:

*"So you know what gets me? There's not enough funding for black schools. They cut the funding because kids vandalize equipment. So because these kids vandalize equipment, they don't have enough books. Kids can't bring home books."*

Teachers underscored the deleterious effects of insufficient equipment: "The problem is that there are so few books, and when they are taken home they don't come back. That's why books can't be taken home." In a haunting depiction of the pervasiveness of inner-city educational deficits, one teacher related her own educational story:

*“I know from how I grew up, what I went through. When I was in 6th and 7th grade, my mother thought it would be really good for me to be bussed. That’s when they had integrating schools. I was bussed to a white school. I felt out of place. I was not up to par with the other kids; I didn’t have their educational background. I didn’t have the basic skills. But I was quiet, I didn’t make trouble. So I was moved along. There was no real push at home to make up deficiencies. I was not comfortable in an all white school. [How did you get to be a teacher?] Well it took me awhile. I had my daughter. I got my GED. I did different jobs. Then I got into a cross-over program at MATC. They taught us basic skills, strengthening us to take college courses. I needed this, I needed these skills because I didn’t get them before. Like these kids. That’s why I wanted to become a teacher so that kids like me, like these kids could learn, could love to learn. It took a long time for me. I learned to learn at MATC. But I didn’t have confidence in myself. Then one day we had a teacher that told us, are you afraid to succeed? I was comfortable being still, afraid of that other world of going to college. I thought, yes, that’s me. [Then what happened?] I got the skills, I improved my language skills, finished at MATC and went to UW. [And now you’re a teacher.] Yes.”*

Another teacher expressed profound views about what schools and families need to offer for students to succeed:

*“I think that 5 outside entities could help. If we had a nurse, a clinic, a childcare center in school, if the parents had more money, and more time.”*

A school administrator amplified these broader needs with a creative suggestion for improvement:

*“I’d like to see a liaison between school and parents. The MPS [Milwaukee Public Schools] has so many changes that have to be explained to parents. I’d like the liaison people to tell parents what they need to know to help their kids succeed. Parents have to get the school’s angle on things. The kids go home and tell a story and then the parents get angry before coming to school. Then it’s hard to talk to the parents. The parents have to know that schoolwork comes first. Parents should make sure that homework is done first. [Is there anything that MJI can do to help?] I don’t know that they can do anything about the problems that teachers have with this community. The students are very mobile. They stay with this relative, they move, they stay with their parents. Our kids go to a lot of schools before they graduate. You don’t know what they’ve learned, what they need. They aren’t stable.”*

Scholastic deficits were paralleled by structural challenges to The Rock’s participation in extra-curricular activities he expressed interest in, such as being a tutor or playing basketball: “I don’t go because I ain’t got no way to get back. They say they have an after school bus but it doesn’t go.” Despite significant attempts at school reform in Milwaukee, budget problems were likely to reduce such enrichment opportunities in The Rock’s academic future:

*“The projected MPS [Milwaukee Public Schools] budget shortfall for 2001 will mean cuts in services for students with special education needs; the loss of music, art, physical education, library and reading specialist services; outdated textbooks; deferred maintenance; and less support for the most needy students from educational assistants, social workers, psychologists, and other staff (Copeland, 2000).”*

The school statistics, teachers’ comments, and Tank and The Rock’s experiences are especially poignant considering the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Blessed pointedly moved to their neighborhood to ensure good schools for their children. A complicating factor was that they moved too late to enter Tank and The Rock in the higher-quality neighborhood

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schools for 1999-2000. By fall 2000, they were loath to subject their sons to yet another dislocation and opted for them to remain in the same schools, prioritizing emotional and academic stability over improved school quality:

*“The boys are being bussed out of the neighborhood to schools. The Rock rides the bus to school for 1/2 hour, but coming home he might leave at 2:40 or 3 and not get home until 4. There are 2 or 3 good schools in the neighborhood, but we couldn’t get them in. They were filled because others from other communities are coming here. We thought about changing his school, but left him there because we didn’t want more change for him. The teachers are familiar to him; they know us by name. We needed to emphasize stability in the kids’ lives—they didn’t have that. We’re really trying to do that.”*

While teachers in both schools were dedicated and motivated, inspirational messages abounded in classrooms and walls, and students were moderately well-behaved in class, the level of difficulty of the work varied greatly from class to class. The problem of insufficient books for take-home homework and the emotional turmoil students brought regularly to school were ongoing hindrances to their achievement. For the Blessed parents, the future appeared to mandate regular intervention and monitoring of The Rock’s educational efforts so that the most dire prognosis does not materialize. For both youth, it is an open question whether the parents’ attentiveness and concern about their children’s academic achievement can counterbalance deficits in school quality. It seems likely that the parents’ goal of college educations for their sons will be an uphill road. Perhaps the ultimate challenge for MJI and other workforce initiatives is understanding and constructively addressing how difficult it is to enhance one’s work life and family welfare when parents have to choose between goals and values for children such as school stability and school quality.



## Follow-up May 2001 and Conclusions

When the Blessed were recontacted in May 2001, 15 months after our initial contact and 7 months after we saw them last, the family was in transition. In anticipation of the summer return of Blessed Daughter from Chicago, the family had recently moved to a four-bedroom house not far from their old neighborhood. The house had a big yard and kitchen; two dormer bedrooms upstairs were for the boys and two bedrooms downstairs for their parents and Baby Miracle. Rooms were furnished with essentials and awaited furniture that was either store-bought or promised by family. While rent for the new house was \$675/month (a \$200 increase), it would soon build equity; after one year, rental payments would go towards down payment on the house. Hard Working compared his housing opportunity to MJI:

*“This house, it isn’t the world’s greatest palace—but this is a beginning. A small beginning to me is enormous—a beautiful ending. It’s harder for me to turn back than to go forward now. Zero percent do I long for the way things used to be. I thank the people for giving me the start. As any start, it’s up to me to keep it going. Without you [MJI/WRTP] I don’t know where I’d be; probably in some dead-end job somewhere. MJI helped me climb a mountain, not just a hill.”*

Hard Working advanced at Metal Company in responsibilities and wages, although not in title. By May 2001, his wage was \$13/hour and he averaged 3 hours of overtime per week at \$19/hour, “depending on how I feel,” which resulted in an annual income of about \$30,000. Although this income was almost sufficient for the family according to the per-adult guidelines of the Self-Sufficiency Standard for Wisconsin (Pearce, 2000), a more nuanced, contextual assessment of income adequacy than federal poverty guidelines, it was not sufficient as the *only* family income now that Mrs. Blessed was unemployed. In addition, overtime hours were often on weekends, taking time away from family and rest. Moreover, added duties were not accompanied by promotion or wage increase. Hard Working was not officially a “supervisor,” despite the fact that he now supervised 20 employees:

*“I’m not officially a “supervisor;” they’re waiting on the title. [For how long?] I don’t know. Maybe a couple of years; maybe 5 years. The Plant Superintendent wants me to take more and more responsibility—this leads to better wages, but not what’s called a promotion. They’re not lazy on the money.”*

The company’s recent economic growth (\$4 million to \$6 million) heralded Hard Working’s potential advancement to shift leader. “No longer low man on the totem pole,” he considered joining a union and focused on wage progression. Hard Working also developed a new goal inspired by a friend’s pamphlet on starting a business: to start his own tire business. At the same time, he acknowledged his present financial struggle:

*“It’s hard to maintain quality of life. Every penny is accounted for. We shelled out over \$900 last week on Mrs. Blessed’s car. I have \$1.35 to last for 2 weeks—and a half a tank of gas in the car.”*

Hard Working’s budget was just enough to cover necessities, much less savings for the future or the cost of unforeseen emergencies like car repair.

Compounding financial strain, Mrs. Blessed was on permanent sick leave from her job at the nursing home. In November 2000, after several months of increasingly frequent and severe seizures, Mrs. Blessed resigned from her

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position. Whereas Mrs. Blessed's seizures had been manageable initially, over the course of several months they occurred weekly. Mrs. Blessed cited work stress and physical exertion as reasons for the seizures that often led to loss of consciousness and physical injury. Transportation problems also figured into Mrs. Blessed's decision to leave, as she could not arrive in time to work more than 7½ hours or take overtime shifts. At the time of her resignation, she earned \$9.50/hour. Resignation meant she was not eligible for unemployment insurance, although she qualified (until April 2001) for "a little help from W-2." Mrs. Blessed's CNA certification qualified her to work in another facility, but she was not medically "cleared" by her doctor to return to work. Mrs. Blessed might be eligible for disability insurance [SSI] but she preferred to work if she could:

*"I like my career choice; I don't want to be on SSI. I may try home health care especially since you need a car for it, or a hospital pool. They call you as needed and you get \$13/\$14/hour, but no benefits. But it's OK if Hard Working keeps us on his benefits."*

Hard Working still wished that his wife did not have to work outside the home:

*"I don't want her working at all. In 2 years, she won't have to lift a finger. She wants to raise her daughter and that's what I want her to do."*

Hard Working's goal to support the family on one income within two years was ambitious given the impact of slow wage progression on older wage earners with families. He still had \$20,000 in debt incurred from student loans, a car loan, and unpaid bills. Financial byproducts of the past continued to impact the present. Emotional family byproducts of the past had equal sway for the Blessed children.

**The Children.** In May 2001, Tank was 16 years old and completing 10<sup>th</sup> grade. His grades—an A in English, and Bs and Cs for other courses—improved over the course of the year. From his perspective, it took 8 marking periods (2 school years) to achieve this improvement—additional testament that *time* is needed for significant change. Tank attributed his improvement to Hard Working's consistent parenting as well as his own acclimation to a new environment:

*"My dad talked me into it. He wouldn't let me watch TV, listen to music, go anywhere. I feel like I'm improving myself. I felt like I was messing up. Not paying attention in school. I wasn't interested in the work. I really didn't know how to do it. They were teaching me new stuff. I thought that the work didn't have a point. It was something I never heard of before; I thought it was unimportant. Now I'm thinking about my career, job. I want to be an electrician and you have to know math. I want to graduate from high school and go to 2 years of college or maybe 4 years and become an electrician."*

Alternatively he thought about being a computer technician.

Tank felt his lot had generally improved since moving from Chicago. He identified the benefits of living with his father as better clothes and schools, but missed his mother and siblings. When asked about his past he said, "I don't like digging into memories. It's kind of hard speaking it out." Tank preferred to talk about his future. He applied for a summer job at local stores so that he could own his own "stuff" and contribute to the family. Tank worried about his family's current finances, connecting his concern to the poverty he experienced in the past:

*“I should get a job. I’m 16. To help pay rent and get my own stuff. I feel like I’m not doing my part. I feel kinda on the down side. We got to find another place to live if we can’t make the rent. I don’t want to live in a messed up place. That’s where I lived in Chicago.”*

Despite Tank’s successes over the course of the year, he avoided situations that required some amount of risk. Although he was interested in competitive extracurricular sports and considered the yearbook committee, after a hard day at school Tank mostly “thought about going home at the end of the day.” Similarly, when the idea was raised of seeking higher level academic work, such as through the pre-IB (International Baccalaureate) program, Tank knew “they teach you more about college; it’s at another level,” yet for the time being, his “concern is getting my credits in. I’m just happy with what I’m at now.” He also recognized that he had to “catch-up” from years of Chicago school deficits: “I need to learn the basics.”

During a repeat visit to Tank’s school, teachers revealed similar impressions about his overall academic performance: Tank was bright, but not working up to his potential. Most teachers cited a string of unexcused absences that resulted from needing to watch the baby during the Blessed family’s move as the reason Tank started to fall behind on his assignments. All that was needed to turn these “unexcused” into “excused” absences was a parent’s note, but this was not communicated to Hard Working, and perhaps not even to Tank, until after our visit. Frequent breakdown in overall parent-child-school communication precluded alarm over Tank’s specific absences. One teacher attributed the problem to the disruption of an ever-changing student population: “I started this year with 175 kids—now I’m down to 120.” A senior administrator concurred:

*“We have a transient population; kids come into school at all times of the year. Since September we’ve enrolled 350 kids; that’s about 2 to 3 a day. But we’ve lost 500 kids. We have a 76% attendance rate.”*

In response to such transience, the school instituted a mid-year change to a more “flexible” schedule that had the unintended consequence of greater instability for students. As one teacher said, “our kids are insecure, want things the same because of their home lives. Then school becomes as insecure as their home lives.” Despite these upheavals, Tank and his family preferred that Tank remain at the same high school. It was hard for Tank to judge his present circumstances without the overlay of his past:

*“Most of the schools in Chicago are horrible. [My high school] is not good, not bad. Nice teachers. Most of the kids are ghetto [which he defined as ‘baggy clothes; fancy clothes; Ebònics; hair’]. I got a couple of friends.”*

Additional points about the school highlighted the challenges facing most urban public schools. For one, several teachers were set to retire at the end of the year, representing another disruption for students. For another, resources for students to excel in the International Baccalaureate program were non-existent. When asked whether the school’s students could afford the \$1,000 fee to take the IB tests, the guidance counselor said the cost was subsidized: students who qualified could pay \$540, and guidance counselors were expected to fundraise for the balance. To date no students have taken the tests even though the IB program has flourished in other, more elite Milwaukee public schools for 20 years. Further, according to the guidance counselor, Tank’s late enrollment and assignment to this high school according to space was a common phenomenon that meant the school did not “get the best students.” Milwaukee school CHOICE consisted of a 20-page booklet and application sent to every Milwaukee family. When we likened the complexity of the booklet to college applications, the counselor replied:

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*“Well, it’s not so hard for our parents because they usually don’t consider all this. They wind up sending their kids to whatever school will take them, or in the neighborhood. So it’s not such a big choice for them.”*

The Rock was 14 years old by May 2001 and was completing the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. His continual struggle in school frustrated Mrs. Blessed who, in March, was ready to “send him to boot camp or at least get him a psychological evaluation.” By May, however, The Rock “buckled down” and his grades and behavior began to improve. As consistent as Hard Working was with Tank, Mrs. Blessed was with The Rock:

*“The teacher called the other day because The Rock told her to “Get off my back.” I told him, “You don’t disrespect teachers. They are all concerned about you.” We all work with The Rock and he’s passing. He just got As and Bs.”*

The Rock continued to adjust to his new role within a blended family. Time alone with his mother was difficult to come by, as were the material possessions his stepbrother was old enough to attain through summer work. The Rock specifically related his inability to buy things like clothes and games to his mother’s current unemployment:

*“I don’t go anyplace. They don’t have gas money because my mother hasn’t worked for a month.”*

However, unlike Tank, The Rock was involved in afterschool tutoring for the proficiency tests. After the tests were over he remained after school in a program called “Primetime” that involved further tutoring, computer classes, and basketball at school. An activity bus was now available to return students home in the early evening, facilitating their participation in these programs. Despite an up-and-down academic year beginning with all failing grades, The Rock buckled down when informed he was in danger of repeating 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Ultimately, like Tank, The Rock passed his proficiency tests and would advance to 9<sup>th</sup> grade in his high school of choice, the same school Tank attended. For both Tank and The Rock, social stability superceded academics. For their parents, familiarity would prevent future problems. Tank could look after The Rock who they described as “always in trouble away from family.”

A repeat visit to The Rock’s school reaffirmed that the Blessed parents and the school were working together to help The Rock succeed. One teacher remarked on the family’s commitment:

*“He’s got a stable family. His parents come whenever you call them. The stepfather takes off from work. Mrs. Blessed is here.”*

Nevertheless, despite frequent contact with his parents, the teachers never discussed academic goals for The Rock. Several teachers remarked that The Rock did not have a learning disability, but was hampered by his role as “class clown” who liked to “play the fool.” The Rock explained his role in an essay on career development: he wanted to be a comedian and was practicing on his class. The teachers agreed that The Rock was creative, but felt, for reasons related to history and racism, it would be frowned upon by family and community to encourage an African American child to become a comedian. When asked who could facilitate his artistic talents the teachers told us, “You can. You can tell his parents.” Planning for The Rock’s future was beyond the resources of a system that communicated with parents only in response to negative incidents or through unrelated third parties. Both Tank and The Rock identified science and math as favorite subjects, with Tank relating his interest to a future career. Whether the school system could facilitate their interests and their parents’ expectations for them remained a question. Equally problematic, as

was common at schools of other Jobs Initiative children, conference schedules regularly clashed with family work demands. Each time the Blessed parents were summoned to school they lost wages.

At follow-up, Baby Miracle was also showing significant developmental progress. At age two, she was talking in full sentences and was ready for the stimulation of a structured preschool environment. Hard Working and Mrs. Blessed resigned themselves to Baby Miracle’s return to home-based daycare with the hope that it was temporary. Their goal was to send Baby Miracle to a Montessori or Christian school by next year. Finances would determine this decision, as such a school would cost at least \$300/month.

Hard Working’s goals for his sons reflected continuing concern about economic opportunity. He tried to expand Tank’s choice of an electrician career by encouraging the pursuit of electrical engineering, a career that required higher-level training but would pay more. In response to Hard Working’s decision for both boys to enlist in military service, Tank proclaimed: “Personally, I don’t like the idea.” Unmoved by Tank’s position, as an older parent in relatively entry-level work, Hard Working sadly explained the economic realities that drove his recommendation:

*“They’ll get all the opportunities there that I can’t afford. I won’t be further in debt. He [Tank] is limited now by my resources. Electrician is an honorable job. But I think a child should aim as high as he can at that age.”*

Both Blessed parents were determined to maximize opportunity for their children. Although the Blessed moved into their new home to facilitate their growing family, Mrs. Blessed’s daughter decided to stay in Chicago to finish her senior year of high school. Mrs. Blessed was proud of her daughter’s accomplishments and recognized her need for stability:

*“On May 17, Blessed Daughter is going to graduate from her CNA class. She’s going to college to work with problem kids. Be a social worker. She’ll come to Milwaukee for the summer, but probably will stay at her grandmother’s for her final year in high school. I want her to focus and it isn’t easy with a baby around.”*

**Expansion.** Dismayed by the possibility that the MJI might suffer cutbacks in funding, Hard Working wanted “to talk to state representatives about how important it is to keep the program.” With the demands of his daily schedule, he had not been able to call WRTP, but planned to do so to help advocate for increased MJI funding:

*“They should get more than \$200,000 to do what they do. They increase the lives of people through education and resources; \$200,000 isn’t enough. The shelters get more. Shelters keep you there; this program expands you.”*

In an earlier interview, the Blessed spoke of the need for additional community resources to continue their progress, and deemed MJI the natural link:

*“They also could help us find out what other programs are available in the low-income bracket. Under Carter and some others in government, before Reagan, there was the Urban Progress Center where you could find out about lawyers, financial counseling, grants and loans. The program needs to benefit more of the middle end—they can benefit. [Mr. Blessed] They should provide more information about things that are available to the public—different programs going on for low-income families.” [Mrs. Blessed]*

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The Blessed's worked with the tools they had to negotiate significant stressors and support their family: consistent and attentive parenting, integrated faith, coping skills and willingness to draw on extended family support when needed. While the Blessed family experienced "expanded" opportunities for successful economic and social experiences as a result of MJI, Hard Working's words bespoke the parallel need for greater community and workplace efforts to promote further expansion and the well-being of their children.

# Moving Up is a Steep Climb

The “Isabell Smith” Family Story

*Parents’ Work and Children’s Welfare  
in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jobs Initiative*



*Roberta Rehner Iversen  
with Annie Laurie Armstrong and Michele Belliveau*

April 2002

## “Isabell Smith” Family Story

**Resident Family:**

**Isabell Smith, a 31-year old Hispanic woman, ethnographic study key informant**

**Dominic, Isabell’s 24-year old Hispanic partner**

**Batman Smith, 4<sup>1/2</sup>-year old son, in therapeutic development program and regular childcare**

**Scooby-Doo Smith, 2<sup>1/2</sup>-year old son, in therapeutic development program and regular childcare**

**Study Timeline: February through October 2000. Follow-up May/June 2001.**

*“We can get through anything now.”*

Isabell Smith’s background of abuse and heroin use was significantly countered by her connection with the Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI). SJI training and subsequent employment enabled her to support her recently-retrieved son, Batman, from foster care and obtain a safe apartment for herself, her two children and partner. Her participation in the ethnographic research was strongly motivated by appreciation of SJI: “I got so much from SJI that I’d like to give something back.” When asked about 31-year old Isabell’s training experience, a Seattle Jobs Initiative staff member replied, “Isabell is very bright. If her life circumstances had been different, she could have graduated at the top of her class at Harvard.” Isabell, who had never used a computer but typed 45 words per minute after SJI training, became an “unusual” example of someone who used the SJI office skills program to land a position in a high-tech company. As a bright and motivated graduate, the greatest challenge for Isabell was meeting the steep, often incompatible demands of work and family.



## Background and Pre-SJI History

Isabell was raised in Colorado, the only daughter of three children. In childhood Isabell’s family exposed her to educational opportunities as well as to abuse. The latter made Isabell “try to be the perfect person” while the former gave her an outlet to explore her aptitudes. Isabell’s mother, who was diagnosed later with severe mental illness, abused her as did her brother, a story the family did not believe until his admission in adulthood. Isabell’s father, a hard-working man by her description, held a position in the armed services which meant the family lived abroad for several years during Isabell’s adolescence. Isabell learned to speak Italian because it was close to Spanish, the language her parents spoke but discouraged in their children: “My mom was always saying ‘you are so lucky you can pass for White.’” What Isabell’s mother viewed as a liability, Isabell viewed as a commodity for her own children who she tried to raise as bilingual, despite the struggle to maintain and augment her own language acquisition.

Isabell spent much of her adolescence reading, writing poetry and becoming an accomplished pianist which she parlayed into her first part-time job as a piano teacher. While this time in Isabell’s life was the happiest because of her music, it was also emotionally painful. Shortly after graduating from high school and towards the end of a particularly severe abusive episode, Isabell’s mother kicked her out of the house. Isabell used savings she had accumulated from teaching to purchase a one-way ticket to a city in Washington where she knew no one but discovered a youthful street “scene” that quickly accommodated her. It was a scene comprised of other unemployed teenagers and young adults, living on marginal means and possessing—in the absence of life skills—survival skills.

Unable to afford rent, Isabell lived out of a car. She initially supported herself through panhandling, but soon began a series of low-wage positions, the second of which was in a pizza restaurant where she was promptly promoted to Assistant Manager. This scenario of promotion became a familiar one for Isabell who stood out among her peers as a reliable employee. Unfortunately, a series of illnesses precluded her ability to stay employed. The most serious illness came after Isabell had worked for a year with a city Arts Commission—her ideal job:

*“The absolute most awesome job I ever had in my whole life because I was around everything I loved. I was around the arts.”*

Isabell’s work with the Commission called upon her strengths: she wrote press releases and radio announcements and canvassed the community to bring a music festival to the city park. She discovered she was adept in communicating with the public, skills she would call upon later in her SJI job.

The length and nature of Isabell’s illness, Blackfan-Diamond syndrome which is a rare blood disorder, only partially prevented her return to the Arts Commission. Since little was known about the illness, Isabell interpreted her diagnosis as certain death:

*“I felt like somebody had just stamped an expiration date on my forehead. They told me I was going to die within ten years.”*

As a result, Isabell “started living my life as if I was going to die. I just went off the deep end for a while.” This meant showing up to work sporadically and often “high.” Isabell soon stopped going to work altogether, moved to Seattle, and began a new cycle of low-wage, intermittently managerial positions. Eventually Isabell headed to Alaska to

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work for a fishing company, a seasonal position she held for about five years. During these years Isabell discovered her desire and ability to work hard, a pattern that repeated itself at her SJI job: “I got to be a trailblazer.” At the same time, she also discovered what she referred to as her “sea of self-hatred.” It was the latter to which she attributed her vulnerability to drugs, and for the first time, heroin.

Working on a fishing boat, Isabell connected her work ethic to her past: “I come from a family that always worked very hard. They do a lot and you just don’t complain about being tired, you just keep going.” Isabell was ambivalent about this ethic as the consequences of making mistakes were dire. Later, this ethic also challenged her ability to balance work and family as an SJI participant. On the fishing boat, however, Isabell had few competing responsibilities. She was able to earn \$15,000 in six months by convincing her supervisor that she could fill a position traditionally held by men: “I not only did it but I became the best on the boat and then I started becoming known on the other boats because I was the first woman to do it.” Once again Isabell employed her strengths. However she again became ill, this time with “fish asthma,” caused by frequent exposure to fish oils. Isabell returned to Seattle with a new set of problems. While living in Alaska, Isabell lived with and married a man with a heroin addiction and, in the process, became addicted to heroin as well. Although Isabell’s marriage ended, her addiction did not.

**Treatment.** In October 1995, Isabell’s first son, Batman, was born addicted to heroin, placed in the custody of Children’s Protective Services (CPS), and eventually placed with relatives of Isabell’s partner, Dominic, a Central American national who had been living with her. While Dominic was not the biological father of Batman, he regarded Batman as a son and pleaded with Isabell to seek treatment. In September 1997, five years into her addiction, and eight months pregnant with Dominic’s son, Scooby-Doo, Isabell entered a rehabilitation facility in order to prevent foster placement of her second child. Although Scooby-Doo was born with methadone and heroin in his system, Isabell was permitted to keep custody of him on the condition she remain in the residential treatment facility.

By May 1999, after a year and a half of intensive treatment, Isabell was ready to move with Scooby-Doo to their own apartment. Isabell had also just completed a final round of chemotherapy to treat the Hepatitis C she contracted while using drugs. At the time, Isabell supported herself and her son with public assistance and was able to afford her new apartment with a Section 8 rental subsidy she had persistently lobbied the Seattle Housing Authority to receive. As a mobile subsidy, Section 8 was essential because Isabell needed to find a new, but otherwise unaffordable, neighborhood away from old friends and habits and, most important, accessible to her children’s therapeutic development program. It was also determined that Isabell was ready to take care of four year old Batman. Isabell credited her caseworkers and one particularly tenacious lawyer with the return of Batman; their faith in her abilities helped to propel her forward as much as her determination to succeed encouraged them. Within one month, Isabell, Batman, Scooby-Doo, and Dominic were living as a family for the first time and Isabell had made her first contact with TRAC (Training, Rehabilitation, Assessment, Consultation), the SJI-affiliated community based organization that connected her with SJI training. As Isabell later said, “I barely knew how to feed my own face and I ended up with these two little munchkins.” Preparing meals for everyone was one of many tasks to negotiate as Isabell initiated her new life as a sober mother of two, working outside as well as inside her new home.

### SJI Training: Office Occupations Project

Isabell was referred to TRAC by her caseworker at the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, an agency that supplied Isabell with small, but vital supports throughout rehabilitation and training. Isabell’s ability to interpret and negotiate systems was revealed early on:

*“I ended up going the whole schooling without any gas vouchers. I ended up getting my clothing vouchers from DVR, which even though they are a division of welfare, they don’t work together.”*

Expressive support was important as well, beginning with the original TRAC case manager who helped Isabell cope with multiple concurrent transitions:

*““I” was my original case manager, she was so awesome. I was trying to do everything and I was moving, getting my son back for the first time, supposed to start school at the same time and I called her up freaking out. She was great, and she told me, ‘girl, you are nervous, but don’t worry about it, school will still be there, you can do the one in June.’”*

The program’s flexibility and the case manager’s validation calmed Isabell’s quickly escalating sense of failure and allowed her to prioritize her commitments. As a result, Isabell started classes in Office Occupations at a SJI-partner community college in June 1999, having at least moved her family into their new apartment.

Having a clearly delineated path and being in school with other students like herself helped motivate Isabell. As a WorkFirst client under TANF immediately preceding SJI, she also felt fortunate to be offered specific motivation to counter her feelings of low self-worth:

*“Anyone on welfare, that is just rough on its own. I mean it was really hard for us to make it each month. I think that is why a lot of people don’t get anywhere because they are so down from their situation.”*

Isabell’s SJI training was slated for three months, although she spent the last week in on-the-job training with her new employer. Isabell’s class, with a graduation rate of 80 percent, was the seventh group to go through SJI’s office training. Characteristic of SJI’s on-going efforts at self-improvement, Isabell’s class benefited from suggestions made by earlier trainees, including ethnographic study participant Maya Vanderhand, that resulted in the presence of a training supervisor, pre-training classes, and tighter controls on participation. Staff characterized Isabell’s cohort as “a strong class; a mature group.” Inspired by the program, Isabell attended required classes during the week and optional “Microsoft Saturdays” where she honed the computer skills that were vital to her goal. In training, Isabell learned both basic and advanced computer programs and was subject to three “performance reviews” which gave her valuable practice in being supervised. Basic skills training proved invaluable in her SJI-job:

*“I use the skills daily—the ten-key class; the typing class of course was the most valuable. [Before SJI] I didn’t know how to type or use computers.”*

Isabell also made curricular suggestions for SJI based on needs that developed later at work: more role-playing and customer-service oriented training to learn how to negotiate with others. She wished SJI training had included

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preparation for money management, particularly how to not “blow it” at the sudden influx of income. Similarly, she wished her internship had been longer:

*“I barely got a sense of what it was like and then it was over. The first couple of weeks were sheer terror. When you start getting comfortable, it is over.”*

Despite her positive learning experience, Isabell felt the program failed to recognize her adult student status: “We were supposed to be adults. I felt like we were in high school.” This prophecy was fulfilled when Isabell and another female student experienced what they felt was sexual harassment by a male teacher, but were afraid to formally address: “We didn’t know what to do and we were scared to tell anybody so we just turned everything he said into a big joke.” Isabell’s attitude and familiarity with a mixed-gender work environment may have made her less susceptible to the potentially deleterious effects of harassment. Nevertheless, Isabell’s experience spoke to the needs of adult Jobs Initiative students, many of whom came to class with a unique combination of naivete and knowledge gained from years of hard living.

While Isabell gained tangible skills from her SJI training, the introduction she received to the complex interface of work and family was even more important. One month prior to training, she had lived in an environment that provided structure and focused primarily on her well being. Although Isabell maintained supports, the transfer to a new home where she was responsible for the structure and well being of her family was abrupt. Isabell was therefore disappointed that the training staff did not seem to understand when a childcare crisis arose and she missed several days of class in order to locate a safer, better-quality facility—one that would not mistreat her children the way the previous facility had. The inability to accommodate Isabell’s family needs was a theme that emerged periodically throughout her SJI participation. Fortunately, Isabell had the ability to depict her particular experience while simultaneously creating a universal needs assessment for low-income working families.

### **SJI Employment: Dot-Com Company**

As part of SJI training, Isabell worked for five weeks as an intern with Dot-Com, an internet-based distributor of books and sundry products. Isabell credited SJI training with her ability to obtain subsequent employment there:

*“I haven’t worked in many, many years [since 1996]. I never would have gotten a job like I have today if I hadn’t had the opportunity to go to school. I’d still be stuck at 7-11 or McDonalds.”*

Despite the “good start,” many challenges lay ahead.

The fact that Dot-Com was a new company and herald of a high-tech retail era shaped Isabell’s work experience. For one, there was no such thing as a predictable schedule or product. In the beginning her work schedule changed every week. Secondly, innovation was valued as were employees who were willing to devote their full energies to the company. The company primarily hired young, single individuals without families:

*“I am the only one in the group who has children. No one understands what I go through—when a kid fell down the stairs or I tripped on the way to the car. It gets a little frustrating sometimes. I don’t go home to my cat like they do.”*

SJI considered Isabell a unique participant when she was hired by Dot-Com directly from her internship, so unique that training staff unwittingly discouraged Isabell’s hopes of actually being hired. This perceived discouragement was difficult for Isabell at the time, yet later served to augment her image as a trailblazer and connect her new experience to her past success on the fishing boat.

Isabell was also a unique hire from the perspective of Dot-Com Company. She was the only trainee in their month-long orientation in Customer Service who had already been hired, the result of her having been a SJI intern. As a trainee, Isabell was paid \$10 per hour and learned yet another new computer system. The day after orientation ended in October 1999, she started work as a Tier I (Entry-Level) Customer Service Representative earning \$11 per hour. Full benefits were available, including a generous medical package, but Isabell initially stayed with her Medicaid coverage because “I don’t have to pay for it.” By the time of her 1-year anniversary she shifted to company medical and dental coverage for herself; the children remained covered by Medicaid. Isabell also invested in 500 shares of stock options as a kind of employee benefit—a plus when she was hired and company stock was at \$60 a share; a less valuable benefit as the price dropped to \$30.

Isabell described her early days at Dot-Com as “so scary, especially when you are now talking to real people.” While under the best circumstances transitions are stressful, Isabell’s job became more intense as the company prepared for the holiday retail season. Within the first two months of employment, Isabell’s work schedule changed three times. By late November she was working fifty-five “mandatory” hours per week, over ten hours per day on the phones, with mostly disgruntled customers:

*“It is very high pressured job especially because I got hired on right before the holiday season and we ended up being on the phones ten hours a day, just phone call after phone call. It was just nuts and people were upset and they were screaming at us.”*

Creating routine and structure for herself and her family was new enough, as was the ability to make mistakes and move forward; having to do so within a consistently shifting framework and under duress was, as Isabell described it, “like going into a war zone.” Isabell’s strain was exacerbated by her history of negative family ‘messages’ about performance:

*“I was raised that if you did anything wrong you deserve to die for it. I mean that is what was embedded into my brains so that whenever somebody tells me ‘you are not doing this right,’ I completely fall apart. I am working on it.”*

Such messages and their persistent emotional impact could easily derail a less tenacious and well-supported worker’s ability to stay on the job, as Isabell noted, “All the people that I went to school with were in very similar situations, backgrounds or whatever.”

That Isabell survived her first few months of work, when demands were highest and her training, preparedness and confidence lowest, was testament to her resilience. Even with multiple supports, these first months of work had a significant impact on Isabell’s family, which in turn caused greater strain at work:

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*“I really took it too much to heart, being screamed at on a daily basis, all day long, and it affected everything. It affected my family, plus I was going to work at 6:00 a.m. and not coming home until 8 or 9 that night. So I would leave the house and the kids were sleeping and I would come home and they were on their way to bed or in bed.”*

When she was home with the children, they often competed for her attention and threw tantrums that she had little energy to resolve. The fact that she was not home in the morning and evening during this period meant that her sons’ “dad got introduced to being a father.” Each family member had at least two new roles to adapt to simultaneously: Dominic as a full-time partner and father, Isabell as a mother and worker, Batman as a son and childcare attendee, and Scooby-Doo as a brother and childcare attendee. The tumult of this period was confirmed by Childhaven, the children’s therapeutic child development agency. Staff agreed that December was particularly difficult; they observed the stress in the children, who were more aggressive in the classroom, and in Isabell who did not have as much time to communicate with them about the children.

Isabell’s description of her role as “just a Customer Service Representative,” belied the duties it entailed: researching answers to customer’s questions; reassuring customers even when their call took time from her lunch hour; corresponding quickly and definitively via phone and e-mail with customers and her supervisors. She was expected to average at least 7 phone calls per hour over a 4-hour shift and a similar number of highly complicated e-mail contacts per hour for the other 4 hours. Despite these multiple duties, Isabell managed to make the most phone contacts out of anybody in her group and was eager for guidance to improve areas in which she struggled, such as composing e-mails. Isabell also tried to stay abreast of constantly changing company tools and information, an effort that required her to study during her “free” time. Isabell’s description of her job after these first months of long, harried hours echoed the tenacity shown in earlier jobs but highlighted work-family conflicts at the same time:

*“It’s my hardest job ever—a challenge—but I like it. I’ve got to make them more family-oriented though.”*

Over time Isabell perceived an absence of reciprocity in her relationship with her employer: she was both asked and willing to stretch her capacities but did not see Dot-Com Company as willing to stretch theirs.

The fact that Isabell remained employed was due largely to her supervisor’s liberal interpretation of official company attendance policies, a form of policy enforcement at the “street level” (Lipsky, 1980) found regularly in hierarchical organizations such as Isabell’s, but not without potential hazards. By February 2000, as the holiday rush wound down, Isabell had already used her forty hours of allowable sick leave for both 1999 and 2000 because of such crises as her son’s pneumonia, childcare holidays not recognized at Dot-Com, or she was stressed to the point of depression and physical illness herself. Even after she accidentally discovered that company policy mandated using the automated “sick-line” to report an absence, an issue that was not covered in training, Isabell called her boss as well, “to let her know what was going on.” In this way, Isabell educated her supervisor about family demands that impacted her work. Isabell’s supervisor’s receptivity to this, when she herself did not have a family, as well as her willingness to advocate for Isabell with higher administrators for additional unpaid sick leave, may have been unique. However, such support was also precarious, as Isabell’s supervisor was “on the verge of getting in trouble” for her flexibility. Moreover, because Isabell performed well in her position, it may have been easier for her boss to be receptive. The fact that Isabell may have had an atypical informal support system at work and still struggled to maintain work and family suggests how difficult it would be in the absence of such supports.

In February 2000, after 3 months at Dot-Com, Isabell was switched for the sixth time to a new four-day schedule of Sunday through Wednesday, from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Isabell preferred this schedule because it allowed her “time off” to run errands while her sons were in childcare. Saturdays were still devoted to cleaning the apartment and food shopping, the latter of which took three hours because Isabell utilized a discount grocery store an hour’s drive from her home. Isabell started to feel more confident at work, having, among other things, established her own informal mentoring system where she benefited from coaching sessions from a more experienced co-worker. She acknowledged her improvement and became confident over time that her life travels and experience was equivalent to her colleagues’ higher levels of formal education.

**Advancement.** At 6 months of employment, Isabell was unhappily passed over for a promotion and told to try again in two months:

*“That was very disappointing. Dot-Com is an extremely tough job. It just gets harder and harder and more stressful and more difficult. There’s always something new. You need to be really flexible in this job. They should have stressed that more in the beginning.”*

At the same time, she was somewhat relieved as she did not feel ready yet for increased responsibility and stress. By 9 months, feeling more ready, she received and accepted promotion to Tier 2 Customer Service Representative. Her salary increased from \$11 to \$12 per hour (fifty cents raise, fifty cents for having worked there six months). Isabell took pride in her advancement and attributed it to increased productivity and willingness to succeed. But Isabell’s promotion came with additional pressure to extend her hours. She began to work on her days off which meant less time with the children.

At base, however, Isabell measured “employment success” in terms of supervisory approval not wage gain:

*“If your boss doesn’t have any issues with you and likes you. I don’t really think it is how much money you are making.”*

Perhaps because of the paucity of positive feedback in her youth, constructive supervisory comments were like lifeblood to Isabell’s retention:

*“I did have another coaching session with her that was actually really great. She had a lot of really good things to say. I let my supervisor know that the coaching session was really nice. She was like, ‘these are the best responses,’ ‘these are so complete,’ ‘these are great.’ She said ‘I think you have met Dot-Com’s standards on the quality scale,’ which doesn’t sound great, but it is.”*

Isabell also considered skill attainment important, although she acknowledged the difficulty of achieving it:

*“I want to be a webmaster but a 9-12 month course requires lots of study. I know I could learn it, but when would I study? How could I afford the class? Webmasters are in great demand and earn lots of money. In my current job I can slowly advance and I will work at it, but it takes time. Two things would help: one, that I learn Spanish, and the other that I be able to work at home [telecommute].”*

On-the job training was available, but Isabell’s relatively low confidence in her current position precluded participation—a situation that employers often characterize erroneously as lack of desire to move ahead:

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*“They are always offering training, but I don’t feel that I am comfortable enough in my every-day job to go and learn something new.”*

For individuals like Isabell, undoing the ravages of the past and building self-confidence to move forward can be a lengthy process, as was found in research among welfare recipients whose journey to sustained employment took many years (Rangarajan, Meckstroth, & Novak, 1998; Herr & Halpern, 1994).

Outside-of-job training was also problematic, for different reasons. Web training subsidized by W-Plex, Washington’s Employment Security Department’s post-employment program for former TANF recipients was only available to unemployed persons, which would require quitting Dot-Com. Alternatively, Isabell hoped that SJI’s planned night classes in tech and web design would provide the skill advancement she sought. The offer of continuing education in a familiar and supportive atmosphere might facilitate SJI participants’ progress to advancement.

As Isabell neared her one-year anniversary at Dot-Com, company morale started to wane, in part because employees learned that Customer Service representatives in other companies made approximately \$3 per hour more than those at Dot-Com. The fact that Isabell signed a hiring contract that precluded other high tech employment for 18 months did not deter her from leaving Dot-Com. Isabell stayed because she believed she was on a career path that would eventually lead to a position of greater autonomy: telecommuting from home. This promotion might mediate Isabell’s competing work and family demands.

As example of such demands, between February and June 2000 several events increased Isabell’s adaptive burdens. In March, Childhaven was mandated to report Isabell for suspected child abuse as relayed by Batman. While the report was unsubstantiated, it was traumatic for Isabell whose history of abuse made her determined to avoid physically hurting her sons. In April, Dominic began to work more hours, arriving home at 10:00 p.m. after the children were in bed. This was an added strain on Isabell who felt “like a single parent” and on the children who missed the time with Dominic that had become part of their routine. In May, Isabell’s paychecks were significantly diminished by having to take unpaid sick leave because of Scooby-Doo’s bouts with asthma and ringworm.

Isabell’s promotion offered both relief and pressure in the midst of these circumstances. A new supervisor was willing to understand her work/family juggle but required more education than her previous boss. Isabell was also developing a clearer understanding of her needs:

*“I think the ideal working situation would be a job that I could get up and walk away from to take care of my family and yet be able to come back to it and I mean on a daily basis. I feel these are my kids, I am supposed to be raising them, and yet the childcare people spend more time with my kids than I spend. I don’t like that.”*

Having the flexibility to be both a parent and worker was important to Isabell. She was not interested in performing either role full-time, but did not want irreconcilable part-time roles either. However, Isabell’s conflict of interest was not only structural, but also due to the nature of her work in both spheres. She alluded to this when she described how meeting everyone’s needs at work often precluded meeting those at home:



*“I have people [customers] yelling at me all day so when I get home I just say ‘don’t even tell me, I don’t want to hear about it.’ It is a hard balance.”*

In September 2000, Dot-Com Company issued a new policy mandating a forty-five hour workweek for all employees, and “strongly encouraging” fifty. This disturbed Isabell whose goal was still eventual telecommuting but who struggled with the hours she already worked. At the same time, having worked at Dot-Com for a year, Isabell’s work record contributed significantly to gains in self-confidence. She anticipated the second holiday crunch with less apprehension because she had survived the first year’s. She felt less helpless when faced with dissatisfied customers and was more creative, using her interpersonal skills to assuage their concerns. Moreover, Isabell felt assertive enough to speak with her former boss’s supervisor about her boss, who had been reprimanded for advocating on Isabell’s behalf for more leave time. Isabell suggested that with such a small percentage of workers with families, Dot-Com Company should not ask those workers to extend hours, particularly when childless workers were eager to do so. Isabell was confident that her record of service was strong enough that she could set limits on how much time she would spend away from her family during the holiday season. Aided by the guidance of service providers, this assertiveness contrasted with Isabell’s earlier self-description: “I’m not real good at jumping up and saying ‘hey this is my limit.’”

At the one-year mark in October 2000, Isabell received her second promotion. In her new position as Tier 2 Escalation Expert she helped those in her previous position handle customer inquiries and complaints that were more difficult to resolve. Isabell again took pride in her accomplishment, despite the eighth change in schedule (6:00 a.m. to 4:00 or 5:00 p.m.) and the added responsibility it incurred without the requisite pay raise. Her hourly wage would increase fifty cents to \$12.50 but she would not receive it for two months. Isabell’s optimism was partly due to the fact that her promotion put her in position to advance to Telecommuter and partly to small victories such as never having to pay for extended day care hours because she could make it to childcare by 6:00 p.m. When asked whether telecommuting might be difficult since the boys would command her attention when she was home, as was raised in a recent report (Armour, 2001), Isabell could only see the benefits. As a telecommuter, she would have to put in eight hours, but, she pointed out this could be “any eight hours.” She would have greater autonomy, flexibility and would feel “less rushed” and “cranky” with her children:

*“I just like the idea of being here and get them ready, put them on the bus or walk them to the bus and then being here when they get home. Instead, I am gone before they get up and then it is 12 hours later for me and I come home and am wiped out. She also believed it would decrease her number of unpaid sick days and holidays as childcare closed for most holidays while her company did not.”*

Transportation was the other dilemma that Isabell could resolve by telecommuting. When she first started at Dot-Com Company, Isabell drove to work and parked downtown which cost \$11 per day. During the holiday season when she worked extra hours, parking cost \$20 per day. Realizing she could not continue to afford this cost, Isabell began to take public transportation. Unfortunately, she discovered her new neighborhood was “not well-bused.” This fact posed a difficulty for other Jobs Initiative participants as well and was not easily resolved without spending additional time in transit and more time away from children. Isabell’s reliance on public transportation also increased her financial burden and stress because the misfit between her work hours and the bus schedule frequently made her late for childcare pick-up at a cost of \$2 per minute—an extra cost she could ill afford.

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**Income Adequacy.** After one year of employment, Isabell and Dominic still struggled with their bills. They had leased a new car and were paying bills accrued during a summer vacation to California to visit Isabell's family. On the surface, they showed signs of leisure and discretionary income. However, on their two incomes, hers of about \$22,800 and Dominic's of about \$18,200, for a total of about \$41,000 minus several thousand dollars for unpaid days away from work, Isabell admitted they could not afford all that they spent. This disappointed Isabell who when she first returned to work felt as if she were, "rich because we [had been] living on \$450 per month." The Smiths' "experience" of income insufficiency is corroborated by applying the Self-Sufficiency Standard for Washington (Pearce, 2001), a more nuanced, contextual assessment of income adequacy than the federal poverty guideline. While \$40,000 annual income surpassed 200% of the federal guideline, the Smiths need almost \$45,000 annually for a living income according to the Washington Standard (Pearce, 2001).

Given their expenses, Isabell was unable to have more than a checking account. She had opened a market rate account with \$1000 in September but had to close it one month later to cover the cost of repairs to Dominic's truck. Dominic had a savings account, but it was not clear whether he viewed this account as family money, and Isabell did not allude to it except to verify its existence. The precarious nature of their finances put the family at risk should any unforeseen expenditure occur, not counting the eventual cost of day care. Isabell contacted her case manager and over the course of a three-hour appointment worked out a budget. The case manager also referred Isabell to a credit counselor to help her consolidate her pre-JI debt of \$7000 comprised of Isabell's ex-husband's parking tickets because she had not taken her name off the car title, unpaid hospital bills, and bad checks accrued during her years of substance abuse. Over time Isabell managed to decrease her debt to \$3000. Like other Jobs Initiative participants, much of Isabell's initial financial gain went toward the reduction of debt, and like other families, she used her Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for the same purpose. This latter income support was critical for Isabell, who heard about it from her tax preparer. Without this knowledge, missing from both SJI training and her employer, she would have missed a vital opportunity:

*"When I saw the amount of the return, I was like 'wow!' The child support is getting paid by money from my income tax refund."*

Isabell believed that a salary of \$22,000, approximately her income without the deletions, would sufficiently support her family, allow her to pay off her debt and buy her own home. However, it would not solve the problem of her multiple shifts or make room for activities outside of work and home.

**Pre-JI Burdens, Retention and Case Management/TRAC.** Burdens accumulated before SJI posed additional challenge to Isabell's work stability and burgeoning self-confidence:

*"I got Batman, moved, went to school, got a job, and here we are. I have a job, I got car, I got my kids, I got a nice home. I got everything I always wanted. [Sense of accomplishment?] I am working on it and you caught me at another trying period because now I have got Child Support after me for child support I didn't know that I had to pay".*

Just as Dot-Com and Isabell regained balance after the stressful holiday period, Isabell received a distressing call at work from the Child Support Enforcement Office, a call that set her apart from her coworkers and challenged her ability to keep work, family and history separate. She learned that she was being held responsible for the financial support of Batman for the years he spent in foster care. Having to address it at work, in a public forum comprised of few workers with families, increased this burden:

*“This guy calls me at work and he said I owe \$14,000 and he wanted to garnish me. He kept wanting me to say at work that the reason why I didn’t have my kid is because I was a heroin, he wanted me to say ‘junky’ on the phone and I was like ‘I am not going to say it because I am at work.’”*

Once again Isabell marshaled her supports: a new caseworker at Child Protective Services, a counselor at the high-risk health clinic where Isabell took Scooby-Doo (Birth-to-Three Program) with whom she had a strong connection, and for the first time, her new SJI case manager at TRAC. After a laborious documentation process, these various services helped Isabell demonstrate her poverty status during the time Batman was in care and reduce the amount she owed to \$900.

Isabell had not called her new case manager before this emergency because, similar to other Jobs Initiative participants, she was unaware of the full scope of retention services:

*“I thought all she wanted to know was how I was doing at work, so I never told her anything else.”*

At the time, Isabell’s particularly prescient case manager, who recognized the interplay of work and family stress, was herself growing accustomed to a new role and caseload of sixty-eight SJI participants. While this adjustment did not preclude her ability to address issues relevant to Isabell, it sometimes prevented in-person connection with participants. Part of the problem, according to the case manager, was that she did not meet participants until they were already working, since the agency format was one in which participants had a separate case manager throughout training and job search. However, once Isabell sought her case manager’s assistance, she was able to help problem-solve around the urgent issue of retroactive child support and the emergent issue of loss of subsidized child-care. More generally, Isabell needed someone who could listen:

*“The more I talk about it the less power it has because [until] I outlet it, I don’t see the good stuff. I sometimes just see all the bad things that are happening and the more I talk about it, it is like ‘you know, things are pretty darn good.’”*

Establishing this connection with her case manager helped ease Isabell’s worries, for as Isabell said, “I pre-worry everything.” This connection was also helpful because Isabell had identified another resource that, contrary to her work environment, approached her situation holistically. As in the past when Isabell’s chemical dependency therapist “didn’t just work with me about chemicals,” and her Birth-to-Three counselor “helped me get toys for the kids...and free clothing...and with all my legal issues,” Isabell’s SJI case manager addressed whatever obstacle Isabell identified. It is significant, however, that Isabell would not have known this had she not sought the case manager’s support.

Isabell’s ability to seek and utilize supports was a critical feature of her JI success—one that differentiated her from many other SJI participants. In the absence of family supports, Isabell had created a network of service providers and select friends to help her. Although Isabell communicated with her mother in California via daily e-mail, her mother’s struggles reduced her ability to bolster Isabell. Isabell’s closest friend occasionally took her sons for a weekend overnight to give Isabell and Dominic time to decompress. Isabell relied on this friend and on service providers to help her maintain composure and avoid the worst crisis she could imagine—the loss of custody of her sons. As Isabell said at one point when she felt overwhelmed, she called upon her supports because, “I was interven-

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ing with myself.” Despite the stress she felt, Isabell was clear that she “wouldn’t give up this stress for that stress [of drugs].” Whether seeking information about the EITC, consumer credit counseling, parenting classes, self-esteem classes, clothing vouchers, or quality childcare, Isabell was persistent. While her ability to follow leads may have been unique, her need for initial information was not.

### Family Welfare

**Parenting.** Isabell’s goals for her family were both material and emotional:

*“We would like to get out of debt and we want to get a house. I want my kids to grow up with self-esteem, a sense of who they are and what they can accomplish and a good sense of responsibility.”*

She saw “spending a lot of quality time together” and “doing more kinds of things, like going hiking, going on walks, talking with them about things” as important to these goals. Although the family went on occasional outings, regular incorporation was hindered by neighborhood limitations and work demands: “We want a house so that we can go play in the backyard.”

Aided by Childhaven and other service contacts, Isabell became increasingly confident in her parenting skills, although like most working parents she wished for more time with her children:

*“We eat together, we pray together, and we talk at dinner. The only thing I wish I did more was play with them a whole lot because I am busy cooking and cleaning and doing something.”*

The benefits of sustained time together were underscored during the family’s summer trip to relatives in California. Despite their young ages, a long drive, and many new people, the children’s behavior was exemplary: “They were well mannered, sweet, didn’t complain in the car . . . maybe because they got more attention.”

Isabell also described major differences in her parenting compared to how she was raised—differences she hoped would lead to her children’s better welfare:

*“I tell my kids that I love them on a regular basis, I hug them a lot, I kiss them a lot, I sing goofy songs with them. My mother was way more detached. I never saw her. When I did see her she was screaming at me and beating me up, but otherwise I didn’t exist. I tell my kids ‘boy you look nice, boy you are handsome,’ and when they do stuff that is nice, I say ‘oh boy,’ and it is hard for me.”*

Although the Smith family’s carefully-selected neighborhood was safe, it was not convenient to transportation or hospitable to children’s play. Isabell’s 4½ room apartment, however, was roomy enough and extremely homey. It was decorated with children’s drawings such as an “I love Mommy” poster, a “Happy Mother’s Day” painting, a Halloween pumpkin, a few toys on the small balcony, and matched living room furnishings from Isabell’s family home.

**Work and Family: Competing vs. Complementary Needs.** “At the same time” became a familiar refrain for Isabell as she described the many competing demands of her daily life. While she recognized the futility of trying to manage everything at once, she had the added burden of feeling she should:

*“I feel like I don’t have enough energy to do everything and feel like I should. We are supposed to be the ones teaching them how to be and raising them to be good people and yet we are the ones that are not here.”*

This exacerbated what Isabell described as “the stress your family goes through when you start working again.” However, to characterize Isabell’s stress this way minimized the overlapping transitions she experienced in her return to work and underestimated the influence of pre-SJI financial and emotional burdens on her new life.

By March 2000, after 6 months of employment, Isabell realized the full impact of competing work and family needs—an impact that may negatively affect retention among SJI participants with fewer supports and strengths, as is suggested by other workforce research (Michalopoulos, 2001):

*“There is no such thing as down time in my house...the only time I have is when I pass out from exhaustion. We try really hard because sometimes it is like, ‘all we do is cry, yell, and get in trouble around here’ and it is just miserable at times and at other times we have a really good time.”*

Isabell rued the costs of work when Batman wanted more bedtime story-reading:

*“Maybe you can read us the [bedtime] story when you are not tired.”*

Isabell was not sleeping well and described the various negotiations she made in her day that demanded the constant weighing of imperfect alternatives:

*“That is probably the worst part of the day...trying to get through the traffic to get to childcare by 6:00 because it is \$2 a minute for every minute that you are late after 6:00 and I have been 30 minutes late before and paid my childcare lady \$60. Then you get the kids and they are grouchy because they are tired and so it is crying all the way home, struggle to get them into the house. Then it is ‘I am hungry’ and I am cooking as fast as I can. I make real food but of course it takes longer and I am not a big advocate of TV. I don’t really think that throwing a kid in from of the TV is a good way to go, even though I have been doing it more than I think is appropriate. Then get them cleaned up, clip the nails, comb the hair, brush the teeth, read them a story, put the baby back to bed five billion times by 10:00. Then you go to bed and you get up and you do it again tomorrow and the weekends are never weekends.”*

In this description, Isabell graphically portrayed a working mother’s “second shift,” and as subtext, parenting activities she would like to do but did not have time for: more time to engage with her children; time to cook meals; time to set limits on things like television viewing; and time to herself. An absence of down time made it difficult to tune into her toddler when he did something frustratingly age appropriate and may have made it more tempting for him to continue:

*“I want to go back to where if the kids throw milk, I just go clean it up—not scream and yell and feel frustrated. Kids spill. I bawled my head off last weekend.”*

Isabell recognized the limited nature of her time and energy when she credited the Dominic’s presence with her ability to keep her job:

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*“If their dad wasn’t around I probably would have been fired by now. Dot-Com Company is not a family-friendly company at all. I don’t think it ever will be, so if he wasn’t around I would have to find something that was more, I hate to say this, but probably didn’t take a whole lot of brain cells so that I could probably be more lax.”*

Isabell thus defined “family-friendly” from a policy standpoint *and* an emotional one. The problem for Isabell was that her two spheres taxed her resources at the same time as they complemented one another—a balance that shifted over time, but was negative in the beginning. While she gained self-esteem from work, a point confirmed by the social worker at Childhaven, it was difficult in the early months of employment for this to offset the fatigue of trying to manage work and home. Fortunately, Isabell had a capacity for self-reflection that enabled her to stay the course and recognize that her family was adjusting to their new life together.

**Partnership.** In the early months of her Dot-Com job, Isabell and Dominic’s tightly balanced parenting schedule illustrated how non-resident partners can provide significant support:

*“Yeah he was really supportive because I sat down and I talked to him and I said ‘look I want to keep this job but in order to keep this job I have got to be at work x amount of hours and x amount of days and I can’t do it with the kids.’ He wasn’t living here at the time and he would come at 5:30 in the morning and get them ready for school because their childcare doesn’t open until 7:30 and I didn’t want to wake them up at 5:30 in the morning. So he would come over, I usually have to call about 7:00 and wake him up because he would fall asleep in the chair. I would say ‘are you awake, get the kids ready, gotta go.’ He was taking them to school and picking them up and we only had one set of keys to the house because he was not living here at the time. So he had the keys and he would bring them home and he would make them dinner and get them in their jammies and all that stuff. I think he did really well for never...because he didn’t live with us for a long time. It has been a couple of years.”*

When Dominic finally moved in after several months of this “exhausting” schedule, he went, “from having no family to having an instant family...dealing with it and not saying ‘you know this is too much for me, I am outta here.’” Throughout our contact, Isabell and Dominic struggled to balance family, work and their relationship, illustrating how partners can support new workers and contribute to retention vulnerability at the same time [see also Tasha Jones Family Story]. They were adjusting to being a family for the first time and also to a new dynamic where Isabell was sober and had different needs and expectations from those she had earlier in their 5-year relationship. Isabell had transitioned from using survival skills to developing life skills, a shift that commanded different skills and expectations from her partner as well.

Dominic dreamed of being a rancher but worked as a Welder, a job that returned him home “black and burned” and paid \$8 per hour for work that would pay between \$18 to \$25 per hour if his employment possibilities had not been limited by a history of serious legal difficulties. Irrespective of these circumstances, Isabell regarded Dominic as her partner, often alluding to her thoughts and acts in terms of “we.”

Isabell and Dominic’s struggle was a combination of the effects of their heavy work schedules, different parenting styles, and cultural differences about gender roles. While Dominic did not resent that Isabell worked and earned a higher salary, he expected her to give full time to him and the children as well. Isabell attributed Dominic’s attitude to his upbringing: “He comes from a background where the women do everything so it is hard for him to let go.” It

was equally hard for Dominic to share the burden of family and financial responsibility; when bills mounted or childcare arrangements fell through, Dominic felt he should be able to resolve problems alone. The fact that Isabell and Dominic struggled to communicate, sort out financial and other responsibilities, and reconcile their own needs with those of the family suggests they could have used assistance as a couple.

## Children’s Welfare

In perhaps the most dramatic illustration of the Jobs Initiative’s impact on children’s welfare, SJI training and employment provided Isabell with sufficient income to meet the children’s needs, cementing her newly-won custody of Batman. At the same time, both children felt the stress of their parents’ work and family burdens. Isabell labored to feel something other than guilt or regret about their circumstances. She described the anger she felt going to work in the morning: anger with the children, anger with Dominic for not helping her more, and anger with herself for being angry. The combination of Isabell’s effort to parent proactively during the time she had, such as creating songs in the car ride home from day care, and the support she received from outside services, benefited her sons, both of whom had specialized developmental as well as basic needs.

**Scooby-Doo.** Isabell recognized Scooby-Doo’s needs from the outset:

*“He was far behind other one year olds. He couldn’t walk, he could not talk at all, not even a word.”*

As a result of Isabell’s advocacy and persuasive persistence, 11-month old Scooby-Doo was accepted into the Therapeutic Child Development Program (TCD) at Childhaven, a state- and privately-funded, highly-reputed therapeutic child development agency for at-risk children with special needs. Dedicated professional staff maintained a staff-to-child ratio of 1:3 for children under 12 months, like Scooby-Doo, and 1:4 for children over age 2, twice the number of staff required by regular child care. Isabell’s observations were confirmed by Childhaven staff:

*“Scooby-Doo was like many floppy drug-affected babies; we wondered if he would walk.”*

As a result, Isabell tried to do everything for Scooby-Doo, in part driven by the guilt she felt having exposed him to drugs, an unproductive feeling Childhaven helped to make, in Isabell’s words, “instead of a mountain at least a rain-cloud.”

Importantly, and in contrast to other therapeutic programs, Childhaven recognized parents’ employment needs and crafted transportation, parent education, case management, and therapeutic services accordingly:

*“We let them (parents) know what is happening, but that we are working with the child. Versus a child care center who reports to parents and expects them to do all the work. We tell parents what we think they can handle—we try to gauge where a parent is at.”*

Childhaven was particularly cognizant of the reality of parents’ lives under the new TANF regulations, as another administrator outlined:

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*“Now that so many women are going back to work, it’s difficult to get them involved with parenting skills. We help teach parents how to be responsible—get places on time. We’re really doing ‘job readiness’ and ‘soft skills’ in our parent training.”*

Isabell consulted with Childhaven’s teachers and case manager at will: several times daily during times of greatest need. Recognizing the vulnerability that stemmed from her abusive background, Isabell and Childhaven staff viewed these contacts as critical to preventing a further generation of abuse.

Throughout his second year Scooby-Doo was seen at the University of Washington Birth-to-Three High Risk Infant Clinic in addition to Childhaven attendance. As Isabell put it, “he’s seen every specialist on the planet,” a fact that exposed the time she needed to take from work in order to fulfill Scooby-Doo’s treatments. Scooby-Doo also needed extra medical care because of his asthma, pneumonia, and chronic ear infections. This combination of regular and specialized needs called upon work hours that Isabell eventually took as unpaid leave, a sacrifice that paid off for her child’s health but reduced her regular \$730 check to \$400 and jeopardized her job security: “I was constantly paranoid that I was going to get fired.” Through a combination of services, greater adjustment to home life, Isabell’s progress at work, and her love for him, Scooby-Doo’s health improved notably:

*“I think he is getting better because his need for Albuteral is getting farther, there is longer periods of time where he does not need it now because he was on it daily, four times a day, every day for almost two years.”*

Isabell’s sacrifice paid off developmentally as well. By November 1999, at age two, Scooby-Doo had made enough progress to receive an upgraded diagnosis from “Developmentally Disabled” to “Developmentally Immature.” By April 2000, Childhaven noticed further improvements in Scooby-Doo’s speech and motor skills and by July, his behavioral improvement brought eligibility for further services into question. TCD professionals predicted that Scooby-Doo would eventually be able to enroll in a mainstream kindergarten class. Perhaps most important, especially for policy consideration, Scooby-Doo’s gains were consolidated by the fact that although he was past his state-allotted 15-months’ treatment, he was able to remain at Childhaven and receive the care that not only helped him but Batman and Isabell as well.

**Batman.** Batman’s entrance into the family was the biggest adjustment for all four family members during Isabell’s transition to work. Child Protective Services removed Batman from Isabell and placed him in foster care the day after he was born because of her active addiction. For various reasons, Isabell saw Batman only sporadically during his years in foster care and so his “return” to her care at age 3½ was more aptly their introduction to one another. The difficulty of this adjustment was exacerbated by Childhaven’s assessment that Batman had been abused while in kinship care, as his initial responses to maternal discipline suggested:

*“When he first moved into the house and the first time he had ever got in trouble he says ‘are you going to lock me in the bathroom?’ ‘We don’t lock people in the bathroom in this house,’ [I said]. He said ‘are you going to hit me then?’ and I said ‘we don’t hit people either.’”*

As a result, one aspect of Isabell’s parenting responsibility was to “untrain” Batman from his experience in foster care. Recognizing his needs as she had Scooby-Doo’s, Isabell negotiated Batman’s enrollment in Childhaven also.



With their help and later, a therapist through the Seattle Children’s Home Society, Isabell understood Batman’s behavior as stemming from his experience: he rarely cuddled with her, was often confused about her parenting role, tested limits, refused the help he needed (i.e. to tie his shoes), protested leaving child care and engaged in long crying spells before Isabell left for work in the morning.

Batman’s behavior commanded capacities for time and patience that rarely exist under the best of circumstances. For Isabell it was often overwhelming:

*“I get so frustrated because I talk to Childhaven and I talk to a therapist and I talked to this lady who taught my parenting classes and Batman is really a difficult child.”*

With the help of supportive services, Isabell was able to parent less reactively, even under stress.

Batman’s health improved appreciably in his new home:

*“He was a sick little guy when he was younger, he was on the fibulator, breathing machines, constantly [for asthma]. He has not gotten sick since he has moved in with me and that is almost a year.”*

At “graduation” from Childhaven in September 2000, after fifteen months of treatment, Isabell reviewed Batman’s gains:

*“They thought he was doing really well. They felt really good about me taking him out because a lot of his behavior was from watching other kids act that way”.*

Childhaven’s social worker confirmed Isabell’s view:

*“I felt it was a positive move for him. The atmosphere in the classroom at Childhaven can get pretty chaotic. Batman got all he could out of Childhaven. At the same time, his behavior at childcare was good. It was a more calm environment.”*

The Childhaven worker voiced no lingering concerns about Batman but applauded Isabell’s decision to secure his gains through continued therapeutic attention at a family counseling agency. Most important, Isabell’s choice of childcare, now threatened by subsidy withdrawal [see below], confirmed and reinforced Batman’s gains in ways that translated positively to his home behavior:

*“He acted out a couple of times, but after that we talked about it and he has been pretty good since at school [childcare]. His getting in trouble here [at home] has toned down a lot too. He used to get in trouble daily and it has gotten a lot better.”*

In Fall 2000, the Childhaven newsletter featured Isabell’s story of recovery and the reunion of her family, highlighting her employment success without identifying her employer by name. Ironically, despite not being family-oriented, her company was one of Childhaven’s financial patrons. From Childhaven’s stance as a social service provider, Isabell was not only a success story but also an atypical parent:

*“Isabell is a highly motivated parent...she is a highly stressed parent as well...she’s more aware of her needs for help than most parents.”*

### Childcare

Every weekday at 7:30 a.m. Dominic took Batman and Scooby-Doo to a licensed home-based childcare facility close to their home. The Childhaven bus picked them up at 8:30 a.m. and returned them to the childcare facility at 3:30 p.m. Isabell arrived at 6:00 p.m. to collect them, almost 12 hours from the time they left home. The long day in external care, while constructive and therapeutic, may have heightened the children's demanding behaviors at coming-home time.

Isabell was pleased with the caring, bilingual [English-Spanish] environment of the facility and felt confident that her sons received treatment in accord with her parenting values:

*"I never tell her [the provider] when I am coming and I always come at different times and she is always reading to them or singing to them or playing games with them."*

According to another community member who sent her child to the facility, it was "well run, nurturing and family-like," all of which eased Isabell's concerns about her sons' welfare.

The only problem with the childcare facility was that Isabell could not afford their services without the childcare subsidy she received. Under TANF regulations her subsidy was set to expire in September 2000, one year after Isabell started working. Under TANF, Isabell paid \$61 (increased over the study period to \$95) a month for both children. Subsidy withdrawal could potentially increase Isabell's cost to \$1200 (\$650/child with \$100 reduction for two children): this amount of money was "like rent times three" and plainly unaffordable. Isabell also experienced a sizeable decrease in her rent subsidy as a result of her new job. Her share increased from \$80 to \$518 per month for her market-rate \$725/month apartment. The reduction or expiration of these vital subsidies revealed a greater truth for Isabell: that fulfilling the mandate of welfare-to-work legislation could mean losing financial ground:

*"The trouble with advancement at work when you've been poor is that you don't earn more money because your benefits go away and your housing goes up. You get depressed. You can't help it."*

Negotiating the subsidies also exerted costs. Isabell had to take unpaid time off work to clarify her childcare subsidy status because of bureaucratic inefficiency or overload, as she educated her boss:

*"I am going to have to go down there. You aren't familiar with this system are you? You leave phone calls and they never return them. You got to go there in person to talk to somebody."*

Isabell hoped that Washington's new post-TANF subsidy program, W-Plex, would make it possible for the children to remain at the quality childcare that was so important to solidifying their Childhaven gains.

Such imbalance between wage increases and subsidy withdrawals may negatively influence retention of Jobs Initiative participants at the 1-year mark:

*“I’m lucky with childcare now. At the moment it is subsidized by the state. I only pay \$95 a month instead of \$650. The first year of working is pretty nice. I had a chance to get all the things we couldn’t have before, the basics like shoes and coats. It used to be, ‘what’s more important—diapers or shoes this month.’ Now I’m getting them everything they ever wanted. What am I going to do with them when I have to pay more childcare?”*

Isabell had faced the difficult challenge of losing her childcare provider and having to search for quality care in the past which made her feel doubly fortunate to have found her current facility. The only affordable alternative was to leave the children in the care of Dominic’s family, but Isabell and Dominic agreed that the children would not have sufficient supervision or engagement:

*“They don’t care what he does or what he gets into or what he is doing. They don’t really watch him. As long as he is not crying, they think everything is fine and I don’t think that is how you watch a child. We will have monsters for children.”*

Underscoring the parents’ perceptiveness, during one attempt to use them for childcare the family lost track of Batman for 4 hours, engendering multiple frantic phone calls that shattered Isabell’s work performance:

*“I can’t deal with this. There is no way I can go to work and work in peace knowing he is over there.”*

Further complicating childcare and work conflicts, as Isabell and Dominic worked to solve an anticipated 5-day childcare closure and possible stoppage of Scooby-Doo’s subsidy, Dominic’s family showed increasing resentment of Isabell’s success—unfortunately a common negative influence on the retention of new workers:

*“Other family members not liking that I am doing better. I think they liked it better when I was struggling. I am getting a lot of cold shoulders, a lot of un-invites.”*

Isabell also faced an additional bureaucratic problem: the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) refused to pay her provider full-time for part-time care and the facility could not afford to take children part-time. Isabell’s critique addressed the larger policy issues of childcare cost and subsidy and the accompanying societal devaluation of childcare work:

*“It is because welfare pays two dollars an hour. I couldn’t get my 14 year old nephew to watch my kids for two dollars an hour. It’s just ridiculous. Watching kids is a big deal.”*

By September 2000, Batman attended childcare full-time, but Scooby-Doo would remain a part-timer unless Isabell discontinued his therapeutic care in order to fulfill the subsidy guidelines—a “Hobson’s Choice,” or lack of viable alternatives, if ever there was one. Although Isabell’s concern about this subsidy loss faded as the deadline came and went without DSHS revoking the benefit, the new problem of payment took its place and Isabell’s childcare worries deepened, as did confusion about her eligibility status.

By October 2000, Isabell had celebrated three years of sobriety and held, for the first time, a large birthday celebration for Batman and Scooby-Doo in her home. Her personal goals centered on her children’s welfare: she wanted to live in a house with a fenced-in yard. Her goals for her children were also developmental:

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*"I want them to see that working pays off, working, having a job, going to school is really important."*

Isabell later reported success in these goals:

*"Batman's got that. He asks, 'is there some work I can do so I can go to the store to buy something?' He always talks about school too. He's got it!"*

Both Batman and Scooby-Doo were doing better at home and school. Soon Scooby-Doo would grow out of his need for specialized services, which meant Isabell would no longer have the support services from Childhaven. However, she had already established a new connection with the Seattle Children's Home Society where Batman would engage in therapy and where she could seek collateral support in parenting.

Isabell also relayed increasingly positive experiences with her children. She spoke of giving them alternative modes of expression, teaching them "how to say 'I am really tired today' or 'I had a really good day' so they know it's okay to have good and bad days." This modeling suggested that Isabell had become more accepting of the normalcy of her own good and bad days.

With the 2000 holiday season approaching and her childcare situation tenuous, Isabell faced new challenges to retention and advancement. For one, she missed the opportunity to attend an information session about SJI's new web development course due to a childcare conflict. Secondly, the Seattle Times reported that attempts were being made to unionize the Customer Service division of Dot-Com Company (Galvin, 2000). As evidenced by Isabell's struggles, scheduling demands and job security concerns made Dot-Com a hospitable environment for organized labor. How this might impact Isabell remained an open question.

## Follow-up May 2001 and Conclusions

When we recontacted Isabell in May 2001, 15 months after our first meeting and 6 months after we saw her last, she no longer worked for Dot-Com. In February, Isabell called us to report that Dot-Com had laid off 1,300 employees and that her job would end in May. Isabell anticipated the Dot-Com lay off, but after one and a half years with the company was not prepared for its effect:

*“There were 1,300 people [in at least two sites] doing my job and there are 75 left in Seattle. The layoff notice said that I would not get special consideration even if they did reopen. They sent out a notice on Tuesday to everyone saying there was an all-company meeting at noon and we should bring all our personal belongings”.*

Isabell’s position was secure until May, as the company needed a skeletal customer service staff to make its transition. She suspected Seattle was targeted due to unionizing efforts that had almost come to fruition. A New York Times article published the day before Isabell’s call alluded to the unionization activity, but cited Dot-Com’s denial that this factored in their decision (Hansell, 2001). Instead, Dot-Com cited higher costs of its Seattle facility as the reason behind the job cuts. Isabell, expressing a mixture of shock and relief at the news, suspected her company of underhandedness:

*“I didn’t have the guts to quit this job, but they asked so much from us. I’ve been unhappy for a while. I’ve had lots of issues with my boss. And then they raised the standards. I wasn’t meeting them. I think it was a ploy to get people to quit. They were unreasonable. A lot of people quit over the holidays. I’ve been trying to leave stress at work, but I’ve been exhausted all the time.”*

Adding to Isabell’s stress, she worked extra hours without pay. These extra hours were initially encouraged by Isabell’s boss who was concerned about meeting quotas for his department. Isabell, for fear of being “written up,” acquiesced, a significant savings for the company that was required to pay time and a half for overtime. Isabell said that extra hours were not mandatory but “expected.” This practice recalled a previous one that circumvented laws against mandatory overtime:

*“Dot-Com has passed a new policy that if you sign up [sounds voluntary but is mandatory] for overtime and you don’t come in, you get a point. If you do it again, you get another point. If you get three points you are put on probation. If you screw up within your probation, you get fired.”*

Under a new deleterious policy, Isabell again feared she would be fired, this time before reaching her May date. She therefore worked “off the clock” until her boss suggested she stop. Isabell described her relationship with her boss, who vacillated between understanding the primacy of Isabell’s family commitments and pushing her to meet unrealistic statistical requirements, as “love-hate.” Perhaps most important, Isabell’s boss came to understand the broader meaning of “dependability” as inclusive of both work and family responsibility which critically influenced Isabell’s ability and willingness to stay employed:

*“He’d say, ‘you miss a lot of work, but out of all the employees, you are the most dependable. More than those who are there every day. With you I know what’s going on.’”*

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While coworkers left during the busy holiday season from stress and low morale, Isabell received an award for retaining customers. She was ambivalent about leaving a workplace where she sometimes felt “‘sub’ to everyone else” and sometimes “right along with them.” While news reports indicated that some of Isabell’s coworkers—accustomed to a wide-open job market for college graduates—were glib about the lay off, this was not the case for Isabell: “You do not know how badly I do *not* want to go back on welfare.” More promising, despite nearing the end of her official 2-year connection with SJI, SJI informed her about an upcoming web design course and her case manager was optimistic about job prospects. Similarly, she would be eligible for unemployment insurance. Isabell would continue to work until the first week of May, at which time she would receive 3 months of severance pay—a sum that seemed princely until taxes eroded it:

*“\$5,700 before taxes but it was taxed 36% so we only get \$3006.”*

Despite this package, which did not include health insurance, Isabell was understandably scared. By the time she left in May, Isabell had been promoted to Escalation Representative and made \$13 per hour. As she said, “The first year I was the intake person; the second year I was the end-all.”

Isabell had one month between her May end date with Dot-Com and her June start date for the SJI-sponsored course in web design, web development, and other related hi-tech skills. Offered through Community College, the course would last nine months: six months of classes, five days per week, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., and three months of internship at 40 hours per week. In addition to skills training, Isabell would earn valuable college credits. By May, Isabell viewed her lay off from Dot-Com in terms of advancement:

*“I was trying to figure out how to work at Dot-Com and go to school at the same time. It just didn’t compute. That’s why this is a blessing in disguise. I didn’t have enough skills at Dot-Com to move up.”*

At Dot-Com, Isabell’s parenting and work schedule did not permit skills advancement unless offered by the company during regular work hours. Isabell had early opportunities to advance that she declined from lack of confidence. Despite this, Isabell acknowledged she had come “a long way” and possessed a steadier confidence in both her work and parenting abilities. Unfortunately, this confidence could not fully obviate financial pressures brought on by Isabell’s job loss and additional unforeseen changes.

**Financial Dilemmas.** Isabell’s “month off” was anything but restful:

*“I wish the month had been more like a vacation. I was so busy with SJI, Unemployment, Childcare, DSHS, and TRAC.”*

Her enrollment in the web design course required entrance tests which she completed with results that, while mixed, did not preclude her enrollment. Isabell looked to SJI for information about benefits eligibility, which they were willing but unequipped to offer. Isabell’s situation required computational savvy and knowledge of benefit structures that were cryptic to providers and beneficiaries alike.

Isabell’s first dilemma was whether to apply for public assistance (TANF) or Unemployment Insurance (UI). While TANF income would be half that of UI, it came with subsidized childcare. Under TANF, Isabell paid \$266 per month

for childcare, an amount that would increase to \$1,350 per month without subsidy. This put Isabell in an untenable position: she needed child care to attend classes full time but in order to maintain her subsidy, under TANF regulations, she would be required to work 20 hours per week. Ever resourceful, Isabell discovered she qualified for two important programs: city-subsidized childcare and Commissioner Approved Training (special permission to simultaneously collect Unemployment Insurance and attend training). Isabell’s ability to cobble together these unusual benefits bespoke the need for improved systems coordination. The advent of TANF, which left Unemployment Insurance policy unchanged, left a gap for many low-income mothers in Isabell’s situation:

*“If I am unemployed, who helps with daycare so I can look for a job? DSHS? No, they don’t pay for it. The organizations don’t work with each other.”*

Isabell qualified to receive Unemployment Insurance (UI) of \$1,046 per month until March 2002. As Isabell explained:

*“I just told them [Unemployment Insurance] the truth. I can’t get a job that will support my family without this training. I cannot work at the same time.”*

The UI time frame coincided with the length of her web design course as well as the duration of the child care subsidy from the City of Seattle. All end in March 2002. The city childcare subsidy surpassed that of TANF; in Isabell’s words: “I have no co-pay!”

Gains aside, Isabell still lacked health coverage for herself; only the children were covered under Medicaid and COBRA payments for Isabell, at over \$200 per month, were unaffordable. Isabell would look into Basic Health Plan, Washington state’s subsidized health care for low-income families, but this required additional appointments and paperwork and a several-month wait. A new development, loss of rental subsidy, was more troubling. For personal and legal reasons, Isabell was reluctant to fully disclose Dominic’s contributions to the family and, as a result, the Housing Authority revoked her Section 8. As of June 1<sup>st</sup>, Isabell would pay market rent for her unit, which was \$775 per month. While this was a substantial increase, Isabell felt a relief similar to that caused by job loss:

*“That was very stressful. I was relieved when they wrote that they were cutting me off instead of examining me further.”*

Isabell planned to use her severance from Dot-Com to pay the rent:

*“We’re using my severance. Both cars’ tires need fixing and we’re paying rent in advance.”*

While this would offset the impending burden of full rent, it would not resolve it. Isabell and Dominic’s anticipated budget did not allow the flexibility required by unforeseen expenses or changes of plan. Moreover, an eight-year waiting list for Section 8 subsidy would preclude Isabell’s reengagement. However, Isabell thought she may have discovered an alternative: an affordable apartment through Lutheran Services. Seeing an advertisement, Isabell followed up and was told she qualified because she was unemployed. At study end, the status of this apartment was not known.

**Family welfare.** By May 2001, Dominic had been promoted to Site Manager and earned \$9.50 per hour, a below-standard wage that continued to reflect his legal difficulties. To remedy Dominic’s situation, Isabell and Dominic

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prepared to hire an attorney. While this would be a long and costly process, it could lead to better employment for Dominic and the ability to formally commit to Isabell and the children.

Despite financial and legal pressures, Isabell and her family appeared more settled. She and Dominic talked openly about bills, streamlined their credit cards, and managed to reduce their debt to \$1,000. Isabell used a second-hand computer from her brother “to shop, pay bills, keep up with my finances.” She reflected on these changes in light of her past:

*“When I think about it, I’m surprised I didn’t completely fall apart. [Why didn’t she?] I wanted it so bad. I wanted to be regular, like everybody else, so bad.”*

In many ways, Isabell’s life was more “regular.” She recognized present challenges as regular life dilemmas and resources she currently used were more regular than therapeutic. She continued to see her substance abuse therapist once a week and talk to her SJI case manager (“she’s awesome”), but also widened her support network:

*“I use friends more than I have in my whole life. I joined the National Council of La Raza.”*

Perhaps most important to Isabell, her role as a mother became more regular. Her home was festooned with children’s artwork and signs of accommodation, such as a child-size table and chairs, and her children sustained considerable social and intellectual growth. In Fall 2000, Isabell’s hope for the future had pertained to family life:

*“I hope it is much smoother than it is now; I hope it is much more secure where everybody feels secure, loved.”*

In May 2001, Isabell reported happily, “I think we met that goal!”

**Children.** Batman and Scooby-Doo’s growth reflected Isabell’s increased parental confidence and consistency. During our follow-up visit, both boys played happily and responded to limits set by Isabell. Batman proudly spelled two words aloud: “zoo” and “dog.” Isabell revealed a mature approach to her sons:

*“I’m reading Raising Your Spirited Child. Batman is ultra-sensitive and Scooby-Doo is ‘out there.’ He’s got more energy; reacts more intensely. I keep thinking they’re ‘normal,’ but they just need extra everything.”*

While both boys needed “extra,” they were also reacting in age-appropriate ways. As Isabell trusted her parenting more, she understood this. For approximately two months, the boys had been acting-out both at home and child-care. Isabell attributed this to the stress of her final months at Dot-Com and the fact that “this is the two-year anniversary of our being together.” The fact that Childhaven “diagnosed Scooby-Doo as fine,” helped Isabell trust that acting-out behavior could also be within the realm of “regular” toddler behavior.

Scooby-Doo would attend Childhaven through August, an extension of services “due to the generosity of the CPS worker.” Scooby-Doo no longer required therapeutic services and, even with the possibility of a loophole to extend services further, Childhaven believed he was ready to advance. Isabell continued to have difficulties with the non-therapeutic childcare facility’s attitude toward Scooby-Doo; now they refused to help him with toilet training. Whether Isabell would seek alternative care was not resolved at study end. At present, she was glad to resolve the issue of payment. Even with subsidy, however, families had to provide lunches due to USDA funding cuts:



*“This caused a big jump in cost for us and was hard for our morning timing.”*

Batman would continue in daycare until starting full-day kindergarten in fall 2001. Isabell’s efforts to enroll Batman in kindergarten engaged her in another struggle, this time with the Board of Education. Because Isabell informed the school district of Batman’s bilingual abilities she had to take him for language tests that, in the end, were unnecessary. By the time this was discovered, Batman could only enroll in Isabell’s third choice, a neighborhood school, one “not particularly academic; tends to focus on kids with ‘issues,’” according to a local expert. While Isabell could advocate to change his assignment, she did not want to “deal with the bureaucracy.” Her decision was also influenced by the proximity of the school that was 15 minutes from her home. Under similar pressures, Isabell discontinued Batman’s therapy:

*“We met with the therapist and had a few sessions, but then couldn’t get scheduled. . . and finally we dropped it. It was too much work.”*

Although high school is far down the line, 1999 WASL scores for 10<sup>th</sup> graders at Batman’s future school were consistently lower than the state average (Seattle Public Schools, 1999). While the school appeared to have enrichment programs for K-12, it was not clear what was in store for Batman. Because Isabell was preoccupied with current needs, it was difficult to anticipate those of the future. Judging from the level of her involvement and concern in her sons’ child care arrangements, Isabell would want to be equally involved in their education. The larger question, as experienced by Jobs Initiative and other new workers [see Kevin McDonalds Family Story, for example], is whether parents who work at non-standard hours in high stress positions, like Isabell, can satisfy school demands for involvement at the level outlined by Batman’s school:

*“Our School community is dependent on the volunteer services of our parents. [In 1999] Parents donated 17,000 hours to various activities surrounding our community.”*

In May, health concerns were most urgent. While Batman was in good health, Scooby-Doo continued to have bouts of asthma and sustained serious hearing loss:

*“He’s had permanent hearing loss in both ears; significant hearing loss. We’re waiting to see a specialist at Children’s Hospital; trying to get a referral from the doctor. It will probably happen while I’m in training and their Dad can’t take them [because of Medicaid]. They’d better have evening or weekend hours.”*

Although Isabell’s concerns reflected those of all working parents, because Dominic and she were unmarried, Dominic’s ability to take responsibility for the children’s care was limited. The need to attend to Scooby-Doo’s health eventually put Isabell’s training plan in jeopardy.

**June 2001.** In June, shortly after starting her course, Isabell felt once again torn between competing spheres of motherhood and work. She described being “too tired” and briefly considered part-time work after Scooby-Doo told her, “Mommy, I don’t want you to work because then you don’t want to play.” Despite these tensions, Isabell decided to stick with her SJI-sponsored class. The class was diverse, offered college credits, and would markedly advance her skills. However, soon after deciding to continue, Scooby-Doo had a severe asthma attack and was hospitalized for

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five days. Isabell said she received “a lot of pressure from SJI” when she was gone and feared she might have to drop out or risk being “kicked out.” Isabell could enroll for the same course in September but this meant her childcare subsidy and Unemployment Insurance payment would end before training. With unemployment insurance set for nine months, it was not clear what her income producer would be in March if she were still completing the course. This issue was not resolved by study end.

The fact that Isabell was atypical in various contexts and still struggled as a parent, worker, and partner, suggests that the “typical” SJI participant would struggle as well, if not to a greater degree. Isabell cited several classmates from her original SJI training cohort who were not working and/or had relapsed from the stress of job search or new jobs. Isabell was able to engage multiple services and systems to offset the role strain she felt in her many transitions. She also benefited from systemic inefficiencies that arbitrarily extended the deadlines that could have just as arbitrarily been imposed. Due to SJI opportunity and extraordinary effort, Isabell and her family moved forward. Current setbacks would be resolved with this same combination, but would need increased follow-up supports.

# Moving Up is a Steep Climb

The “Kevin McDonalds” Family Story

*Parents’ Work and Children’s Welfare  
in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jobs Initiative*



*Roberta Rehner Iversen  
with Kathe Johnson and Michele Belliveau*

April 2002

## “Kevin McDonalds” Family Story

**Resident Family:**

Kevin McDonalds, a 29-year old African American man—ethnographic study key informant

Lynn, a 27-year old Caucasian woman, Kevin’s fiancée

Salina McDonalds, 6-year old daughter, in 1<sup>st</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> grade

Christina McDonalds, 5-year old daughter, in Kindergarten/1<sup>st</sup> grade

Fireman McDonalds, 3-year old son, in daycare/K-3 preschool

Study timeline: February through October 2000. Follow-up May 2001.

*“Without a start, there’s no finish.”*

As a 29 year-old African American male who had been incarcerated twice, Kevin McDonalds’ employment prospects were poor. The Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJI) gave him an opportunity to define himself outside of his status as felon, to legitimately support his family, and to be a day-to-day parent to his children. Kevin’s story portrays the successes and the challenges for even the most determined, working two-parent families in their attempts to achieve sufficient income and overcome the past.

## Background and Pre-MJI History

Kevin was born in Arkansas where he lived until moving to Wisconsin at age 7 with his mother and three siblings. He spoke nostalgically of regular contact with his near-by grandparents during his Arkansas childhood. Although Kevin graduated from high school, he had little confidence in his ability to pursue a career, as no guideposts were available to help cultivate his talents. He repeatedly lamented the absence of information and opportunity for himself and other urban people of color:

*“When I grew up, for Blacks and Latinos there were only two things pumped—college and the armed forces. We were not told about different apprenticeships, different skilled trades. We were just told if you didn’t have college, you couldn’t succeed. If the high schools had information about the trades, a lot more people would do it. They could introduce us to what was going on. We could have seen more things we could do. If we didn’t want to go to college, or to the armed services, we had the sense that there was nothing else we could do. With information about these other possibilities, it would not have seemed just like a dead end.”*

Kevin believed that he might have sought an apprenticeship out of high school if he had known about such a route, since he did not view himself as college-bound:

*“I probably would have done it. I don’t mind going to school, but I’m not a college-bound type of person. I tried it—but I was discouraged. If you’re not good at school—then what! You don’t feel like there are any options.”*

Such observations, reiterated by other MJI families (see Hard Working Blessed Family), staff in partner organizations, and teachers in the urban schools, have profound implications for advocacy and policy efforts sponsored by the Jobs Initiatives across the country, as well as for their advertising efforts, as Kevin suggested specifically to MJI:

*“Now I’m in school at MGAI. But it would be much better if the program [MJI] were going to the high schools. Tell them about the possibilities beyond college and the armed forces. Give them choices, options.”*

Kevin’s concern about opportunity persisted in his concerns about his children’s futures:

*“My kids can do what they want. That’s their life. That’s how I was raised. If I have a vision for them, and they don’t want it, I’ve blown it. But it’s important that they know about different outlets.”*

Faced with young adulthood, dreams of one day becoming the proprietor of a club, and no awareness of options beyond the armed forces or college, Kevin turned to the quickest way to make money that he saw available to him: selling drugs. As a result of taking a “shortcut” to money, Kevin was incarcerated twice: the first time for eight months and the second time for three years. While both periods of incarceration were difficult for Kevin, the second period was more so; by this time he had two small children to support and few job prospects upon his release from prison. By the time Kevin was introduced to the Jobs Initiative he had identified a very strong reason to resist the financial allure of selling drugs—the freedom to provide for and raise his children, Salina, Christina and Fireman:

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*“I go through occasional withdrawals when I look at my small paycheck sometimes. The paycheck goes fast. But I want to see my children grow up. I’m lucky they were young when I was in prison. They knew I was gone, but they couldn’t feel it like they would now. Now is a critical point in their life.”*

Kevin’s family became the chief motivating factor in his efforts to excel at training and work.

### **MJI Training: Milwaukee Graphic Arts Institute (MGAI)**

Kevin was first introduced to MJI through a radio announcement and later through a friend who had successfully completed an MJI training program. Kevin was skeptical of training programs having previously completed a plumbing apprenticeship that led to frustration, not employment. Kevin did not receive the tools he needed to find a job, the most important being a network of potential employers to contact:

*“I was in a plumbing course before MGAI. It was different from this one. You had to go to look for a job yourself. If there had been more help job searching—like this program [MJI/MGAI], it would have been a nice program. At the time I didn’t know what I was looking for. I didn’t have my driver’s license. I was a felon, and that was looked at negatively. I was into the program, the classes, and figured they’d help me find a job. We were a team. I was thrown for a loop when they didn’t. I never went for the final aptitude test at the local union. We were supposed to take it together [everyone in the class]. But the teacher left. If people would have cut the yellow tape—sent us to meet Bob, Joe, Lou. . . it would have helped. Like the MGAI program [did].”*

For Kevin, “cutting the tape” meant more than simply developing contacts; it also meant helping him overcome his prison record. In the two years between prison release and his connection with MJI, Kevin cycled through a series of low-wage jobs. In the 12 months before MJI enrollment, Kevin worked at 2 jobs for 40 weeks earning a total income of \$6,000. His most recent job paid \$6.50/hour, for a potential annual income of \$13,500, and offered no non-wage benefits. Only his most recent job at the hospital where his fiancée worked held opportunities for advancement, until a law prohibiting the employment of felons was passed forcing the hospital to fire him: “[Eventually] They changed the law back, so that felons can work in hospitals as long as they don’t have direct contact with the patients, [but] it was too late for me.”

With understandable apprehension Kevin attended an information session with MJI affiliate, the Milwaukee Graphic Arts Institute (MGAI), and met the MGAI Printing Connection Program Manager and the Employer Liaison. With enthusiasm and conviction that he was the right person for their program, both MGAI representatives encouraged Kevin to enroll in their 8-week training program. His goal was to “learn occupational skills.” When Kevin reflected on his training and subsequent employment, he was clear that without the support of the two representatives who “work beyond their job,” he would not have persevered. Kevin particularly credited the Program Manager, who described herself as “half case manager,” with “really putting me out there” and was not sure what he would be doing if he had not been introduced to MGAI. In response to such speculation, Kevin simply said, “I don’t even want to think about it.” At the Program Manager’s eventual departure from MGAI, Kevin was equally dismayed. His comments also illustrated the relationship between good case management and job retention:

*“When I learned that Program Manager was gone—I was shocked! She was the one that really got me motivated and started—her and Employer Liaison. Program Manager really put me out there. I hated it when she left. Seeing her and talking to her helped keep me motivated and uplifted.”*

Although Kevin felt supported by the Employer Liaison who remained at MGAI and the new Program Manager, this incident highlighted the importance of both on-going support and the need for workforce programs to have an orderly, in-person termination process at an employee’s departure. To her credit, Kevin’s Program Manager contacted him at a later date, helping both to ease the transition and cement the effects of their work together.

One of Kevin’s recommendations for MJI, applicable to other workforce programs also, was that it be made more widely known in the community. “It’s like a lot of things—anything that’s uplifting or instructive for a person—it’s hidden.” He had specific suggestions for broader outreach:

*“A lot of places—high schools; newspaper; Community centers—like the Martin Luther King Center near here. Post it up. People don’t get good information; we only got good information when we were in prison. Visit halfway houses. Put it on TV. The only ads on TV are for military or college. This limits a person’s choices. They don’t hear about apprenticeships.”*

Importantly, Kevin’s fiancée Lynn felt similarly positive about his training: “The program was really good. He had 2 months of class and they got him interviews.” That Kevin’s newfound direction through work took the tone of someone who had found true meaning was neither overstated nor surprising given his former life experience. It also reflected Kevin’s new perception of a personal future that could be achieved through his MJI work.

## **MJI Employment: Bindery and Printing & Bindery**

**Retention.** Through MGAI’s employer connections, Kevin began work in April 1999 as a Floor Person in the Bindery pressroom where he made \$9.76 per hour with full non-wage benefits. According to MGAI Program Manager, wages at this company, at approximately \$20,300 per year, were good but advancement was questionable: “Bindery moved into the city to access the population—they are flexible with personal situations and low wages but there is no clear path for advancement.” After almost 6 months at Bindery, a common period for job change, Kevin attended a second MGAI open house where the Program Manager and Employer Liaison followed up on Kevin’s interests and job status. Finding him dissatisfied with the advancement opportunities at Bindery, they helped him switch to Printing & Bindery in September 1999. Although his initial wage as a Floor Person was \$9.76/hour, as it was at Bindery, Kevin did not view this as a lateral move. Printing & Bindery was a union position with room for advancement, including further education:

*“There’s room to move around. You’re not stuck in tunnels. I could even move to an advertising agency to check colors, do desktop publishing. It’s not a dead end. At a bindery you can only do so much—there’s a fixed number of machines. Now I also go to school through my worksite. I work on different machines. It pays about the same, but I can do a lot more.”*

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Six months later Kevin was promoted to Jogger which paid \$11.51 per hour which included a 90-cents/hour bonus for 3<sup>rd</sup> shift. Kevin's wage increase, while important, motivated his work performance and retention less than did his work schedule and opportunity to learn skills from co-workers. Kevin's third shift schedule, 11 p.m. to 7 a.m., Sunday through Thursday, allowed him to assume parenting responsibilities that a more traditional schedule would foreclose:

*"3<sup>rd</sup> shift works good with my family—that's why I work it. I get tired of it sometimes, but 3<sup>rd</sup> shift saves me and Lynn a lot of stress. If kids need to go to the dentist, be picked up at school, are sick—we don't have to worry about getting them, taking off from work. I may be tired at night when I go to work, but not often."*

The flexibility in Kevin's schedule that allowed for this "double shift" was simultaneously advantageous and harmful, as it provided the illusion of extra time and allowed for little sleep. Even his MGAI contact was aware of his heavy load of work and family responsibilities: "I do not know when he sleeps!" Kevin was fortunate that fatigue did not result in dangerous workplace conditions, unlike experiences of other MJI family heads.

Although Printing & Bindery had a strict tardiness/absentee system, characteristic of many Milwaukee manufacturers, Kevin had missed only 2 days of work at the six-month mark. Kevin was well respected as an employee. His supervisor wished he could "clone" Kevin based upon his record of consistently showing up to work and getting the job done. The supervisor wanted "more [like him] you can send our way," and another supervisor commented that absenteeism was their usual experience among new workers: "We got some good workers, but they just don't like to show up for work." Kevin understood that the supervisor's commendation was related to his retention: "I definitely have pride in my job." He also foresaw a similar orientation for himself as a future business owner:

*"A lot of people don't take their work too seriously, so they're glad when somebody does. Someday I want to own my own business, and I think about having people work for me. I want someone who will show up and not just always call in."*

Kevin felt part of a team that was diverse in age and race, which helped him stay motivated and satisfied with his job. He was able to learn from older, more experienced workers and contribute to a job he viewed as meaningful:

*"For a convicted felon, it was hard to find a job. MJI made it easier. In my new position as jogger—I'm motivated at work. You work as a team on the press: 2 jiggers, a compensator, roll tender, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> pressmen—we work together to keep the press running or get it started back running. The press I'm on—these are people I don't mind working with. [What makes them 'people you don't mind working with?'] Two reasons. One, they're all older—some 20 or 30 years or so. I love that. I like to work with older people. I'm 29; the youngest is 34 and the oldest is 52. They have more experience. I respect them more—they put in the work. Two, they're more serious. They laugh and joke, but they know a lot. I learn from them. I hope we stay a team."*

That Kevin was the only African-American on his team did not go unnoticed by him, nor did the potential for racism:

*"I know it's there, but people stagnate themselves if they let it eat at them. They end up the victim. If racial problems occur, I go to my union. If I don't get help there, I go over their head. There is always something I can do to combat it."*



As with other challenges, Kevin was comforted by the knowledge that there was a procedure he could follow to redress grievances. However, he was also somewhat resigned to the more subtle forms of racism in the workplace: “I just deal with it and don’t let it bother me. You have to. You can’t change things.”

**Advancement.** Another key factor in Kevin’s ability to stay focused and motivated was opportunity for advancement: “In my job now, I can go all places... otherwise I’d get discouraged.” Opportunity for advancement was a central part of MGAI’s job preparation and ongoing support, what they called “career laddering.” As Kevin noted: “If you don’t know what’s behind the door, you don’t go in. It’s too ‘iffy.’” According to the Program Manager, MGAI’s basic mission was employer- and advancement-oriented:

*“To serve contributing employers—not become an entry-level training school. Serve incumbent workers—expand skills and finish apprenticeships. MGAI is a printing industry school – ‘The union school’ versus MATC [Milwaukee Area Technical College] who has a large printing program and good, focused skill classes. [We have an] Apprenticeship program here—MATC does not.”*

Thus, the MGAI training focus was on printing as a career. Equally critical however, and different from other industry sectors, advancement in the printing industry depended on staying with a particular employer. Thus, a printing worker’s capacity to repel racism or other oppressions, versus moving to a more hospitable site, exerted a critical influence on career development that could also have deleterious emotional byproducts.

Nevertheless, this orientation towards the future and emphasis on strengths benefited Kevin who had misgivings about his past and no opportunity to fulfill his potential before MJI. For one, Kevin attended 3-hour printing classes for “jogger” and “press operator” at MGAI one to two mornings a week after his shift, which essentially meant working for 12 hours straight (11 p.m. to 11 a.m.). He paid for the classes up front, but was reimbursed by his employer according to his course grades which were “As and Bs,” grades that qualified for full and near-full reimbursement. When finished with the “press operator” classes, he hoped to take computer classes for the press, viewing the skill classes as critical to broad-based advancement whether in printing or elsewhere:

*“You can really get ahead in this business. There is a lot of opportunity to do that. You can just keep moving up by taking classes. I don’t know if I want to stay in it, but you learn a lot of things that will help. The classes are easy. Except going there after work.”*

Secondly, while the career path at Printing & Bindery was not fast, it was at least visible. Kevin knew that his ability to advance was contingent upon open slots; that it could be several years before he achieved a higher-paying position such as Pressman or Foreman:

*“I’m something like #27 now on the list for the next promotion. It will probably take 3-4 years until the next position, 5 at most.”*

However, he was in an environment where guideposts existed which was important to Kevin and naturally impacted other areas of his life. Kevin acknowledged the gradual nature of his advancement, “I pay bills and put a little in the bank. I keep my eyes on the prize.” Despite his entrepreneurial aims, he viewed a printing career with growing interest and dedication, gradually learning about the nature of the ‘career ladder’: “I’d like to own my own bar or club. I’d like to stay in the printing industry for some years. Finish school and get some experience.”

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Kevin's ability to remain positive may not have been fully tested as yet. At the time of his first year anniversary at Printing & Bindery, Kevin still worked third shift and had taken on a second, part-time job at Fast Food, adding fifteen hours of work to his week. With a second job he could continue to provide for his family, save a little, help the friend who asked him to work there, and still have some of his own spending money. While he remained positive about work and continued to speak of his dream of club ownership, he was tired despite claims that he only needed 3-4 hours of sleep per night. The hours of work were challenging enough without the added responsibilities of family life.

Although Kevin only stayed at Fast Food for 2 months, it raised important 'red flags' about the potential tension between income advancement and children's welfare. Kevin's and Lynn's overtime and second job meant that neither of them was home on Saturdays which reduced interaction with their children who were in school and daycare for a full 5-day week. In all such decisions, Kevin's family was the largest motivating factor of all, yet balancing work and family was also the greatest challenge.

Kevin's advancement potential was also linked inextricably with Lynn's work pathway. Lynn earned \$9.20/hour plus health benefits for herself at her job as a Certified Nursing Assistant at a Medical Center. She bemoaned the "hard work, lifting all those people," but was dedicated to the field. Her advancement plans included taking the Advanced Nursing Assistant (ANA) test which would result in higher wages and more varied and skilled job duties. She had just completed ANA training and hoped for an opening soon after the test as an Ob/Gyn assistant, a position that would also draw on her earlier on-the-job skill training.

Unlike Kevin's workplace which had a systemic response to absences, Lynn's progress depended on workplace policies that were subject to supervisory discretion. Lynn's head nurse was highly critical of parents who missed work because of sick children:

*"The nurse that works with us isn't married and doesn't have any kids. So she can't understand when somebody needs a day off if their kids are sick. She just doesn't get it. And she's not very nice about it if something goes wrong and you have to take off work for a day."*

Fortunately Lynn missed little work, but her priorities more closely matched those expressed by a co-worker than those of the head nurse: "I can replace my job, but I can't replace my kids. If I need to be with them because they're sick, I'll do it." The hopes that Lynn verbalized were practical, tied mostly to her workplace, and inextricably linked to her role as a mother.

Kevin's hopes, while also tied to his workplace, were more far-reaching. Although he was not sure about how to go about attaining his goal of club ownership, Kevin's ideas about the nature of the club reflected deep concern for the urban African American community:

*"My dream, since high school, is to own a club with music and people—maybe a Hip Hop Club where nice people can come to talk and dance. In Milwaukee, we don't have clubs for Blacks—especially ones that are Hip Hop oriented. Or if we do, they're deep in the urban community where there's violence."*

Kevin knew that it would be difficult to obtain the necessary licensing because of his prior felony convictions and he counted on Lynn to help him with this aspect of the business. These steps may become more clear as Kevin builds

additional workplace confidence. Importantly, both Kevin and Lynn expressed ideas about advancement more in terms of skills than wages, which was unusual for JI families. Such conceptualization may contribute significantly to actual advancement.

**Wages and income adequacy.** Kevin and Lynn had similar views about the adequacy of their individual and combined incomes. According to Kevin, his new employment increased the children’s well-being: “The kids dress well now and eat well; they are comfortable. We’d like to buy a house. Lynn and I share expenses.” Kevin and Lynn’s combined income was about \$40,000, although regular overtime added about \$4000 to this figure, resulting in a total family income above 200% of poverty level but not quite reaching self-sufficiency according to the Self-Sufficiency Standard for Wisconsin (Pearce, 2000), a more nuanced, contextual poverty assessment of income adequacy than the federal poverty guideline.

Accordingly, although both parents worked more than full-time, the family often ended the month short of food, a tangible sign of still-insufficient income. Lynn was told she did not qualify for food stamps because the assistance office calculated her irregular overtime pay as regular and the family struggled to meet their heating bill in winter.

Kevin and Lynn also received a patchwork of small government subsidies to support their children, both “without” and “with” strings. Supplemental materials for Fireman’s asthma needs (nebulizer machine or tubing) would have been available regardless of the parents’ residential or marital status. In contrast, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and daycare subsidy through W-2, Wisconsin’s TANF program, came at a price. As Lynn lamented:

*“It would be bad for us to get married now. We couldn’t make it financially. My co-pay for childcare was raised recently so it would be higher than \$80 every two weeks. That was because they [W-2] looked at overtime and figured that into it. It doesn’t seem right, because I never know when I can get overtime.”*

Ultimately, the quality of the children’s daycare is the price Kevin and Lynn would pay if they lose the W-2 subsidy: “If we lose W-2, we’d change daycare.” Lynn and Kevin thus portrayed the dilemma of many low-income parents: whether to legalize their status and risk disqualifying for a safety net they cannot do without or remain, on paper, separate households, with costs to the children of not having both parents in full time residence.

By October 2000, Kevin had conceived of another plan that would bring in additional income—creating personalized calendars. As a trial run, combining both the printing and business worlds, Kevin bought a digital camera and was “learning how to use it to make cards and personalized letters and calendars. I want to see how that goes as a business. I’m learning on my friend’s computer.” He was still focused on his long-term goal of club-ownership, trying to devise legitimate ways to reach it more swiftly. He also viewed a printing career with growing interest and dedication. What he had perhaps not contended fully with, however, was that he would soon reach the wage ceiling for his position. No further wage increases would occur until the promotion spot opened, which could be 3-4 years off at best. It would be important for retention research to track the cumulative impact of such slow career mobility on families such as the McDonalds.

### Family Welfare

Kevin and Lynn had been together for 13 years, since he was in high school and she junior high. While Lynn is Caucasian, of Italian ethnic origin, the issue of their being an interracial couple was rarely mentioned despite living in what Kevin described as a “racially segregated city.” Reflecting on their families’ reaction to their relationship, Kevin felt that Lynn’s family was “different from most families in Milwaukee,” and that he and Lynn had been together long enough that his family accepted Lynn.

**Family support.** Kevin and Lynn had extended family nearby who were sources of varied contact and support. Lynn’s sister, brother-in-law and their 2-year old son lived in the upstairs portion of the McDonalds’ two-family house, which both Kevin and Lynn viewed as optimal:

*Lynn: “My sister and I are really close. It’s great to have them upstairs. We go back and forth a lot. The other night we left the kids with their Dads and went out to have margaritas. Our mother joined us.”*

*Kevin: “It’s great to have Lynn’s family upstairs. They don’t complain at our music, and we can trust who we have around us.”*

During the period of Kevin’s incarceration, Kevin’s and Lynn’s mothers and aunts helped out “with money, time, whatever.” Now, as Kevin said, “the only sitter we have is daycare.” Lynn’s mother was only occasionally available for childcare because, having started her family at age 16, she was pursuing personal life goals such as returning to school for a master’s degree in social work. Kevin’s mother worked three housekeeping jobs and thus was also only occasionally able to baby-sit her grandchildren. When she had them on a weekend, however, she took them to church. Despite having limited time, her pride in Kevin’s accomplishments was palpable: “I’m excited. He came a long way. Tell me to shut up, but I’m excited for him.”

Kevin often stayed at his mother’s house, his legal residence, during the week, especially before he and Lynn had a second car. From his mother’s he took only one bus to work; from Lynn’s he needed two buses that took 45 minutes. When he could, he altered this pattern for the sake of the children: “If Lynn gets a day off during the week, I’ll come here and use the car to go to work. Then I can be here longer.” Transportation needs thus influenced the time he could spend with the children on homework, play, and bedtime.

**Home and neighborhood.** Kevin and Lynn paid \$500/month rent for the first floor of a two-family house—6 rooms that were cheerful and neat. An antique desk in the girls’ bedroom belonged to Lynn’s grandmother and one living room wall consisted of a TV and music console, shelves full of family pictures on both sides, and a rack of children’s videotapes. Despite the children’s usual amount of talking and making noise in the house, an overall sense and feeling of calm existed throughout. Both parents’ demeanors were calm as well.

The McDonalds’ neighborhood consisted of well-kept, mostly two-family homes interspersed with several house-based bars, small groceries, and a church. A large transfer and storage facility and a small abandoned factory building comprised the 3 blocks leading to the house from a main thoroughfare. The family’s home was bound on one side by a canal and faced the factory grounds which was surrounded by a fence. Children’s toys dotted the McDonalds’ porch and the lawn was neatly mowed. Lynn characterized the neighborhood as sandwiched between good and bad:

*“It’s good here. But 2 blocks one way, it’s bad. Two blocks the other way, it’s good. We’re in the middle.”*

Kevin characterized it somewhat more positively:

*“The neighborhood is safe. I like it because there’s nothing around—no houses across the street and only 3 houses next to us. Down the street there’s a dead end. It’s better for kids—they play with kids in the alley.”*

While there were several daycare facilities in the neighborhood, and also a local elementary school, the children’s daycare facility was located in a distant, more affluent, predominantly Caucasian neighborhood nearer Lynn’s mother’s house where Lynn grew up. This choice added more than an hour of extra driving time to Lynn’s or Kevin’s day. Considering that Lynn’s worksite was one mile from her home, and that Kevin added this driving time to his overnight work shift, this sacrifice was considerable.

**Parenting.** Perhaps because of their history of separation or as a matter of style, Kevin and Lynn cultivated separate family domains based upon their strengths: Kevin interacted with the children’s school whereas Lynn’s domain was the home. Kevin described Lynn as a “perfectionist,” better than he at keeping things in order. While Kevin could not recall the details of the children’s health insurance, he knew they were covered and that Lynn was in command. Similarly, while Lynn did not always recall the names or locations of the children’s schools, she knew that Kevin would respond to any problems that arose.

Kevin and Lynn’s separate parenting domains may also have been a function of their work schedules, both of which were “fixed,” which contributed to a regular family rhythm. Lynn got up at 5 a.m. in order to get the children to daycare by 6 a.m. and herself to her work by 7 a.m. When Lynn’s shift began at 7, Kevin’s ended. Three days a week he continued on to his second job; one or two days he attended school, and weekends he actively parented. Every other weekend when Lynn worked a required Saturday-Sunday shift, he had the children alone: “I’m Dad—I just do it. That’s my job.” Periodically Kevin sacrificed sleep to chaperone children’s field trips and attend teacher conferences. A field trip meant no sleep after a full night’s work—an essential consideration for school personnel when they evaluate parental participation in daytime school events [see Children and School section].

A bus took Salina and Christina from daycare to school and back to daycare in the afternoon. Lynn left work at 3:30 p.m. and picked up the children between 4:30 and 5 p.m. until the second family car enabled Kevin to do this. When Kevin stayed at his mother’s house, Lynn was sole caretaker of the children in the evenings. In the summer—a period in which Kevin also worked considerable overtime, he again sacrificed sleep to spend more time with the children:

*Lynn: “The school lasts until noon, then there is a wrap-around childcare program until 4:30. Transportation is not provided. Kevin picks the kids up at 1:30, so they are not there the full time.”*

*Researcher: “Is that hard on him since he works all night?”*

*Lynn: “A little, but we’d rather do it like that. That gives him more time with the kids.”*

While Kevin and Lynn provided together for their children, each had independent hopes for the future. Although not unusual for any couple, this fact was particularly salient for a couple who spent their youth parenting and, in Kevin’s case, in prison. Kevin and Lynn expressed their support of one another in ways that suggested neither was overly

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troubled or involved with the other's plan. Although they were parents together, they have had little opportunity to develop an adult relationship separate from their children. As Kevin characterized the impact of the period of separation: "We both changed, but in different ways. She grew in some ways and I grew in other ways." As a result, Kevin socialized almost exclusively with his friends and Lynn with hers or with family. When Lynn went on a vacation with her mother and sister, Kevin stayed with the children and planned to take them to Arkansas to visit their great-grandmother. Neither Kevin nor Lynn expressed misgivings about the absence of time together as a couple. At the same time, their support for each other was evident. Kevin wholeheartedly encouraged Lynn's vacation, saying: "Yeah, we're solid. She hasn't had a vacation in a long time. She needed to go and do that." Reciprocally, Lynn was enthusiastic about the time Kevin spent in printing classes: "He's helping his education. That's important."

The majority of the photographs in the family album were of Lynn's family and the children, which was understandable given that Kevin was incarcerated for the girls' toddlerhood. This underscored the value of the opportunity MJI offered Kevin in returning him to the family "picture." Important to their continuity as a couple and as parents, Lynn had visited Kevin frequently in prison and brought the children for regular visits. Her awareness of the possible family byproducts of this period, however, was overshadowed by her future orientation: "It happened; he's changed." When asked if he felt different because of his prison experience, Kevin's analysis was present-oriented: "Definitely; I'm more settled," but he was also cognizant of its negative effects on the children: "Especially this one [Salina]." The family history of separation, reunion, job struggle, and personal development set the stage for some of the family-school problems.

### Children and School

Kevin and Lynn's children were bright and articulate like their parents. They were well cared for and well behaved, saying "excuse me" when poised to interrupt adult conversation. For their age, both Salina and Christina used difficult vocabulary with facility—words like "probably, usually, normally, actually, and permission." All three children were in good health, except for Fireman's occasional bouts of asthma. They had gone to the same regular doctor since they were born. At home, the role of parent and child were clearly delineated and the children responded respectfully and with affection to both Kevin and Lynn. Despite having what Lynn described as different parenting styles based on their upbringings, Kevin and Lynn had sorted out how to parent together effectively. TV programs were monitored, the girls generally did an art activity along with TV watching, and Lynn engaged interactively with them in letter-writing and cooking. The following exchange was typical of the parents' agreement and ability to communicate about expectations for their children's behavior:

*Kevin: [to Fireman] "Tell Mama what you bumped and how it happened."*

*Fireman: "Seatbelt."*

*Lynn: [to Fireman] "You weren't wearing your seatbelt? Why not?"*

*Kevin: "He took it off."*

*Kevin: [to Fireman] "Tell me why you have to wear a seat belt?"*

*Fireman: "To be safe."*

*Kevin: [to Fireman] "Good. Now I don't want you to take it off again, OK?"*

*Fireman: "OK."*

Kevin’s parental priorities were clear, as indicated by his response to our initial knock at the door: “I have to take care of my son a minute—he is being potty trained and he had an accident. I’ll be right there.”

At school the picture became more complicated, which may suggest the problem exists at school and/or simply manifested there. What occurred as a result of school problems demonstrates the additional struggles faced by young, working parents in the absence of clear communication with the institutions that serve their children.

Salina and Christina attended Montessori school, a distant public elementary school whose students were mostly African American and Latino. Fireman attended K-3 preschool there half-day and daycare the rest of the day at the same site Salina and Christina went for before- and after-school care. At study onset in February 2000, Salina was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade and Christina in Kindergarten. In October 2000, Salina was still in 1<sup>st</sup> grade and Christina had advanced to 1<sup>st</sup> grade.

In 1998-99, Montessori had higher than average results (both city and statewide) on the Wisconsin Comprehensive and Reading Test for Grade Three (Milwaukee Public Schools, 2000). Ninety-eight percent of the students tested Basic or above and 78% of the students tested Proficient or above, percentages that approached some of the highest among the Milwaukee public schools. Attendance rates were high; truancy rates low. Highlighting the idiosyncratic nature of Salina’s grade repeat, only 3.1% of Montessori students were retained in 1998-99.

Salina and Christina’s teachers were trained in the Montessori method where emphasis was placed on fostering each child’s potential. Given the expressive qualities observed in Kevin and Lynn’s children, this environment should have been a good match for their talents. That the parents traversed the city to take them to school was equally significant, as was the fact that Lynn’s grandmother had taught in a Montessori school.

In Spring 2000, Salina expressed enthusiasm about school, albeit with some concern about disciplinary attention:

*“School is fun. I like working, listening to the teacher. I don’t want to lose my green card. Green card is good. It means you’re doing good. A pink card is less good, the yellow card is worse, and if you get the red card, it means the teacher will call home.”*

However, by the end of the 1999-2000 school year, Kevin and Lynn were told that Salina would need to attend summer school, as Lynn related the school’s final evaluation:

*“She didn’t do any of her schoolwork. She can. But she doesn’t. She didn’t do any of her schoolwork. She didn’t turn anything in. And she got in trouble too many times. Her teacher recommended her for summer school. Kevin went to talk to the principal. He agreed with the teacher that she needs summer school. She just didn’t obey the teacher at all.”*

A visit to Salina’s half-day summer school program at a non-Montessori school suggested that she was not being too social but was, conversely, shy and withdrawn with peers. The summer school teachers used only positive reinforcement and were encouraging to the students, in contrast to Lynn’s assessment of Salina’s Montessori classroom the previous year:

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*“When I was at the school, I heard the teacher yelling a lot. I don’t think I would learn too much like that, myself. I think that it’s the teacher that has the problem. I’m going to really try to get her into a different teacher’s class next year.”*

Salina read out loud fluently but had difficulty keeping up with word assignments, which appeared incongruous with her expressiveness at home. Salina’s teacher considered her in the “highest need” category for reading, a reading level “about what a child entering first grade should be in,” and was concerned that Salina was not getting the reading practice she needed at home. Although Kevin and Lynn followed the recommendation for summer school, they did not elect to have counseling as Salina’s teacher also suggested.

Based on less than hoped-for improvement in the summer school program, the Montessori school concluded that Salina should repeat the first grade. The school was organized to make it possible for Salina to advance to 2<sup>nd</sup> grade during the year, and on to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade the next year, obviating the grade repeat. That outcome, however, would clearly be influenced both school and parental actions.

Similarly, while Christina advanced from kindergarten to first grade by Fall 2000, her final kindergarten report card indicated that she had difficulty staying on task and paying attention during lessons, despite the fact that Lynn characterized Christina’s year as having had “no problems.” Kevin’s assessment was that: “Neither one has problems with learning or picking up. They want to talk, socialize, be class clowns, do what they want to do.” Referring to Salina, Kevin noted the similarity with his own school experience: “She comes by that honestly. I repeated a grade too—probably the same grade.” Salina partly concurred with her father’s assessment of the past school year: “I was doing other stuff that my friends were doing. I talked to my friends a lot.”

Several weeks into the fall, the McDonalds had received calls from both Salina’s and Christina’s teachers that resulted in the girls’ “room confinement” at home. Although Kevin felt the teachers were not doing anything special to help Salina remember to bring home and do her homework, despite her grade repeat, he also believed that “the responsibility falls on the home. She’s got a nice teacher. Classes may be a bit too big, but that’s a problem with every school except a private school.” Salina’s view of the school year was “Bad. Too much first graders.” She had gotten mostly “green cards” this year: “That means I’m doing good.” Christina’s teacher had called because: “She was not listening.” From Christina’s vantage point, ‘not listening’ might have been related to the conflicts she was having with classmates who were teasing her about her family, perhaps all the more distracting because she perceived no support at school, as she reported sadly:

*Christina: “Other people have been talking about my family—a boy and a girl in my class. The boy’s in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and the girl’s in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. They also talk on the bus. They say my Mom is fat, but she’s not. They say my cousins are fat, but they’re not.”*

*Researcher: “What do you do?”*

*Christina: “I talk back. I sit at my table in the class, but the teacher says ‘there’s no telling on people.’”*

*Researcher: “Is there anyone else you can tell?”*

*Christina: “There’s no-one at school to tell.”*

Nevertheless, Kevin’s response was that “Christina and Salina are in their room until they get a sense of school.” Making ‘parent responsibility’ operational, Kevin and Lynn both supervised the children’s homework:



*“They bring their homework to Lynn or me. We’ll read it, make sure it’s done, make sure they do some every day—reading, writing, or arithmetic. The teachers give us specific things to do at home; they’re good at that.”*

On the other hand, the school’s emphasis on “homework” in their critique of the girls seemed counter to the school policy outlined by one of Christina’s teachers:

*“Maria Montessori did not believe in homework, and neither do we, but, yes, I gave them some packets of exercises for her to practice what we learn in class. If we have to give homework, we like to give the kind that is integrated into the daily life of the child, like writing thank you notes, or helping with a recipe, or something like that.”*

Lynn had been to one school conference already with the girls’ teachers who reported at that time that “Salina seemed to be doing better than last year” and “Christina has improved in the last few weeks.” Kevin planned a follow-up conference. Although both parents had demanding work schedules, they made time for children’s oversight. At the same time, they had somewhat different views about the solution to Salina’s school difficulty:

*“She [Lynn] thinks Salina has the same problems this year as last year and that Salina should go to a different class or switch schools. Salina has the same teacher as last year—they’re in the same class for 3 years. I tell her [Lynn] not to be frustrated. I think if we start now changing schools, classes, we get the kid set to think ‘if I don’t like it, I can act up and move on.’ I think we have to stay here and get it right.”*

By late September 2000, the parents’ and school’s perceptions about the girls’ school performance were in stark contrast. The parents and children reported mostly acceptable performance, the teachers reported both problems and improvements, and an administrator issued a very critical, seemingly-stereotypical report. Different perceptions of “discipline” underlay these variations.

Christina’s teacher was puzzled by Christina’s behavior: “She doesn’t stay on task. Her reading skills need improvement. I don’t know what happens at home, if the children aren’t disciplined or have consistency.” In contrast, although an administrator characterized the Montessori school as “more relaxed than a lot of public schools,” we found Christina’s classroom somewhat rigid. Christina had greeted the researcher by running to her and hugging her—not an unusual reaction of a five-year-old to a familiar adult. In response, the teacher said sternly: “You know we do not bother guests, Christina. The guest sits in this chair and observes. I want you to go back to your work now.” In addition, to the researcher’s eye—admittedly not a teacher, but an experienced parent and grandparent—Christina’s work seemed age-appropriate for first grade. She had written the following story that day, in legible cursive, and turned in her assignment on time:

*“My Mom and Dad like cookies, pies very much, and she likes pumkin, and she likes to go to sleep, and she likes to go to the park, and she likes to play and she likes to work. My dad likes to ride on horses and he likes to play around.”  
(spelling and punctuation – Christina’s)*

Similarly, one of Salina’s teachers characterized her as “not so focused. She’s a challenge to have in the class. She just doesn’t seem to pay attention or to follow directions.” Another teacher said that Salina “has a lot of problems. She had tantrums last year. [and this year?] No, not so much.” This teacher also noted improvement after the conference

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with Lynn and the parents' follow-through on Salina's home-reading packets: "She seems to do better work now." Again in contrast, the researcher reported the teacher's complaint that: "It is difficult to get the kids to do as they are told." The researcher observed this teacher as "very tense and scolded the children frequently, telling them to be quiet," similar to Lynn's observation during the previous school year. For Salina as well as Christina, the teacher's description of school policy could be construed as excessive for a 7-year old child:

*"She had a 3-day suspension about a month ago. I don't know all of the details. I was gone for the day. There was a substitute. I am rarely absent from school. But anyway, Salina hit a girl on the playground. She was given a 3-day suspension. [In school?] No, we do not have in-school suspensions. When you're suspended, you go home."*

In what was beginning to sound like a "party line," a school administrator also suggested that Salina was perhaps not receiving enough discipline at home and therefore was not appropriate for a Montessori environment, notwithstanding Montessori's tenet that all children could benefit from her environment:

*"I get the feeling that the parents just let her do what she wants to do and there is no order or discipline at home, that she isn't made to follow any rules."*

If anything were true, the children were perhaps too disciplined at home, having to maintain a strict schedule based on the mandates of their parents' work schedules. Kevin exercised a consistent and authoritative parenting style, albeit from the "command point" of the living room couch, with comments such as: "No skateboard in the house;" "Beds are not meant to be walked on;" and to Christina's complaint about her brother's behavior, "When did you become a parent? Who gave you the power to parent him?" Kevin also modeled an exceptional ability to acknowledge his own mistakes, a critically important skill for children to learn from a parent. When Fireman broke a glass picture, Kevin followed an initial frustrated remark immediately by acknowledging his complicity in the breakage:

*"No, it was really my fault. I shouldn't have left the package that way. Now we'll have to clean it all up."*

In response to the administrator's comment about insufficient discipline, the researcher related the disciplined, organized structure of Lynn's daily routine:

*[Researcher] "The mother gets up very early in the morning and has to have the children prepared to get to school and prepare her self to work a full day. In order to do this, she prepares the evening before by setting out the children's clothes and they are fed and groomed on a regular schedule with a system."*

*[As Lynn had described it] "I can't get Fireman to brush his teeth. The other two do it as part of a routine. When they get up in the morning, I brush one of their hair, while the other one brushes her teeth and then we trade off. Then night before, I iron their clothes and set them out. They take their pile and get dressed and then we eat. We have to have a routine or I would be late for work. I have to be at work at 7:00. So I have to be up by 5:00 and get them to day care by 6:00. So we have to do it like that."*

From our perspective, the administrator's surprised response was graphic and distressing evidence of her limited and judgmental perspective about the McDonalds family:

*“Well, that’s surprising. It certainly is a surprise. I was sure there was no discipline in the home. You said she gets everything ready the night before? Doesn’t that seem obsessive to you?”*

Compounding the school’s focus on discipline, the McDonalds’ participation in school activities was also deemed unsatisfactory. The administrator evidenced little understanding of the reality of Kevin and Lynn’s demanding schedules and the lengths to which they arranged these schedules to attend to their children’s needs:

*“We have a full calendar of events for the students, families, and teachers to join in. We take trips to the museum. We went to the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, and to the apple farm. We are having an ethnic potluck this coming Wednesday. We have Sock-Hops, and a sleigh ride during the winter holidays. We have a Black History program in February. I have never seen the family here. I send home information on the trips with each child in the school.”*

It is well documented in child development literature that when parents perceive negative approbation from school personnel to whom they have entrusted their cherished children, different views of children’s performance surface. In many cases, although not yet with the McDonalds, parents also withdraw from the school, furthering inadequate communication to the children’s detriment. Such patterns of school-family relations are all too common in poor urban areas and are clearly one way the relationship between the McDonalds and the school could evolve.

By October 2000, Kevin felt the problems probably lay with both the school and Salina, but had some difficulty separating his own experience in school from his elder daughter’s: “I see Salina in me when I was young.” For both Kevin and Lynn, one challenge was to empathize with their daughter without the overlay of their own histories. Another was to accurately assess the appropriateness of this school for their children. For the school, the challenge was to be sensitive to the reality of working parents’ lives. Ultimately, to what extent Salina was really struggling academically remained unclear. On the day of our fall visit to the school, Salina was caught writing on the bathroom walls. Since Kevin was the parent to respond to such crises, and this was also the period that he was working two jobs, Salina may have been asking for more time with her father. One thing that was evident was the absence of understanding between Salina’s parents and the school, and the limitations of both in communicating effectively in the best interests of the children.

At one point during the research, one of Salina’s teachers offered to be interviewed from her home during the evening. The willingness of this teacher to take time out to discuss Salina suggested that she might have spoken with Kevin and Lynn in the same manner, had the lines of communication been more open. When this teacher—who had raised her own children as a single parent on a limited income—was told the purpose of studying the connections between the Jobs Initiative and children’s welfare, she replied that families needed more than money to thrive: “They need to have good social experiences and to feel that they are important and valuable to be productive.” Had the school been able to translate this philosophy into their dealings with the family, and had the family had more social experiences in the past that empowered them to negotiate with the school, better communication might have ensued. Kevin’s experience with MGAI may be the first in a series of positive social experiences that can contribute to the growth and welfare of his family. The larger question for this research is how MJI and other workforce programs can continue to help families resolve serious dilemmas affecting their children’s welfare such as this after the “official” program relationship is over.

### Follow-up May 2001 and Conclusions

When the McDonalds were recontacted in May 2001, 15 months after our introduction to the family, Kevin still worked at Printing & Bindery, earning an hourly wage of \$12.09 (\$11.19 plus 90 cents for 3<sup>rd</sup> shift). He continued to speak of needing two jobs, despite pressures created by overtime from one:

*“Last week I worked 24 overtime hours. It was a hardship on my family. Lynn needed a break. The kids needed to see me.”*

Kevin worked overtime in order to pay off a pre-MJI tax debt that had recently emerged. Eight years previous, he had filed income taxes incorrectly and as a result owed the IRS \$9,000. The original sum was smaller, but it accrued interest while Kevin was in prison. His wages were now garnisheed, which left Kevin with very little to provide for his family; moreover, even punishing overtime opportunities were limited by a company financial downturn:

*“They garnish my wages 15%; that leaves me with nothing. I got \$120 last paycheck without overtime. To make up for this, I worked two 12-hour shifts and Friday and Saturday last week. There I am, doing the right thing, and whoa! Here I am trying to get it right and I’m in another hole that I’ve got to fill up. Before the tax problem, I was bringing home \$400-500 a week; \$1200-1600 a month. They take child support out of my check too. How do they expect a person to make it without overtime?”*

Kevin had not talked to MGAI or anyone who could have helped him with this significant financial burden—particularly to ascertain whether or not interest accrual during incarceration was legal. Kevin alluded to the precariousness of his newfound path: he was “doing the right thing” but struggling, and continuing to pay what seemed a disproportionate price for past mistakes. Kevin sensed limited opportunities to accrue financial capital based on the realities of his past:

*“With my life and my friends’ lives there are a lot of minorities—we don’t too much understand taxes. A perfect example is the paper today. Minorities are just starting to invest in stocks. It’s terrible to say. The U.S. economy messed up—racism; not wanting us to learn about the stock market and get more money. We have the problem of not knowing, not understanding.”*

With limited opportunity for wage advancement, in part the result of his tax burden, Kevin was frustrated. He had almost reached the ceiling wage for his position and advancement opportunities were contingent on two unpredictable factors: one, a union contract in negotiation, and two, whether the company stayed in business, about which there was increasing speculation.

*“The ceiling may change, depending on the contract and whether the company stays in business. A lot of people have quit, so I may get a promotion earlier. If taxes hadn’t eaten into my income, my current income could have sustained me. It [taxes] threw me for a loop.”*

The “loop” Kevin spoke of presented a significant challenge to his staying power. One hopes that MGAI can advise and possibly help Kevin lower this debt, much as another MJI affiliate helped trainees solve legal problems with driver’s licenses. Such help could significantly counter Kevin’s discouragement and aid his retention:

*“I’m not where I want to be—feel I should be—not a failure all around, but not enough accomplishment either.”*

In response, Kevin fast-forwarded his career training plans. Instead of waiting until fall, he planned June enrollment in MGAI computer courses that were affordable due to a flexible payment system.

In the period since October 2000, Lynn had passed the Advanced Nursing Test and was now making \$9.60 per hour, a 5% wage increase from her previous wage. With this advancement, Lynn was able to perform additional nursing procedures, which she liked. However, Lynn was not happy to continually train new staff who either left or advanced. Her increase in wage and responsibilities did not bring attendant autonomy from her supervisor and, as a result, Lynn was reconsidering her options:

*“I’m thinking about working part-time there for now and finding another part-time job elsewhere. It’s stressful; we’re short-staffed.”*

In Lynn’s view, the only way to advance would be to move to another company. How much Kevin’s situation impacted Lynn’s decision-making was not clear. Each verbalized their support for the other’s career decisions. Any strain that appeared in their relationship was not attributed to work and remained absent from discussion.

As in the past, Kevin and Lynn were in agreement when it came to identifying and meeting the needs of their children. Problems with the Montessori school persisted, enough so that Kevin had changed his mind since October:

*“She [Lynn] was right last year. We should have changed Salina’s teacher. I was worried that she’d get the idea she could just change classes when she acted up. But I was wrong.”*

Kevin’s increased ability to understand his daughter’s educational needs was significant. Salina and Christina were both in the first grade and reportedly having difficulty learning. Whereas Salina had already been held back one grade, Christina was now “possible to be retained” despite “showing improvement” and being “almost where she should be” in reading according to her teachers and parents. According to Lynn and Kevin, one possible explanation for holding the children back was that the school administered state-wide proficiency tests to second graders and wanted to maintain their reputation for high scores and standards. Despite the fact that Salina and Christina could compose stories and write in cursive, both of which were age-appropriate, doubt about their ability to score well on the tests may have impacted the school’s decision to retain them. Lynn expressed her dismay with the school’s treatment of her daughters’ education:

*“Two years, two daughters—and the school may hold them both back. Neither are slow. I’m really upset with Salina’s teacher. The first conference I had with her, the teacher said ‘I’d bring some work out, but she hasn’t done any; there’s nothing to show.’ I said, ‘you’re just now telling us this?’ I didn’t like her. Salina was tested by the reading specialist and she was behind. But I think it has to do with how the teacher taught. The teacher had no control of the class; she was disorganized; she was stressed out and yelling. I had to take Salina home with me that day. Other classes, like Christina’s, are in control and organized.”*

Both Lynn and Kevin were involved with the school and trying to resolve the problems Salina in particular experienced. They received little support in return. As a result, although the Montessori philosophy kept children in the same classroom for three years, Kevin and Lynn arranged for Salina to be moved to a new classroom in Fall 2001.

## Moving Up is a Steep Climb

Our repeat visit to the Montessori school confirmed impressions gained from the first, as well as those of Lynn and Kevin. With the exception of a patient and positive reading teacher, adults were observed either yelling at children or indifferent to them. Salina, who had gotten into trouble the day of our visit, was required to complete a worksheet of essay questions designed to highlight her bad behavior and indicate steps she would take to correct it. Later in the day, Salina was left to her own devices to call her mother at work and inform her she was not allowed to attend afterschool taekwando because of her bad behavior. Research field notes described the school's questionable child treatment:

*"When she [Salina] didn't get a response from anyone she said again "I have to call my mother because I can't go to afterschool." One of the secretaries, whose desk is not in view of the children shouted to her "Well go ahead and make your call." Salina reached up and dialed then a number and asked in a very mature manner for her mother. She put down the phone and said that's the wrong hospital number. The secretary shouted out again, "Did you dial 9?" Salina replied (politely) "Yes I did." Salina dialed another number and left a message for her mother. Then Salina left the office and walked around in the hall. The administrator came in and Salina trailed behind her and told her she wasn't allowed to go to afterschool and couldn't get in touch with her mother to let her know about it. The administrator said "then wait here" and Salina sat in one of the chairs in the front office."*

Whereas Kevin and Lynn had been making a concerted effort to collaborate with the school by reading with their daughters at home, the school administration vacillated between indifference and hostility toward the family. Instead of feeling proud of her ability to use the phone to call her mother at work, Salina experienced shame. Despite misgivings, Kevin and Lynn had decided to keep the girls at Montessori school until the third grade, at which time they would consider parochial school. Fireman had also recently started at Montessori and after an initial adjustment period, was doing well. The issue of private school expense was not raised, nor was the possibility of other public options, both of which suggested the limited array of solutions known to the family. A staff member from the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP), another MJI affiliate, identified both a high-quality public school in the McDonalds' area of the city and CHOICE money that the family could use for other Montessori schools. Kevin's MGAI contact may also have known about these options, but the family's school dilemmas were neither offered nor solicited in their career discussions.

At follow-up, all of the McDonalds children were involved in afterschool activities. In addition to daycare activities, Fireman played basketball two nights a week at a nearby community center. Lynn and Kevin located the program in a Milwaukee Public Schools resource guide and received a discounted fee due to their eligibility for free school lunch. Kevin was the one to take Fireman since as Lynn put it, "it's a father-son thing." Fireman had also recently started wearing glasses, a development Lynn said she would not have discovered were it not for a free vision-screening program available at the children's daycare. This valuable service is less likely to have been available at a lower-quality facility, the type of facility open to the McDonalds if their childcare subsidy is summarily reduced or withdrawn. Their son's performance would have suffered accordingly.

Kevin and Lynn were determined to provide their children with the resources they believed would nurture their growth. When asked whether the family had been able to save any money in the past six months as planned, Kevin replied with a resounding "No!" Providing the basics for their family was difficult enough and they still faced a loss of subsidies with any increase in income. Kevin expressed his frustration with what felt to him like slow progress in his finances. Periodically he attended investment clubs at MGAI in an effort to plan for his financial future, a future

that was uncertain given his tax burden and incremental wage progression. Kevin and Lynn’s goal of buying a house was also delayed by these burdens.

When asked for final suggestions for MJI, Kevin described his situation in terms that revealed acute, but still nascent critical consciousness:

*“I’ve been going back and forth—Program Manager, Employment Liaison, us, schools. Why don’t they [MJI] give people other kinds of jobs? Tell us how to go further—how to invest; how to get our money to grow; how to buy homes? As it is now, it doesn’t help us become a power... why not help people go to a higher level than normal—like using computers?”*

Kevin was aware that upward mobility would require more than the wage increases he anticipated in his current work, yet he did not have access to the full array of tools that would help him. MJI had offered him a critical start in the labor market, but he now perceived the limitations of that market, of his specific industry and employer, of his children’s school, of post-incarceration legalities, and of policies affecting subsidies that the family needed. These challenges will exact continued resilience and determination as Kevin labors for his family’s welfare. Kevin’s testimony about the benefits of MJI, “Without a start, there’s no finish,” and his mother’s testimony about Kevin’s accomplishments, “I am so proud of him. It’s like that ad—you’ve come a long way baby,” are clarion calls to programs, employers, and policymakers to support the efforts of hard-working families like the McDonalds.

# Moving Up is a Steep Climb

The “Lucky Miracle” Family Story

*Parents’ Work and Children’s Welfare  
in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jobs Initiative*



*Roberta Rehner Iversen  
with Annie Laurie Armstrong and Mona Basta*

April 2002



## “Lucky Miracle” Family Story

**Resident Family:**

Lucky Miracle, a (46) 43-year old male Asian-country immigrant, ethnographic study key informant

Fantastic Miracle, Lucky’s (41) 44-year old wife, also an Asian-country immigrant

Special Miracle, 9-year old American-born daughter, in 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> grade

Awesome Miracle, 4-year old American-born son, in pre-school

Study Timeline: March through October 2000. Follow-up May 2001.

### *“Working hard for the next generation—the children”*

After decades of revolution, dislocation, political persecution, young adult emigration, and adult readjustment, Lucky Miracle and his family were living a near-middle class life in a Seattle exurb. The children were beautiful and well adjusted, both parents were employed, and family supports abounded. At the same time, the byproducts of Lucky’s life cataclysms persisted in subtle ways, through language and cultural influence. As an “underemployed” [job content and wages that do not reflect attained education and skills] participant in the Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI), and the only one of the ten ethnographic study parents who did not get Jobs Initiative employment, Lucky Miracle’s family story exemplifies both “what is and could be” and “what might have been.”

## Background and Pre-SJI History

Lucky’s background as an Asian-country refugee was a crucial factor in his sense of identity, his work ethic, and his general perspective on employment. Lucky’s parents fled their home Asian country because of political revolution and settled in a second Asian country where Lucky was born. After high school completion, army service, and several years’ work as a retail clothes salesman on his way to having his own clothing manufacturing business, Lucky and his parents fled the country because of a Communist takeover. Along with 326 others, they escaped on a boat that was seized by Germans and rerouted to a refugee camp of 50,000 people in Indonesia. Lucky was interned in the camp for 16 months and described it penetratingly as “Terrible. It was a jungle. We had to chop the trees to build a house.” Unknown to Lucky at the time, Fantastic and her parents were also at the same camp, having fled the same Asian country at age 20.

Immigrating to the U.S. was a difficult process for Lucky. He eventually managed to leave the camp and arrived in Los Angeles by boat in October 1980 at age 26, knowing no English at the time. Conditions on the boat were so taxing that three refugees died upon arrival. Lucky specifically chose to come to the U.S., and did not regret leaving his previous host country. He legally changed his name when he arrived in the U.S., a freedom not permitted in his Asian country. Similarly challenging to identity, both Lucky and Fantastic, who emigrated at the same period, “bought” false IDs for U.S. entry and were subsequently advised to not correct their ages. Accordingly, Lucky was 3 years older and Fantastic 3 years younger than their IDs showed—potentially a disadvantage in later life. Lucky attained citizenship in 1986 with help from an Asian refugee center.

Lucky struggled to support himself and create a home in the U.S. After short periods in Los Angeles and a small town in Texas where he had to protect himself at night with a rifle, Lucky moved to Washington state on the advice of a friend who had traveled from Indonesia with him. At that point, Lucky wanted to go to school and thought about getting a GED, but felt that work demands precluded enough time to study. He was also concerned about the difficulty of the test:

*“Some people say the GED is pretty easy. I said, ‘well I don’t think so.’ High school I think was easier. GED is not that easy.”*

He enrolled instead in ESL classes where he met other same-background refugees and eventually met Fantastic through relatives.

In his former country, Lucky held positions that required extensive interaction with the public and found that communication skills were one of his greatest strengths. If Communists had not taken over the country, he would have had his own clothing business, selling wholesale and retail clothing. He liked sales work but encountered challenges to that pursuit in the U.S. such as the need for a license, language limitations as communication is the key skill in sales, and lack of an American sales track record.

After coming to Seattle in 1980, Lucky held a series of menial jobs, lower in social status than those he held in Asia and a further assault on his identity. These jobs included a maintenance mechanic for an Asian firm, a night janitor for a building service, and a manager’s assistant at a café. Lucky’s refugee status limited his job choices. His first choice of employment upon arrival in the U.S. was to become a policeman, however his lack of a high school diploma

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from the U.S. disqualified him from this position. Although he obtained his high school diploma in his Asian country, this diploma was not recognized in the U.S. Recognition was further complicated by the fact that he had no official paper certifying his Asian education, as he was forced to leave his important belongings when he fled the country. This was particularly unfortunate since Lucky's high school education in Asia was an elite one—paid for by scholarship and parents who scrimped to do so.

In June 1991, Lucky was hired by Food Company in the shipping and receiving department where he remained employed until, and after, SJI participation. During ten years at Food Company, Lucky applied for several other jobs to improve his wage and advancement opportunities, but to no avail. These jobs included a custodial position at a local school, another position in shipping and receiving, and a position that involved considerable manual labor. He learned about these positions through local advertisements. Because he had no U.S.-recognized education credentials, limited employment options kept him stuck in his Food Company position with decreasing benefits, minimal wage increases, and no advancement opportunities.

### **SJI Training and Case Management: Industrial Occupations/ ACRS (Asian Counseling and Referral Service)**

In September 1999 Lucky tried again to upgrade his employment situation. Responding to a newspaper ad, Lucky contacted SJI-affiliate Asian Counseling and Referral Service (ACRS), was categorized as “underemployed,” and referred to the SJI Industrial Occupations training program. Lucky's 12-week program in diversified manufacturing training was held at a community college that was located about 1 hour from his home but only 15 minutes from his worksite. The facility was set up for on-site, hands-on training and practice in a variety of manufacturing skills and competency areas, including computer numerical control (CNC) machine tool operation. A SJI staff member explained that Lucky's training, as part of the third cohort of manufacturing trainees, was general by design:

*“Employers give on-job training themselves. What they want is entry workers who understand safety, know how to look at blueprints, and have basic skills. In essence, the 12-week program serves as a ‘rite of passage.’ It shows an employer that the individual will commit himself to show up.”*

Most manufacturing trainees held either a high school diploma or GED. In Lucky's case, his foreign diploma was informally recognized by SJI. Concerned that such recognition had not transferred to employers, Lucky lamented that he was not able to complete GED training at SJI, as his earlier GED training had been confusing and discouraging:

*“That would have been wonderful! Because I would try to contact SJI, I try to go to Goodwill, they have a GED training but it takes long, long, long time because one night for school. The most of it you study by yourself, instead of study by yourself they want you to go to school. Like that book, I try to go, I want to get a GED package since I would say fifteen years ago, but I don't have any clue how to get them because history in the U.S., I don't know that much. You have to pass them, the math, I can't do that.”*

Repeatedly, his suggestions for SJI involved GED attainment:

*“If they can help people get a GED, they can get the other job.”*

Despite the entry criteria and his “technical” ineligibility, Lucky was one of only 3 trainees who finished the program. Lucky characterized most of his 14 co-trainees as problematic: “Only I and one other were there to upgrade. The rest had problems.”

Although the training class offered no stipends, Lucky received occasional gas subsidy and food vouchers. As did another SJI key informant [see Maya Vanderhand Family Story] however, Lucky observed differential supports during training in relation to the particular case manager and CBO:

*“When I went to school, some of the classmates they go to a different agent, their agent always come up and say, ‘we don’t have money.’ They did give me \$100 food voucher but some of them they paid for their rent.”*

Perhaps most important for Lucky, the training schedule accommodated concurrent part-time employment, giving important recognition to participants’ need to maintain income while training. In Lucky’s case, this allowed him to attend training without informing his employer:

*“I didn’t tell my company I was doing SJI training. I didn’t do it to advance in this company, but to get a better job at another company—to upgrade. I didn’t let my company know what kind of school I was going to.”*

According to a speaker at a manufacturing orientation subsequent to Lucky’s cohort, program content was designed to address both life and employment needs. Life skills trainers “help with skills for the job and for life. It’s time to talk; it’s helpful.” The hands-on format fulfilled a dual role of skills education and the equivalent of work experience equivalency to facilitate employability:

*“It’s hands-on learning. That gives you a big heads-up when you get out. You can tell them you have some experience. They will be excited about that.”*

Particularly pertinent to Lucky, who categorized himself as having “a lot of trouble with math,” the speaker reassured potential trainees about math competency:

*“Don’t be discouraged if you weren’t good at math in school. Here you’ll learn applied math.”*

From Lucky’s perspective however, confronting a difficult subject was threatening:

*“If you try to get good at things you aren’t good at, like math, you get to feeling bad about yourself.”*

Similarly pertinent, the program offered optional forklift training at a neighboring facility after the 12-week general training, at a cost. Lucky availed himself of this training but failed the driver’s exam and did not try again, largely because he already drove a forklift at Food Company and neither the facility nor SJI encouraged him to retake it. While absence of official certification did not prevent forklift work at Food Company, it could jeopardize transferability of this skill in a job change.

Lucky characterized his SJI training as good and bad, largely in terms of skill content and teacher competence. One teacher was “wonderful and enthusiastic” while another “didn’t teach. He’d just go around and look at what people

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were doing and then he'd go away for a while." Lucky thought the "Life Skills class was good too, [but] the safety classes were way too boring." Lucky wanted more computer training and a longer program overall, sentiments heard repeatedly among Jobs Initiative participants in all industry sectors:

*"We wanted more training on how to use the computer instead. Everyone liked this. The attendance was great during the computer-training time. I did a little of it. My job uses basic computer skills only—mainly how to pull out orders from the computer. But the computer training wasn't long enough. The program wants people to get a job as soon as possible. Training should last from 4-6 months."*

These sentiments were shared by Lucky's case manager who discussed what he *wished he could do* for Lucky:

*"More training. More choices to expand for the client. SJI gives good support. The problem is, not much training. More training equals more clients equals more success. Computers? Not here. Mainly in office. How many Asians are able to do office occupations? As for Industrial Occupations, how many people understand what that is? Before when we had electrical assembly/ CNC [Computer Numerical Control machine tool operator project], we had a lot of clients."*

The sentiments also pertained to what the ACRS case manager *wished training could do* for Lucky:

*"Try to provide more language assistance. We have an ESL teacher [but it isn't connected with SJI]. Material covered in class—there needs to be more of that. Especially skills. For most Asians, the focus is too much on life without skills. They need skills. Self-esteem depends on a job. Status in the community depends on a job. Family depends on a job."*

Immigrants' critical lack of GED suggested policy as well as program implications, as Lucky emphasized:

*"I would say in the future the policies for the country for all the new immigrants will be to try to let them easier to get a GED. [What would make it easier to have it?] In general the language and some of the stuff could be a little bit easier. Because I know a GED is not easy to get, you have to pass this and pass that and if you fail just go back again because people can, all the immigrants can get a GED. You know most the people when you come over, like I come over like I come over this country my age is over, I cannot go to high school but by that time I didn't know about GED until I found it out few years too late."*

### **Non-SJI Employment: Food Company**

During the course of almost 10 years at Food Company, Lucky became stuck in the position of assistant shipping and receiving manager where he was given more responsibility over time but never promoted. Although Lucky's income gradually increased, from a starting wage of \$5.50/hour to \$10.70/hour at SJI enrollment, no raises were given in 1999. Food Company cut back on raises and benefits because it was struggling financially, so it said, although Lucky observed large expenditures on equipment. Even worse, the company progressively reduced and eventually *eliminated* Lucky's health and retirement benefits. The only "benefits" offered by 2000 were health insurance for himself but not his family, for which he had to pay \$129/month, sick days with full pay, and the ability to work overtime for time and a half as a replacement for regular raises. Health insurance coverage for his family would have cost an additional \$400/month. Fortunately, Fantastic's union medical coverage for the children and herself was much less expensive.

Peremptory policy changes also erased 174 hours of sick leave Lucky had accumulated. Moreover, the company expected its workers to work flexible hours according to company, not worker, schedule. In return for these demands, the company allowed Lucky to come to work late twice a week so he could drop his daughter off at school for her singing class, although he was unable to do this if they were extremely busy at work. Because of the increasing loss of benefits and retraction of raises, many employees left the company by June 2000 and the general manager planned to leave in July. Lucky felt that people were leaving because of poor management.

From Lucky’s perspective, ethnicity played a significant role in his ability to obtain employment and in the lack of respect he received from Food Company. He linked the fact that he was Asian with being exploited at work: Food Company hired Asians because they worked harder for less pay than workers from other backgrounds. The owner and managers were white, a plus and minus according to Lucky’s case manager:

*“That’s both good and bad. Sometimes the management knows that the Asian employees have a hard time getting jobs, so they can take advantage of the employees—not pay them enough, not give them advancement.”*

Confirming the case manager’s opinion, the Food Company owner told dissatisfied workers: “Oh you don’t like this job? You can go.”

Food Company workers included Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese and Chinese immigrants. Lucky had a strong work ethic and characterized other Asians similarly: “They feel strongly about work. They stay longer at the company.” Lucky also had a generally-positive orientation towards work. For example, he did not take breaks, although he was entitled to take them at both jobs he held during the study period. On the other hand, the pay was too low to be able to support the family comfortably. Lucky was also concerned that the demands of his work interfered with the time he could spend with his family.

**Spouse’s work history.** Fantastic’s life in the U.S. was also characterized by hard work and struggle. A significant difference between Fantastic’s background and Lucky’s was that Fantastic finished her high school diploma in the U.S. After she graduated, she went to a training program for accounting, but did not complete it. She then worked as a housekeeper at a Seattle hotel for eight years, including a period as a supervisor, but quit when the company would not give her time off after she suffered two back injuries in one week from the hard physical labor the job required.

For the past three years, Fantastic worked as a material processor at an aviation facility, a job that was unstable because of repeated lay-offs. During the initial 6-month study period her company announced further layoffs and the Miracle family feared that Fantastic would be among them because she did not have seniority. Over time fear of layoff lessened, but remained in the background due to her company’s unpredictability: “They always change and we don’t know what will happen.” Despite an American diploma, Fantastic’s advancement possibilities were practically non-existent at the aviation facility because of limited English-speaking ability. If laid off, she hoped her union would fund retraining, “school for computers and electricity,” that would make advancement more possible: “Hopefully they will call me back and by that time, with the schooling, I can look for a good job too.”

Fantastic got up at 4:30 a.m. to access the metro vanpool to her jobsite which was a 30-minute drive from her home. Work hours were 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and Fantastic arrived home about 3:15—almost 12 hours after she woke up. Although she had no contact with the children in the morning, she picked them up at her mother’s soon after school

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ended and saw to any necessary appointments. Lucky's schedule was equally rigorous. He got up at 6 a.m. and took the children to grandmother's about 6:30, except for the days he took Special to choir practice at school.

**Income.** At study onset, Lucky earned \$10.70 per hour and worked 40 hours per week for a base annual income of \$22,250. He also worked up to 8 hours of overtime per week, but no less than one day per month, which raised his annual income to about \$24,000. His employer substituted the option of working overtime for raises—a policy that reduced the time Lucky could spend with his children because overtime hours were generally on Saturdays.

Lucky's wife, Fantastic, earned \$11 an hour for a total of \$23,000 per year. The family had a checking account but no money saved, despite a combined income of about \$46,000. The tightness of the Miracles' budget was underscored by the \$48,276 annual income estimated as necessary for their family by the Self-Sufficiency Standard for Washington (Pearce, 2001), a more nuanced, contextual standard for assessing income adequacy than the federal poverty guidelines (FPL). The Miracles closed their savings accounts when they bought their house, but hoped to re-open them when they had "extra money." The family also shopped economically, buying clothes at K-Mart and waiting for sales:

*"I never buy a pair of shoes over thirty dollars, never. I was looking for a casual shoe. I wait and wait and wait and finally I wait for a year, they on sale, fifteen dollars."*

Lucky's idea of a family-supporting wage was \$15/hour.

**Expenses.** By their own assessment, the family's expenses were high. Two years earlier they bought their house for \$160,000 with considerable help from Fantastic's family. Monthly mortgage payments were \$1,100 and two annual property tax payments were \$1400 each. The house turned out to be a good investment, as it had appreciated to \$200,000. They made monthly car payments of \$458 for Fantastic's car, although they had paid off Lucky's car. Their utilities totaled \$200 to \$300 every two months, \$30 for their regular phone and \$40 for a cell phone monthly. They also spent approximately \$200 each week on food, or approximately \$800 per month. In the course of the study, Awesome had several cavities treated which resulted in a balance due of \$1,200 because their dental insurance only covered 70% of the dental services. Still, without such coverage—precarious at Fantastic's job and impossible at Lucky's job—their expenses would have been even higher.

After the family paid these expenses, there was little left for educational or recreational equipment for the children, although the family was able to take a summer vacation. Lucky said repeatedly that he would like to buy a computer for the children to use at home, but could not afford it. In summer 2000, Special participated in community swimming lessons which cost the family \$37 per month for three lessons per week at a neighborhood pool. Special also had a particular interest and talent in music that she expressed through her singing lessons at school. Lucky thought that the natural progression of her musical ability would be for her to take up an instrument and that piano would be an appropriate choice, but could not afford to buy one.

### Why no SJI job for Lucky?

Unfortunately, by October 2000, ten months after SJI manufacturing training, Lucky was still not able to "upgrade" and "get a better job." He remained in the same exploitive job he had before the training which deprived his children of resources the family wanted to offer. The quality of the manufacturing skills training coupled with the support of

a skilled case manager made Lucky’s inability to secure higher-level employment particularly perplexing and painful. Some of the reasons for this failure were Lucky’s complex relationship with his overloaded case manager, the still-developing manufacturing sector services, and Lucky’s language-driven hesitations about changing jobs that were exacerbated by cultural patterns of non-assertiveness.

**Case management perspective about no SJI-job.** Lucky’s case manager had an excellent reputation, maintaining the highest retention rates in the training program and earning praise from SJI staff who said that the case manager “never loses anybody.” We observed him as exceptionally competent, sensitive, and dedicated—but overloaded with agency responsibilities in addition to those pertaining to SJI, a pattern also seen in other workforce research (Iversen, 2000). Accordingly, Lucky’s experience with his case manager was complicated. Lucky admired the case manager’s competence and personal attention:

*“He saved a lot of people. He really does good. He did different things to try to find me a job, answer questions if I was in any trouble.”*

On the other hand, the few jobs that the case manager learned about from SJI offered only \$8 or \$9/hour, a wage decrease Lucky could not afford:

*“I asked him to find me a better job but he found me some job that is less money than I make now.”*

Lucky also perceived that his case manager was always busy and did not have much time to consult:

*“He’s having trouble finding me a job that pays enough. But I am hopeful. I talk mostly with him on the phone. Before the program, I saw him every few weeks. Now he just calls.”*

In contrast, the case manager perceived that Lucky was doing well and called him only if necessary—a pattern observed among other SJI case managers with clients who were not “squeaky wheels”:

*“I’m running around like crazy. He [Lucky] is a high-functioning client. Sometimes I end up focusing on those who are more in trouble.”*

Lucky’s case manager also acknowledged the limitations of the assessment process in the early days of the manufacturing project:

*“We did career assessment when he first came. The program was just starting. Sometimes there was not enough time to go into his history, how he got here. I rely on what clients tell me. I guess I need to question them.”*

These statements were particularly germane to what seemed like incomplete assessment of Lucky’s needs. Given his computer interests and self-proclaimed weakness in math, we wondered about the appropriateness of the manufacturing training assignment, especially with the demise of CNC training after a large potential employer cut back its workforce. In fact, Lucky originally wanted office occupations training, but lamented that its daytime-only schedule precluded participation because he needed to maintain his job:



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*“I heard they had a program in the evening that didn’t work out because they were short of money at [community college]. I really wanted to learn about computers.”*

**Industry sector perspective about no SJI-job.** An important part of SJI’s aim of systems reform, and potentially helpful to Lucky in his continuing job search, by the time of the fourth cohort the manufacturing project was officially affiliated with Seattle’s Manufacturing Industrial Council (MIC) and its individualized resource provision through MIC’s workforce development specialist. That this affiliation was nascent strongly influenced Lucky’s inability to find SJI employment, despite the emphasis on a “team approach” to finding a job and the success stories at orientation from earlier trainees with challenges such as a physical disability or health problems.

When SJI learned that Lucky had not found a manufacturing job, his case manager and SJI staff conferred about magnifying their efforts on Lucky’s behalf. An SJI staff member was particularly impressed that Lucky had held his job for 10 years. A flurry of activity ensued, but no designated individual was in charge. SJI staff knew about the jobs and believed that Lucky should be making “\$13/\$14 an hour somewhere,” but did not serve as Lucky’s official “contact.” Lucky’s case manager did not know as much about the jobs, was overloaded with more demanding customers, and expected that SJI personnel would fill the breach. In accord with the overall philosophy of the Jobs Initiative, the workforce specialist waited for Lucky to contact him, as even the researcher reinforced:

*“He has got a lot of job leads; it is up to you. I can give you his number. He has been going out and developing job leads for the Jobs Initiative.”*

According to Lucky, however, the specialist may have been on vacation and did not return his calls: “I called him a few times and he never called back.” Ultimately, SJI’s philosophy of customer-initiation rather than organizational outreach, together with Lucky’s reticence, meant that Lucky fell through multiple cracks and by Fall 2000, one year after SJI enrollment, had still not attained the upgraded employment everyone thought he deserved.

**Lucky’s perspective about no SJI-job.** On the surface, Lucky’s inability to change jobs was characterized by his case manager as partly motivational: “So far Lucky doesn’t want to change yet—his job seems OK for him.” Pressed for a more nuanced assessment, however, the case manager emphasized the subtle but pervasive impact of language difficulty, even among those who seemed fluent. Immigrants’ verbal proficiency often obscures the more subtle deficits that ESL-speakers experience: for example, knowledge about how to access social institutions [see Mike Jeremy Family Story], and in Lucky’s case [see also Maya Vanderhand Family Story], fear about changing work environments:

*“Their English. It seems OK, but it’s not good enough to do more than at present. People out there [employers] use it as an excuse.”*

Lucky’s case manager reflected further on the disconnect between Asian cultural patterns and succeeding in the American workplace:

*“Being Asian—we’re hard workers but not good at standing up for ourselves. In our culture, we respect the one in power. We’re not assertive, aggressive.”*

Throughout the initial 6-month study period, Lucky repeatedly planned to revise his resume and his case manager offered repeatedly to help if Lucky came to his office. Lucky’s fear of failure at a new site suggested an additional reason for his plight:

*“Some higher ones they have more experience. Since you haven’t worked at this type job before, it might fail in the beginning.”*

Similarly, although Lucky desperately wanted computer training, he was loath to join a class that consisted mainly of younger people: “Sometimes I feel so embarrassed.”

A final reason for Lucky’s reluctance to change jobs may have lain in the comfort he felt among his Asian co-workers:

*“The things I like, work is real friendly. Except the owner, everyone is real friendly.”*

Many co-workers spoke the several native languages he knew, another comfort as well, although not one he cited as holding him at Food Company. Ultimately, an Asian acquaintance linked Lucky with a second job.

## Second Non-SJI Job: School Custodian

Several months after SJI training did not result in manufacturing employment, Lucky applied for jobs similar to the one he held at Food Company, finding them mainly through local ads. He also re-activated a 4-year old application for a custodial position at his local school district. Disappointingly, none of these jobs called for the training he had at SJI, but Lucky viewed the benefits of SJI training in broad advancement terms:

*[Have any of these jobs been what you trained for at SJI?] “A little bit, but not a lot, because I know since I got training that if you get in this kind of job, you get a little more.”*

By Fall 2000, Lucky worked at two jobs simultaneously. He continued at Food Company 30 hours a week while he served a 3-month training period as school custodian. His 2-job work day lasted from 7:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. “or so,” according to his wife, with a 1-hour break between jobs: an exhausting 70-hour work week. When Lucky completed the probationary period at the school district and became eligible for health insurance, he planned to quit his Food Company job.

During the probationary period the school district paid Lucky \$14.62 per hour, yielding a potential annual income of \$30,400, \$6000 higher than his Food Company annual income which Lucky viewed as a chance to get ahead financially and build assets to ensure his children’s future welfare:

*“[With] more money I am going to try and pay the house off as soon as I can and we try to pay the cars off too. Car payments, mortgage payment, loan payment is a lot. And [we’ll] try to get extra money to open an account for those kids, they can go to college.”*

More immediately, Lucky hoped to buy his children a computer by the end of the year, recognizing that it would enhance their ongoing school achievement.

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Although Food Company did not want Lucky to leave, they were reluctant to raise his wages or increase his benefits—the family-focused reasons that Lucky sought the second job:

*“The owner asked me why I leave. I said ‘school got more benefits for me and it got more money, they cover all my family,’ and I require the medical for whole family, now it is only by myself. If I want to buy it, I got to pay for it. They [school district] have pension plan, they have retirement, and they are unionized.”*

Lucky’s opportunities for advancement at the custodial job may be more limited than they could have been in a manufacturing job attained through SJI, but he was considering further computer education during the day after his probationary period. He expected cost of living wage increases of about 3% annually, per union contract, but foresaw no skill or position advancement. Nevertheless, Lucky applied himself to his new responsibilities with a vigor that illustrated his need to feel self-confident in a job from the outset:

*“My supervisor just told me last night, I try to do my best, since I am new. I am supposed to have break but since I am new I don’t get used to it, I don’t take any break, any break time or lunch time, try to do the best that I can. They say: ‘oh you can handle,’ I try. I am trying.”*

Underscoring this need, Lucky described his new job in terms that suggested considerable performance stress: “The new job is depressed. I am new, so can’t finish on time. I just depress myself, ‘oh, what do I do?’”

### Family Welfare

Finding a new ethnic identity after immigrating to the U.S. was a bumpy road for Lucky in some areas. For one, religious belief was both a source of crisis and strength. Initially, Lucky attended an Asian Christian church where the minister reprimanded him publicly when he fell asleep during a service. Nevertheless, the family maintained its faith and kept several shrines in their home to celebrate “Buddha, nature and family.” In addition, the children attended Asian language school on Sundays at the family’s downtown temple, on their way to becoming multi-lingual like their parents. The language school characterized Special as hard-working, like her parents:

*“The Asian-language school teacher gives her lots of prizes because she is the only one that studies real good.”*

The language center also served as a gathering place for the larger Asian populace and provided an important source of community for Lucky and Fantastic: “We see a lot of friends, pretty much like a church sometimes.”

For another, Lucky and Fantastic’s 12-year marriage was characterized by a blend of traditional Asian gender roles and contemporary American role sharing. Lucky felt that the ideal marriage was one in which the wife took responsibility for the home and children, and the husband worked outside the home to support the family. In reality, Lucky’s family compromised out of economic necessity. He helped take care of the children, such as changing diapers because: “there’s no choice.” Similarly, women worked out of necessity: “In our country women don’t work. It’s OK for women working in this country because they have no choice. Unless you win the lottery.”

Extended family offered the most significant support to the Miracles. Lucky’s mother, sister and niece lived in a suburb about 45 minutes away and saw the Miracles frequently, despite the mother’s precarious health. Fantastic’s mother lived 5 minutes away and was an integral part of the children’s daily lives. She took care of Special and Awesome and 3 cousins, aged 11, 5 and 7 months, before and after school while Fantastic and Lucky worked. This informal childcare was without major cost to the Miracles as they compensated Fantastic’s mother only with “occasional groceries and clothes.” Lucky viewed the children-grandparent care relationship as reciprocal and integral to sustaining Asian-country values:

*“Americans don’t care for older relatives. My kids are grandkids. That’s where they belong.”*

Lucky considered this relationship a significant plus for his children: “I always say we’re lucky.” The children played with play-dough, baked, played basketball with neighbor children, and read at their grandmother’s. The grandmother’s care also facilitated the children’s bilingualism, as they primarily spoke Asian language there.

Fantastic’s brother, an engineer studying for his master’s degree, also helped the children with their homework every day after school. The help he provided to Special was a crucial factor in helping her improve her math skills and school performance during the previous year:

*“In second grade she was terrible [in math], before he started helping her. Now she’s much happier.”*

The Miracles were also supported by friends who originated from their home and adopted Asian countries:

*“We have our own ethnic community. We went to ESL school together at the nearby Community College. We went first to ESL and then tried electronics. But the government cut down on the loans, so we only went for one quarter. I had to work the rest of the time. At that time I was a full-time student and did part-time work.”*

Such friends provided crucial help to the family as they managed their daily activities and the continual demands of establishing themselves and attempting to advance in their careers.

The family was in generally good health, although Awesome had periodic seizures and at one point Lucky had saved Awesome’s life. Awesome’s health deeply worried Lucky because he also had fevers and seizures as a child. Lucky, Fantastic, and Special also suffered from allergies, mainly to grass and animals, although Lucky’s were also exacerbated by the flour-laden air at Food Company.

**Neighborhood.** The Miracle’s 6 room ranch house was in a residential community outside Seattle that was predominantly “middle class” and 17% Asian according to a school district profile. Nearby neighborhoods were less residential and less clean than the Miracle’s immediate neighborhood. Although Lucky described the community as “pretty safe; not really an area that I worry about crime,” his neatly-mowed yard was surrounded by a chain-link fence and the front door was guarded by a black metal mesh door with several large locks. Lucky also planned to “put in a gate—security for the kids.” However he also described an incident where his mother-in-law’s purse had been in an unlocked car overnight, yet “nobody touched it.” Perhaps the tension between the hope for suburban safety and memories of Asian-country persecution influenced such measures. More immediately, the major highway one block away and the high school and community center across the street contributed to the felt need for such protection.

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Increasing numbers of Asian residents in the Miracle's community normalized Special and Awesome's ethnic origins in school and translated into increased numbers of ethnic food stores and restaurants, maximizing the short time available for family shopping. The Miracles' neighbors were of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds, described as "pretty good neighbors." Although there was little formal social interchange, Lucky viewed it as a comfortable environment: "I know my neighbors and we talk outside when the weather is good... when we're mowing grass and things like that."

**Hopes and goals for the children.** Lucky and Fantastic provided enriching travel experiences for the children, despite limited income. They flew to California for a relative's wedding, providing the children with their first airplane ride, and proudly showed us at least 100 pictures of their summer trip to Disneyland. Accompanying pictures of Christmas at the Miracles evidenced presents and a full set of holiday decorations.

Despite these occasional "treats," Lucky rued the fact that his SJI training did not result in upgraded employment, linking the loss of resources he could not provide with fears about the children's future welfare and enrichment:

*"I'd get the kids a computer. They're using it at school. I'd really like them to have one at home. I'd get them more education. Awesome asks all kinds of questions. I have to explain a lot to him. Special says that the boy is really smart. I'm doing labor work—Fantastic is also."*

He also regretted the hardship his family experienced when he was in training:

*"The hardest thing is that people don't want to get too tired and not spend good enough time with their family. If they are always learning and going to late classes, they can't do that."*

Lucky was also concerned that the physical labor of their jobs took a regular toll on their energy and ability to fully attend to their children's needs:

*"At Fantastic's job, they upped the expectations from 1000 a day to 3000 a day. That takes a physical toll."*

As a result of the parents' work schedules, daily family dinners now occurred only once a week.

Special's goals for herself changed frequently, customary for her age, but reflected Lucky's strong desire that the children not remain laborers:

*"Since I don't have that much good education, I want the kids to have it so they don't need to do labor work."*

At age nine, her goals included being a model, an engineer and a teacher. Awesome, on the other hand, at age 5 was characterized as a "pretty good cook." At base, however, Lucky wanted the children to do what they wanted to do. Recalling that his parents forced his pathway, he wanted his children's lives to be different: "Like I say, my boy and girl, if they want to think what they want to do in the future, just let them."

During the summer the children spent most days at their grandmother's and in past years took gymnastics and swimming lessons at the nearby community center. Community center instructors characterized Special and

Awesome as “happy, adjusted, and motivated.” In addition to singing, Special played school basketball and Awesome played basketball at the grandmother’s neighbor’s house after school, although he limited outdoor time because of his allergy problems. The children would have gone to summer school in summer 2000, but had no transportation, so Lucky supervised lessons at home:

*“Since she does not go to summer school I make her do something [math and reading] at home.”*

### Children’s Welfare and Schools

Lucky and Fantastic’s children were hard-working academically and interactive socially. The children were developing at an appropriate pace and performing well in school and activities, but showed some signs that they needed more attention from their parents. The fact that the parents’ overtime hours generally occurred on Saturdays contributed to the children’s perceptions of insufficient parental time. Special’s complaints also held over from the time Lucky spent in SJI training: “He came home late. Sometimes we’d go shopping, but I didn’t get anything.”

**Special.** At 9 years old, Special was in third grade at study onset and was active in school and extra-curricular activities. Her singing instructor thought she had a good singing voice, and this was her favorite activity. Despite sacrificing work hours to do so, Lucky’s decision to foster Special’s singing interest also enabled the family to contribute to the larger community as her choir readied to perform for area nursing homes. Lucky also left work early one day per week during the summer to take her to her swimming lessons, from 3-5 p.m. On the other two days, Fantastic took her to her lessons.

Lucky spoke proudly about Special’s singing ability and writing skills, but Special responded with a comment about her father’s inattention to her needs:

*“But you never check it after I write something. He’s too busy finding something to do.”*

She also complained that he did not help her with her homework because he came home late from work. Special’s comments underscored that she wanted more time and attention from her father, which she expressed articulately for a nine-year-old. Work demands, in conjunction with the time SJI training took away from his family, made Lucky’s daughter’s desire for more attention prescient and understandable.

Special’s school performance was good and improved over her third grade year. In spring 2000, she received “meets expectations” remarks in all of her classes. In second grade she had been tutored in reading; in response, her grandmother read with her and the family went frequently to the public library. After an early third grade parent conference, Lucky reported that the teacher mentioned notable reading improvement:

*“Special is getting more progress. The teacher said she is the whole class here, reading is number one.”*

Special also had trouble with math during second grade, but her uncle’s daily after-school tutoring led to significant improvement. To consolidate these gains, her uncle also tutored her during the summer.

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Special attended a local elementary school that was part of a suburban district that was about one-quarter the size of the Seattle School District, with an enrollment of 10,229 compared to 47,609 students in Seattle public schools (1998-99). Funding in the suburban schools was slightly lower than in the Seattle schools: a per-student spending rate of \$6,416 compared to \$7,027 (1997-98). In contrast, teacher salaries tended to be higher: an experienced teacher received a salary of \$44,530 in the suburban community but only \$39,772 in Seattle. Lucky was particularly pleased with Special's third grade teacher whom he described as "awesome, wonderful. She knows the way to teach the kids." In contrast, he described Special's second grade teacher as "a couple of times pretty fussy." Lucky or Fantastic attended parent-teacher conferences 2-3 times a year, but their work schedules made PTA meetings hard to attend. As a substitute, Lucky consulted informally with his daughter's teacher.

Special's school was "inviting and relatively informal" and "open about their challenges." On indicators of student performance, such as truancy, suspension, and expulsion, students at Special's school compared favorably with public elementary schools in Seattle. Academically, results from the 1999 Fourth Grade Washington Assessment of Learning were generally higher in Special's school than in the Seattle public schools. Eighty-three percent of fourth graders at the suburban school met state standards in Reading in 1999, nearly 30% higher than the rate for the Seattle public schools. Forty-eight percent of suburban fourth graders met state standards in Writing and 57% in Math, nearly 10% and 20% higher respectively than Seattle fourth graders. Attendance was also good in the suburban public school. No students had ten or more unexcused absences during the 1997-98 school year.

**Awesome.** At age 4<sup>1/2</sup>, Awesome was also expressive and interactive. He loved to go to his pre-school program, looking at the clock every day and saying, "Time to go to school." At pre-school he was improving his math and reading skills and Lucky helped him with "homework" during school vacation breaks. Technically eligible for Kindergarten in Fall 2000, Awesome remained in pre-school because of his mid-fall birthday. In part because Awesome was bilingual, his parents felt that an additional year of pre-school would consolidate his skills, although his father reported proudly that he already knew his "colors and shapes and his alphabet and numbers." By Fall 2000, despite only two school days a week of one hour and 45 minutes, Awesome had learned how to spell his name. The pre-school program was held in a local high school which meant that the staff was augmented by enthusiastic high school student aides.

Because Awesome was younger than the other children their grandmother watched during the day, he was often excluded from the older children's activities. While he sometimes felt bad about this exclusion, he usually tagged along anyway and seemed to have fun. He also followed Special to the community center even though he was not taking classes. He wanted to accompany his cousins to school every day, an orientation that augured well for his eventual entry to "real" school.

### Family Status in October 2000

Lucky's background as a refugee who was trying to establish himself in the U.S., with no educational degree that was recognized here, was the single most influential factor in shaping the culture of his family and affecting the well-being of his children. Lucky's greatest advantage lay in the extensive social networks among extended family, in particular, and friends who had also been refugees and gave advice and assistance when necessary.

The "plusses and minuses" of Lucky's new custodial job in Fall 2000 epitomized the experiences of Jobs Initiative parents in the low-wage work market: with each, the other is also present. Sometimes they balanced towards family

welfare; sometimes they did not. For example, while Lucky’s custodial job *potentially* provided increased income and benefits, it took him away from the children every evening, reducing the family cohesion that had come from shared meals and parental oversight of homework and bedtime routines. On the other hand, if he held only the custodial job, he would not work Saturdays as he did at Food Company, thus he would have more time on weekends for the children. In addition, the school-year work schedule of nighttime hours would provide an opportunity for Lucky to pursue further skill development during the day.

Lucky focused on the tradeoffs in financial terms, as most study parents did:

*“The truth is a lot of money, more money. You don’t need to work more hours like the first time I had more money. I make \$1500 for a month and I only work eight hours, forty hour a week but the other job I work sixty hour to make the same money.”*

Because of Lucky’s second job, the annual family income increased from about \$45,000 to about \$57,000 over the initial 6-month study period, a notable 25% increase. Given the gender expectations of Lucky’s cultural background, the fact that his income now surpassed his wife’s was perhaps also important. The family’s benefit situation was poised to improve, as Lucky’s job-in-training would provide full family benefits, replacing their piecemeal coverage. Material enrichment and asset building for the children’s achievement were also poised to improve, but at some cost to the amount of time available for direct parental attention to the children’s needs—a dilemma expressed ruefully all along by the 9-year old daughter.

The patient persistence evidenced by Lucky and Fantastic’s refugee ordeals, immigration, struggle for upward mobility, dedication to children’s welfare, and bumpy but tenacious pursuit of future advancement were both impressive and positive for the ultimate welfare of the Miracle family. As an example of his perennial hopefulness, Lucky chose the family pseudonym according to the potential he saw from his new school district job:

*“I feel the things that I want to, expect to come in sooner or later will come to me. This job I was expecting and this day I will get this job, but it took me four years.”*

Lucky clearly also wavered between his own advancement aims, concomitant need for a GED, and devoting parental labors to improving the family’s material condition such that the next generation—the children—could progress further upward.



### Follow-up May 2001 and Conclusions

When the Miracle family was recontacted in May 2001, 14 months after our initial contact, Lucky still held two jobs. He worked from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Food Company, Monday through Friday and, if business was not slow, on Saturday. Lucky worked Saturday mornings to accrue the 30 hours per week necessary to be eligible for paid vacation. Weekdays, he went from Food Company to the school for his 2 p.m. to 11 p.m. shift. As a school custodian, Lucky cleaned three of nine buildings that stretched along five city blocks. Regarding the possibility for promotion at the School, Lucky described his current responsibilities and arduous schedule:

*"[A promotion] would depend on whether there was an opening. I could be Head Night Supervisor. I would like this. I have more responsibility now. I set the alarm at night. I walk back and forth making sure everyone is out of the building. Then I set it at 11pm. I come home and shower, eat, and go to bed at 12:30. At 6:45am I wake up, take the kids to grandma's house, and go to Food Company. I'm tired; really tired."*

According a teacher's letter to the Vice Principal of the school, Lucky's fatigue did not impact the quality of his work:

*"The new night custodian, Lucky, is truly outstanding. Not only is everything spotless, done on time, and with such expertise, but Lucky is one of the most pleasant people on our staff."*

Below this Lucky's supervisor wrote, "Way to go! Thank you for your hard work." These sentiments were reiterated by the Vice Principal and in the "Kudos to..." section of the school newspaper.

The same work ethic commended by the School was responsible for Lucky's continued employment at Food Company. As Lucky initially justified keeping his shift, "Food Company won't let me go." The company, newly but still mis-managed, needed Lucky's ten years of experience to train new workers in inventory procedures. Under the new management, Lucky trained three workers who subsequently quit. Lucky remained at Food Company for the pay schedule and cumulative income of 2 jobs. Although his hourly wage was higher at the School than at Food Company, it was not enough to pay the bills and would not increase until year two:

*"Basically, I'm still expected to do my previous job [at Food Company], but they pay me less and I work less hours. I'm paid 2 times a month there. I need that for my bills. School pays me only once a month. I'm keeping the Food Company job for the money. I pay the bills now as they come versus waiting until the end of the month."*

Fantastic's annual raise to \$11/hour resulted in \$22,800 annual income; together the family income was almost \$70,000, well above sufficiency according to the Self-Sufficiency Standard for Washington (Pearce, 2001). Yet this annual income required the wages of *almost three full-time jobs*, a punishing 70-hour week for Lucky and a 40-hour week for Fantastic. The family had not yet been able to save money or buy a new computer as planned. However, Lucky managed to procure a used computer from a coworker at Food Company who was "upgrading it for a modem."

Lucky's 70-hour work week precluded the pursuit of further training and education. It did not appear he could reduce his hours anytime soon. He repeatedly said that Food Company, in their desperation to keep him, was flexible; he could arrive late or leave early in order to take the children to their appointments. However, any time that Lucky missed was unpaid. "Flexibility" in Lucky's schedule was a zero-sum predicament, which was not the case for

his employer. For Lucky, the benefits of working two jobs were strictly financial: he could meet his bills and, “Fantastic can spend more money.” The most evident drawback was having less time with his family. Less evident and having more to do with the nature of Lucky’s two jobs were the environmental hazards he faced. As Lucky said, “I’m coughing from the bleach in the cleaning liquid at school and from the flour at Food Company.” Fortunately Lucky had health benefits from his custodial job; the children and his wife remained covered by Fantastic’s benefits.

Fantastic continued to work at the aviation company, though her job appeared in jeopardy. In early spring 2001, the company announced it was leaving Seattle, news that was poorly received by the city that relied upon its almost 80,000 jobs. A March news article reported the potential relocation of only 1,000 jobs, as the company would maintain most of its operations in Seattle (Foster, 2001). It was not clear how this would affect Fantastic, as Lucky noted: “There are lists and she is on the list, but she has not been laid off yet.” For the time being, Fantastic worked only one shift. As Lucky said, “she doesn’t work any overtime so she has more time with the kids to balance my second job.”

**Family.** Lucky lamented the amount of time he spent away from his family but believed they understood. He reasoned: “The children don’t say anything. Special knows I am working hard.” While understanding, Special indicated at an earlier time that she missed her father. Similarly, Lucky relayed a story about a trip he took with Awesome’s preschool to a pumpkin farm:

*“He was soooo happy. He said, I had a good time Dad because you go with me.”*

To accompany Awesome, Lucky took unpaid time off from Food Company. While one morning could be budgeted, longer periods of unpaid leave could not. The family already planned a summer trip to a nearby lake, which would use Lucky’s paid vacation leave. Therefore, the trip to San Francisco to visit the larger temple of his religion was not possible. Fantastic and the children, who would be baptized this trip, went with their congregation, but without Lucky.

Sunday was Lucky’s day with the family. He still took the children to Asian language school and the whole family went to lunch and food shopping together, “even my mother-in-law.” In Asian language school, Special and Awesome were honing their bilingual skills; folders of papers covered with “Good Job” stickers were testament to this. Special could read in Asian language and Awesome could write the numbers “1” through “5.” Lucky was able to tutor them in Asian language skills on the weekend, while their uncle continued to help them with their English language homework during the week.

Both Special and Awesome were doing well in school. According to an Instructional Assistant, Special was still charming, a good singer, energetic and athletic, but continued to need practice in reading. Lucky did not think bilingualism had a negative impact on the children’s English skills:

*“The kids talk English all the time—at home too. Special is doing real good in school. Mostly A’s or A-pluses. No C’s this year; different from last year.”*

If Special attended summer school in 2001, Lucky said it would be solely for enrichment: reading and math for one month. Special would spend the rest of her summer playing soccer and taking swimming lessons with her brother at the community pool. In fall 2001 she would enter the fifth grade and resume her recently acquired position on the School Safety Patrol. Lucky brought Special to school early every two weeks she was on patrol, taking unpaid time from work to ensure she would be there.

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Awesome was completing pre-school and would enter kindergarten at Special's school in fall 2001. Lucky was glad he and Fantastic decided to hold Awesome back one year; his teachers agreed this was a positive decision. During the research team's repeat visit, Special and Awesome's (soon-to-be) elementary school was described as clean, with attentive staff and students engaged in positive activities. Lucky arranged that Awesome would attend kindergarten in the mornings and take the school bus in the afternoon to his grandmother's home. The Miracle's extended family continued to provide support and to nurture the children's interests. Awesome continued to show off his baking talents, his recent feat being banana bread.

Lucky had not had any contact with SJI. When hired by the school district, he called ACRS to relay the news and left a message, but never received a call back or any information about the scheduled one-year transfer to a new case manager. Lucky was, however, still in touch with his former classmates:

*"I still talk to five people who graduated with me from SJI."*

On his own efforts, Lucky positioned his family geographically to increase the human and social capital of his children. By all accounts, the family's welfare improved over the course of almost two years. If the Jobs Initiative had been able to negotiate his cultural hesitations and procure viable job opportunities for him in his training area of manufacturing, Lucky could have come even nearer to providing the range of opportunities that give "middle-class" children the edge in life attainment. He would have held higher-status employment. He would not have needed a second job. He would have had potential for further professional development, of greater significance given his actual age. And the family would have had more resources to extend the children's development.

# Moving Up is a Steep Climb

The “Maya Vanderhand” Family Story

*Parents’ Work and Children’s Welfare  
in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jobs Initiative*



*Roberta Rehner Iversen  
with Annie Laurie Armstrong and Mona Basta*

April 2002

## “Maya Vanderhand” Family Story

### Resident Family:

Maya Vanderhand, a 32-year old Hispanic woman, ethnographic study key informant.

Jesus Vanderhand, Maya’s 48-year old Hispanic husband.

Iesha Vanderhand, 13-year old daughter, in 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grades.

Sahari Vanderhand, 11-year old daughter, in 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> grades.

Zimba Vanderhand, 8-year old son, in 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> grades.

Max Vanderhand, 7-year old son, in 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> grades.

Study Timeline: March through October 2000. Follow-up May 2001.

### *“Responsibility”...at work and home.*

Maya Vanderhand had high standards for her work and home life, epitomized by her often-repeated theme of “responsibility.” Maya’s job at home was “to raise children who will be responsible” and her idea of a good employee was “someone who is responsible, knows their job, doesn’t complain, and gets along.” Maya’s desire to feel competent, skillful and knowledgeable about her work resulted in high quality performance that was recognized by her coworkers and supervisors and rewarded by a 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> percent raise during her first year of Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) employment. Maya also had opportunities for advancement as a result of her performance and professional relationships.

Maya’s ethos of responsibility, at work and in the family, helped to compensate for incomplete education [no high school diploma or GED] and the absence of parental involvement in her schooling. Maya recognized she would never have arrived where she was now in her career without the help of the Seattle Jobs Initiative. Her participation in our research was driven by a desire to help improve the program, as she felt she could contribute an important perspective:

*“You don’t know what’s inside until you hear from someone who’s been inside.”*

During our initial 6-months’ contact with Maya, she often repeated her hope to make an impact on SJI training: “I hope there are changes, even one.”

## Background and Pre-SJI History

Maya emigrated to California with her mother in 1979 after four years of elementary school in her native Central American country. Some years later, Maya dropped out of high school at the end of 10<sup>th</sup> grade and met Jesus soon thereafter. Maya and Jesus moved to Seattle in 1993 because there was no work in California. They married legally at that time. It was important that Maya do everything well: be a good parent, a good wife, a good worker. She hesitated to try anything new, or change anything, until she was sure she could succeed.

However, lack of a high school diploma was a major challenge in Maya’s life and until SJI had prevented her from achieving the success she desired and needed in order to support her family. Maya’s aspiration to work for the Immigration Department could only be fulfilled if she obtained her GED. This goal reflected her own experience as an immigrant and her desire to help others overcome the obstacles she had overcome. She wanted to help other people who were responsible, like herself, to become citizens and achieve success.

Before enrollment in SJI, Maya worked for two years as a lead cashier in a military office. Her top wage there was \$8/hour for a 20-hour week which yielded an annual income of about \$8000. Her husband’s full time job raised the family income to about \$30,000, about 150% of the federal poverty guideline (FPL) for a family of 6.

## SJI Training and Case Management: Office Occupations/ TRAC (Training, Rehabilitation, Assessment, Counseling)

**Office Occupations Training.** In January 1998, Maya left the cashier job to spend time at home with her children and go to school. Maya received a flyer about a training program from the Family Support Worker [an individual assigned to schools to provide information and resources to families] at her children’s elementary school and attended an open house there for additional information. Her income was too high for the advertised training program, but fortuitously she met a representative from TRAC, a community based organization (CBO) affiliated with the Seattle Jobs Initiative. Seven months later Maya re-contacted the TRAC representative and subsequently enrolled in SJI office occupations training in September 1998. Maya hoped to gain the following from SJI participation: “Have skills assessed; get job/job placement; learn occupational skills; and improve math/reading skills.”

Described as “a leader—dedicated from the beginning,” Maya nevertheless offered a number of critiques about her Jobs Initiative training class. Twenty-some trainees began the class but only 6-8 completed it. Similar to other SJI participants, Maya’s high standards for herself translated into a conviction that the Jobs Initiative should only help motivated people: “They are spending too much money on people who don’t want to be there.” Maya also felt that the instructors did not answer questions and did not teach well; they did not measure up to her standards for a training program. A SJI staff member confirmed the accuracy of Maya’s assessment:

*“Maya’s office training was still in very formative stages. Maya’s class was not a good class. There was no training supervisor—no one monitoring the trainees day to day. Slackers got through. Trainees went from class to class without any overarching supervision.”*

## Moving Up is a Steep Climb

Importantly, by the time of this research SJI had corrected most of the areas Maya critiqued for subsequent office training cohorts, illustrating that workforce development organizations must be flexible and customer-responsive to draw and retain trainees. For example, SJI changed the training locale after Maya's group, believing they would get better service at the new site. SJI instituted a training supervisory process whereby a specialist on location monitored all trainees and liaised regularly with individual case managers. SJI also helped their CBO affiliates conduct more thorough assessments of general work-preparation skills before referring an applicant to formal training.

Part of the increased focus on assessment included more refined literacy testing. SJI teamed with the community college on the federally funded ABE/ESL [Adult Basic Education/English as a Second Language] program to offer more inclusive pre-vocational preparation in reading, math, and language to applicants before their formal office training. Maya had attended pre-vocational ABE classes and worked on her GED, but did not finish it at that time, unfortunately, as GED attainment would have significantly improved her advancement potential. Illustrating the importance of having sensitive and competent teachers in such programs, Maya stopped attending because of the teacher's demeanor:

*"I started going to some classes for GED but then it got to the point where the lady that was teaching it, the way she was teaching it, it wasn't very professional. She was kind of rude and so I decided not to go again."*

Maya suggested having "GED Saturdays," similar to "Microsoft Saturdays" which were voluntary extra computer skills tutorials, to advance GED completion.

SJI also instituted stronger controls on program attendance, dropping trainees after 5 days of non-participation, and either trained or replaced instructors whose work did not meet SJI standards. Finally, employment-site internships were expanded from 12 days over a 6-week period to 15 days over a 5-week period—exactly what Maya suggested—and the "job search" component was lengthened from 1 to 1½ weeks.

Observations of recent classes in business environment [soft] skills, Excel, word processing, interview skills, and the community college facility in general corroborated these changes. Instructors who were officially associated with SJI surpassed the community college instructors in expertise, vision, sensitivity, and knowledge about racial and ethnic discrimination, but all instructors conducted their classes in a professional manner, simulating a work environment. Not surprisingly, in a city where technology has played a major role in the labor market, computers were generally up-to-date and plentiful. In contrast, textbooks were not always available at the beginning of a course. Microsoft volunteers offered Saturday tutorials through SJI for both current and former office occupations trainees—a "perk" of this sector that other SJI participants wished for. Due to both the contemporary policy environment of "Work First" under TANF and the facility's location, few students other than SJI trainees were observed in the community college classrooms and hallways during the six visits to the facility.

Maya's suggestions and our observations also pointed to directions for further improvement. Significantly for Maya, SJI training did not include instruction in workplace safety or ergonomics. Such instruction is critical to the long-range health and advancement of clerical workers, as Maya's experience illustrated (see below). Less obviously, such instruction is important for the children in JI-families, as they observe parental computer work and as JI-households become able to afford PCs. A recent report noted the increase in repetitive-stress injury among children as young as 11 years (Kadaba, 2001). Increasing the overall length of the training was a suggestion as well. Maya

believed that a 3-month course followed by 1-2 months of internship would have prepared trainees even better. This call for longer training was universal among SJI participants, countering current “rapid attachment” policies and reductions in funding for workforce development under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998.

Maya also suggested that the training program internship should be paid. She heard that the company where she interned was paying someone for the trainees’ time but had not been able to confirm whether or not this was true. She also heard about the existence of the Individual Development Account (IDA) program designed to help trainees build up a savings account, but these funds seemed mysteriously inaccessible. She would have liked to access IDA funds to help purchase a house.

**Case Management/TRAC.** Many of Maya’s comments about the Jobs Initiative program centered on the unevenness of initial case management procedures:

*“I’ve volunteered at SJI. I found out through volunteering there that SJI was not run the way they thought they ran it. Barrier-busters: SJI approves it. I’ve been told there’s no funds—it’s a bunch of lies. Some case managers—who they can help; who they want to help. It’s different even within organizations—depends on type of workload. Some are overwhelmed with clients bugging them. But the help is there. SJI said that all the case managers need to do is to request a barrier-buster and they will approve it.”*

A SJI staff member agreed with Maya’s critique of the initial case management process:

*“The only way SJI had any idea about how they were doing, whether or not they were attending, etc., was if a case manager happened to come by”.*

Despite these critiques, and the fact that she had three different case managers over the course of her initial 15 months with SJI, Maya developed relationships with them that facilitated her asking for help. The case managers’ regular, monthly outreach was essential to engaging Maya supportively:

*“They call me like once in a while, ‘how are you doing? Do you need anything?’ and that is when I started getting help, after I started talking to them more.”*

Given cultural and other differences in individuals’ readiness to ask for and accept help from outside persons, persistent outreach may be particularly necessary for a portion of Jobs Initiative and other workforce program participants.

Perhaps critical to her ability to remain on the job, Maya’s third and most tenacious case manager called just at the point Maya needed help with moving expenses and a rental deposit, having secured a new and safer apartment for her family. Importantly, this “point” was *after* the 12-month shift to a second-year retention specialist should have taken place. Maya’s case manager perceptively recognized that the 1-year mark was often one of particular vulnerability, and thus continued with her customers through the transition. In the case manager’s experience, one year on the job was often the end of a “honeymoon period” wherein old patterns surfaced and threatened job retention. In Maya’s case, the 1-year period marked a desire to improve the family living situation—a desire that was economically feasible until her husband lost his job in the middle of the residential change. Although they had never met in person, Maya was confident of her case manager’s allegiance: “If I want her to, she’d call every day.”



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Maya's case manager also helped with gas vouchers and clothing expenses such as shoes for work—expenses that were critical for Maya to feel comfortable and appropriate in her new professional environment, but ones that she regularly subsumed in order to meet the children's needs:

*"You need a pair of shoes because with kids it is really hard. I buy the kids first but then when you really, really need it, it is like geez...you got to squeeze things here and there, and so they help me with some shoes and I made it work where I could get some tights and shoes and get some sales out there."*

Maya also thought that the case management services would have been more helpful if she had been able to meet with her case manager in person. This issue was particularly salient as the retention transfer took place:

*"Now that I've been on my job for a year, she's transferring me to somebody else. I feel so bad. I didn't really know [my] case manager, and now I'm being transferred. The contact should have been person to person. [How do you think the new case manager will be?] It's another caseworker. I won't be as comfortable as with [my previous] case manager. She really helped me out. I don't know if the new one will contact me every other month. I don't know her ability to help me. This will pull me back from asking."*

In the face of her imminent transfer to an unknown, un-named person, Maya had some pointed suggestions for SJI:

*"It would be best if: 1) I could meet her; find out in-person what she has to offer; 2) what she thinks about—if and how often we should meet; and 3) we had some type of connection—not just phone. If I don't know a person—how can I call and say I need help? It's best to meet one-on-one."*

Such suggestions were particularly germane to the personal and employment challenges Maya anticipated at the post-one year period:

*"My husband is not working. I probably have to have surgery on my hands. My hands are going numb. I'm having a hard time. I'll have a MRI on March 15. The nerves are bad. My supervisor says he'll do anything he can do—100%. I can delegate my job duties. I'll need to train someone. [And the new supervisor?] The new guy, we just don't know yet. He's been there only 1 week so far. My hands are no good; my workload is cut in half. But he says 'Just let me know—we'll go from there.' This puts pressure on my co-workers; and there's less money for the house."*

Responding to Maya's concern, her case manager arranged an in-person meeting between the SJI retention specialist and Maya to facilitate the transfer. The fact that Maya now had a "personal" connection with her case manager's sequel may be particularly important for resource acquisition during her second retention year, since case manager-customer contact is generally less frequent than in the first year. Essentially, Maya thought that "staying more connected" and "putting more time in a person to get to know them better" were critical to helping SJI graduates keep and advance in their jobs.

By the time of Maya's 18-month employment anniversary, she viewed herself as more independent and less in need of services from the Jobs Initiative, although she might seek help to update her resume. She saw herself as an independent person, and did not want to become dependent on any organization: "It's too easy to be dependent and to stay dependent." She would like to attend SJI reunions if they "gave more lead time" in their invitations.

In line with her independence and illustrating growing self-confidence, Maya volunteered for Dress for Success, a community organization that she used as a resource during her SJI training—one that helped new workers find adequate and affordable professional clothing. She was a board member for a short period, but reverted to regular volunteering when time pressure and home responsibilities became heavier. Dress for Success functioned doubly as a “professional women’s group,” offering not only instrumental help with clothing and resume production, but communication skills, money management, fashion tips, and other expressive peer support oriented toward helping new workers stay employed.

After completing SJI office training, Maya received two job offers and chose to work at Insurance Company. Before SJI, the lack of a high-school diploma or GED was a major barrier to building a career. The Jobs Initiative helped her overcome this barrier and obtain a position in a corporate environment that she would not have had access to without the skill training, connections, and retention services of SJI.

### SJI Employment: Insurance Company

One of two SJI graduates to be hired by Insurance Company, Maya began in January 1999 as a personal lines operator at an annual income of \$24,000 [approximately \$11.50/hour] with benefits—a salary that was \$16,000 greater than that of her pre-JI job and one that also covered her medical needs. The children’s health needs remained covered under Medical Assistance throughout our period of contact with Maya; coverage that was expected to last until November 2001. Her husband’s health needs were covered through his employment.

At our first contact with the Vanderhands in March 2000, Maya had worked at Insurance Company for just over one year and her annual salary had increased to \$25,800. Maya found SJI skill training inclusive and pertinent to her position: “I use them [the skills I learned at SJI] everyday.” In fact, Maya was often called upon to teach others:

*“Because of the computer skills and stuff like that, now I am having to help other people with that, how they even get into Word.”*

The Jobs Initiative thus afforded Maya an opportunity to excel in her work and conduct herself professionally in a corporate environment—a far cry from being lead cashier.

Maya was particularly skillful in her professional relationships at work. She was disappointed when her supervisor was promoted to another position in the company, as she had developed a good working relationship with him. In return, he exercised flexibility when family needs arose:

*“He says ‘mom is first and so if you need to go home because your kids are sick, don’t worry.’”*

On another occasion, he allowed her to bring her sick son to work, understanding her dual role as parent and worker.

Understandably, getting a new supervisor felt precarious. Maya would have to invest in developing a new relationship with a person who seemed less eager to accommodate her needs. Ultimately the new supervisor was flexible about child emergencies, although more strict about compensatory arrangements. His flexibility seemed more related to his

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satisfaction with Maya's work than to an understanding of the conflicting demands of family and work: "He said he noticed that when he gives me something to do, I do it right and I won't give it to him until it is perfectly done."

The nature of Maya's work required her to collaborate with coworkers to complete tasks that were generally done on the computer. Maya had one friend among her coworkers, but initially described them as challenging: "They are *not* pleasant. Some make things difficult for others. So I do what I need to do and leave it at that." These sentiments were expressed during Jesus' first period of unemployment, and may have been heightened by Maya's tension at that time. At a later point, coinciding with Jesus's re-employment, Maya's view of her co-workers was more measured: "We are all going to have differences and conflicts, but that is part of working together and different cultures. But we are pretty good." Overall, she was skillful in coping with difficult coworkers and knew how to avoid unnecessary aggravation that could arise from workplace conflicts.

**Advancement.** Maya's excellent job performance did not go unnoticed, in spite of the fact that she did not actively seek career advancement. Advancement opportunities were available, including on-job training, but they involved changing departments and in some cases, office locations. Maya knew what she was doing and hesitated to move into another position where she might feel less competent:

*"I don't want to change departments any time; there is a lot going on. I have so much on my plate that I don't want to screw that up. I can go to another department but I want to get to know my job better where I am at. There is claims or underwriting or there is other things and they will train you, but I don't want to jump from one group to another. I want to get to know that it is better and plus because my hands are not well, I would rather stay where I am at and well down."*

She also did not consider changing companies for advancement purposes at this point, largely because her tendinitis might affect her performance and attendance at work. At the 18-month point at Insurance Company, Maya predicted that her supervisor was going to offer her a promotion when she was reviewed in a couple of months. However, her attitude towards advancement remained framed by her desire to be competent:

*"I know I am very smart and capable and I do not like to work places where I am not sure I will succeed."*

Maya's education also complicated her advancement process. While SJI training compensated for the lack of GED in getting a job, its absence now severely hampered her long-range advancement opportunities:

*"I want my GED. Not having it is not holding me back at Insurance Company, but there was a time when I did need a GED to get a job. But now there isn't time to study for the GED after work. This job offers more than what I was offered before, particularly without the GED. I was going to the X college for the GED but I didn't like the way the teachers treated me. They treated adults like kids. So I stopped going."*

*"Because of the GED I can't really go forward, not with the company because I know I can, but outside the company because I would like to get a job [in immigration]; they do require a GED."*

Even though Insurance Company reimbursed GED pursuit, Maya anticipated a several-year delay in taking this advancement step because competing responsibilities at home took all her extra time and might also jeopardize her success:

*“That could be maybe next year’s goal to get my GED, to really focus on that because I can’t really do two things at a time. It is hard and then with the four kids, no I am not going to even try to do that because I might even fail. So even I found out that through the job that they might even pay for it. [Time off to do it too?] No they won’t give me time off but I am going to have to work my schedule so that I can go to school and then work at the same time.”*

Ultimately, Maya’s definition of employment “success” mirrored her current employment situation:

*“To have the right job I guess, you are comfortable and you are happy with what you are doing and with the pay and there is room for advancement. It is not like you are going to be stuck in one spot and that is it. We have a lot of work. I like that pace, there is work coming and you are always doing something. It is not where it is kind of slow and there is nothing for you to do. I am very comfortable. I am in my own cubicle. I manage my own desk, not even my manager manages my desk. This is what I am doing and I like it.”*

**Work and Health.** After 10 months at Insurance Company, Maya developed an increasingly severe case of tendinitis in her wrists and hands, ultimately declared an “on-job injury.” In response, the company set up her workstation to be ergonomically correct and her supervisor told her to order any supplies she needed. However, the demands of her work and family life made it difficult for her to take extended periods of time off from work. Thus, she used individual sick days to consult a variety of health care professionals, from a hand surgeon to physical therapists. Her doctors ran MRIs, CAT scans and EMGs on more than one occasion, but did not find anything conclusive from this series of tests. She began to experience numbness in her hands, and her doctors came close to changing her diagnosis from tendinitis to carpal tunnel syndrome. Meanwhile, the pain worsened.

During this period, Maya seemed unable to accept help or get the rest she needed from her work and household chores. Her description of her condition did not reflect the fact that this was an overuse injury that necessitated a reduction in activities that aggravated the condition. Rather, she identified other courses of treatment such as medical tests and possible surgery as the only ways to treat the problem. Her assessment of the most effective treatments may have resulted from both her overriding responsibility, such that she would or could not reduce her schedule, and incomplete direction from her health care professionals. Although her doctor was reputedly an excellent hand surgeon, Maya said he treated her rudely and with condescension and did not attempt to fully understand or help ameliorate her condition.

Maya continued to take care of her family as she had always done, including washing dishes and doing laundry among other household chores—activities that aggravated her hands and wrists. As a result, her deep sense of responsibility worked to her disadvantage, as was obvious from her repeated descriptions of pain and the fact that she missed work from time to time. Most of the time however, Maya maintained a relatively positive outlook on life and the future, a rarity for a person in chronic pain. Although the pain did not appear to affect her mental state, it affected her decisions such that she was not willing to consider advancement, job changes or educational pursuits while her symptoms persisted.

### Partner's Work and Income Sufficiency

**Jesus's Work.** Maya's husband, Jesus, had two years of university and six of professional precision trade school education in his native Central American country [different from Maya's country of origin] that earned him the degree of "Precision Mechanic." In an attempt to translate this education into occupational accomplishment in the U.S., he took one year of Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machine tool training at a local community college in Seattle. Unfortunately, precision machinist positions were in short supply in Seattle at this time—a plight that also hindered the employment aims of two other ethnographic study participants, both of whom were also immigrants [see Mike Jeremy and Lucky Miracle Family Stories].

Jesus alternated between employment and unemployment during the initial 6 months of our family contact. In March 2000, he had just been laid off after 2½ years of employment as a machinist and was recovering from a job-related back injury. Maya urged Jesus to use this period to reassess his goals: "When the right job comes, you'll be ready for it. You don't want to take a job that isn't good for you."

In April Jesus secured a lower-level machinist position at \$11/hour plus benefits, resulting in an annual income of \$22,000, \$2,000 less than his previous job. Initially he found the new job repetitive and uninteresting, but felt pressure to keep the job due to his obligation to the family, suggesting that Maya felt similarly: "She didn't think I should be out of work for long." After time he liked the job better and felt he was learning new skills.

The instability of Jesus's job situation contributed to the family's chronic shortage of money and created periodic strain in the couple's relationship. Their strain was further exacerbated by Jesus's knee operation 5 months into the new job that kept him out of work for three weeks. The possibility that Jesus might lose his job was a source of extreme anxiety for Maya: "I am not even going to worry about it because if I start worrying, I am going to go crazy." Jesus's work was one area of their lives over which Maya had no control but was crucial in order to improve their financial situation.

**Income Sufficiency.** During calendar year 1999, Maya's annual income was \$24,000. She got a raise to \$25,800 in January 2000 and hoped for another in January 2001. Her husband made \$24,000 during 1999, although he characterized his former employer as discriminatory and received only a 50-cent/hour raise over a 2½-year period on the job. Nevertheless, *when* both parents were employed full time, their combined income of nearly \$50,000 met most of their needs, in line with the amount [\$51,630] considered sufficient by the Self-Sufficiency Standard for Washington (Pearce, 2001). The Self-Sufficiency Standard is a more nuanced, contextual assessment of income adequacy than the traditionally-used federal poverty guideline that estimated that \$45,700, or 200% of poverty level was sufficient income for the Vanderhands family of 6. When Jesus was first unemployed, even though he received \$600 per month compensation from Labor & Industry insurance for his back injury, the sufficiency of their income was strained.

The family's expenses were high. They paid \$850/month rent plus \$50 additional for their water bill. They spent approximately \$400 per month for food, their phone bill was about \$150 per month, and their electricity was \$80. Maya's transportation cost \$20 per week and Jesus's cost \$50. The before- and after-school care for their children was subsidized by the city, but Maya expected that this subsidy would soon end. With two incomes they could afford the \$65/child per month co-pay: "It adds up but it's better than paying \$400," the minimum rate for school-based child-care in Seattle. However, in periods with only one income, even the lesser co-pay produced financial strain:

*“We pay all the bills first. We’ve cut down on extra stuff. We used to take the kids to McDonald’s after church, sometimes rent movies, get extra snacks. We don’t do any of that now. The kids, they understand.”*

Given the expense of sustaining a 6-person family, Maya particularly lamented the fact they had “no savings” because she wanted to buy a house. She hoped that Jesus’s new employment would enable them to save money toward this goal, but family expenses were constant: “With four kids, it’s not easy to save.” The children rarely had new or expensive outfits, the toys were used over and over, and “little purchases” like pens and paper were carefully maintained. The children had fully integrated the family’s stringent economies, as the younger daughter demonstrated while working on her homework assignment: “If I put the marker upside down, it fills up again.”

### Family Welfare

**Home and Neighborhood.** The Vanderhand family lived in a 2-story, 84-unit apartment complex that was nestled amidst trees and shrubbery off a major city thoroughfare. Their unit was in the back and was very quiet. Despite being safer than their previous neighborhood, housing was an area of hardship for the Vanderhand family. The six family members lived in a small two-bedroom apartment where four children shared one bedroom—a source of stress for Maya. Finding larger housing for her family was proving difficult financially. Maya’s goals of safety and affordable, sufficient space were in conflict. Maya’s new neighborhood was safer than her old neighborhood, although their larger 3-bedroom apartment in the previous community was only slightly more expensive (\$950).

**Family Life and Parenting.** The Vanderhands were technically a blended family, but this fact did not influence their family relationships on a day-to-day basis because the family had been together for 14 years. Their elder daughter Iesha had a different father, but Jesus fathered the other three children and devotedly fulfilled the role for Iesha as well. Jesus also had three children outside his marriage to Maya, two of whom lived in Central America: a 24-year old son and a 27 year-old daughter who had two children and was pregnant. A third daughter was 18 and lived in California. Both Maya and Jesus spoke of “good family relationships” with Jesus’ children.

The tightly-knit family coped well with hardships and challenges and was one in which the parents attended carefully to the needs of their children. The family’s cultural background was central to their identity, underscored by Maya’s recent trip to visit family in Central America and California and the fact that they spoke only Spanish at home. Although relationships with extended families were close, evidenced by many pictures of relatives in the house and high phone bills, none lived near enough to provide regular support. Maya and Jesus prized their privacy and engaged in little social interaction with neighbors or other community adults: “We don’t have any friends. We like to be by ourselves.” The formal institutions of church and school were the main exceptions to their self-imposed isolation.

Involvement in a social institution like a church reflects a family’s sense of identity and place in the world. For the Vanderhand family, church was the most important institution. Illustrating their split community identity, perhaps paralleling their split ethnic identities, they remained aligned with their former church despite its 45-minute distance from their new community. They found the people friendlier and more welcoming there than at churches in their new neighborhood. Church members reciprocated this regard, characterizing the Vanderhands as “a wonderful part of our church family.” A church parishioner echoed the Vanderhand’s allegiance:

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*“This church is a place where people are protected, feel close to God, and receive the spiritual guidance to make choices that are good for the family.”*

Another parishioner spoke of the depth of the Vanderhand’s religious commitment:

*“Religion isn’t part of their life—it is their way of life.”*

Maya regularly attended church school classes and took her First Communion on Easter Sunday, a rite of momentous family importance that paved the way for Maya and Jesus to establish their marriage in the eyes of the church through a formal ceremony, even though they were already legally married. The long wait for necessary papers from their home countries had delayed this event. In addition to being involved at the church, the family extended their faith into the community at large. During the week before Easter, they participated in an eight-mile walk symbolic of the walk before Jesus Christ’s crucifixion. During this walk Jesus prayed that his father, who suffered with diabetes and was close to death, would have his pain eased. Jesus’s religious faith also comforted him after his father’s death, compensating somewhat for the fact that he could not afford to attend the funeral.

As in other areas of family life, Maya’s parenting style set the tone for the family. She created a highly structured environment and described herself as a strict parent. She was interested in how each child was doing, what each was involved in at any given time, and insisted on meeting their friends. As the lenient parent, Jesus’s initial response to the children was to accommodate their desires, but Maya set limits that Jesus reinforced and the children followed. During one visit, their youngest son wanted something to eat, so Jesus made him a sandwich and started to give him Kool-Aid when he asked for it. Maya intervened and said he could not have Kool-Aid because it was too much sugar for him so late in the day; he could only have milk or water. Jesus and Max complied accordingly.

Providing a warm, comfortable family climate, Maya and Jesus strongly supported each other’s work efforts. At the same time, both expressed ambivalence about Maya’s full time work schedule which Maya felt was “hard because the children have to do more housework and also have to get up earlier to go to childcare before school.” While work played a crucial role in her life and in shaping her self-image, Maya’s desire to be an excellent wife and parent led her to think, on occasion, about not working and staying home to take care of the family. Jesus’s similar ambivalence was perhaps connected to cultural norms: “He would rather have me here at home and take care of the kids and take care of the house.” Lack of partner support often negatively affects the retention of new workers, but Maya’s husband knew how important work was to her and thus encouraged her continued employment:

*“It is good to have a break. Sometimes I tell him I will stay home, and he says ‘okay fine, but you are not going to like it,’ and I don’t. Two months later I am already crazy wanting to get a job.”*

Maya had worked since age fifteen. Most of the time she was fully aware that she was not a person who could stay home and not work, but the tension between working and parenting remained below the surface:

*“Sometimes I do want to stay home and just take care of the house and have my kids, take them to school, be home when they are coming back from school, because it is hard for them to come home and I am not home. Just come in an empty house and that is it.”*

Her ideal would be “a part-time job” in order to be home after school so the children “can have a complete meal or have the house ready so I can manage my home too.” The family’s tenuous financial situation made this ideal impossible.

The Vanderhand’s plans for the children’s summer break from school evidenced another kind of parental ambivalence: the tension between protecting them from the “outside world” and the perpetual emphasis on accomplishment. In summer 2000, safety won out. Maya explained her decision to have the children stay home, in the house, in child-enhancing terms: “The kids will get to sleep in and be relaxed.” They were not allowed to go outside until she returned from work mid-afternoon. From the children’s perspective, this regimen was somewhat “boring” and restrictive. Fortunately, Maya’s job allowed her to adapt her work schedule to 6:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. so she could give the children “outside time” after she came home in the late afternoon.

### Children’s Schools

During the 1999-2000 school year, Iesha and Sahari attended a local middle school and Zimba and Max attended a local elementary school. The relationship between the Vanderhand family and these schools was close, characterized by intimate knowledge on both sides. Maya invested considerable time and energy in developing relationships with the school staff. As a result, the Family Support Worker, among others at the elementary school, knew Maya and her family well:

*“Maya puts a lot of emphasis on being responsible, studying and the future. She is driven. The kids understand they too must work hard. Jesus is nice too. They are good parents.”*

Teachers and staff described the children as “good students, happy, and loving. You know they are cared for and understand that discipline is a part of life.” A volunteer parent described how the family emphasis on education was evidenced in the daughters’ tutoring behavior: “They are helpful; you can tell they think education is important.” Unsolicited comments from a school office worker underscored the parents’ devotion to their children’s welfare:

*“The Vanderhand children are loyal and look out for one another. Their kids are united. They are friendly and in a way almost old-fashioned because they are so courteous.”*

According to the Family Support Worker, the children’s school performance and behavior had not changed since Maya started working.

All the Vanderhand children had attended the same elementary school; Zimba and Max were still students there at study onset. The boys were described in terms that paralleled Maya’s ethos of responsibility: “The younger children [the two boys] always hand in their homework on time and often do their homework right after school.” Based on student performance on standardized tests, the children’s elementary school was an academically inferior school compared to other Seattle public elementary schools, although not to an extreme degree. Compared to the Seattle school district as a whole, lower percentages of the elementary school students met state standards in all four subjects on the Fourth Grade Washington Assessment of Student Learning (Seattle Public Schools, 1999). The percentages of students meeting state standards in Writing and Math, (23.3% and 14%) were virtually half the percentages meeting state standards at the district level (38.6% and 35.8%).



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Whether or not Maya knew about these comparisons, school selection was a priority as her goals were for the children “to be able to go to school, go to college.” Maya also knew that the road to their accomplishment would be difficult, despite their “minority” status:

*“They know they have to have great grades. Right now we are doing elementary school, middle school and high school, and I told them it was a lot of grants out there especially for minorities, so you guys have to fight for it. It is not just because you are a minority you are going to get it, no, you really have to fight from elementary all the way up to high school.”*

Accordingly, in Fall 2000, Iesha and Sahari transferred to a more academically rigorous middle school that was a one-hour bus ride from home. The youngest child, Max, went to the companion elementary school. Only Zimba remained at the local elementary school, largely because Maya did not know how to petition the school to change this assignment. What effect this might have on Zimba’s aspirations to be a lawyer may be influenced by whether or not he is moved to the more rigorous school in Fall 2001.

When the girls encountered serious academic problems during the transition, the family’s ability to cope with the children’s performance shifted into high gear under Maya’s leadership. During the adjustment period the girls brought home an interim report card that had “F’s” on it, whereas they earned A’s and B’s the year before. Maya told them that these grades, although interim, were unacceptable. Because the new school was harder, “I can see that it is very challenging for them,” Maya arranged for extra help and tutoring at school. A neighbor also helped one of the girls with a report, which she did well on, and offered both girls access to her computer.

Maya also supported the children’s social adjustment to the new school. Initially Sahari did not have friends there and did not like it for this reason. Maya advised her to be patient and she would make friends: “You have to give it time.” Time solved the social transition for both girls, but Maya believed the higher school caliber caused their grade problems, not their socializing:

*“I think it is a better school, smaller group of kids, each teacher has less kids in the class. I think it is the work that they do; it is tough.”*

Standardized test results corroborated the girls’ experience of the new middle school as more rigorous than their previous school. They were assigned more research and paper-writing at the new site. The new school was clearly on the high end of the spectrum of middle schools in the Seattle public school district. Across all four subjects on the Seventh Grade Washington Assessment of Student Learning (Seattle Public Schools, 1999), 59.8% of seventh graders at the new school met state standards, thirteen points higher than the school district total of 46.6%. The proportion of 7<sup>th</sup> grade students meeting state standards in Reading (60.9%) was one-third higher than the district average of 40.1%. Similarly, the percentage that met state standards in Writing was 48.2%, in Math 31.8%, and in Listening, 98.2%, exceeding school district totals of 36.3%, 26.9%, and 83.2% respectively.

The new school also offered unique programs that were not available at other middle schools including: Cooperative learning groups, core classes with an integrated curriculum, an independent 8<sup>th</sup> grade project requirement, an after-school activity program (including unusual activities such as Ultimate Frisbee and skiing), tutoring, an artist-in-residence program, and technology-based education. Preceding one of our contacts, Maya had just attended Sahari’s Ultimate Frisbee tournament.

These carefully chosen school environments augmented the family’s emphasis on the children’s academic and work achievement as well as the girls’ future goals. While Sahari experimented with various career ideas, such as a wildlife protector, Iesha’s eyes were firmly set on being an interior designer. Evidencing this tenacity, Iesha showed us a 2-page Internet description of how to become an interior designer. She also proudly exhibited a folder of “architect drawings” of the dream house she designed—one with tennis courts, swimming pool, many rooms, an escalator, and a ‘secret room.’ Field notes described this as “fabulous...all done to ‘kind of scale,’ as she [Iesha] put it.” Ultimately, Maya knew that their responsibility as parents was to provide financial and emotional support for the children’s goals, whatever form they took:

*“Support them financially and in any decision that they want to do. If they want to go to the army or whatever, we have to be there for them. That is your choice, you get several choices, you get to pick whatever you want but if you fail then you have to get up and start all over again. We can’t decide for them; if they choose to do something, then just go ahead.”*

Maya’s work ethic for the children was not new with Jobs Initiative participation, but her success at work, the confidence she gained from this, and the example she set put muscle into the translation of these aims into the children’s goals and work patterns.

### Follow-up May 2001 and Conclusions

When the Vanderhands were revisited in May 2001, 14 months after our initial contact, Maya had recently returned to work after five months on disability leave. Citing chronic tendinitis, Maya took leave initially in December and returned in February, only to be told she could take another month at full pay because business was slow. During this time Maya underwent surgery on her shoulder and extended her leave time to recuperate, returning to work the first week of May. Fortunately she received full disability pay for the entire period.

While shoulder surgery eased her tendinitis, it could not resolve it. Maya was glad to return to the workplace, as staying home was “okay for about two weeks,” but described her persistent physical dilemma:

*“When I was off work, it got a bit better. It was very painful to go back to work. It’s still tender, but not so bad now. I’ll see a hand surgeon soon. I’m trying 100% of the time. The therapist the surgeon sent me to said I should quit the job. I said, ‘What kind of work can I do?’ The therapist said something like a receptionist. I don’t want to do that. At Immigration or IRS, I’d be doing some customer work. I don’t do any customer work now; only computer work.”*

Maya’s salary was still \$28,500. Because of disability leave she did not receive the anticipated raise in January 2001, but will be reevaluated in July. Whereas the company was expanding 6-12 months ago, their current goal was to “make more money and stay small.” Maya, therefore, wanted to remain in her position and avoid changes. However, Maya made one change that could potentially affect her opportunities for advancement: she enrolled in a GED class.

In March 2001, Maya discovered a GED course at a nearby community college while looking for ESL classes for Jesus’ younger daughter who was visiting from California. Maya’s course met twice a week from 6:30 to 8:45 p.m., was a mile from home, and free. Classes were scheduled to end in June, but Maya was determined to continue her studies through the summer and take the test this year. The class and test format would change in 2002, creating a potential setback for Maya. She described the beginning classes and her growing amenability to change:

*“It was hard. I couldn’t remember what I’d learned before. But now it’s coming back. It’s interesting. It’s cool to find out about perimeters. And I see others who are worse than me—they don’t know how to add, subtract, do division. In order to go to the University of Washington you have to have a GED. The schedule was also hard in the beginning—it was a new schedule; I had to leave home by 6.”*

Maya was encouraged by a passing pre-test score and her teacher who said she “only needed a little more work.” With a GED, Maya’s sustained goal to obtain a government position became more accessible, as Maya poignantly stated:

*“Training is here today, but not tomorrow. With a GED, I can go higher and higher.”*

Absent GED completion during SJI training, or time to study during Insurance Company employment, Maya’s recent decision to advance her education was a serendipitous benefit of her extended medical leave from work: “It was time. I had a little extra time and decided to start.” Together with citizenship attainment in 1999, GED acquisition will establish a base from which Maya can parlay her SJI training and Insurance Company competencies into significant career advancement.

Jesus continued to work for the same company, but received a promotion and wage increase. While Jesus now made close to \$14 per hour and made greater use of his CNC skills, he would make \$18 to \$20 per hour were his position unionized. There were two barriers to obtaining a union job: Jesus needed more tools and few companies were unionized. Despite persistent financial pressures, Jesus and Maya managed to provide for their children and planned to buy a computer this year. Maya still wanted to buy a family home and awaited a flyer from Washington Affordable Housing listing dates for information sessions. She enlisted the aid of a friend to write a letter to the credit bureau “to clean up my credit.” Were Maya and Jesus to buy a home outside of the city as envisioned, they face a potential loss of subsidies and resources:

*“I discovered that I won’t lose the medical that we get through the Seattle Schools; it’s available at all Washington schools. We’d lose the daycare through, and would have to go [for subsidy] through the city we’d be living in.”*

Decisions that involved simultaneous mobility and loss were not uncommon among Jobs Initiative participants, which emphasizes that greater information and resources and more uniform eligibility policies are needed to help low-income families move forward.

Within their still-tight budget, Maya and Jesus made room for their upcoming church wedding. With the contributions of creative friends, the couple planned to be married in August, fulfilling Maya’s long-held dream of a church-sanctioned marriage:

*“The wedding is taking the savings. It will be small; my neighbor is making sure we have pictures, a cake, and she’s making my veil.”*

Maya was excited about the wedding and planned almost everyone’s outfit: Jesus and the boys would wear tuxedos; Iesha would wear the dress she bought for her prom; Maya’s dress was with a neighbor so Jesus would not see it. Despite some stress caused by friction between Maya and Jesus’ California daughter during her two-month visit, Maya appeared rested and healthy. She also seemed more relaxed with the children and, having acquired more personal knowledge of her neighbors, less concerned with their safety. The children’s frequent and playful comings and goings were noted by us and confirmed by Maya:

*“The children have more social life; more friends now in the neighborhood. There are a lot of kids in the area now.”*

Maya’s primary restrictions focused on the girls, both of whom were struggling in school. She discouraged their involvement in social relationships at school because they lived far away. However, she encouraged their involvement in extracurricular activities and was proud of their accomplishments.

**Children.** In May 2001, the children were in the same schools they attended in October 2000. With the exception of Iesha who planned to go to high school and Zimba who was #1 on the waiting list for the more academically rigorous school his siblings attend, the other two children would remain there for the 2001-02 academic year. Iesha’s high school plans, however, were contingent on passing the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Both Iesha and Sahari continued to struggle with their schoolwork. The 2000 annual report for their school showed an increase in already above-average WASL scores, underscoring high expectations for students. Iesha in particular struggled with her homework, describing it as “too hard.” While Maya agreed that Iesha’s adjustment to the school’s applied learning method was uneasy, she held Iesha accountable for her grades. Maya restricted Iesha’s babysitting activity and permission to go to the prom until her grades improved. Iesha was more socially active this year; knowing few friends who would attend her new high school in her more immediate neighborhood, she was less enthusiastic than Maya about the choice. Maya thought only in terms of academic opportunities:

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*“It’s a smaller school; less kids; more programs for smaller groups of kids. She can take the metro bus or I’ll probably drop her off on my way to work.”*

Maya’s assessment was accurate. The 2000 annual report for the high school described an impressive array of enrichment and curricular programs including foreign travel study, mentorship, a student operated radio station, conflict-resolution, and particularly salient for Iesha, graphic arts. Ninth grade classes had a 20:1 teacher/student ratio and graduates entering the University of Washington had the highest GPA of any Seattle public high school. The percentage of 9<sup>th</sup> graders meeting national standards for the Iowa Test of Educational Development (ITED) was consistently higher than the national average in reading, language and math.

In order for Iesha to graduate from 8<sup>th</sup> grade, she would attend mandatory summer school. Maya was frustrated with the school for not alerting her sooner to the severity of the problem. While Sahari struggled as well, she was not in danger of being held back. Summer school was a possibility due to “shaky grades,” but not yet mandatory. Sahari remained active in sports, adding biking and in-line skating to her list of activities. Maya proudly announced that Sahari’s Ultimate Frisbee team won both the district and overall 1<sup>st</sup> place trophies for the year. As both girls entered adolescence, Maya’s continued involvement in their scholastic and extracurricular lives was an asset.

Zimba and Max continued to do well in school, though their parents pointed out this was not as difficult for Zimba given the lower standards set at his school. With the exception of the writing test, WASL scores for the year 2000 improved from the year before: 51.5% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders met state reading standards; 31.8% met math (twice that of 1999); listening scores remained steady; and writing scores fell to 10.6% from the previous year’s 17.6%. Maya was focused on the boys’ summer activities: Max would be in child care and take trips to places like the zoo, while Zimba would partake in a summer morning sports program at his school and go to child care in the afternoon. Zimba—who changed his career choice from lawyer to brain surgeon—would play the violin in an upcoming school concert. Family lore supported Zimba’s growing talents: Jesus said when Zimba was in utero, he [Jesus] heard Zimba cry. Jesus’ grandmother told him “when someone cries inside, he’s going to be a wise man.” Maya and Jesus consistently revealed their commitment to nurturing the potential of their children. Locating the resources to do so was essential.

In May 2001, Maya was now beyond the official two years of SJI retention oversight. During the 2-year contact period, SJI provided Maya with skills training, organizational ‘legitimacy’ that resulted in entrée to a good job despite no GED, and sustaining case management that helped her family stay on a family-wage employment path. Prior to revisiting the Vanderhands, Maya’s GED attainment seemed the primary impediment to her employment future. Her resourcefulness and commitment diminished the need for SJI assistance but did not supplant it. Had Maya not looked for resources on behalf of someone else or taken disability leave, she might not have enrolled in classes.

Maya’s family story graphically illustrates how important it is to have *both* case management and workplace supports for job retention and advancement. Case management provided transitional instrumental aids and her workplace provided structural consideration of family needs such that Maya could “responsibly” attend to both. Considering how the children have already benefited from Maya’s work accomplishments, her advancement could constitute further advantage for them through helping the family realize their goal of buying a house, remaining in a safe and friendly neighborhood, being closer to higher-quality schools, and being able to save money for future enrichment opportunities for the children.

# Moving Up is a Steep Climb

The “Mike Jeremy” Family Story

*Parents’ Work and Children’s Welfare  
in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jobs Initiative*



*Roberta Rehner Iversen  
with Annie Laurie Armstrong and Michele Belliveau*

April 2002

## “Mike Jeremy” Family Story

**Resident Family:**

Mike Jeremy, a 42-year old African refugee, ethnographic study key informant

Christina Jeremy, Mike’s 29-year old African country wife

Tony Jeremy, 2-year old son

Tonya Jeremy, infant daughter

**Study timeline: March through October 2000. Follow-up May 2001.**

*“Family is important. Work is important.  
Health is what you need most.”*

When asked about his first job after Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) manufacturing training, 42 year-old Mike Jeremy replied, “I have a family, so they pay me good and so I have to stay there.” Mike consistently attributed his motivation to work, as well as his reluctance to work too much, to family. From the outset, a staff person at C.A.M.P. (Central Area Motivation Project), Mike’s SJI-affiliated community-based organization (CBO), was puzzled by Mike’s sustained need for financial support and wondered how C.A.M.P. could help him be more self sufficient. C.A.M.P. hoped that our research would illuminate reasons for Mike’s patterns and needs. We concluded that Mike’s needs, in large part determined by his immigrant and refugee status, required assessment, outreach and employment that his Jobs Initiative network, for several reasons, was unable to provide.

## Background and Pre-SJI History

In 1991 Mike immigrated to the United States as a political refugee from a besieged African country. After settling in Seattle, Mike’s application for citizenship was eventually granted because of his refugee status. Initially Mike had emigrated from his native African country to another African country, working as a newspaper and radio journalist in both countries until a Communist takeover “changed the meaning of journalism.” This political change forced Mike to leave his country, his journalism career, and a furniture-making practice as well. Although he graduated from high school and studied road/property surveying for three years at a technical college in Africa, Mike’s immigrant status, minimal English language skills, and the lack of American educational equivalency certification prevented him from continuing his former trades in the United States.

In 1993, Mike became a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and was offered a position at a health facility that he held for approximately five years. As a CNA, Mike earned \$8.65 per hour, worked forty hours per week, and considered his future employment plans, hoping for employment beyond the poverty-level income yielded by his CNA wage. One plan was to apply to nursing school, but the tuition was prohibitively expensive. Given Mike’s fledgling knowledge of resources, he was likely not aware of financial aid possibilities. In 1997 Mike was employed briefly by an employer who required passing a test for sustained employment. Mike scored 84 on the test, but felt that his limited English skills prevented reaching the passing grade of 87. As a result, he was fired. Mike eventually returned to CNA work after several months of collecting unemployment. This experience did not leave Mike hopeful about his future prospects and lowered his confidence in taking other courses.

Several important events transpired during this period that offered Mike more hope. In 1996, he returned to his native country for the purpose of bringing his wife Christina, whom he married that year, to the United States. Christina, then 25 years old, possessed few English skills and, unlike Mike, did not have the slight advantage of English language acquisition in high school. Despite this, Christina found work; at first in a fast food restaurant and later in a child care center. Like Mike, she enrolled in CNA classes, but was unable to complete them once the couple’s first child, Tony, was born in 1998. Christina’s citizenship status was still pending by the time her husband enrolled in the Jobs Initiative. Also pending were Christina’s own employment and training goals that were encouraged by her husband, but unknown to anyone who might help her attain them.

## SJI Training and Case Management: Manufacturing Sector/ C.A.M.P. (Central Area Motivation Project)

Like many participants, Mike was referred to the Seattle Jobs Initiative through C.A.M.P, a community-based social service organization, and to C.A.M.P through friends in the African community who had participated in SJI. At an earlier point, Mike had tried a non-SJI employment program hoping to pursue office training that would draw on his writing background, but was not able to pass the English test: “Second language, grammar, that was hard.” That program then referred him to construction training where language facility was less important. Neither employment nor further language training resulted from this program, making Mike’s opportunity at SJI his third try at negotiating an upgrade through skills training.

SJI ideally offered Mike access to a formal network of employers that offered higher wages and benefits. By contrast, the network to which Mike and other same-country immigrants had access consisted of jobs and employers that



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offered lower wages and no benefits. Unfortunately, Mike accessed the new, formal network at an inopportune time. The type of employer he was trained to work for was suffering an industry downturn and consequently withdrew from the SJI network. At the same time, the case managers to support him were in flux.

Irrespective of the above, Mike was motivated in October 1998 when he began his three-month SJI training at Community College in Computer Numerical Control (CNC) for machine tool operation. He hoped to gain vocational and institutional skills from SJI, as noted on his intake form:

*“Have skills assessed; get job/job placement; learn how to look for a job/learn interview skills; learn occupational skills; improve math/reading skills.”*

The length of Mike’s list foreshadowed the extent of his needs. In an attempt to fulfill the math and reading skill needs, SJI sent Mike for a short “brush-up” course in English and math that he found helpful before formal training. The depth of this course would be revealed later as insufficient.

Mike supported his family during the training period by working two long shifts per week at the health care facility, a flexibility that offset the fact that training time was unpaid, and by supplementing his salary with clothing, food and utility vouchers from C.A.M.P. Mike enjoyed his CNC classes: “got a lot of knowledge in the class,” made friends who eventually went to work with him, and earned high marks: “I was the first student in the class that had a lot of As.” He particularly valued the pre-training job readiness class:

*“I learned a lot of things that I use now—how to communicate with people; management. For one week they gave a good class—how to be friendly with people; customer service.”*

He expressed only two regrets: that he did not learn broader skills (Math versus Assembly) and that the training period lasted only three months: “It should be two years.” He believed a longer period was necessary to develop more skills and become eligible for a higher salary. Mike’s case manager concurred with the need for further training in addition to the need for support:

*“They need more training because they need to make more money. They still need support. SJI says support services are the last resort. This needs rethinking.”*

Mike’s case manager also emphasized the need for SJI organizations to take a pro-active role in retention and advancement:

*“Everyone should be contacted at the one-year work period to inquire—you’re doing this, what do you want to do? What skills do you want to improve? This course is... and costs... Go to the Internet, library, former teachers and tell them what you want to do. They’ll help you find out how to do it. We’ll help with this. What does the market place say about how to get a shop? What’s the first step? What’s next? And so forth.”*

As for his employment prospects upon completion of training, Mike rued what he experienced as SJI’s lack of connection with employers:

*“I had a friend who was in the same class as me. He worked at Equipment Manufacturer. They had openings for CNC—they [the General Employment Agency] put him there. Me and my other friends, they didn’t have openings, from what the temp agency said. It would be really good if SJI had direct connection with employers for the manufacturing classes—electrical assembly, CNC, all the classes. After a year now, I’d need a refresher course to take a CNC job. It would be better if SJI had relationships with employers—to put a person in the right place. That would be the best. SJI—if they graduate 20 people and have different companies, fine. If have one company—e.g. Equipment Manufacturer—that’s ok too.”*

Mike’s comment suggested there might have been some hiring discrimination at the temporary agency and it graphically revealed an unfortunate fact of his SJI experience. While he was in training, SJI was disengaging from the CNC portion of the manufacturing industry as CNC had taken a sudden industry downturn. Mike lamented his inability to capitalize on his SJI training:

*“I did 300 hours of CNC training. I’m not using it now. I was a good student. 4.0. I worked hard to be a good student. And now I’m not using the training.”*

A SJI staff member underscored Mike’s misfortune:

*“Mike is a sad story. He’s a good guy, smart, had all the skills, and got fired up for the program. Then we told him, ‘we’re done in this industry, find a job on your own or come back to me.’”*

Mike chose the former of these options and followed a lead to a temporary employment agency for the manufacturing industry.

Mike’s self-reliant demeanor was misconstrued by SJI staff as not needing intervention, similar to the experience of other study parents, particularly those who were immigrants [see Lucky Miracle Family Story], as a staff member highlighted:

*“That’s my whole issue. I’ll never know unless they say something. If it isn’t working, I want to know. If someone is unhappy, tell me.”*

SJI’s decentralized structure, overloaded and underpaid CBO case managers, and SJI staff and industry changes combined with Mike’s self-reliance and family focus to limit the development of his career pathway, as a SJI staff member rued:

*“Mike had very little help from SJI in finding employment. The Community College didn’t help. When Mike’s case manager left, he transferred Mike to [a new] case manager. Handoffs usually don’t happen very well. The program got dissolved. The broker got fired. Mike was left out.”*

**Case Management/C.A.M.P.:** Mike’s contact with C.A.M.P. began strong but waned over time:

*“I talked with the case manager every week initially. After I got the job at Equipment Manufacturer, I had less contact. I didn’t call [my new] case manager for a long time or go there for a long time. When I go there, he’s very helpful.”*

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Part of the problem was that Mike's original case manager left C.A.M.P. at the same time Mike began work at Equipment Manufacturer. Mike developed a good connection with his original case manager and had difficulty making the switch to a new one, due entirely to the fact that "handoffs have never been successful" and not to individual differences. The decentralized structure of the SJI network was another part of the problem. According to his new case manager, Mike should have been "handed off" to SJI for help, but "the place they come is the place they stick to." Mike's case manager maintained a caseload of over 30 families and did not have the time or resources to detect or act on Mike's needs. A staff member also cited the 'squeaky-wheel' component of SJI that was mentioned by other key informants [see Maya Vanderhand; Lucky Miracle], particularly by immigrants and political refugees whose cultural background differed from the American ethos of "speaking up for what you want."

*"The program works for those who want to work it. For clients who understand that they've got to say 'this is what I want.'"*

Unfortunately, Mike did not fit this description, although he recognized that this "foreign" process yielded results for others:

*"To ask is information. Otherwise, there aren't any persons helping."*

However, Mike said this only after our questions suggested there were resources available to him. Mike's problem was, as he phrased it, "the American way to live and even to join the community, for example." Mike needed to gain entry into a community of people, agencies and services he did not know were available to him. Without knowledge of this context, he could pose no questions.

Unfortunately, although Mike had benefited earlier from a weekly men's group at C.A.M.P., when he stopped coming to the agency, his case manager assumed that no news was good news:

*"If an individual is with a program for a year, he's pretty stable. He is highly motivated. No need to call and ask 'what are you doing.'"*

The case manager viewed Mike as having specific life goals for his family and thus felt "no need to call." While Mike had goals for his family, such as wanting his children to "grow up in the right way and be somebody," they were not specific. Had the case manager spoken with Mike in the summer of 2000, he would have learned that the family was in dire need of intervention.

### **SJI Employment: Equipment Manufacturer**

Upon completion of training in January 1999, Mike was hired as a temporary worker with Equipment Manufacturer, a manufacturer of lifting equipment. Mike was paid \$11.82/hour, worked forty hours per week, and was fairly confident he would be offered a permanent position with the company. In March, Mike took a permanent position on Equipment Manufacturer's production assembly line, a job that at \$11.50 per hour paid slightly less, but offered health benefits and the potential for salary increases and advancement. Mike was pleased with his new salary and benefits, which would cover Christina and him, as their son still qualified for Medicaid, but eventually developed

misgivings about the nature of the work and the time it took away from family. Nevertheless, he stayed at the job in order to fulfill his family responsibilities.

He also initially saw potential for advancement at Equipment Manufacturer via job postings that employees could apply for. After his second child's birth in winter 2000, Mike was less interested in promotion than in transferring to a department whose schedule was more complementary with his family responsibilities. He also pondered changing to an evening or weekend shift so that his wife could work days, a schedule ensuring that one parent would be present for the children.

Mike's Equipment Manufacturer schedule of four ten-hour days per week, 5:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., had both a positive and negative impact on family time. On the positive side, Mike had three full days with his family. Conversely, he was virtually absent on the four days he worked. Mike left home at 4:15 a.m. for the half-hour drive, because public transportation was not available, and due to working overtime he often did not return until 6 or 7 p.m. This schedule allowed only one or two hours with his wife and son before he needed to sleep.

Over the course of a year, Mike's schedule and working conditions took a toll on each member of the family. Christina did not go outside alone with 2-year old Tony during the day, a function of cultural norms and her discomfort with a still unfamiliar environment. This meant Tony, who was quickly developing into an active toddler, was inside all day storing up what were already large amounts of energy—a challenge for Christina who had a new baby to care for and for Mike who was tired from a schedule and work that were physically demanding. Equipment Manufacturer's motto emphasized heavy lifting, which characterized both the nature of the company and Mike's work. By January 2000, after almost one year at Equipment Manufacturer, 42-year old Mike suffered from debilitating back pain attributed to an on-the-job injury and the daily strain of alternately lifting heavy objects and standing in place. As a result of his schedule and deteriorating physical condition, Mike's misgivings grew, despite incremental salary increases to \$12.43 per hour. Despite a potential annual income of \$25,850, the inadequacy of this income for Mike's family's needs added extra burden. Mike felt “very depressed” that he could not save money. The fact that 200% of the federal poverty guideline was \$34,100, almost \$10,000 above Mike's annual income, corroborated the family's experience of burden. Contributing to income inadequacy, although Mike's apartment was subsidized by Section 8, his share was \$610/month, almost *half* his monthly net income.

Mike's workplace injuries resulted from multiple, interrelated elements: his physical condition, language comprehension, and supervisory practices. SJI training about occupational health and safety issues might have benefited participants more had it been more thorough and tailored to their vulnerabilities. Mike's pre-JI vulnerabilities included the ongoing stress of debt, concurrent strain of parenting an active toddler, and being an older worker entering a physically hard, potentially dangerous manufacturing position—a “*life-stage mismatch*.” SJI advocacy for improved workplace safety conditions and adequate physical preparation might have prevented or offset the severity of Mike's back injury.

By February 2000 the birth of his daughter Tonya tipped Mike's balance of responsibilities. In anticipation of her birth, Mike planned to use vacation time, but characteristic of the unpredictability of such an event, Tonya was born at the end of his vacation. Therefore, Mike took extra days off and by March 2000, had used all of his leave time. He could not miss any more work:

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*“I work whether or not I’m in pain or sick. In the morning I’m OK but after a few hours the pain starts.”*

During this time Mike wished he “could have another job, but there’s no time to look.”

### **Post-SJI Employment: Parking Company**

In April 2000, after 16 months’ employment, Mike left Equipment Manufacturer. Back pain and other physical work hazards jeopardized his responsibility to his family:

*“I was sick. The day before I quit, I had another accident. It’s hard to put screwdrivers in; sometimes the hand turns. I hurt my hand and they took me to the first aid office. I couldn’t stay there any longer. My family is my first priority.”*

Our observations at Equipment Manufacturer tallied with Mike’s experience of the company:

*“Impersonal; hard work; tough work; very fast paced; a dangerous environment; and more Asian than African.”*

Mike had been in several accidents at work, due to a combination of the work itself and his increasing fatigue. He also did not know, and was not directed, to report his injury:

*“The problem is to pick up the columns, but the column was under the rug so you have to bend your back and bring it up and at that time I feel something but I didn’t mention it and I didn’t report. Two or three days [later] we were just moving something around and when I picked up a box like 50 pounds each from one place to another place and when I was twisted back I was in the same area and I get pain. It doesn’t go away.”*

Although Mike informed his case manager about needing a new job, he perceived that C.A.M.P. offered generous instrumental supports but limited employer connections:

*“What they are doing is helpful. They’ve given financial support, transportation support, food even. [Employment guidance?] Not much. There’s not much information about that. It would be really helpful to have more employment information!”*

Mike thus returned to his African-community network of job seekers and within two weeks was employed as an attendant at Parking Company, located in downtown Seattle. This new position paid \$8.50 per hour, an almost \$4/hour reduction from his JI job, no benefits, and a schedule of 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., five days per week. Illustrating its long-term *non*-potential, benefits would never be available at Parking Company, even for a full-time position.

Two months after leaving Equipment Manufacturer, Mike woke up with searing pain between his chest and shoulders and spent two days in the hospital for a “heart virus.” The details of this virus were unclear, but the symptoms, along with Mike’s other physical complaints, suggested he was under considerable stress. Parking Company’s lack of health insurance compounded this stress. Christina also no longer had health coverage, as TANF paid only for her family planning costs. Fortunately, the children remained covered by Medicaid. Whether Equipment Manufacturer

provided extended health care coverage to former employees was not a question Mike knew to ask, was not told, and was not part of his SJI training.

The over-\$2000 bill for Mike’s hospital stay went unpaid, although he subsequently applied for and received health coverage through Washington state’s Basic Health Plan, for which he eventually paid a small monthly amount based on his income. Regretably, Basic Health coverage was not retroactive. In Fall 2000, Mike was applying for charity from the local hospital to pay the outstanding bill.

In part because of his on-the-job and post-employment health problems, Mike was relieved to be working in a low-stress capacity and only thirty hours per week: “If you aren’t feeling well, it’s good not to work so hard.” The “down time” of the position also allowed him to re-engage in his former vocation of writing:

*“In the parking, I have a lot of time to sit down and I am even writing some poems for my collection. To publish a small book or something like that; I am doing that.”*

However, he acknowledged ruefully that while Equipment Manufacturer made employees work hard, they had provided him with a higher salary and health benefits. At the same time, he believed retention and workplace conditions were linked: “If Equipment Manufacturer were better work conditions...”

Leaving Equipment Manufacturer and staying at Parking Company were also linked with Mike’s conundrum between work and family responsibilities:

*“Lots of things like my family, my health, my young children make work less important to me. I guess my idea of what I need most to be happy is what stands in my way of making me too busy to look for better work.”*

Ultimately, Mike defined job success in family terms:

*“I want to have my kids grow up in the right way and be somebody. I don’t want bad things. As much as I can, I want to have a good family.”*

At the same time he valued work: “Work is [important] too.” As a dedicated husband and father, Mike was torn between his duty to provide financially for his family and his duty to spend time as a parent and husband:

*“Family is the most important to me. Work is too. I would like my wife to work. But health is good too—it’s what you need most.”*

Mike’s personal aspirations outside of family exacerbated this struggle. These aspirations, many of which were artistic, may have accounted for his desire for Christina to work, which seemed difficult to reconcile with her reluctance to go out alone during the day. In light of these circumstances, both Mike and Christina were in need of a thorough, culturally-sensitive *family* job development assessment. Mike’s predicament, one and a half years after initial contact with SJI, suggested the need for services to assess and build upon his interests and strengths.

### Need for Post-Employment Skills Assessment

As an immigrant, Mike's underemployment was not uncommon. Despite his legal status, he encountered significant barriers to the use of his skills. He was a writer, both as an avocation and vocation, but did not have the English language skills needed to employ his talents. Similarly, he had a formal education and technical training in his country of origin, but was denied the ability to employ his skills in his host country. Mike also expressed a desire to work as a furniture maker again, but could not afford his own tools or space:

*"In Africa, I worked in a retail store—making furniture. I had a workshop and electrical tools. They want experience to do that here in America—American experience. I'd like a garage or a workshop to rent. I'd make good money. [Have you looked into any small business loans?] I need start-up money. [Have you talked with your case manager about this?] I can show them what I can do; take samples of my work. But you need space. I looked at a house with space in this neighborhood, but it was \$1500 a month. Downtown is \$2000. A shop is expensive. I can't afford that."*

Despite these barriers, Mike articulated ways in which he believed he could ply his trade in a new context. Mike thought about employing his skills as a translator of documents. He identified potential projects such as Census 2000, "they need to write it up in my language," and information pamphlets for the Africa community that were distributed by government agencies. Mike had seen translations in his native language that were poor quality with grammar that was "not quite right." The idea of translating information for the community built upon his previous experience as a journalist. The fact that the on-site researcher knew of two local agencies that would need translation services suggested the possibility existed. However, the distance between this possibility and Mike could only be bridged by outside assistance. Mike had ideas but did not know where to begin to realize them, just as he had questions about services but did not know where to ask, which suggests that he would have benefited from thorough assessment and sustained intervention. Characteristically, Mike referred to himself through his concern for others:

*"My country people, they don't know how to find things—where it is."*

In the absence of this knowledge, he relied on the available sources of information, which often meant he did not access alternative sources.

Mike's case manager offered penetrating views about Mike's needs in the context of SJI funding:

*"Support services need to be rethought. If SJI really wants to get rid of barriers—e.g. \$1000 for tools—the guy has done everything SJI wanted him to do—he should get the money without hoops. Improve how the money is administered and get it to the client in the end."*

The case manager's interventions were aimed at helping disadvantaged community members develop social and financial capital, a primary aim of the Jobs Initiative as a whole. Yet as discussed above, SJI was unable to realize its full potential in Mike's case—a fact that also impacted Mike's family.

## Family Welfare

In December 1999, two months prior to Tonya’s birth, Mike’s family moved into a new apartment through the Seattle Housing Authority (SHA). The two-bedroom unit, described as “nice and cozy,” was part of SHA’s scattered-site housing and was located in what Mike referred to as a “good family community.” The family had lived in a market-rate apartment ten blocks away and were pleased to qualify for a subsidized unit in the same tree-lined neighborhood. Rent for the new apartment was eventually lowered to \$320 [from \$610], only after the on-site researcher informed Mike that his subsidy was based on income and family size, both of which had changed for him by April 2000. Had we not asked Mike about this, he would not have known to alert the Housing Authority to lower his rent. Despite the reduction, Mike’s rent still constituted one-third of his now-lower, monthly net income.

Within a two-mile radius of Mike’s neighborhood were several services, small grocery stores, an elementary school, community associations, several childcare and development centers, and a neighborhood “block watch,” a service of the Seattle police crime prevention department. Mike was not aware of the function of the neighborhood associations around him, and described his participation in community groups as limited to the African church the family attended in a distant neighborhood. The church sponsored several family activities, but Mike chose only to partake in family bible study. While limited family time may have offered partial explanation, it was possible that Mike had grown depressed and, as a result, had difficulty engaging with outside supports, preferring to keep to himself and the private realm of his family. This may also have explained his preference for work as a Parking Attendant where interactions were kept to a minimum, as well as his difficulty in following up on those service referrals he did receive.

A closer look at Mike’s community suggested its income polarity. The contrast between his lower-income neighborhood and the nearby “town center,” with its ubiquitous SUVs and young urban professionals cycling on fancy bikes and filling pub bars and restaurants to overflow, was most starkly evidenced by a sign posted on a utility pole that revealed the poor underside of the upscale community:

**NO**  
**Sitting or Lying Down on Public Sidewalks**  
**7 a.m. to 9 p.m.**  
**Neighborhood Commercial Zone**

While not destitute, the Jeremys qualified for WIC and Medicaid for the children, and received a tax rebate through the Earned Income Tax Credit program, although Mike’s wages disqualified him for food stamps. As was the case with other Jobs Initiative parents, the cost of food, rent, utilities and diapers made it impossible to accrue enough money for a checking account, much less savings, a fact that depressed Mike. In addition, by summer 2000, he was paying for health insurance. His desire to own his own home was increasingly out of reach. Mike and Christina considered and decided against the prospect of Christina working, for the couple would have to work different shifts which would detract from family time together. While childcare could have partially resolved this issue, it would not resolve the issue of household management.

Mike was proud that Christina managed the home, the children, and prepared things according to custom; for example, Christina roasted the beans for coffee she served ceremoniously. These beliefs, along with those about parenting, were of the utmost importance to Mike who frequently said, “my family is my first priority.”



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**Parenting and Children's Welfare.** Mike was a loving but firm parent. It was important for him to have family time in order to help his children succeed in life.

*"I am very happy. I'm strict—there are rules, yes. If I don't take care of rules today, it will be hard to take care of them tomorrow."*

Mike and Christina both felt that home influences were particularly important before a child started school.

**Tony.** At two and a half, Tony could identify letters in the alphabet and was learning to speak both English and his parents' African language. He was a bright, energetic child who Christina and Mike believed could benefit from the stimulation and enrichment of a childcare center.

Tony's childcare became a central issue for Mike, in part because he had difficulty following through with referrals. It was a need that could have been addressed by C.A.M.P., but again required proactive case management. Unlike the children of JI participants who attended childcare in order for their parents to go to work, Tony needed it to maintain his developmental pace. While Tony's need was no less pressing than work-related care, it was less visible to C.A.M.P., an agency trying to keep up with the childcare needs of working, mostly single, female parents. However, Mike's need was noticed by a SJI staff member who wanted to create a program for male participants with children, citing the family-work nexus as a "human issue" and not one determined by gender.

Tony's potential to benefit from Head Start and Mike's inability to access it suggested the need for a family-based intervention—particularly one aimed at helping the family access "foreign" American social institutions. Despite the fact that Mike wanted childcare for his son and had a list of 15 area providers, some of which were no-cost, he did not follow through. Although he said he understood his eligibility for subsidized childcare, it appeared that he did not fully understand the process of obtaining it:

*"He's almost 3 years now. I have the list [on-site researcher] gave me. I'll call them to see how expensive they are. We'd have to pay them, but because of that I can't start him now."*

Mike needed someone to help him formulate and take the steps to secure services for his family.

When the couple spoke of goals for their children, Mike hoped Tony would become an artist: "Music or something in art. I wanted to be an artist, but I can't. So I want that for him." Christina wanted Tonya to become a doctor. Both parents recognized that education was critical to achieving these goals for their children:

*"Mike: Get teaching. When he grows up, before he starts school—encourage him. If he grows with that before he starts school."  
"Christina: Give them a lot of books as they grow. It helps to read a lot of things."*

Mike read regularly to Tony and proudly triumphed the result: "He knows all the letters now."

**Tonya.** Over the course of our initial 6-months' contact with the Jeremys, Tonya developed from a newborn infant into a happy, robust child, characterized as "so much calmer than our son" at the pre-mobile 6-month period. Christina heralded Tonya's good eating patterns and growth: "fruit, dry meat, broccoli. She's a good eater. She's got-

ten really big.” Christina hoped to be able to stay home with Tonya until she was at least one year old. Although the children stayed predominantly inside the apartment, in the summer when Mike was more free and the days were longer, the family planned trips to the park, the garden at the Zoo, and the playground there.

In October 2000, Mike still worked as a parking attendant, although he increased his hours to 40 per week. He alternated between attendant and car lot checker. The checker position paid \$1 more per hour (\$9.50) but entailed “driving around and around” and the extra dollar was given to cover gas costs, not as a pay raise. Mike considered returning to work in the health care facility but recognized that they too did not offer health benefits. He considered trying to do both jobs, but had recently missed six days of work as a result of headaches, a fact that prompted Christina to say, “he was never sick before, but lately he’s been sick lots of times.” Christina’s concern and observation of her husband conveyed the connection between their current circumstances and his poor health. Mike’s successive illnesses suggested the stress and ambivalence he felt about work, family and building a more successful future. While he perceived future employment opportunities, “maybe another technology comes,” or “I might apply for a job with the housing authority,” he was not clear how to seek them. Mike observed one session of a computer class at a Community College, but was intimidated by the level of the material:

*“I started a class at the Community College—computer application. But it was too hard. They went too fast. It was hard with my English—too advanced. I need basic computer work first. There’s no time to study at home because of the kids.”*

He neither returned nor sought a less advanced class. This fact also impacted Tony, as Mike wanted computer proficiency in part to enrich his son’s development.

### Follow-up May 2001 and Conclusions

**Work.** When the Jeremy family was recontacted in May 2001, 14 months after our initial contact, Mike still worked at Parking Company. His hourly wage had increased to \$9.75, a 25-cent/hour raise, but his hours were reduced which resulted in a net income loss. On average, he worked 30 hours per week (5 to 6 hours per day, 4 to 5 days per week) and was on a waiting list to work more hours. Mike was not outwardly troubled by this decrease in hours. His schedule allowed more time with family and his job duties did not exacerbate what had turned into chronic, debilitating back pain:

*"I have medicine but it doesn't work. Even if my back hurts, I've got to go to work. My parking job is better for my back."*

When asked what his work life would be like in his country of origin Mike replied:

*"If I'd be there and had a woodworking shop—or as a journalist—I'd work 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday and 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturday. Sundays off. Back home I wish everyone would work hard like here, then the country would be very good. There are no second or third shifts there. Everyone works an 8-hour day. If like here, my country could do a lot of things."*

While he valued hard work and economic success, time with family was his foremost concern: "It is more important to have time with my children than money in the bank." Under similar obligations, Mike sent money home to Africa "once in a while when I get enough" and had taken a loan prior to his 1996 visit "to help family at home." This was a usual expectation for immigrants returning to poorer countries of origin where family members counted on relatives from America to bring wealth. However, as was the case for Mike, family obligations could lead to unmanageable debt:

*"When I went home [in 1996], I took money out to help my family. I tried to pay it when I came back, but I got behind so I declared bankruptcy. I got bankruptcy clearance. But that stays with me."*

Mike's prior financial burdens were not assessed by SJI, although they were revealed through our inquiry in May 2001 which suggested they were accessible to more intensive assessment. Similarly, Mike and Christina had been in a car accident years previous. Christina needed extensive medical care for a broken collarbone but a lawyer assured the family that their over-\$10,000 bill would be paid. Recently, judgment was rendered against Mike's friend who was the driver, which meant that the bill would remain unpaid and could further damage Mike's credit history.

Despite these burdens, Mike did not anticipate leaving his job any time soon. He was vaguely interested in the idea of another manufacturing job but felt the only way to obtain one was through more training:

*"Maybe I'd need a class. There's no way I can do that because she's [Christina] not working."*

Under current circumstances, Mike could not afford to spend any time in unpaid training.

Christina stayed home with their daughter Tonya for her first year, as planned, and now felt ready to work outside the home. Mike and Christina inquired whether TANF would provide childcare if Christina went to work or school,

but had not received an answer. Mike did not know about any TANF-sponsored training opportunities. As before, the Jeremys were eager to benefit from services that existed but could not be accessed without help. Christina wanted to engage in work or training but relied on Mike to be her facilitator. Now beyond the two years of official SJI retention contact, Mike had not heard from SJI staff or C.A.M.P case management.

**Children.** Now age 3, Tony continued to display a keen and energetic nature. During our visit he sang the alphabet song, identified all the colors in the room, and counted to ten. The children’s pediatrician confirmed that Tony was “very advanced,” which underscored his readiness for a preschool program. Tony and Tonya benefited from the warmth, care, and structure provided by Mike and Christina. Mike regularly took the children to the playground and both parents engaged their children verbally and in play. Tony’s capabilities and Tonya’s emergent bilingual abilities were evidence of this. Both children were healthy; Tonya had grown into a happy, toddling 15-month old. Mike focused on his children’s good health and the fresh fruits and meat they ate in a discussion of what it would mean to return to his country:

*“Life would be completely different there from here for the kids. They’d have a change of food; they’d be sick.”*

The Jeremy children received a head start from their parents. To ensure their continued growth, the family needed to access educational and childcare resources.

**Navigating resources.** The family’s Section 8 rental subsidy was under recertification, but they foresaw no problems with this process. Rent was still set at thirty percent of income so that Mike now paid \$284 per month. While the family was not making income progress, they were slowly connecting to the services necessary to survive. Along with formal supports, Christina indicated a larger family network: two brothers and two sisters who lived in Seattle and visited with her regularly. Christina’s persistent attempts to pass her driving test suggested efforts to venture into the broader community.

**C.A.M.P.** Independent of its affiliation with SJI, C.A.M.P. remained a resource. When asked why he had been reluctant to approach C.A.M.P. for help in purchasing woodworking tools, Mike replied:

*“Hard question. I don’t think C.A.M.P. would be able to do it. If I ask to buy equipment, I still have to have space. Rent is too high. I think it is of no use to talk to [case manager]. It’s too much to ask of them.”*

While Mike’s reply reflected the financial reality of small entrepreneurship, it also reflected his hesitancy to ask for things or to take unfamiliar steps toward advancement. He had successfully contacted an organization serving the African community, as well as several potential childcare facilities, but had yet to engage services:

*“I tried, but didn’t go yet. They have free computer lessons now. They start a school for kids. There are better resources now.”*

The childcare facilities Mike contacted were all “too expensive.” However, the inaccuracy of his perceptions about payment—in one case, Mike believed that twelve months of payment were required up front—indicated both a breakdown in communication and a reluctance on Mike’s part to press for resources. The same held true for Head Start. Tony was eligible and ready to begin, but Mike had not yet pursued his enrollment. The on-site researcher, moved by Tony’s brightness, provided the numbers Mike needed to contact Head Start programs—additional evi-

## Moving Up is a Steep Climb

dence that more than two years of retention supports are necessary for many new or underemployed workers, as other research found (Rangarajan, Meckstroth, & Novak, 1998; Herr & Halpern, 1995). Resources offered by the African community might eventually prove more fruitful.

**Church.** Mike and Christina's African church emerged as a significant family support at follow-up. Music, praise, personal prayer and joy characterized the weekly gathering of families from a number of African countries, resulting in a warm, enveloping atmosphere that was particularly important for Christina's adaptation to the U.S.: "This family is my family too. We learned America together." The congregation's warmth spread to us, as welcome guests, and the children thrived in the community's approval, as Tony related: "He's my friend; she's my friend. She knows my Daddy." Members of the congregation made arrangements to see each other during the week, an extension of the religious community that had been a significant source of information about resources and employment for the Jeremys. Instrumental contributions notwithstanding, the church appeared to be pivotal for the family's emotional stability "Peace. Country. Friends" was what church meant to Christina. The strength of the church in the Jeremys' lives suggested that they could have benefited greatly from a native-speaking SJI case manager—one who could have expanded upon the important, but limited resource knowledge of the African community by being an active liaison between them and other American institutions.

A possible limitation of connecting primarily with the African community for external support was that Mike and Christina continued to struggle with their English skills. Mike's earlier participation in the C.A.M.P. Men's Group had been a valuable way to counteract his lack of knowledge about American social institutions:

*[Case Manager]: "He found it useful. A lot of immigrants use the space to get understanding of culture. They listen to what others say—get clues to what others are doing."*

Mike discontinued group attendance for family reasons, implying both family responsibility and support that obviated the need for group participation: "I have a family now." A similar group for families or couples might have helped Mike and Christina remain connected to information and resources and learn American access procedures. One of the benefits of the Jeremys' research participation was "sharing our problems and that's a help."

**Conclusions.** After our year-plus with the Jeremys, we reconsidered the C.A.M.P. staff member's and our own puzzlement about Mike's lack of follow-through. Our data suggested three possible explanations: 1) Information processing difficulty, which may be real or an artifact of limited English and/or cultural norms about help-asking and receiving; 2) Illusory language competence, even though verbal skills seemed good; and 3) Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), given Mike's refugee status, physical ills, and feelings of letting the family down. PTSD could manifest in procrastination, desire to "slow down," and general inertia. In support of the latter view, a local African American newspaper article featured the traumatic experiences of political refugees from the Sudan, suggesting the possibility of similar byproducts for Mike as a political refugee from a different, although similarly-besieged African country (Aberg, 2001). Most likely all three elements are at play.

The research team concluded that the C.A.M.P. staff member's puzzlement and ours about Mike's follow-through were different. C.A.M.P.'s reflected under-recognition of the interplay between family wages that were barely above poverty coupled with physical work hardships and competing work and family responsibilities. Ours reflected the impact of profound cultural differences that manifested mainly in inability to understand and access American institutions, insufficient mentoring and retention support, and possible persistent stress.

Overall, Mike’s predicament, two and a half years after his introduction to SJI, suggested a deeper, longer, and more inclusive retention plan, and more broadly, expanded funding for workforce development so that Mike, at very least, could obtain the education and certification that would extend his background skills. Several events had conspired unintentionally against Mike’s success, some of which were avoidable. Mike could have benefited from an assessment of his family’s needs, as well as his training and employment history. Mike was willing to employ his writing and woodworking skills—he had started to construct products that reflected his homeland—but this willingness had not been tapped. Similarly, Christina was potentially more able and willing to navigate systems with the help of a service provider. The family could still benefit from a thorough analysis of Mike’s language ability, his concomitant reluctance to negotiate unfamiliar systems, and possible byproducts of surviving persecution. Although Mike had lived as an American citizen for approximately nine years, six of these were as a single male. As a father and husband, Mike’s role and needs changed and required greater integration into the community. At study end, Mike and his family were poised to benefit from services, without which their abilities and hopes may not be fully realized.

# Moving Up is a Steep Climb

The “Randy Jackson” Family Story

*Parents’ Work and Children’s Welfare  
in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jobs Initiative*



*Roberta Rehner Iversen  
with Kathe Johnson and Mona Basta*

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## “Randy Jackson” Family Story

**Resident Family:**

**Randy Jackson:** a 40-year old native of African country—ethnographic study key informant

**Shawn Jackson:** Randy’s 28-year old African American wife

**Junior Jackson:** 5½ year old son, in Kindergarten/1<sup>st</sup> grade

**Stan Jackson:** 4½ year old son, in pre-K/Kindergarten

**Study timeline:** February through October 2000. Follow-up May 2001.

*“This job is better. In the other one, I had no life.”*

Randy Jackson’s connection with the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJJ) benefited his family through new avenues of economic and social advancement. The Jackson children had more time, supervision, and constructive contact with their father, their health needs were more fully addressed, and the family participated more in community activities after Randy got his MJJ job. That said, the family also struggled with the challenges of blending multiple cultures and functions in a society at odds with the primary culture of both partners: one an African immigrant; the other an African American from the south. Family challenges that preceded Randy’s MJJ involvement were less well addressed, largely because of massive flux in his MJJ-affiliated organization. Most relevant to the aims of the Jobs Initiative, Randy was not helped to resolve his long-held dreams of professionalism in a society hostile to foreign academic achievements. Such resolution could even further forward his children’s welfare.



## Background and Pre-MJI History

Randy earned a Bachelor of Science degree with Honours in Biology in Africa in the mid-1980s. Two theses written in English were required for this degree, evidencing considerable English proficiency, although Randy’s MJI-job foreman said initially that communication was strained: “I have trouble understanding Randy—trouble with language.”

Randy proudly described leadership positions he held in his tribal village and in college: He was elected chairman of his age group, which was the primary tribal social structure, and hall chairman of his college’s student government: “Being elected is a pretty big deal.” After college, Randy spent a mandatory year in the National Youth Service Corps teaching mathematics. He also played one year of professional soccer for his country before coming to the U.S. Being a professional soccer player was an extremely high status position, as soccer was a critical component of his country’s national identity.

Randy came to the U.S. in 1989 to visit his brother and stayed, in part because of the political unrest in his home country and in part hoping for greater professional opportunity in the U.S. Randy tried to get a research job in his field of botany, but was not able to obtain one. Randy believed this was due to the difficulty of translating his African education into acceptable American terms:

*“I’d liked to have pursued a master’s degree or a Ph.D. America is not hospitable to foreigners. The big problem with foreign education was looking for a job. Employers [in Wisconsin] recognize foreign education but find it difficult to hire you. They prefer US-based college. They hire you because of the ties.”*

As graphic evidence of this ethnocentrism and lack of American social capital, Randy had to settle for work in maintenance management and for the next 9½ years held the position of senior maintenance technician where he did “electrical work, carpentry, and all kinds of maintenance.” In light of his accomplishments in Africa, not to mention his father’s position as village Chief, these occupational barriers in the U.S. were humbling and frustrating. Jones-Correa (1998) highlighted a similar phenomenon in his discussion of the social dynamics of accepting host country positions that are lower in status than positions held in one’s country of origin.

Immediately before MJI enrollment, Randy worked for 4 months as senior maintenance mechanic at a furniture and appliance store at \$13.50/hour for a 50-hour week before being “let go” in November 1999. At MJI intake, Randy reported \$28,000 employment income for 1999 which reflected his second-most recent job. Although overtime hours at the furniture and appliance store raised his income, family welfare suffered:

*“I made \$13.50 at my previous job, plus a lot of overtime—more than I’m making now. But I had to work a 10-hour day, sometimes 7 days a week. This job is better. In the other one, I had no life.”*

When he was hired by the furniture and appliance store he lost the seniority he built at his previous 9½-year job and also his health insurance. This was a stressful period according to his wife Shawn, one that was mitigated significantly by Randy’s MJI employment:

*“Before Randy went to CCWC, he was unemployed for 2 weeks. He had Unemployment Insurance [but no health insurance.] He had a good job before that, but it was racist. His supervisor/boss did not like to see black people talk to white people. But he was paid good money.”*

### **MJI Enrollment: Central City Worker's Center (CCWC)**

Randy had been unemployed for 2 weeks when friends told him about Campaign for a Sustainable Milwaukee, the MJI-affiliated parent organization of the Central City Worker's Center (CCWC), an employment and training organization with a progressive approach to working with employers. The next morning Randy went to CCWC and enrolled in MJI, noting that his sole goal was to "get a job." His more general goals were oriented to both professional development and family welfare:

*"Better condition of life—own a house, be my own boss. I want the kids to have the best education, live an upright life, and make good decisions."*

At CCWC, an employment specialist examined Randy's credentials and not only got Randy a maintenance job offer that day, but helped him get a job in the construction industry several weeks later when Randy's first job fell through. According to the employment specialist, the construction job market was good because the industry had a shortage of skilled workers. However, of potential relevance to Randy's retention and advancement, the employment specialist stressed that the construction industry relied heavily on social networks for recruitment of employees, "the good old boy network," and was systematically racist in its employment practices. At several sites we visited, even those considered "minority contractors," only Caucasians were in positions of leadership.

In concert with the aims of MJI, the employment specialist's goal was to recruit more minorities into the construction trades. The construction project worked with 115 employers and had placed 220 new workers by January 2000. As a result, the specialist spent only minimal time with individuals in the program even though he regularly visited sites to check on their progress and give them encouragement. Although Randy considered the employment specialist supportive to his work efforts, they had little contact after Randy began his job. Nevertheless, the job connection was critical as Randy's wife emphasized, hoping that CCWC might also help her:

*"Randy's employment specialist was a unique person; he helped Randy so much. He got Randy a job—right away. Most people said they would help Randy get a job, but they didn't. His employment specialist did. Randy thinks maybe his employment specialist can help me too. I want to go to school—for computers."*

**Apprenticeship.** At CCWC, applicants became part of the Jobs Initiative when the organization placed them in a job or in the Learner's Center. The latter was open to all Milwaukee residents and was staffed by a Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) teacher who offered GED and pre-apprenticeship training—largely at a customer-initiated pace. The teacher was there "for advice, direction, and practice." Eighteen individuals had signed up for the Learner's Center on one of our visits: for steam fitter; plumbing; GED; and electrical training.

In addition to placing him in a job, Randy's employment specialist advised him to seek an apprenticeship, a path followed by only 5% of new construction workers like Randy. Confident in his earlier education, Randy felt he did not need classes:

*"I took the pre-test and the post-test. I wanted to try them without any studying. I got 100% on the pre-test and 100% on the post-test. I drew on what I'd learned about math 20 years ago."*

Subsequently, Randy signed up to take Joint Apprenticeship and Training for the Electrical Industry. The requirements for such apprenticeships, however, were stringent and financially punitive, if not impossible, for low-wage workers with family responsibilities, a target population for MJI, as was obvious from Randy’s outline of the expectations:

*“I signed up in January to take the test in March. March 8 test is for all January applicants. You can only apply the 3<sup>rd</sup> Monday of the month. The application process is as follows:*

- 1) You sign up for the test.*
- 2) You take the test at the JAT office [some distance from Randy’s home].*
- 3) You have interviews.*

*4) If accepted, after the test and the interviews, you work at an electrical firm for 3 days a week and have paid school 2 days a week. They pay for both, plus benefits. But I’ll be making less money than now. [Randy was making \$16.40/hour at his construction job] In the first year of apprenticeship, I would make \$9.71/hour. In the second, \$10.92. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> period, \$12.14. In the 4<sup>th</sup>, \$14.56. Then \$18.20, \$20.30, and as a Journeyman, \$24.27. Each period is 1000 hours—about 6 months of full-time work. To reach Journeyman level, it would take 4-5 years. I can’t understand why they wouldn’t accept me.”*

Randy received a score of 4 on the March apprenticeship test; a score of 5 was required for apprenticeship eligibility. Randy was frustrated about not having answered all the questions on the test, even before receiving his score. He answered the hard questions first and then ran out of time, omitting the easy questions at the end of the test. Randy’s experience suggested that practice in “test-taking skills,” particularly for immigrants, should be part of all workforce training.

Although it was possible to retake the test, Randy was increasingly dubious about the sufficiency of the low apprenticeship wages. In contrast, the employment specialist viewed workers’ reluctance to pursue apprenticeships as motivational: “Fear of study. They think they’re getting OK wages and they are scared of school.” Such a view belies the multiplicity of family needs and responsibilities among participants in a program such as the Jobs Initiative.

**Apprenticeship versus long-range professionalism.** In contrast to the career direction MJI offered him, Randy had long-range professional goals. He wanted to get Master’s and Ph.D. degrees but could not do so because if he attended school full time, he would not be able to support his small children. He was dedicated to providing for his family and had at times worked two jobs in order to do this. The apprenticeship setback exacerbated Randy’s tension between advancing in a trade and pursuing a professional career and between professional pursuit and family support:

*“I don’t know if I want to become an electrical apprentice. The way I look at it, it will take me three years to move up, by that time I could be doing something else I like more. You know I always wanted to be a medical doctor. Also, at one time I thought about being a lawyer. That’s when I was in school in Africa. I just don’t know if I want to be an electrical apprentice. I could go to school for three years and earn a degree in law. That’s the same amount of time it would take me to be an electrician. And I would be doing something I like more, I think. I just didn’t think I would like law when I was in Africa, but now I think I would like it. I would like to have my own practice. I can go to a local University. I went to a seminar there. I have information on their law program. I really wanted to be a medical doctor, you know I have the biology courses and everything from my school in Africa.”*

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**Organizational flux.** Aside from apprenticeship training, Randy did not ask for other help from MJI, which was just as well as little would have been forthcoming. CCWC offered no case management, retention consisted of a tri-monthly tracking call or letter, and the specialist's view was "the first job is on me. After that you join the union. The union will find you a job." CCWC persisted in its selective contact: "If you go for an apprenticeship, I'll help you try to find a second job. We've just started pushing the trade." In contrast, Randy offered *his* services to CCWC, giving motivational speeches about MJI at CCWC orientations.

In Fall 2000, when CCWC was being completely restructured, Randy knew that the original organization was in flux, but had not talked to his employment specialist recently; nor was he contacted when the specialist left CCWC. Randy's suggestions for MJI pertained to program-employer relations rather than to participant services:

*"They're doing a great job. But most people they send are disappointing to the employers. They should have orientation programs about the employers—what to expect; what bosses want. The bosses are telling the Employment Specialist, but the information doesn't get to the prospective employees. I spoke at Orientation, with Tisha Shanks [another MJI ethnographic study parent]. I think MJI should get weekly reports from employers about their MJI workers, for at least the first month of employment. In the orientation and training, MJI should have an agenda—motivational and instructional. They should tell the participants: if we help you, you also have to help yourselves."*

Similar employer-report practices were recommended for job retention in recent welfare to-work research (Strawn & Martinson, 2000).

### MJI Employment: Construction Company

Through CCWC, Randy obtained a manual construction position in January 2000 at a unionized Construction Company at a wage of \$16.40/hour [\$32,800 annual income]. Compared with the potential annual income from his pre-MJI job [\$27,000 + \$10,000 overtime], the construction position yielded less total income. However, its hours and schedule produced compelling family benefits:

*"I was used to working 2<sup>nd</sup> shift and I always slept late. But this schedule [1<sup>st</sup> shift] gives me more time with the kids—I can help with their homework and I don't have to work weekends."*

Pursuing advancement somewhat eroded these benefits. Although Randy got off work at 3 and arrived home by 4 p.m., three days a week he went to the CCWC Learner's Center for apprenticeship study, reducing the time he spent with the children.

The Construction Company's contract was to tear down an existing building in preparation for the construction of a hotel, shops and a business complex in the downtown section of Milwaukee. As a result, asbestos fibers filled the air of the enclosed building although none of the workers wore masks or was given safety preparation for working with this dangerous material. This was also Randy's first job at such basic manual labor: "I know nothing about this; I was slow in the beginning, but I am learning." He believed this stint at manual labor would benefit the electrical work he aimed for through the apprenticeship program. According to the employment specialist, entrée to the electrical trade demanded not only good marks on the apprenticeship tests but also experience in construction.

Randy was considered a stellar example of an MJI trainee by the employment specialist and jobsite supervisor. The specialist’s position was: “If Randy can’t make it—nobody can.” Although the specialist referred other workers to the Construction Company, Randy outlasted these MJI placements and other employee layoffs. Randy’s dependability distinguished him from the other workers; he said with pride on many occasions that he had not missed a day of work since he started there. Randy’s tenacity was palpable—to the researchers and his supervisor who said “he’s great”:

*“But you know when you take a job you don’t get to choose what you do. If you don’t want to do something or if you don’t know how to do it, you just figure it out. If you can’t figure it out, you ask questions. Like today, I had to tear down this wall and a ceiling. I had to build a kind of bridge (a scaffold) to get the job done. I had to use a jackhammer to tear everything down. It was hard. I had to figure out how to do it. I had never done that before. Now I know how and the next time it will be easier. I don’t understand why people get a job and think they are not supposed to work. Work is hard, but that is how it is supposed to be.”*

After about six months on the job, Randy’s supervisor invited him to do office work instead of manual work, which included “daily logs and inventories and paperwork for all kinds of things.” Neither his job title nor his wage changed as a result: “Paperwork is a privilege. But I don’t get extra money for it.”

Although Randy had good relationships with his co-workers, his switch to office work produced resentment because they perceived the shift as “favoritism” from the boss. Randy did not agree with the “favoritism” charge; he believed that the change was a reward for his reliability, punctuality, positive attitude, and good work. At the same time, he continued to frequent a tavern after work with his coworkers and his boss, suggesting that friendly relationships overshadowed the resentment.

**Wages and benefits.** At the time of his switch from manual to office work, Randy earned \$17.10/hour—a normal 6-month raise. He had expected another raise in several months to \$19.10/hour, but was told recently that the maximum raise—to \$21.10—would not occur before 18-months’ tenure. Most notably, the family’s health care and the way they coped with health problems changed drastically after they received union health insurance coverage. Shawn spoke poignantly about how the interim months before health insurance took effect resulted in considerable hardship for the children:

*“We don’t have any health insurance right now. It’s tough on the kids. The kids have been sick a while. We only have money for over-the-counter medicine. We spend a lot of money on that. We used to take them to the Private Hospital, but now go to the County Hospital. We still have bills coming. The kids got ringworm in school, but we couldn’t afford to take them to the doctor. The drugstore medicines didn’t work very well. It took a long time to go away. We had to take them to the hospital.”*

In contrast, after Randy’s union insurance began, the children’s health needs were attended to: “It’s real good insurance. I’ve been taking the boys to the doctor, back and forth.” Shawn also noted that the adults’ healthcare was negatively influenced by the period of no health insurance: “We’re in good health, but I should have a physical. The medical benefits were paying for my Depo [birth control] shots, but now I can’t get them.”

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**Advancement.** Randy repeatedly said that he had professional goals for himself:

*“I want a career—not just a job. I want a career—like law. I was a science major but I was good at social science too. My boss was mad at me when I talked about law.”*

His boss, in fact, encouraged Randy to pursue civil engineering. At the same time, the CCWC employment specialist pushed the path of electrical apprenticeship. Randy’s uncertainty about career direction was firmly lodged in the realities of his being the sole family wage-earner:

*“My original aim in the United States was to go to medical school. But it was going to take too long. Since I got this job I’ve thought about civil engineering. But any studies I do, my family will suffer—even if my wife works. She can’t earn enough to carry us. If I go to school for 4 years, which would be the minimum for civil engineering, that would be a lot of years. Local University gave me Law School admission a year ago—I went to some seminars. I’m thinking about doing that. It’s shorter than an apprenticeship.”*

Clearly Randy could be helped by knowledgeable career counseling—information about scholarships, minority subsidies, alternative work-study programs, and ways to negotiate the family’s income needs while pursuing a profession. Absent such counseling, since he did not think he could commit to pursuing his true goals, he attempted to take advantage of opportunities to advance into a higher status position in the construction industry. His current position was inconsistent with his high level of educational achievement and sense of identity as a highly trained and educated professional.

Randy’s career plans were further complicated by the fact that his boss at Construction Company was leaving to start his own company and wanted Randy to eventually work there. However, there was no formal offer at that point and the job content of this “invitation” was not specified.

To put a necessary block in place towards career advancement, Shawn reported that Randy planned a trip to Africa in December 2000, in part to visit his family and in part to retrieve necessary certification papers:

*“He’s going to Africa to get some of his papers, like his transcript. He wants to get his papers there, because when he tells them he wants to do something, he can’t, because they want his papers, his transcripts.”*

Armed with this evidence of his background, heretofore stymied by local bureaucracy, “There’s corruption and difficulty getting official material from long distance,” Randy planned to decide about what course to pursue when he returned.

### Family Welfare

**Income and family roles.** Both Randy and Shawn felt that their income was insufficient for their needs although they seldom articulated specific lacks or sacrifices. Randy did not specify what he thought a family-supporting wage would be, but felt that if Shawn got a job after Stan started all-day school, “that would be enough income.” Despite tight finances, the Jacksons were one of the only families in the study who managed to save money: “We’ve got a sav-

ings and a checking account. We saved up from our tax return.” They also used the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to extend their income sufficiency.

With deep sadness, Randy talked about having to miss his father’s funeral two years ago because he could not afford to travel to Africa at that time. The savings that he had accrued from his MJI job would finally allow him to go to Africa—the first time since he emigrated to the U.S. 11 years ago:

*“I’ve been saving money for some time to go to Africa. I didn’t go last year because I hadn’t saved enough money. I’ve been saving before the MJI job and since. You can’t go back without lots of money. I didn’t have enough money before, but now I do.”*

The family’s annual income consisted of Randy’s salary of about \$34,200 per year which equaled 200% of the federal poverty guideline but was \$8000 below the Self-Sufficiency Standard for Wisconsin (Pearce, 2000), a more nuanced, contextual calculation of income adequacy than the federal formula. Shawn had an “informal” source of income through caring for the children’s cousins, aged 2 and 3, from noon to 6 p.m. while their parents worked: “They pay me good for it and it gives Stan somebody to play with.” Shawn did not reveal how much she earned from babysitting and Randy did not know the amount either: “She keeps it to herself.” Moreover, it was unclear whether the financial gain offset the stresses of having daily responsibility for two additional pre-school children, as suggested by Shawn’s contradictory self-evaluation: “I thought about going into day care, but I just don’t have the patience. I’m good with kids though. I could do it.”

Randy’s family helped financially in the form of periodic gifts for the children: \$200 to Junior on his birthday and \$2000 when the boys were christened. However, Randy’s reciprocal financial obligations offset these gains. He regularly sent money to Africa for the education of his two daughters, aged 12 and 14, as well as to other family members. Shawn hoped the daughters would come to America for their education because she was “tired of all this sending money back and forth.” Shawn also anticipated that the daughters’ coming would provide childcare respite for her, without recognizing the additional demands of having two more children in the family—teenagers who had not seen their father since they were infants who, at the same time, would be making a monumental transition to another country and culture.

At the policy level, Randy’s income outflow was a kind of “child support” that is not factored into eligibility for subsidies yet significantly reduced the sufficiency of his income. As a result, Shawn periodically struggled with whether or not to try to obtain employment, having not worked outside the home since 1996:

*“I don’t have enough money. I need to get a job, but I don’t know about the kids. I can’t sign up [for public assistance], because they would know, I don’t want to do that now.”*

Although both Shawn and Randy wanted to increase their income, each also expressed ambivalence about Shawn working outside the home in terms of the tension between work and family responsibilities. Randy said that Shawn wanted to work but could not get a babysitter for the kids. He was concerned about how the children’s needs would be met:

*“It’s hard to know how they will get to school and who will be there to see them when they get home. It’s a problem.”*

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Shawn's ambivalence was both economic and parental:

*"It would cost \$250/week for childcare. And when you have children, you want to be responsible for them."*

Nevertheless, during nearly every conversation Shawn said she wanted to get a job: "I need a job. I want to work; I want to learn things. When Stan is in school a full day, I'll work." Shawn's concern about their youngest child was interconnected with her own exhaustion, desire to work, ambivalence about the pressures of working, and view of herself as a "good" mother—illustrating graphically the cascading effects on children of the clash between family economic needs, family responsibilities, and the returns to low-wage work:

*"I'm a little worried about Stan. He's a little too hyperactive. I cannot deal with him. I want to send him to Africa to stay. Now. It's so hard on me. Just too hard. When I do get some help, I pamper myself sometimes—go for a long walk. Children—they make it harder. It stops you from doing a lot of things. If you make extra money—you have to find a babysitter. And that's too much. I used to work 1<sup>st</sup> shift at Department Store. I love working. I get out of the house. I'm responsible for myself. But the kids are doing good in school. They don't miss any school."*

**Neighborhood.** The Jacksons paid \$445/month rent for their 4½ room apartment in a near-downtown neighborhood, an amount that was similar to other local rentals. They had lived in this 34-unit building for 9 years—in an apartment that was better suited to a childless couple than a family of 4. Despite Neighborhood Watch signs on the outside doors indicating concern for family safety, there was no contiguous, safe place for the children to play. The apartment building superintendent prohibited patio play because children marked it up with crayons: "And you know, that's graffiti; even if it's crayons, it's still graffiti. They make it a mess." Randy said their building and neighborhood were pretty safe, in part because "there is a police station nearby and we can leave our door open. But there's no place for the kids to play." Randy wanted to move further north to an area that was quieter so that the children "would have a school field to play on and so they wouldn't have to avoid cars all the time." In Fall 2000, Randy and Shawn were looking for a house to buy, expecting considerable financial help from Shawn's father, although no concrete progress had occurred at that point. At the same time, their apartment was homey and friendly—showing signs of redecoration and "sprucing up" over recent months. Visiting, eating, and TV watching centered in the living room, one wall of which was a shelf arrangement with Randy's trophies, children's puzzles, and family pictures. Plants, sconces and a mirror adorned the walls and floors.

**Marital relationship.** Although it appeared outwardly that Randy and Shawn's marriage was characterized by a separation of roles and domains, their relationship was multi-layered. It appeared that Randy led the family, made decisions that affected the family, and represented the family in public, while Shawn managed the family's home life, making sure they had what they needed and got to work and school on time. However, Randy stressed that the couple made decisions jointly and cooperated on family tasks and responsibilities.

Before Randy's involvement with MJI, his experiences at work had affected the quality of their marital relationship according to Shawn:

*"Randy would have a bad day, an argument with his boss, and he'd come home and argue with me. He didn't like the way people treated him. We didn't argue or fight in front of the children, but children are smart—they know."*



Shawn added that Randy’s MJI job significantly improved the couple’s relations:

*“Now Randy feels relaxed—he comes home and greets me with a hug and a kiss. His boss told him last week that he was doing a good job.”*

On the other hand, the new job, the apprenticeship training, and the fact that Shawn could not drive also eroded the time Randy and Shawn spent together as a couple, as Shawn lamented: “These days there’s not enough time. Randy and I used to spend more time together. Now it’s just a little bit in the morning and a little bit in the evening.” At a later point she added, “It’s important to tell employers what would help families,” by which she meant reasonable work hours and sufficient wages.

Overall, Shawn appeared to have assimilated successfully into the culture of their family, which was heavily influenced by Randy’s cultural background. She believed the African diet was healthier and valued the fact that Africans were family oriented. Randy’s cousin, “Uncle,” concurred that the African cultural ethos held family as primary: “If one person needs something the family takes care of it. The family has to stay together.” Randy expressed a similar view: “If you have people, you are rich.”

**Social and community life.** Randy and Shawn’s social life revolved around family participation in activities sponsored by Randy’s cultural groups. The national group numbered about 1000 and the Jacksons met at least once a month with these Africans and Americans at regular and special events. Randy also participated once a month in tribal group gatherings of about 100. Randy had more time for these groups in his MJI job than he had at earlier jobs—a community “benefit” that also translated into enrichment for the children. For example, Randy and Uncle had recently revitalized the tribal group by introducing native dancing into its spread of activities. Randy included Stan in the initial dance exhibits because “he was able to pick it up fast,” but he planned to include Junior in subsequent practices. Randy’s pride in Stan’s performance was palpable as he showed a video of their recent performance: “See my son! See him there. Isn’t he good? Uncle and I taught him the dances.” Spreading their influence beyond the immediate ethnic community, the dance group was commissioned to perform at the State Fair Park to help celebrate the country’s independence day and hoped for additional “gigs” as they developed their repertoire. Both cultural groups met in a nearby Catholic Church, which also figured into the family’s activities although somewhat less centrally than the cultural groups. Randy had recently joined a prayer ministry at his church led by a minister from Africa—another positive result of his MJI work schedule: “Since I changed my job, I can go to this now.”

Randy’s MJI job also gave him time to pursue independent hobbies. Consistent with his high level of participation in public activities, Randy belonged to the Milwaukee Area Coin Darts Organization and represented a local tavern in dart tournaments. Friends at this tavern were the ones who referred Randy to MJI. The extent to which his active interests also reduced marital interaction or relieved Shawn’s primary responsibility for the children and home was unclear.

Although Shawn benefited in many ways from Randy’s extensive social networks, her family supports were geographically distant. Nevertheless, she talked with her mother and sisters in the South daily by phone. Randy supported this contact through buying her a long distance phone card every time he got a paycheck. Aside from Randy’s networks, some of which she shared, her primary contacts were married mothers and their children in her apartment building. During many of our contacts, Shawn seemed to be somewhat isolated and depressed and spoke often about parental stress:

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*“Next summer I think I’ll go with the kids to the South, maybe for about 4 months. I can’t take it here sometimes—I feel like shouting ‘come and get em’ [the kids]. When I go to the South, I don’t spend much time with the kids. My mother is young and takes care of them. I have some free time.”*

### Children’s Welfare

To general inquiries about the children, Randy and Shawn typically responded that the boys were doing well, that they sometimes had behavior problems they considered typical of young boys, and that they were very intelligent. At each inquiry the children were also “doing fine” in school. Shawn and Randy periodically considered sending Junior and Stan to Africa for their schooling, although Shawn’s motivation was a mix of enrichment and personal respite while Randy’s goal was the children’s academic progress and safety:

*“We want them to know both cultures. When the children finish grade school, we will send them to high school in Africa. There aren’t any gangs there. They live in dorms; they’re at school full time. Then back to U.S. for college.”*

Randy and Shawn’s parenting style was extremely strict and characterized by physical discipline that the children, particularly Junior, may have experienced as overly harsh. Both parents reported being punished physically in their own childhoods as “clear consequences of doing something wrong.” Uncle noted that in Africa, family discipline was handled physically:

*“With a stick. In school if I didn’t do something right, I got lashes. And my father would say to the teacher, ‘give him more lashes.’”*

Shawn’s disciplinary style consisted of threatening the children and lifting up the phone receiver to call Uncle if they didn’t straighten up. Most of the time the children responded to these threats by changing the behavior in question. Randy was assertive with the children but did not yell at them. When he told the children to do something they obeyed him. His parenting style was to correct and instruct the children in how to behave, although he also punished them. Stan’s punishment for a negative school “report” was to clean the house and stay in his room for a day—arguably somewhat strong treatment for a 4½ year old. Both Randy and Shawn mentioned “whipping” the boys when they misbehaved and Shawn said on a number of occasions: “I’m so tired of hollering at the kids.” When asked to describe their discipline philosophy and methods, Randy said he tells them to behave themselves at school and on the bus, at all times. He also said he “flogged” them sometimes and Shawn did too. He then defended this practice, saying that “If you spare the rod, you spoil the child. If they are not disciplined when they are young, they can’t be disciplined when they are older. They know we love them.” Reflecting his British English, Randy clarified that his use of the term “flogging” was different from the abusive meaning of this word in the U.S.:

*“Hitting them, but not hard, and not in anger. We don’t abuse the children—we are just firm with them. We use physical punishment only carefully and not to hurt them—just to teach them. We give them positive reinforcement and we give them negative reinforcement—‘this is wrong.’”*

The family’s adults also contributed positively to the children’s socialization and recreation. After the parents, Uncle was closest to the children and had the most contact with them. Uncle was a masters-level special education teacher

and counselor who lived in an apartment house next door to the Jacksons. After school the children often went to Uncle’s to “do computers.” During the summer when the boys were out of school, Shawn reported that Uncle took them out frequently, as did Randy, so “they get out a lot.” Randy also took the boys when he played soccer on Sundays. Although he did not directly teach them the sport, they had an opportunity to play outside with the ball and watch the adults as well. Unfortunately, Junior and Stan did not attend a summer enrichment program at their school because they did not have transportation. However, the family visited friends and relatives in Minnesota and Chicago, which provided stimulation for the children and respite for Shawn.

### Children’s School

The neighborhood elementary school that Junior and Stan attended was an old building but brightly lit and colorfully arrayed with simple, low-budget displays of children’s art. The school was populated predominantly by children of color, many of whom had worn shoes and clothes. Teachers interacted with students individually during class, gave clear instructions and feedback, and were generally affirming in their directions and praise to students for their work during class. The teachers’ pedagogical philosophies emphasized individual rates of learning and attempts to meet students’ academic *and* social needs.

On selected measures of student outcomes and involvement, Junior and Stan’s school compared favorably with other public elementary schools in the Milwaukee school district. Students had higher than average results on the Wisconsin Comprehensive and Reading Test for Grade Three (1998-99): 83% of the school’s third graders tested Basic or above and 61% tested Proficient or above. The school’s results, however, were somewhat lower than the state totals for Wisconsin. Similarly, on the Fourth Grade Knowledge and Concepts Examination, 58% of the school’s fourth graders tested Proficient or above across all categories, including Reading, Language, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies, comparable to the district wide average of 58.4% across the five subjects (Milwaukee Public Schools, 2000).

Other indicators of student performance and involvement in the school, including attendance, truancy and retentions in grade placed the Jackson’s school at nearly average—higher on some indicators and lower on others compared to other district elementary schools for 1998-99. The attendance rate was 94%, among the highest attendance rates in the district. The school did not appear to have disciplinary practices that were more severe or extensive or to have more discipline problems than other Milwaukee elementary schools, although we observed one teacher conducting a physical exercise with a child that resembled the restraining techniques used with developmentally-disabled children to contain combative or violent behavior.

At our initial contact in spring 2000, halfway through his kindergarten year, Junior described what he liked and did not like about school:

*“[I like] My ABCs, my letters, my numbers, my name and address, everything in the world. [Do not like?] The kids fighting.”*

When asked what he did about that, “I tell the teacher. I ignore them.” In contrast, Stan said “I will kick them.” These responses turned out to be mirror opposites of both parent and school characterizations of each of the boys’ behaviors.

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Although the parents reported “excellent” school reports for both boys for the 1999-2000 school year, they were also told that “Junior did not pay attention.” Per family “mantra,” the parents’ views about the boys’ performance early in the 2000-2001 school year remained positive. According to Shawn: “They’re doing fine. They’re both real smart. You know they’re boys and sometimes they show out. But their teachers and all that say they’re doing fine in school.”

However, as the school visit neared, Shawn revealed that there were some problems at school:

*“Well you know, Junior’s not too much for it. Stan’s doing OK. Junior’s getting foolish. I gets so tired of it. It’s nothing too bad. You know it’s just the beginning of the school year and already he has me too stressed. I don’t like the way they do the kids. They should put kids into their own class, you know like if one isn’t getting something, then they should just put them aside and let them learn it and not put them all into one group. If I was a teacher I would ask, ‘what can I do to help you?’ I wouldn’t just be putting them where they can’t learn anything. You know, some kids just learn different.”*

In addition to this plea for more individualized attention, Shawn also felt the school should have more of a peer-teaching culture and be more firm:

*“I’m teaching him [Junior] so he can teach Stan. That’s how it should be. The big ones teach the little ones. But I think at the school they should divide them up with the kids who are willing to learn. They just don’t do that. If I could afford it I think they should go to Africa to get some right training and education. They’re not getting it here. The teachers don’t just take the time to teach them right.”*

It became slowly apparent that both parents felt the children’s negative school experiences caused disgrace for the family. Shawn seemed to feel this pressure most acutely, both at present and fearfully for her son’s future:

*“It’s making me and Randy a fool. He’s a disgrace to me in school. I don’t want him to be a failure. I don’t want him runnin’ around with no bad boys and hangin’ out in the street.”*

School visits also illustrated that Stan’s and Junior’s experiences at the school were very different. Stan was very popular with his teachers and got along extremely well with his classmates. His regular teacher of two years in a row liked Stan and described him as developmentally-appropriate for his age:

*“He likes to talk. He’s made a lot of improvements. He’s very curious. He likes to ask questions, and get a lot of hugs. He gets out of line, but he’s five years old. When I correct him, he listens.”*

She added that he respected others, attended school regularly and was willing to share with others. He seemed particularly interested in art, something that his father noted also. Stan was doing “okay” in math and showed continual improvement. He also liked working with the computer. When his teacher assigned papers to do at home under parental oversight, she always got them back.

In the area of social development, Stan was a star among his peers. His teacher said he interacted “wonderfully” with other children and had very good social skills. He liked to converse with people and was very polite. When he wanted some water, he would ask, “Could I have a cup of water?” In contrast, the other children would just say, “Can I get a drink?” Stan’s teacher found Junior equally polite, asking her how Stan was doing whenever he saw her.

Junior, on the other hand, reportedly acted in ways that were inappropriate in the school environment and received repeated negative sanctions from the school. Less than a month into his first grade year, Junior had spent a day in what he called “the darkroom”—a room where teachers sent students on in-school suspension to do school work. Both Shawn and Junior’s teacher recounted the same incident that led to the suspension: Junior hit a girl on the school playground. Junior’s teacher said they were working with him on improving his behavior:

*“He is not a mean child. He is just very impulsive when he lashes out. When he gets upset, he just hits or gets out of control. Then when he’s corrected about it, he reacts more strongly than normal about being corrected.”*

While this response occurred more frequently with Junior than with other children, the teacher also reported that Junior had improved recently. These behavioral patterns may reflect his emotional response, as oldest child, to his parents’ disciplinary methods and a need for more positive reinforcement at home.

The teachers were puzzled by Junior’s sub-par academic performance since it did not seem to be the result of lack of ability. Junior’s teacher thought he was capable of doing better in school, specifically in his writing. He received individual attention in a small reading group for an hour each day to improve his reading skills. In contrast to Stan’s teacher’s report about homework, Junior’s teacher said that the return of homework packets was inconsistent: “Sometimes they are returned. They are usually not completed.” She also reported that Junior was not doing very well in math, yet Shawn’s understanding was that Randy was good in math but got C’s and D’s in spelling. Shawn believed the reason he was not learning was because the school was not teaching him well. In contrast, Junior’s teacher believed he would benefit from tutoring.

Although our discussions with Junior’s teachers seemed to suggest that he had been held back in the K-1 class, Randy emphasized that Junior had not been retained; in Fall 2000 Junior was a full-fledged first-grader. Teachers also reported that Junior’s speech therapy during Kindergarten had been successful enough that it was not needed in first grade.

**Home-school connection.** From Stan’s teacher’s perspective, the connection between home and school was completely satisfactory. Randy attended regular parent-teacher conferences and was “concerned about his [Stan’s] development.” She was able to talk to either parent on the phone and felt she could call them anytime. Stan’s teacher also said that the school had family activities, such as a math and science-oriented Halloween event, and that the Jackson family sometimes participated.

Junior’s teacher had seen Randy twice already by mid-October to confer about Junior’s behavior and performance. She, too, reported that both parents “seem very nice and want to be helpful.” It was not clear, however, why the teacher thought outside-school tutoring was the best response to Junior’s needs. This recommendation was particularly troublesome considering that several steps beyond teacher-parent consultation were needed to effect it. Area churches provided tutoring for children, but the list was provided by the school social worker, not the teacher. The teacher suggested that the researcher report this to the parents and encourage them to consider tutoring. This interchange raised the question of how fully Junior’s teacher was informing the family about Junior’s needs and procedures to attain resources.

Because Shawn was primarily responsible for managing the children and home, her frustration about literacy and numeracy tasks may have been a barrier to helping Junior improve his school performance. Shawn said that the school sent homework packets for the boys to do that she could not understand:

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*“They do send things home, but it don’t help. You can’t even understand it. The directions don’t make no sense and you don’t know how to do it.”*

Shawn wanted desperately to be able to help them learn, and even asked the researcher to help her find a way to do this. At the end of the initial six-month study period, Shawn asked the researcher for connections to parochial and Montessori schools and information about scholarships—a more appropriate role for a CCWC retention worker, had there been one.

The Jackson children’s precarious academic situation spurred our outreach to MJI as a resource for the family as the initial study wave ended in October 2000. With the employment specialist’s departure and the total re-organization of CCWC, Randy had no personal contact there despite the fact that he was still technically in “retention” follow-up, having worked at his MJI job for less than a year. A contact at the parent organization, Campaign for a Sustainable Milwaukee (CSM), was pessimistic about CCWC’s ability to serve as retention back-up to the Jacksons:

*“That’s not a role we could effectively play. We don’t have the commitment or funding to do this. MJI is not about this kind of resource. Plus, CCWC is no longer connected with the construction industry.”*

Whereas CCWC’s retention follow-up had been skeletal in earlier months, it was now formally disbanded, leaving Randy and others in the lurch. Interestingly, our CSM contact concurred with our assessment of Randy’s family’s needs and recognized that others had similar needs:

*“We spent time this morning talking about exactly this issue—the need for follow-up and monitoring/ case management of many of the MJI participants. We are aware that important continuity is lost when individuals leave the referral organization. It produces a strain on the families. I think our referral process is increasingly restrictive and difficult. It is a major boat being missed. We hope to make CCWC more responsive.”*

As a limited substitute for what was arguably a viable but absent retention role for MJI, we urged the children’s teachers and the Jacksons to confer and collaborate further, with each other and with the school social worker, in order to more fully address the children’s academic and behavioral needs.

## Follow-up May 2001 and Conclusions

In May 2001, fifteen months after our first contact with the Jacksons, further positive byproducts of MJI enrollment and employment had accrued. Although Randy was laid off from Construction Company in mid-February 2001, he was quickly re-employed at his former boss’s new company, FFF Construction. Randy earned more money at the new position, felt increasingly validated in his work, and felt generally satisfied with his life. Although Randy was not promoted at the new job, despite the fact that his boss regularly introduced him as his “assistant” or his “vice president of operations,” the change resulted in an adjustment of Randy’s wage to the *correct* union wage of \$21.10, a \$2/hour increase over his incorrect wage at Construction Company. Randy now earned a wage that was “sufficient” for his family according to the Self-Sufficiency Standard (Pearce, 2000). However, the Standard is set according to the wages necessary per adult and Randy’s wife was not earning anywhere near Randy’s wage.

The short period Randy was between jobs was notably different from his unemployment before MJI—particularly in regard to health insurance. Randy underscored the overarching benefits of union membership for his family’s welfare: “The union health coverage continues whether or not I am working.” Regardless of job change and periods of unemployment, Randy, his wife and children would never have another deleterious period of being uninsured, such as they had before MJI.

In February 2001, Shawn began work as a part-time housekeeper at a hotel near the Jackson’s home. Randy still had mixed feelings about Shawn’s employment, but he was proud of her accomplishment at the same time. Randy and Shawn’s new two-working-parent status was facilitated by a neighbor who saw the children off to school in the morning and sometimes also watched them on weekends—at the affordable cost of \$50 per week. The use of informal childcare appeared to mitigate the additional expense of going to work for Shawn and made a second family income more profitable for the family. Buying a house was a priority for summer 2001, aided by the fact that the children visited their Southern grandparents and cousins.

When Shawn began working outside the home, her role in the marriage and the family transformed into a more public role, as Randy acknowledged: “Her role has changed.” Having a babysitter while she worked and on some weekends freed her to spend more time away from the children and in a world of other adults. In contrast to our early observations of Shawn as stressed and possibly depressed, at follow-up she appeared strong and confident. It appeared that labor market re-entry raised both her spirits and self-esteem.

Despite the acknowledged benefits from MJI enrollment and employment, CCWC re-organization and eventual closure [April 2001] robbed Randy of additional resources the organization could potentially provide as well as further opportunity to motivate new applicants and trainees. At base, Randy felt that the organization was not interested in him as a person and while it had been moderately helpful, he no longer needed such help:

*“When they [CCWC] fell apart, they couldn’t find my file. People there don’t care about you. They are not interested in you. When I needed help, they gave it to me, but they didn’t do much. My new job I got on my own merit, based on my past work performance. After Employment Specialist left, there was nothing there any more. No file, which was a requirement of the new job. I had to fill out a new form. I had to notarize it at a bank [notarization had been done previously at CCWC], and give CCWC a copy and take it back to work. I was not paid for the 3 hours this took me.”*

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By May 2001, Randy made considerable progress in achieving recognition for his educational achievements in Africa. He had submitted his transcript to Educational Credential Evaluation, Inc., a for-profit credentialing service, and his degree was deemed appropriate by U.S. standards for a Bachelor of Science. Obtaining additional “official” transcripts, however, would better serve Randy’s educational pursuits as the evaluation company downgraded in-between grades. For example, they calculated and reported an A-B (A-minus) as a B. Randy planned to get more official copies of his transcripts when he takes his sons to Africa in December 2001.

At follow-up, Junior and Stan remained healthy and were increasingly involved in their parents’ cultural activities. The parents attended regular teacher conferences, presented their African dancing at school cultural events, and oversaw the children’s homework, as a school administrator reported:

*“Junior and Stan are doing better. I have talked to their mother a few times and she’s always cooperative. I think she disciplines Junior when he gets in trouble in school. And the parents come here for activities. I have seen their African dancing. They performed at one of our activities. I really like them. Yeah, the parents are really good and they care about the kids. I can call them any time and talk about the kids.”*

Positive byproducts of Randy’s MJI job, particularly through more parental time, greater personal satisfaction, and more sufficient wages thus increased the children’s welfare as well.

Over his first-grade year, Junior’s school performance improved slowly but steadily from receiving two D’s and 4 C’s during the first marking period to receiving five C’s and 1 B in the third marking period. Accompanying progress reports indicated general improvement in academic problem areas. Although the reports also noted Junior’s chronic difficulty in controlling his anger, his “B” grade for Behavior was the best grade he had received to that point in the year. Stan’s performance remained strong and at year end, both boys were promoted: Junior to 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and Stan to 1<sup>st</sup> grade.

Ultimately, the reasons for Junior’s academic difficulties were unclear. One teacher reported that he was inattentive in class, but we observed him on several occasions engrossed in his written work. The distraction his teacher observed may have resulted from the fact that he did not like school, given that his academic and behavioral problems had led to negative attention from teachers as well as parents. Teachers suggested that he had low self-esteem and did not recognize his contribution to the school community or, more specifically, he had difficulty expressing his role at school in his written work. His difficulty in writing seemed to center on lack of confidence in his ability to make decisions about what to write.

Randy associated Junior’s academic and behavior patterns with the family’s bilingual environment and Randy’s own behaviors as a child:

*“It takes him a little more time; he’s improved dramatically. There’s a language barrier, culture. He has a temper. The teacher identified it and I identified it. He wants to have his own way. It took me a long time when I was growing up. I always liked to have my own way. I was the favorite child. I had a temper too.”*

The fact that Randy now had sustained time to address Junior’s school needs was an important bonus of Randy’s MJI job and its sequel:



*“Over the last 6 months I got weekly reports from the teacher so that I could keep up with his progress. If he didn’t progress, he had no TV. When he had 3 straight weeks of progress, it was OK and the teacher stopped sending the reports. He is growing rapidly. He has no problems with academics now.”*

The disparity between the school’s and parents’ views about Junior’s performance puzzled the research team until we realized that the same pattern was repeated in the relationships between other MJI families in the ethnographic study and their schools, whether elementary, middle, or high school level. By and large, teachers gave the researchers negative reports about children’s performance, expressed pessimism about the children’s futures, and evidenced resignation and exhaustion in their jobs. In contrast, teachers told MJI parents that their children’s problems were improving, commended them for their efforts, and predicted future achievement for the children. We concluded that teachers and administrators in these beleaguered, besieged, and woefully-underfunded inner-city Milwaukee schools used their research responses as an opportunity to proclaim their needs to “like” professionals, emphasizing negatives and “worst-case-scenarios” about the study children as a tool to effect change.

In conclusion, Randy’s parting words were “I am happy. People appreciate what I do. I got my job because I proved myself.” Randy’s satisfaction, confidence, and modeling positively influenced all members of the family. For now, Randy’s longer-range professional goals have been subsumed to the family’s immediate welfare, but he “ultimately intends to go back to school to pursue further education—perhaps a degree in engineering or a master’s and PhD in Biology.” MJI offered a pathway to employment with increasingly-adequate wages, ample non-wage benefits, and a structure that facilitated Randy’s ability to attend to his children’s developmental needs and enrichment in ways he was not able to do before MJI. If MJI were funded to forward Randy’s academic competencies in the long run, in ways that he could also financially support his family, as they have forwarded his trade skills and employment in the short run, his family’s long-term welfare might be even greater and more secure.

# Moving Up is a Steep Climb

The “Tasha Jones” Family Story

*Parents’ Work and Children’s Welfare  
in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jobs Initiative*



*Roberta Rehner Iversen  
with Diane Michalski Turner and Michele Belliveau*

**April 2002**

## “Tasha Jones” Family Story

**Resident Family:**

Tasha Jones, a 24-year old African American woman—ethnographic study key informant

Nami Jones, Tasha’s 2-year old daughter

Nicolette Jones, Tasha’s 1-year old daughter

Fiance—Tasha’s 29-year old immigrant fiancé

Study timeline: February through September 2000. Follow-up April-May 2001.

*“Bettering myself in a better job.”*

## Background and Pre-MJI History

Tasha Jones, a 24-year old African American woman, was the youngest of four children raised by her parents, aged 50 and 51. Tasha and her two daughters, two sisters (ages 30 and 29) and a brother (age 27) lived in close proximity to one another and to their parents’ Milwaukee home which served as the nucleus and primary gathering place for the family. Tasha described her family as close-knit; her mother described the family as “just to ourselves.” This closeness was integral to Tasha’s ability to juggle parenting and work. At the same time, Tasha also worked to define her own ambitions.

Tasha described herself as having done “OK in high school.” At one time she aspired to go to college as one sister did, but felt her grades were not good enough. After graduating from high school, Tasha spent 6 years working and trying to develop a career path. She completed one semester of police training through Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), but dropped out early in the second semester because of illness. She later enrolled in a travel agency training program but was unable to find a job after completing her training. These combined experiences left her discouraged and approximately \$2500 in debt. In 1995 she began work as a cashier at Store, a large seller of household goods, earning \$7.60/hour for a 32-hour work week that yielded an annual income of \$12,566. She moved from her parent’s home into a nearby apartment owned by a friend of the family. Tasha retained ambitions for college but was deterred by debts that prohibited future educational loans and her image of herself as not capable. Nevertheless, she “thinks about it all the time.”

In 1997 Tasha’s daughter Nami was born. The pregnancy and birth were difficult for Tasha who already suffered from toxemia, high blood pressure and asthma. Moreover, Nami was born with a condition making it difficult for her to breathe, particularly during sleep. Nami’s health complications, in addition to Tasha’s, made it difficult for Tasha to maintain consistent job attendance—a work-health-family conflict that persisted later in her Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJI) job.

After recovering from Nami’s birth in her parents’ home, Tasha returned to her job as a cashier and soon became pregnant with her second daughter, Nicolette. She received little work support for her parenting role and instead was subjected to comments from her manager about “getting some protection.” Given the culture of her workplace, Tasha interpreted these comments as racist, which was one reason she considered MJI. Tasha’s primary support at this time was her family, a support that remained constant throughout her MJI training and subsequent employment. While Nami’s father provided child support (\$174 per month) and cared for Nami every other weekend, he did not engage in everyday parenting. Paternity for Nicolette had not been confirmed by the time Tasha began her MJI training or employment, a fact that resulted in further conflict between work and family needs.

When Tasha began MJI training in July 1999, Nami was two years old and Nicolette one. Tasha was already a working mother, familiar with the routine of single-handedly bundling children up, transporting them to her mother’s care (a home-based daycare comprised mostly of grandchildren), shuttling herself to work, and returning to collect them. Tasha had also been dating Fiance, an immigrant who soon became her fiancé, for several months. However she was not accustomed to embarking on this routine at such an early hour, an element that presented additional strain on the family once Tasha began her MJI job. First came the training period.

### MJI Training: Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP)

Tasha learned about MJI through the Workforce Coordinator at the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP), an affiliate of MJI. The Workforce Coordinator was a family friend who lived in the community and knew Tasha's father. The fact that MJI participants received no training stipend was particularly burdensome for Tasha. Upon acceptance into the training program, she had to move back into her parents' home because she could not afford to pay expenses during the 7-week unpaid training period. In addition to her educational loan debt, she owed several hundred dollars to her landlord and the utility companies. At one point her gas had been shut off. Since Tasha had barely been getting by on her cashier salary, she knew she could not provide for her family without any salary at all.

During training Tasha attempted to apply for public assistance. She already qualified for food stamps and Medicaid for the children and was told by her WRTP contact that she could apply for cash assistance. However Tasha had little success navigating the W-2 office (Wisconsin's TANF program): "They gave me the run around saying that I need a statement showing that I wasn't going to get paid for the training and then they needed a statement showing that I wasn't working." This cumbersome process called upon self-advocacy and negotiation skills that Tasha had never exercised. It later occurred to Tasha that someone at WRTP might have helped her apply for public assistance:

*"They could have called the caseworker they self and told them it was an unpaid training and that I needed some money. [Did they offer to do that?] No. [Did you ask them to do that?] No."*

Tasha's friends' similar responses to unpaid MJI training may signal one reason that many of the Jobs Initiatives and other workforce programs are undersubscribed:

*"[Did any of the friends you told about MJI go into the training program?] No because my friend, she didn't want to quit her job because they were saying you had to go to school for unpaid training and she needed the money."*

The theme of untapped services emerged at later points as well, when Tasha was not clear about what might be available to her as an MJI participant:

*"They should tell people to let them know if they need another job. I didn't know that they could help me find another job until I talked to my WRTP contact [an accidental meeting]. I don't think anyone in my training program knew we could go back to WRTP. All the students in the training program with me got fired or quit from Manufacturing Company."*

Tasha's suggestion signaled a need for workforce program outreach:

*"When I first filled out the application they [WRTP] told me about the job—they should have told us then about being a resource for re-employment. They could have sent a letter or called."*

Overall, Tasha expressed mixed opinions about her MJI/WRTP manufacturing training. The guarantee of post-training employment was most important, particularly since her previous training did not lead to a job:

*“They [Travel Agency training] said they were going to help me find a job and they gave me a list of jobs to go for. At Manufacturing Company I was guaranteed a job but not for Travel Agency. I had looked for a job on my own but I just had a certificate to say that I graduated the travel academy.”*

Tasha also valued the overall orientation of the training and the motivational efforts of the instructors:

*“I think it was something that was good for me. It refreshed my memory on things. It taught me how to go to an interview and how to act on a job. I liked the training program and so I think that everybody should have an opportunity to go to one. HD was a really good teacher. He stood by our side 100%; that was really helpful. I graduated one of the top. When I felt like I couldn’t do something, he said ‘you know you can.’ He’d explain over and over; he took time to explain. NB was also good.”*

However, the fact that the unpaid training resulted in negative consequences for her children diminished its positive aspects:

*“I was unable to buy my kids what they wanted and needed because I didn’t have the money to do that. I had to ask for money for the care from either of my kids’ dads and sometimes my kids’ dad didn’t want to give it to me and so I would have to go to my mom and dad. In a way I felt bad because I couldn’t provide for them but in a way I felt kind of good because I was bettering myself in a better job instead of getting paid nickels and dimes.”*

Tasha appreciated the refresher courses and getting to know people with whom she would eventually work, but also felt the skills taught during the training were not applicable to the job she obtained:

*“I am glad I went to the training plus it got me a chance to meet people before I started working. The people that were in the training program with me they started working the same day I did and so I was not like a stranger to the job. But it was [also] a waste of time because we do nothing that the class taught us. We don’t work with nuts and bolts and wrenches and stuff like that, so all the stuff that they taught me I don’t use today. So it was a waste of my time and I wasn’t really paid for it, which made it harder for me.”*

Tasha expressed concern that the training was geared to those at a certain level such that participants who could not follow were left behind. This was consistent with a MATC educator’s assessment that MJI was “good for those who already had work histories but less appropriate for those with poor job histories, welfare receipt, and multiple barriers.” Tasha also regretted that issues such as childcare were never addressed during the training. She thought this was due to the fact that she and the other trainees were not yet part of the company and therefore not worthy of investment. Finally, Tasha rued that MJI/WRTP was not able to help her family members whose service needs were greater than her own:

*“I’m disappointed they didn’t help Fiance. They had a meeting about to start and said they’d help him. I called the Retention Specialist two or three times. My sister also tried to go through my contact. She’s trying to get her life together. She’s not on welfare so she can get her kids back. They haven’t helped her. My contact said my sister has an attitude problem. But my contact said she’d keep up with Fiance and will talk to the Retention Specialist if it doesn’t work out for him at X Company. My sister had problems with drugs. I’m able to pay my bills; care for myself and my family. She stays with her boyfriend. The kids have a caseworker. Her criminal record wasn’t as good as she said it was. She got involved in bad checks because a lady was using my sister’s ID.”*

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More positively, Tasha's mother and Tasha both said that the training helped her adjust to getting to work regularly and on time, neither of which had previously been expected of her. Moreover, Tasha scored high on skill and knowledge tests, particularly math. This gave Tasha confidence, as did the opportunity to use her writing and typing skills creatively: "It was the last day of the training program and our instructor told us to do anything and I was sitting at the PC and I just started to write a story." Tasha wrote her story in two hours. She went on to write a play which she composed at home. Tasha eventually set up a room in her apartment around a second-hand computer and designated it the "computer room."

### MJI Employment: Manufacturing Company

In August 1999, Tasha started work at Manufacturing Company, the suburban factory where she had her MJI/WRTP training as a machine operator. Tasha's starting hourly wage was \$9.84, for a potential annual income of \$20,467, which was a \$5000 increase over her pre-JI job and above poverty-level income for the first time in her life. Health benefits were available after a 3-month probationary period. Despite these substantial financial benefits, Tasha's starting position raised questions about workplace safety:

*"I was working on an oven and he told me I had two weeks to make it or they were going to transfer me. And I was like well I don't want to do this anyway because it hurts my fingers. The oven is like 465 degrees— a big wheel that turns and as it turns you have to put parts on it, pieces. When it comes back around you have to pick them up and put more parts on the assembly line. I had to tape up my fingers and sometimes my fingers got burnt really red. I'd come home and they were sore and burnt. [Did you get any kind of gloves to wear for that job?] No you just get tape. You just tape them up really well. I guess they feel the heat don't go underneath the tape, but not only was I using tape, I was using Band-Aids. I had to do it from seven to three thirty, 5 days a week."*

After two weeks, Tasha was transferred to a less hazardous assembly position. Had Manufacturing Company not been flexible about job assignment, Tasha could easily have become an early non-retention statistic.

Before the cumulative negative effects of commuting time, medical ills, family stress, debt, and a car accident—the straw that broke the back of her work resolve—Tasha reveled in the company's work environment and wage bounty:

*"I put brakes together for a lawnmower and snow blower—I'm an assembler. We do 15 boxes—80 in a box. The parts come down the line and I do the final part. I love my job. Store was very prejudiced. The suburb is only white people, but they are all very friendly. I work with mostly older, nice people. I have more money—I can buy the kids clothes—the things they need. I also have more time. I don't have to work any weekends, like at Store. There I worked long hours. After 5 now I have the rest of the day".*

Tasha's mother emphasized how Tasha's new job contributed more to her children's welfare than her pre-JI job did:

*"The other job Tasha had [Store] was working until 9:00 at night and I didn't like that because she was spending less time with her kids but now this job she has, it is like she is working from 7 to 3:30 and that is much better. That way she have time to spend with her kids before they go to bed."*

Tasha’s Manufacturing Company wages allowed her once again to move to her own apartment, affordable because the monthly rent of \$350 was discounted by her parents who owned the house. This informal subsidy did not detract from Tasha’s success, but it reduced her costs and enabled her to support her family on the wages she earned. At an annual income of \$20,000, Tasha believed she was making enough money “if I was to go to work everyday like I am supposed to.” She later acknowledged however, that even at full attendance, her new salary was still not enough to cover emergencies. Applying the Self-Sufficiency Standard for Wisconsin (Pearce, 2000), a more nuanced, contextual analysis of income adequacy than the federal poverty level (FPL), to Tasha’s earnings corroborated her assessment: \$32,000 to \$40,000 annual income would be sufficient for her single-parent family.

A Manufacturing Company union Bargaining Committee member and Tasha’s supervisor, the Floor Leader, both underscored Tasha’s assessment of wage adequacy:

*“Wages are not adequate. In 1984 we took a \$2.00 an hour cut because of the threat of closure because our product wasn’t selling. We used to have piecework and they took that away. We made the same hourly rate in 1980 as today. \$10.36 in 1980 is \$11 today.”*

The Department Supervisor echoed his colleagues’ concern about the adequacy of Manufacturing Company’s wage scale, particularly in relation to a person like Tasha:

*“In my opinion, a husband and wife have to both work if they’re making these wages—\$11 or \$10 an hour. That gives you roughly \$20,000 a year. And a woman with two kids is not having an easy time on that. I think you need about \$30,000 for one person to raise two kids.”*

The factory, considered a model for workforce integration, had undergone several recent changes when Tasha began working there. For one, because of the need for workers and recruitment efforts in Milwaukee via MJI, it had gone from having a workforce that was 100% white to one that was 70% white. As a result of having a new, younger workforce and high rates of absenteeism and employee turnover, the factory instituted two programs which it credited with retention of these new workers: the Learner’s Center and the Mentor Program. Although Tasha was aware of the latter and could identify mentors by the shirts they intentionally wore, she more often turned to her floor supervisor for support. This support worked for Tasha both because the supervisor had good managerial skills and because Tasha responded well to an informal, maternal support system, not unlike her family.

In contrast, despite Tasha’s wish for further education she was not particularly aware of opportunities at the Learner’s Center which was both a retention and advancement effort at Manufacturing Company. As an institution, MATC emphasized non-traditional occupations for women in the technical and manufacturing area, an orientation which could have benefited Tasha. An employee bulletin board outlined Learner’s Center offerings:

*1st and 3rd shifts and Office Employees, Learn Word ‘97  
Second Shift Employees Register now for MATC  
Manufacturing Company Learning Center hours, Monday 1:15 to 5:30 p.m., Tuesday, 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m., and  
Wednesday 1 to 5:30 p.m.  
Get your GED...develop math skills, life skills.*



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The Learner's Center was staffed by a MATC instructor who oriented classes to employee preferences:

*"Basically, that's GED, ESL, computers, and basic math and reading. Manufacturing Company pays the MATC teacher, that's what I am. I have 72 registered students [out of a workforce of 500] and between 55 and 60 are active. Right now our most popular class is the noontime Tai Chi. It meets three times a week. They don't have release time for these classes. If their classes are for work and they meet during their shifts then they're paid. The classes that they want at the Learner's Center are for things to enhance life outside of work. Computer classes are popular. The Tai Chi has 17 per class. This [Learner's Center] is really rare. But the Manufacturing Operations Manager is really for education. He's on the Governor's Board on Adult Education and on Workforce 2000. He said it's okay if people leave the company as a result of knowledge they got at the Learning Center. That's how committed he is to education."*

One reason for Tasha's vagueness about the Learner's Center was that Manufacturing Company operated, as did WRTP, on a "self-serve" philosophy that may not be vigorous enough to draw someone into an advancement stream like Tasha who already felt that work shortchanged time for her children:

*"Some of the advancement could take more hours and more days and I don't think I would be able to do that because the more time I spend with my children is the best time I could spend with them."*

Still, Tasha responded favorably overall to her new workplace. While she initially struggled to find her niche, she was soon pleased with the facility of her work. She felt competent at her job and liked her coworkers. Other co-workers, many of whom had worked at Manufacturing Company for over 30 years, also emphasized the existence and importance of the friendly environment.

That Tasha did not perceive any racism in the workplace was important but did not mean racially motivated concerns about the "new workforce" were not present. Several older workers and managers, largely from the suburban locale of the factory, expressed their observations in the language of elders, lamenting the absence of "work ethic" in the young, urban workforce—without explicitly identifying race or ethnicity as problematic. One manager characterized the changes in the new workforce as a change in demographics from Polish and German immigrants to black and Hispanic. A union member pointed out that the mentor program, established to prevent turnover and absenteeism, was only accepted by the older workers when they realized that the retention of new workers would protect their jobs as well. One supervisor expressed his concern that the MJI workforce "didn't see their parents go to work" and were thus not work-oriented. He felt advancement, which he equated with work ethic, was not a goal of the new generation of workers as shown by their higher rates of absenteeism. While absenteeism eventually was a problem for Tasha, it was not because she had not seen her parents go to work. Tasha's mother provided childcare for 6 or more children a day and Tasha's father held 3 jobs.

### Balancing Work, Family and Other Issues

From the outset, Tasha worried about losing her job at Manufacturing Company because of the conflict between her health problems and workplace practices:

*“I’m worried about losing my job. I had the flu a couple of times this winter and I got bronchitis. After I gave birth to Nami. I almost died of pneumonia. I had toxemia and high blood pressure and I still have chest pains. They’ve given me EKGs but can’t find anything. If I turn left or a certain way, I have pain. I’m also short of breath. The doctor gave me an inhaler for when I’m short of breath. One big problem is that even though it’s forbidden, my co-workers smoke on the job. This makes me more sick.”*

Tasha’s children’s health problems caused even greater concern and significantly impacted her attendance. Nami’s condition kept Tasha awake at night and increased her fatigue in the morning:

*“Nami is sickly—she’s going to be part of a sleep study. She was born with a flat nose. She may need surgery. She breathes really loud at nighttime—like she’s trying to catch her breath. I need to stay close at night because she can’t sleep in her sleep. I sleep good, but wake up a couple of times a night to check on her. The hard part is in the morning time, well first of all at night. I go to bed at 10:30 and wake up at 5:30. I can’t really go to sleep until they both fall asleep. I will check her in the middle of the night to make sure she is okay. I have to get up early in the morning, dress them both, carry them both downstairs, come back up the stairs just to lock the doors up. I mean it is hard for me and I be too tired to get up any earlier and so that is the hard part.”*

Tasha recognized that work and family needs were often out of balance, creating considerable role strain:

*“The only way I would leave this company is if I get fired. In a way I feel that I am not going to get fired but pretty soon they are going to get tired of me missing days, but it is important that I do miss some days because my kids are very important and if I got to go to court it is more important and so if they can’t accept that then they are going to have to let me go.”*

Such life circumstances as well as Tasha’s role, ambivalence and values as a single mother seemed to provide a better explanation than “work ethic” for her conduct as an employee.

In addition, Tasha struggled with structural components of her work. The first was the 12-point system whereby if an employee missed a day of work due to illness or childcare problems they received one point (reduced to a half-point with a doctor’s note). Manufacturing Company developed the following “Control Procedures” to deal with absenteeism in a consistent, uniform manner:

Occurrence	Points	Number of Points	Corrective Action
1. Tardy	1/2	3	Verbal warning
2. Leave Early	1/2	6	Written warning
3. Absent 1 day with valid doctor’s excuse	1/2	9	Final written warning
4. Absent	1	12	Termination
5. No call in or late call 30 minutes from start of shift	2		
6. No call in for 2 consecutive days	2		

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As one manager admitted, “you can use up a lot of points with kids.” Such was the case for Tasha. By March 2000 she had not worked a 40-hour week for the past 5 months, which significantly impacted her monthly take home pay and reduced her potential above-poverty yearly income of about \$20,000 to a real income of about \$16,650/year, close to poverty-level. Although Tasha was worried about the points she had accumulated, several factors assuaged her concern. For one, she had not received a warning from her supervisor even though workplace policy mandated written warnings at 3 and 6 months. Second, she saw co-workers take personal leave as a result of childcare problems or personal problems and witnessed their return to work. Tasha also credited the point system as helping her keep her job: “Because it’s helping me to be on time and also to be at work. Helping me hold onto my job is serious.” Arguably, a strong support system enabled her to her job as well.

More enlightened Manufacturing Company managers understood the difficulty of combining work and family responsibilities in contemporary society, as Tasha’s department supervisor illustrated:

*“Well, the new people have more family problems because they’re younger and they have young people’s problems, like childcare. But they’re different, more are divorced than the old workers were. There are more single parents and that makes things more difficult for them, and that affects work. Absenteeism is greater than it was in 1975. More time is missed today for family life.”*

Such enlightenment was double-edged in Tasha’s case, as supervisory flexibility about absenteeism boomeranged in the end.

Although Tasha missed days as a result of various problems, childcare was not among them. Her mother provided safe, affordable (\$225/month) and unlimited childcare, thus Tasha felt that her daughters were not suffering as a result of her need to work. However, she missed a significant number of days as a result of court dates, doctor’s appointments, and children’s illnesses, all of which illustrated the various adaptive burdens of a single mother living at or below the poverty level. The court appointments were for unrelated incidents: paternity for Nicolette, to obtain a restraining order against Nami’s father, and a car accident. Doctor’s appointments for herself and her children resulted in at least 10 days of lost work and lost wages. Nami underwent CAT scans, a sleep clinic observation, and other tests to determine the cause of her breathing problems. Although Tasha’s mother was able to “spell” Tasha for regular pediatric visits, Tasha had to attend the major appointments. Nami was eventually scheduled for an operation to remove her adenoids and tonsils.

Conflicts and confusion about health insurance coverage added to the time Tasha lost because of health reasons, and in some situations resulted in inadequate medical attention. Although Tasha was insured through her company’s health benefits policy, the children’s health coverage was provided under Badger Care, Wisconsin’s low-income health plan “for people like me who make less than three thousand dollars a month.” When Tasha was terminated from Manufacturing Company, she also enrolled in Badger Care. However, this insurance switch interrupted important medical treatment for Tasha.

*“I got sick in July. I had all this pain inside my stomach and throwing up and bleeding. I went to the emergency room and they said I had an ovarian cyst. [Have you followed up on that cyst?] No. My doctor who I’ve had since Nami was born doesn’t take Badger Care. I don’t want to go to another doctor”.*

A second structural component Tasha struggled with at Manufacturing Company was her work schedule, primarily because of transportation difficulties. When Tasha first began working, Fiance purchased a car for her so that she could drive the half-hour to work. However Tasha was unable to afford car insurance. In January 2000 she was in a car accident that severely damaged the car and for which she was eventually held responsible. Because Tasha was uninsured, her injuries and court time cost 18 days of lost work and wages and a subsequent lawsuit added over \$2,500 to her existing debts. In addition to these burdens, Tasha had to rely on public transportation to get to work. Although Fiance drove her to work in the morning, she took the bus home which meant she got off work at 3:30 but could not leave work until 4 p.m. when her bus arrived. This wait both delayed the time she spent with her daughters and illustrated the difficulties faced by all Jobs Initiative participants who rely on infrequent public transportation that protracts their work day and detracts from family time. The attendant role strain was best described by Tasha’s mother:

*“Sometimes she might come home from work and she is tired and the babies are crying, both of them are crying at the same time; and she has to hold both of them at the same time and sometimes she might scream at them or something; and sometimes you can see the sadness on her face or can feel the hurtness in her voice that I am failing because I am tired.”*

After six months of working at Manufacturing Company, these cumulative issues of fatigue and feelings of failure prevented Tasha from having the energy to be relaxed and consistent with her daughters. They also contributed to her reluctance to care for herself, such as taking the iron medication that would help give her energy or seeking the care of a general practitioner instead of relying on her gynecologist for “primary care.” The effect of fatigue on her parenting and self-concept helped to explain Tasha’s disregard for advancement. In contrast, the company supervisor equated Tasha’s hesitancy about advancement with an absence of work ethic, a simplistic view that belied the complexity of balancing work and family demands.

### Family and Children’s Welfare

After a day’s work at Manufacturing Company, Tasha usually arrived at her mother’s home between 4:30 and 5 p.m. Tasha’s parents, while living only a 5-minute drive from Tasha’s home, lived in a slightly better neighborhood. The streets with their “neighborhood watch” signs and brick homes were in better condition than the streets and wood-frame houses of Tasha’s neighborhood. During the week, Tasha and the girls often ate dinner with her parents and returned home in time to read a story, take baths and get ready for bed. On the weekends, she went to her parents’ home for meals and socializing. Tasha’s mother admitted that the girls sometimes stayed over during the week in the winter because it was difficult for Tasha to transport them in the morning.

The shared parenting role was integral to maintaining the health of Tasha’s daughters. Both girls were slightly underweight, which was not alarming as Tasha was a petite woman. However Tasha also admitted she was not one for cooking and preferred to eat fast food when not eating in her parents’ home. The fact that the responsibility for Tasha’s daughters’ well being was shared by the entire family was not unusual, particularly for this family. However, it also came with some resignation and ambivalence on the part of Tasha’s mother. While Tasha’s father made a point of taking what he called “quality time alone,” Tasha’s mother did not have or make room for this kind of time. During the week she cared for at least six children under the age of five. Tasha’s mother’s exhaustion was evident in

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her comment, said almost as an afterthought, “I thought by this time I wouldn’t have kids, but I do.” Tasha’s mother was tired but also invested in her role as caretaker for her family and as the person who Tasha “stays under.” Her mother’s fatigue was ultimately one reason Tasha considered leaving her job at Manufacturing Company.

Tasha’s mother was not the only source of shared provision of family responsibilities. Her father was an electrician, a Baptist pastor, a teacher, a landlord and, at least for Tasha, tax preparer. In his work as an electrician in the public school system, Tasha’s father was dismayed by the conditions of the schools and decided to homeschool his teenage granddaughter for whom he and his wife had temporary custody. This schooling led to the granddaughter’s acceptance into a good, private denominational high school. In contrast, despite Tasha’s goal for her children to “do better than I did. . . get good grades so that they will be able to go to college so they won’t have a hard time finding a job,” the children’s educational future in Milwaukee schools may be grim, as school statistics in the other MJI family narratives and Tasha’s father’s comments suggested:

*“I’m in different schools everyday as an electrician. I see the damage the kids do to the schools. And I see what kind of teaching they get. They’re wasting the taxpayer’s money. I don’t want to give my tax money to the Milwaukee schools. The kids are handicapped by not knowing basic math. They have calculators and computers, but no math skills. I’m adept at computers, but first you have to have skills. English and grammar too—they can’t read the newspaper and it’s written at 6<sup>th</sup> grade level.”*

As pastor, Tasha’s father served as spiritual guide for his family who comprised the bulk of the congregation. This spiritual guidance and belief system were important to Tasha who believed strongly in God and often relied upon prayer to help her with work tasks. The family’s shared religion helped keep them closely-knit and in service of one another.

Tasha’s family was initially disapproving of Tasha’s relationship with Fiance. Over time, however, they grew to accept him as part of the family and regard him as “a son.” By all accounts Fiance was a support to Tasha. He referred to Tasha’s mother as “mama” and shared parenting responsibilities for Nami and Nicolette. For most of the study period he worked a 6-day, 90-hour week at an ethnic grocery and was paid \$500 in cash. He sent \$350 monthly to his ‘former’ wife [we were never certain that he was divorced] and three children in his home country. Although Fiance knew his job exploited him, he was unable to get or stay in other employment, even with the help of Tasha’s father and a partial attempt to utilize MJI/W RTP. He reverted to the grocery after these several forays into higher paying, career-line employment. His experiences were similar to those of other immigrants and refugees in the ethnographic study: specialized training and competence in the home country that did not translate to employment in America; some language limitation; different cultural attitudes and experiences; and high valuation on security and “the known.” These were the life circumstances that remained unspoken by the family but may have affected their acceptance of him.

Fiance expressed considerable concern about the impact of Tasha’s job on herself and her family, another factor that may have cumulatively affected Tasha’s decision to leave Manufacturing Company: “He said it is so far away that I be too tired and because when I get up he has to get up too because he has to take me to work.” Fiance was particularly worried that Tasha’s schedule hurt the children:

*“She was tired before. She’d have to go to sleep early. I didn’t think that [was good for] the children. Waking up early, waking children from sleep that’s hard. Make child sick. Sometimes they’d be asleep. They wake up. Warm in house and car not warm enough. Children should sleep until 8 am. All children need sleep. They children; they get sick. She worked too early.”*

Tasha’s mother also felt ambivalent about Tasha’s work-family demands. On the plus side, Tasha’s mother credited the new work experience with helping Tasha begin to develop her adult self and to learn to be a “mother who goes out to work.” Tasha’s mother offered the examples of Tasha purchasing child safety locks for her kitchen cupboards, buying educational and safe toys for her children, and buying a safety gate for the doorway as evidence of Tasha’s increased sense of responsibility and an effect of earning a higher hourly wage. Likewise, these examples demonstrated one important freedom that greater economic prosperity affords: safety and protection of oneself and one’s children. At the same time, Tasha’s mother also had reservations about the Manufacturing Company job that may have explicitly or implicitly influenced Tasha’s decision to leave it:

*“I would never thought that kind of job was for Tasha because she was so little, she was so petite. She was always to me like a person in an office job. I didn’t have a picture of her working in a factory but yeah she likes it. The only part she don’t like is traveling that far out there because they have one here in the city but as far as the job concerned she likes the job. I feel that at first I didn’t want her to have that job because one thing it was far away from home and then she had to get up at night, early in the morning when it is dark to get the children and I just didn’t want her to work on a machine and in the factory because of the dust and she already have problems breathing and I just didn’t want her to work in the factory. The expressway, the distance, it is so far away.”*

At base, Tasha’s mother prioritized parental responsibility, not work, as paramount:

*“My hope for Tasha is that she will always remember to put her children first, her children is Tasha’s first priority, as far as they health is concerned and as far as they future is concerned. That she will be a role model for her children, this is my hope for Tasha.”*

Aside from values however, Tasha’s mother’s comments also starkly identified how workplace policies can either aid or obstruct parental responsibility and children’s welfare:

*“Will they give them flexibility to spend time with their kids? Like single parents they have to go to work and I understand that you have to work, don’t get me wrong. I know you have to work but it should be that single parents they should be able to have some time for they children because when you go to work and you work eight hours and you are coming home you are only giving your children like two or three hours. When they say quality time and you got to sit down with your children and sometimes your kids are either sleepy or they are in a bad mood and you can get off work and say ‘oh when I get home I am going to do this with my child, I want to do this with my kid’ but when you get home after 4:00 or 5:00 and your children have went to school all day or they are in daycare all day they are tired too. So people need to work on when the mother and the chilren come together, how can you spend that time without being so tired. Put in time with your children and let them know that they are important because nobody else is going to teach them. Sometimes teachers misuse your children and so I feel that on these jobs if they would allow you to take time off on your job when they have a doctor appointment or go to they school. You know when children are in school, the only time a parent really gets interested in going to the school is when the children is fighting. You know the teachers have a hard time with those children, you know why? Beause parents have not had quality time with they children, they let everybody else raise the children and then when they get home, they ain’t got time to fool with them either, they will send them off to they room or something. That is why schools are like they are now because young people have children and the young people didn’t take time with the children. You can tell the difference between young folks’ children and the older people’s children. That is why they say the children in the 90’s is really raising themselves.”*

### Post-MJI Employment and Children's Welfare

By March 2000, Tasha could no longer simultaneously juggle her parenting responsibilities and work at Manufacturing Company. After seven months of employment, she requested personal leave. Nami's sleep study results were inconclusive and a CT scan was recommended to determine if a tumor might be causing her breathing difficulties. This and other factors contributed to Tasha's leaving. Among them, Tasha was sensitive to her mother's growing fatigue in caring for six children under the age of five:

*"I have kids all the time. I wish sometimes that I could just have some time by myself. No kids. I always have kids. When my niece goes to regular school next year, that's when my work will really get hard. She helps me a lot now. [Are the girls spending more time in childcare now that Tasha is working full time?] Yes."*

Tasha was also sensitive to Fiance's comments about the effect of her work on the girls, about the amount she had already pushed her employers, as the concept of employee assistance was not expected in the system in which he was raised, and to her potential role as his wife: "She [Tasha] should work 9 to 5...it would hurt me if my wife has to get up at 5 a.m."

In addition to these factors, the newness and charm of Tasha's MJI job had worn off. She missed at least 10 days due to Nami's health and over 18 more for her own health, the car accident, and court dates. She stopped going to work in March and after several days requested a personal leave:

*"I asked them if I could have a personal leave because I told them I didn't have a baby sitter. But that was just one of the reasons why I left. I felt that I needed to stay home with my kids. [My mother] She was able but she used to always say she was tired. [And they gave you leave?] Right but they didn't say when to return. [Fiance added] They said they were going to call her when she should come back but they never did and they just sent her a letter that she was terminated."*

Because Tasha never fully understood how the point system was being applied to her, as noted earlier, because she did not know how to negotiate any other terms for personal leave, and perhaps because she also felt a sense of relief from family pressures, she took no further action when she received Manufacturing Company's official termination letter in April 2000.

After leaving Manufacturing Company, Tasha did not work for about two months. She received food stamps, health coverage for herself and the children through Badger Care, and relied on her parents and Fiance for additional support. She applied to an agency for temporary work but did not like her assignment or wages and quit after the first day. She applied for a dietary job in the schools and for a job to be a "big sister" to a 13-year old girl in the community. In May 2000, she serendipitously ran into her WRTP contact who, through MJI, referred her to a job as Order Picker in the candy division of Distribution Company. Tasha was pleased with the position, the hours (second shift, 3-11 p.m.) that allowed her more time in the morning with Nami and Nicolette, and the hourly pay of \$9.66 which was lower than her ending wage of \$10.01/hour at Manufacturing Company:

*"The new work schedule is much better for me and the children. I had to get up so early before, and get them up before they were awake (e.g. 5:30 a.m.). Now we all get up in the morning and I have time with them before I go to work at 2. I can read to them more than I could before. With my other job, I was always so tired at the end of the day."*

After 90 days she would be eligible for health benefits and with consistent attendance would make \$10.36 per hour, which she earned at the time of our September 2000 interview. Raising her income further, Distribution Company “offered” 8-16 hours a week of overtime, although some of the hours were actually mandatory. Tasha’s annual income would be \$21,550. Overtime wages could potentially raise her annual income to \$28,200.

Several important points emerged from Tasha’s experience after leaving Manufacturing Company. The first is that she happened upon her MJI contact at WRTP, otherwise unaware that MJI could help her find another job. Because of the chance meeting, once again WRTP was able to locate a family-wage employment opportunity and lend legitimacy to her search process. Second, Tasha progressed in defining herself as an adult and mother, to some extent fostered by her participation in MJI. The fact that she sought employment as a dietician, even as she struggled to meet her own and her daughters’ nutritional needs, and the fact that she chose to be a mentor may both be signs of her growth. In September 2000, Tasha also said that while her mother was again providing childcare, she was seeking alternative, more stimulating daycare arrangements for Nami. The notion of seeking “outside” daycare had evolved considerably from Tasha’s prior feeling that she “should put them in daycare” but “didn’t want nobody but mama taking care of them.” Likewise, she said she was less focused on marriage as a solution to self-sufficiency. During the time she was unemployed, Tasha was concerned about Fiance’s employment situation and urged him to consider finding a job with health benefits. By September, while she still expected to get married, she sounded less concerned about Fiance’s work; she was more hopeful and less ambivalent about meeting her own job and family responsibilities. Through both the attainment of the initial JI job and the related job change, she was taking greater control over her own life. The fact that it had only been a month in this new work/family arrangement, however, underscored the tenuousness of her situation. Third, Tasha used the period between Manufacturing Company and Distribution Company employment to think further about her career direction. As she said a number of times, she wanted to work in an office and saw such advancement potential through Distribution Company that she had not seen at Manufacturing Company:

*“At Manufacturing Company, promotions were available to people who are there longer than I was. It’s an advantage at Distribution Company—there aren’t promotions, but I want to work in an office. I like to type. I’m doing this now because I need a way to take care of my family. I talked to CM in the HR office about my interest in office work. I told him I know Windows and Word Perfect. He said I need more experience before I can do office work. I’ll stay there longer if I see a posting for office work—I’ll go for it. There’s a union at Distribution Company and I belong to it.”*



### Follow-up May 2001 and Conclusions

When we revisited Tasha in April/May 2001, 15 months after our initial contact, she and Fiance were married and Tasha was no longer working for Distribution Company. Tasha described her decision to marry Fiance as being “tired of living in sin.” More importantly, Tasha was ready for Fiance to be an official, contributing member of her family. Tasha and Fiance were married on January 3, 2001, approximately two weeks after Tasha left her position at Distribution Company.

Tasha’s reasons for quitting reflected tensions that were anticipated in September 2000. For one, she described a new supervisor’s behavior as unpredictable and critical of her work performance. Tasha admitted she had missed several days of work, again for Nami’s health appointments, and was minus 4 on a plus five-point scale for allowable absences when she left. However, the biggest problem according to Tasha was a schedule of late hours that were the result of “mandatory overtime,” an increasingly-common workplace policy that conveys the incompatibility of the historic male-oriented model of work behavior and the demands of single parenthood reflected by Manufacturing Company managements’ earlier comments and echoed here by Tasha:

*“I understand mandatory overtime but you should not get mandatory overtime everyday because I have two small babies that I have to bring in every night and it is dangerous to bring them in the house from the backyard.”*

By April 2001, Tasha had completed a course of 20 classes through the Wisconsin Early Childhood Association to start an in-home daycare. The course, which Tasha heard about through a family friend, cost \$40 and prepared her for a subsequent three-week daycare licensing course, also \$40, scheduled to begin in May. However, Tasha was unable to start the licensing course due to “low funds.” Other than financial constraints, Tasha was undeterred. She believed running her own daycare would allow several freedoms: to be her own boss; to attend to Nami’s health needs; to be with her children and earn money simultaneously; and to someday “own a big, beautiful, brick house.” This latter dream was something Tasha equated with her business because someone she knew had both a home and daycare. Other circumstances that made home ownership possible were not mentioned.

Tasha anticipated that her daycare would bring in \$500 per week, approximately the same amount she earned at Distribution Company. She was aware of several start-up costs, such as a washer and dryer, but remained focused on the benefits of her decision. Regarding her previous goal of completing office training, Tasha was put off by the increased demand for computer skills which were more than the word processing skills with which she was comfortable. While alluding to more computer training, Tasha focused again on how running her own business would let her be both worker and responsible parent: “I can maybe have someone fill in when I have to take Nami to the doctor and not be penalized.” If an existing workplace could not accommodate Tasha’s competing needs, she would create one that could.

Tasha and Fiance’s finances were precarious at follow-up. Fiance had tired of working six days per week at the grocery store. After a brief stint in September working at Foundry, Fiance went to work at an ethnic furniture store, 5 days per week earning \$350 under the table. Fiance reported leaving Foundry due to a back injury, but more salient was his need to work “off the books” due to a poor credit history. By May 2001, Fiance was still working nine hours per day at the furniture store, but earned \$500 a week, without health care benefits. With his salary Fiance maintained what he described as “three families” in two countries: his former wife and three children (ages 10, 7 and 3) and his parents abroad, and Tasha and her children in the US.

Tasha’s monthly income consisted mainly of \$400 in child support she received from both Nami and Nicolette’s fathers. Tasha reported she was denied W-2 assistance because she owned a car and that she had recently reinstated the children’s Badger Care coverage, unaware that or why this coverage had stopped. A letter from the W-2 office that could offer an explanation was literally undecipherable. Tasha’s health care had also been neglected. Deterred by an overdue medical bill to her gynecologist, she no longer sought birth control pills and for a short period feared she might be pregnant. Tasha also said she was denied food stamps, despite the fact that she was eligible to receive them. The solution to this problem was not simple.

*“I’ve been calling my caseworker for two weeks straight. Her mailbox is full. If I go there to figure this out, I have to wait all day.”*

In addition to little income, Tasha had several newly incurred debts. The car accident she was in the previous year cost her \$3,000, a suit reduced to \$2,100 by the efforts of her father. Having not paid bills over the winter, Tasha owed a total of \$1680 to the gas and electric companies. While she had applied for energy assistance in March, she did not anticipate receiving it for two months.

Despite her financial situation, Tasha remained positive and described a renewed spiritual faith “because of all the good things that have happened.” She had made several home improvements since the fall, including Fiance’s installation of a new kitchen floor. Tasha described her marriage to Fiance as “lifting a burden.” While Tasha referred directly to the burden of keeping the seriousness of her relationship with Fiance secret from her family, she may also have meant the burden of being a single, working parent. Getting married and considering an in-home daycare resolved the strain of her prior work-family ambivalence. Her marriage to fiance may have enabled her to fulfill her adult obligations to family in the same way her mother fulfilled these obligations. As Tasha’s mother’s daycare load decreased, Tasha planned to increase her own.

Nami’s (now age 3) health problems persisted, while Nicolette’s (now age 2), including hospitalization for a bronchial infection, were mostly in the past. Nami continued to have breathing difficulty at night, as well as a monthly runny nose. Nami would soon undergo another sleep study and eventual reconstructive surgery of her nose. Nami was also to begin preschool in the fall at Montessori School, a school known to the researcher through another MJI family whose experience with the school had been negative. Irrespective of this, Tasha secured an otherwise unknown and potentially good resource through her family network.

*“My Dad picked the school. He did some electrical work there and saw that the kids did fractions in kindergarten and they taught them Spanish. She has been accepted, together with her little cousin. She’ll be in K-3.”*

When asked a final time about her MJI/WRTP training experience, Tasha identified lessons she had learned that applied to both her present and future. While she found the math skills too simplistic at the time of training, she now called upon the skills to help her nieces and nephews with their homework. Similarly, communication skills learned in training were “good for me” in negotiating with her former supervisor at Distribution Company. Moreover, Tasha thought she would use the communication skills manual she received in training to work with her future clients: the parents of children in her daycare. MJI training offered both foreseen and unforeseen benefits to Tasha and her family. As was the case with other JI families, Tasha’s primary suggestion to WRTP concerned the need for outreach and follow-up:

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*“They should let people know up front that once they leave a job on good terms they can always go back and ask for another job. Helping you find another job.”*

In conclusion, as Tasha’s mother stated, when Tasha started her training with MJI she had always been a mother who worked outside of the home. She was a single parent earning an hourly wage that, despite working full time, kept her well below the poverty level. However, there were several categories into which Tasha “fit” that belied the true nature of her situation. Despite the fact that Tasha earned what she and many others considered a family wage, she was only able to provide for her family on such a wage because of the supports available to her. Her family network provided childcare, rental subsidy, food subsidy, and “financial management” services. Without this network, it was difficult to know how Tasha and her children would fare.

Tasha intimated at several points that there were referral services to childcare and other subsidized programs available to her through MJI. However, she could not remember all of these services and was not adept at advocating for them alone. There is evidence to suggest that Tasha made life changes during the course of her ethnographic study participation in part because of the research questions and in part because of her relationship with the on-site researcher: “She was like a mentor to me.” This suggests the potential power of an ongoing “case management” relationship wherein asking questions and providing services helps people make changes in their lives. Absent a strong family network, Tasha would have been forced to seek out such services. Conversely, and just as easily, she could have fallen through the cracks.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the process and evolution of Tasha’s career direction and wage advancement seemed to fulfill the initial aims of the Jobs Initiative. Advancement, the ultimate aim of the Jobs Initiative, would be more complex. At this point in her life and career pathway, Tasha viewed work instrumentally—for its potential to provide income and material goods. Accordingly, advancement opportunity through skill development was a low priority and job change, hence limited retention, carried little penalty. Tasha’s Distribution Company job offered her more wages through working more hours, but this also meant less family time. Similarly, educational advancement at Distribution Company was available but Tasha’s positioning in the hierarchy did not allow her this opportunity. The “ideal” of job advancement through small but regular wage increments, augmented by significant overtime, is a gendered model of work behavior that exerts particular hardship on single-parent families, even one as extended in support as Tasha’s. While Tasha was resourceful and found an alternative job path for the time being, given her history of multiple job transitions, she could clearly benefit from substantive career development assessment and mentoring over the next several years. As individuals earning higher incomes well know, developing one’s career direction is a multi-year, multi-resource process. Regrettably for Tasha, and ultimately her children, few resources beyond those developed by the Jobs Initiative are currently available for such advancement.

# Moving Up is a Steep Climb

The “Teresa Russell” Family Story

*Parents’ Work and Children’s Welfare  
in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jobs Initiative*



*Roberta Rehner Iversen  
with Annie Laurie Armstrong and Michele Belliveau*

April 2002

## “Teresa Russell” Family Story

**Resident Family:**

Teresa Russell, a 43-year old African American woman—ethnographic study key informant  
Tom Russell, 10-year old son, in 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> grade

**Study timeline:** March through October 2000. Follow-up May 2001.

*“My job is union. It’s set up for families.”*

Teresa Russell, a 43-year-old African American woman, did not like “uniformity” when the prospect of her 10-year-old son Tom wearing uniforms in school was raised. Despite an affinity for non-conformity, Teresa was steadfastly dedicated to her son. Her attempts to juggle home, work, single parenting and community involvement spoke to the complexity of even the most goal-oriented, resourceful Seattle Jobs Initiative [SJI] participant’s life. The quality and extent of these involvements were also evidence of the subtle and incremental benefits to Teresa’s and Tom’s welfare that resulted from Teresa’s involvement with SJI.

## Background and Pre-SJI History

By the time she began SJI training in September 1999, Teresa had amassed a diverse and patchwork employment history spanning nearly 25 years. In February 1976 she worked as an office assistant at a local educational facility earning \$3.00 per hour. Teresa had survived on many such low-wage jobs throughout her working life: some that were billed as temporary and some she regarded as temporary. The majority lasted from several months to a year. She worked as a cook, a counterperson, a typewriter repairperson, a dietary aide, a cashier, a driver, a court docket clerk, and an office assistant. She liked office work least of all, finding it tedious and solitary. Having worked in various settings, Teresa was able to recognize what she desired in a job and how to interview for the position. Indicating how important work was to Teresa, her entire employment history—complete with locations, dates, and wages—was retrieved from a small, well-worn book found instantly in her small, collection-filled house for this discussion.

Teresa left high school 14 credits shy of graduating, but earned her GED, attended two vocational programs, and took community college courses in young adulthood. Her most significant attempt at further education was a 12-month JTPA automotive skills program in 1983. This set of skills, combined with the shorter but more current SJI training and the SJI broker’s connection, enabled her to get a job at Rental Car Company in January 2000. In the early 1990s she took continuing education classes through a local church that included basic computer, accounting, and entrepreneurship. While she did not use most of her computer knowledge at work, she was ready to use it for a church newsletter after the family received two donated computers from an enrichment program connected with Tom’s school, one of the many resources Teresa had secured for her son over time:

*“I have my own computer and Tom has his own. Three years ago the school had a computer give-away. The family was able to get used computer systems. I think they got them, IBMs, from Seattle City Light. I learned how to take them apart and put them together. Mine is a Gateway.”*

During periods of unemployment, Teresa applied for public assistance, a benefit she used in lieu of unemployment insurance. One period was when Tom was born and Teresa was adamant about being home with him during his infancy. Throughout both her working and non-working periods, Teresa nurtured her catering business, which she described as “my first love.” Teresa frequently referred to catering as the one thing she truly enjoyed and would like to pursue. However, it was also an untimely goal: “[One] I don’t have time to think about.”

In the 12 months preceding SJI enrollment, Teresa worked part-time, part-year as a driver and delivery person at an hourly wage of \$7 with no benefits. She augmented these earnings with about \$1500/year from occasional catering jobs but did not receive public assistance, with the exception of food stamps. Her total earnings for this period were about \$6000.

## SJI Training and Case Management: Automotive / C.A.M.P. (Central Area Motivation Project)

Throughout SJI training and subsequent employment, Teresa was regarded as a model of success for SJI. She was the only female employee in the repair department at Rental Car Company and she had maintained steady employment since January 2000. Of 18 men and women who began SJI automotive training in September 1999, only nine graduated from the 12-week training program. Teresa was the only one of 3 female trainees who stayed in the pro-

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gram more than 1 month and graduated. Teresa attributed attrition to the fact that some participants needed greater preparation for training and, by extension, the job market. As Teresa's case manager put it, "with this economic market, if you don't have any issues, you've got a job." He characterized Teresa as successful because she had "specific life goals for her life and family" and therefore needed less support, "push" and follow-up. Teresa, who was aware of her own internal and external resources, echoed this sentiment and that of other participants who believed SJI "should have some way to work with people who don't get jobs for awhile." Trying to do her part, Teresa mentored a subsequent SJI trainee's interview process at Rental Car Company. Although Teresa did not see a need for follow-up services for herself, and affectionately said she had to "get on his (case manager's) case" about visiting her work site, she believed better follow-up with participants was needed. The case manager concurred, emphasizing the importance of front-end service:

*"There's so much that needs to be done with people just to get them prepared for training."*

Consistent with past experiences, Teresa got what she felt she needed from her training although she had to wait vulnerable months to begin it—a complex problem for SJI and one that was equally common in other sectors and workforce programs (Iversen, 2000):

*"The automotive course was supposed to start in spring, but there weren't enough people. It was postponed two times, and didn't begin until the fall quarter (Sept. to Dec. 1999). I was months waiting."*

Although for a period after Teresa's participation the automotive training classes began every two weeks, obviating punitive waits, a SJI staff member lamented that financial considerations forced a return to quarterly rather than open-ended enrollment procedures:

*"There were 5 competencies going on all the time. For 2 weeks we had basic safety in the beginning—and we'd loop the rest around. Each competency took 2 weeks to teach—a 10 week cycle. We didn't need to wait for weeks and weeks to start a class. But this was costly. We needed three instructors at all times: one for the 5 competencies, one for safety, and one for jobs. Everyone loved it—the case managers too. But we're going back to the quarter system in September [2000]: a 12-week cohort."*

Overall, Teresa had a positive experience during her training at Community College where she developed several Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) competencies and a good relationship with her instructor who gave her "pep talks." She was pleased with the quality of her training, enough to say, "If I'd had these teachers 16 years ago, I'd have gone into the auto field." If a quality program like the Jobs Initiative had existed earlier, the 16 years since her introduction to the automotive field might have been more financially and professionally fruitful for Teresa and her family.

Teresa's only criticism of the 12-week SJI program was that students were not made aware of post-employment training opportunities at the College, such as the Saturday Lab where participants could return with questions and learning needs. Once Teresa suggested to her training coordinator that these retention services be highlighted, she saw them implemented with a subsequent cohort. Such responsiveness characterized SJI's pursuit of improved programming. As a SJI manager noted, programs were changed regularly as a result of participants', employers', and trainers' suggestions:

*Now the training is 14-16 weeks. We’ve added some of the extra bells and whistles that [Community College] attaches to their program. After training [we offer a] Lab to do:*

*(1)[ASE] test competencies; timed test for each competency, e.g. brake work—how long does it take to do a brake job. Employers value that—not only that the graduate does it, but speed is a factor. Speed brings in the dollars.*

*(2) Prolonged orientation in a front module is new. Orientation and shop tours—visit various shops. We’ve added a lab piece for 2 weeks after the training. The students are tested by outside examiners—e.g. alignment. The instructor timed them—all were competitive. We’ve also added Basic Skills—3 competencies:*

*1) Basic math that they need for training, e.g. convert metric to our system; convert numbers to percentages.*

*2) Language—industry vocabulary.*

*3) Work order—how to write it (this is done in the first 5-6 weeks).*

Reading about these changes during review of her family story in May 2001, Teresa said “I wish I’d have had that.”

Characterized as “a leader in the class; very well liked,” SJI invited Teresa to give a motivational speech about her experience to current training participants, a role that boosted her self-confidence and pride. Yet Teresa was still struggling, a fact that while not detracting from her success, highlighted the reality and complexity of her life and the importance of having a case manager.

**C.A.M.P. (Central Area Motivation Project).** “I’ve been on and off C.A.M.P. since C.A.M.P. was around” was Teresa’s description of her relationship with the longstanding multi-purpose social service agency serving a low-income district of Seattle that served as her SJI entrée and retention base. Through C.A.M.P. she attended family Christmas parties, received help with her gas bills, and was referred to SJI:

*“I saw a paper there that said “JOBS” all over it. Really—I saw the word “FREE” which really caught my eye. I said, ‘let me check into it.’ I was ready for something to get me a job. Me and welfare, I don’t like it. It’s really nice not having to depend on a welfare check.”*

In partial compensation for the training delay, Teresa developed a sustaining relationship with her case manager who was African American, approximately her age and, like her, had been involved in the community for years:

*“[My] case manager steadily encouraged me. It’s gonna happen. He helped with gas vouchers. [Case manager] has told me that he has the font picked out for my shingle when I do it [open own automotive repair business]. I haven’t totally agreed with it yet. All I do is pick out the location. He even picked out the font before I took the class.”*

Teresa’s case manager identified with the potential barriers for SJI participants, drawing on his own experience with racism and poverty: “When I was growing up, Mom told me I’d always have to do 110% to everyone else’s 100%. It’s doubly true for our clients.” Teresa called her case manager when she needed to talk or obtain gas vouchers, a component of support that Teresa continually needed. At this point in her employment pathway, the case manager thought Teresa needed *both* training and support for retention and advancement. He also highlighted how important *listening* is to helping workers stay in jobs:



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*“They need more training because they need to make more money.” [But he added,] “They still need support. Teresa, for example, calls me at home now and then if she’s had a bad day at work. She’ll show up for work if she gets to speak her mind.”*

The case manager’s dedication to the success of SJI participants was palpable in this interview, along with his strong views about the need for more individual support:

*“I want this to work. It’s just one small corner of what we need. We need more time to work with and support people.”*

As a reflection of both C.A.M.P.’s mission and Teresa’s community-mindedness, Teresa also donated clothing to the agency: “It feels really good to give back.” The theme of giving back was an important and perennial one for Teresa who gave back wherever she saw the opportunity. It was also a message echoed, perhaps inspired, by her church, and a message that even defined Teresa’s entrepreneurial ethic. Teresa’s catering jobs came from the City of Seattle and were for nonprofit agencies that worked with her son, illustrating ways that city government can foster community reciprocity:

*“It’s a good deal for them and me. They get an inexpensive catering job and I get the money... they are in touch with me when they have tight budgets.”*

In this way, Teresa situated herself on a continuum of services, both providing and utilizing according to need. This same ethic justified Teresa’s cleaning house twice a week during spring 2000: the work was paid but it was done for a 91-year old friend. Teresa described her desire to work as an extension of her care ethic, which said much about her priorities and the type of work she will maintain. It also raised questions about whether Teresa’s priorities fit the goals of her full-time employer.

### **SJI Employment: Rental Car Company**

By all accounts, including her own, Teresa secured good employment after her SJI training as Utility Person in the auto maintenance department of Rental Car Company. Her starting wage was \$8.75/hour that was supplemented with health, dental and eye-care benefits. Importantly, her benefits allowed continuity of service at the community health clinic Teresa and Tom had used for many years.

Teresa drove to work in ten minutes and had a daily schedule of 8:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. She negotiated this schedule as part of her hiring contract as it meant that her childcare concerns were less daunting: Teresa needed only morning care for Tom and was able to pick him up from school in the afternoon, a schedule which also facilitated his involvement in after-school activities. This carefully crafted schedule became problematic for several reasons. For one, Teresa had to get up early enough to drive Tom to her goddaughter’s father, a friend who watched Tom until it was time for school. However, in the course of our initial 6-months’ contact, Teresa’s friend had domestic problems with his wife. While this environment concerned Teresa, the alternative of leaving Tom alone to wait for the school bus was even less attractive. The unreliability of her truck was another challenge to Teresa’s tightly-balanced schedule as public transportation routes did not mesh with her morning family responsibilities, a common problem for Jobs Initiative participants in Seattle:

*“I wish I could catch the bus, but I can’t. I have to take Tom to the sitter. Then I’d have to take the truck back here, catch a bus to downtown Seattle [the opposite direction from work], and then get a bus to Seatac.”*

Teresa’s struggle to balance family responsibilities and work was exacerbated by the fact that she was raising Tom alone. Teresa and Tom’s father were divorced and he was not involved in Tom’s life. Although \$500 in monthly child support was stipulated in their divorce decree, Tom’s father had not paid and was not persuadable because he worked as a mechanic “off the books.” To hold Tom’s father legally accountable might require energy and resources Teresa did not have.

Over time, Teresa missed increasing numbers of workdays due to childcare concerns, truck problems, and Tom’s needs. Importantly, official and unofficial practices at Rental Car Company significantly eased Teresa’s family pressures. Teresa credited her Teamsters Union for its family focus: “My job is union. It’s set up for families.” For example, the union’s official policy was that any illness that spanned two consecutive workdays was counted as only one absence. Unofficially, Teresa’s manager overlooked consistent absences and lateness based on an understanding of her life, the quality of her SJI training, and her work:

*“Teresa is a really good person. Our company is innovative. Teresa takes a little more time than I’d like. We have a strict attendance policy—usually Teresa takes time without pay. She fits in good with the fellows. She was well trained and she’s good at it—she makes few mistakes. The computer training at SJI helped a lot.”*

Teresa’s manager further revealed how he interpreted and enforced workplace policy in a family-supporting manner, enacting a form of “street level” supervision (Lipsky, 1980) that can help workers, as in Teresa’s case, or boomerang if higher-level supervisors disagree [see Tasha Jones Family Story]:

*“The policy was made for employees who abuse their sick leave. Teresa is not abusing it. She just has family responsibilities most of the time. When you’re a parent, what can you do?! Her son—he’s too big for childcare; too young to be alone without getting into trouble. I try to be flexible.”*

Teresa’s regular and open communication with her manager about her needs facilitated company flexibility. In turn, workplace schedule flexibility helped to ease Teresa’s tight schedule, particularly during the school year:

*“Over the summer I was doing eight hour days on most of the days because of the childcare situation with Tom; where he was I didn’t have to worry about getting there any earlier, but now that school has started it has changed.”*

Such flexibility was not only unusual for employers, but was unique to Teresa’s negotiations at the time she was hired. If she were to leave, the person hired would have to work a 5:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. shift. Such timing would not accommodate most children’s schedules and would be particularly problematic for single parents like Teresa.

Teresa’s longevity at Rental Car Company also reflected her ability to work well with others and her belief that co-workers were nice, the environment was team-oriented and flexible, and her duties were varied enough to prevent boredom. Teresa’s retention may also have been related to Rental Car Company’s satisfaction with its SJI partnership and to the sector broker’s attentiveness, as the fleet/maintenance manager suggested:

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*“B. is another SJI graduate that we hired. She was well trained too. M.—he’s the third we have right now. The SJI training was good for what I need. I’m a custom-made place—the SJI folks basically change oil and do tires. If they were trained in mechanics, SJI would have to do a lot more training. The job market is huge. Auto Broker comes often—at a minimum, once a month. He’ll invite me to supervisory meetings and come in person to talk with the trainees. One time, 6 people from SJI applied the same day. Auto Broker tells me who is ‘highly recommended.’”*

**Income Adequacy.** Teresa considered her Rental Car Company wage vastly superior to her welfare income:

*“I get almost three times as much money now as when I was on welfare. If I could survive on \$369 a month, we can certainly survive on my income now.”*

She also believed that it improved her ability to provide for her child and household. She planned to accompany Tom to a youth convention in Richmond, VA in summer 2000 that would cost \$400, and she also planned to get an economical form of e-mail for Tom’s academic enrichment:

*“He can use the Internet for different things on his computer [in preparation for 5<sup>th</sup> grade next year]. I don’t want to pay for full Internet connection, but there’s a special connection I plan to get.”*

Analyses of income adequacy, however, tempered Teresa’s view. Because she regularly worked 30 hours a week, except for 40-hour weeks during the summer (see more below), her annual income from Rental Car Company was \$14,700. This income was above the federal poverty line of \$11,250 for a family of two, but below the more generous 150% poverty figure of \$16,875 and barely half the amount considered adequate (\$23,350) by the Self Sufficiency Standard for Washington (Pearce, 2001), a more nuanced, contextual assessment of income adequacy than the federal poverty guideline (FPL). Thus, while Teresa’s income increased substantially with employment, her choice of “survive” reflected the precarious nature of her finances, even with a higher wage and earnings from side jobs. Her initial hourly wage would increase with time and further skill training, but family priorities may limit both sources of potential increase.

Assessing the adequacy of her income was further complicated by the fact that Teresa was unable to save money and avoided checking accounts. Of the latter, Teresa said she simply could not keep track of her spending: “I never use checks because I can’t handle money.” Her preference for money orders over checks only cost her four dollars a month because of her bank’s special payment package. Teresa also ‘pinched pennies’ when she could: “I go to Cosco gas station—there regular and super is \$1.66 compared with \$1.70-something other places.” She also used her research honorarium as an income supplement to pay down her gas, electricity, and phone balances and an SJI honorarium for Tom’s clothing needs:

*“The higher income has, yeah because he would not have gotten that coat that I got him because the coat was eighty dollars. When I did that little speech thing for SJI they gave me two gift certificates to J.C. Penny for twenty-five dollars each, that is fifty dollars, and all I had to do is put another thirty dollars with it. I would not have been able to get that for Tom. It would have been a hardship for me and I know he needs it. It doesn’t matter about me because I put on my coveralls and come to work, I put a layer of my clothes on, but he is going to be playing at school so he needs that stuff and other little things. For Tom, higher income has definitely helped.”*

Despite more income than before the Jobs Initiative, Teresa and Tom still needed formal income supplements. Section 8 rental subsidy made it possible for them to live in their neighborhood and pay \$320 per month (increased from her pre-SJI payment of \$185 per month) for a house with a market rent of \$800. Despite the subsidy, Teresa’s housing took over one-third of her monthly income and she was frequently behind in rent because of her extremely tight budget:

*“[It is] very hard to have to work and not be able to save money—but God takes care of me and I’m grateful for work.”*

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) was another critical subsidy:

*“I’ve known about it [EITC] since my oldest boy was little. I use it every year; it’s a wonderful thing. It makes a big difference in a little paycheck. I want mine at the end of the year, versus every paycheck.”*

Over the months, however, the adequacy of her income waned. By October 2000, ten months into her job at Rental Car Company, Teresa’s hourly wage had risen to \$9.00, although she did not really benefit from the increase. Teresa had used all of her paid sick days and, according to her manager, took an average of one unpaid day per week, which resulted in a potential \$3000 deduction from her annual income. The deduction also dropped her income to poverty level, yet was not acknowledged in subsidy eligibility calculations.

**Advancement.** On her SJI application in May 1999, Teresa wrote that she wanted to “improve on automotive skills,” a goal she accomplished enough to secure her job at Rental Car Company. Her initial work performance evaluation noted the following strengths:

*“The Community College auto classes; Willing to learn; Strong commitment to succeed.”*

When she began at Rental Car Company, she planned to upgrade her automotive skills and earn more money by taking the requisite ASE (Automotive Service Excellence) competency tests:

*“ASE is a national test you can take on automotive. My co-worker got information off the Internet. I want to go for brakes, emissions, steering and suspension. There’s an on-the-job increase of 35 cents for each one. This is extra from regular pay raises. The test is given two times a year. I have to pay \$25 or \$30 for each certificate. I can’t take them until I’ve been in the business for 2 years. But I can study and I can take the pre-test. I’d have to pay, but I’ll be reimbursed if I pass the test.”*

Rental Car Company encouraged Teresa’s upgrade plans in their 3-month performance evaluation recommendations for her skill development: “Improve mechanical skills; Take ASE test this year; Learn parts skills.” Yet views differed on how Teresa could best advance.

Teresa’s co-workers felt that SJI training should have focused more on the ASE competencies and de-emphasized classroom instruction, as the lead mechanic noted:

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*“Too much reliance on school-based instruction is not effective, because people have to know how to do things—not just what to do.”*

In contrast, SJI sector staff emphasized the need for basic skills:

*“Employers tell us not to focus on ASE. If the worker has the skills, studying is not hard. Even if they pass the ASE test now—they don’t get a certificate for 2 more years. They said to focus on the other things I just talked about. They’ll help with ASE certification.”*

Such conflicting views about training content need resolution in order to best aid workers’ advancement, particularly since Rental Car Company’s developmental action plan outlined only informal means to accomplish these ends. “Work with leads during slow times” and “Work with J. to learn parts job” were the informal means specified by the Fleet/Maintenance Manager:

*“Here—we have 4 mechanics and 4 utility persons. 3 of the 4 utility persons are from SJI. We maintain a fleet of 2000-3000 cars. The utility persons—all day they do oil changes and tires after oil changes and tires. On slow days, they learn other stuff. They do computer entry.”*

Whether because of these conflicting directives, the fact that her tight budget did not have room for up-front funding of the competency tests, non-work reasons, or all of the above, over time it was evident that Teresa was not working towards upgrading her skills. As she said in October 2000, ten months into her job, “I don’t think I’m going to learn more ASE competencies for awhile. I like the way it is now.” While her manager did not understand her hesitancy to take the tests that would advance her skills and earn her a promotion and more money, Teresa unequivocally stated her reasons in terms of personal values and family priorities:

*“I don’t think I’ll ever want to be a manager. I like my hours. Like the flexibility. Like the low-key environment. Money is not all that is important to me. What people have to realize is that there is nothing wrong with being a worker who just likes to do what they know and then put their time into things that they care about—like church.”*

The ASE tests required time and money that Teresa did not have. Although Rental Car Company was willing to reimburse her costs, a policy SJI and other workforce programs could replicate by providing up-front subsidies, the test-taking procedure was lengthy and required that one feel unambiguous about the process. In addition, the informal training for these tests at the workplace was scattershot at best:

*“I have not had a chance to learn the part skills. Every time I ask about it, it is kind of like they need their cars or he has already done them or whatever.”*

A further impediment to Teresa’s advancement lay in the nature of the opportunities available. Teresa’s boss noted that mechanical advancement was not guaranteed, even with ASE competency:

*“Even if you are qualified—unless I have an opening, I wouldn’t offer a promotion. [So taking ASE exams doesn’t guarantee a promotion?] Every mechanic here started in a Utility Position.”*

Teresa’s boss added that advancement in the management direction would entail radical changes in hours:

*“If you want to make money working for our company—you need to go to the airport and rent cars. They get incentives—so much for selling more insurance; so much for the gas packages. Their base pay is like the utility person here, but they get extra. But they have the worst days—they have to work nights and weekends. That isn’t good for a single mother like Teresa.”*

Similarly, advancement entailed interests Teresa did not have:

*“Some of the stuff would be fun but mechanics is not a life long goal of mine, not really, never has been. [And are these ASE tests for mechanics?] They are for mechanics. [So that doesn’t give you a lot of motivation to take those ASE tests?] Not really, even though it would be okay, it would increase my pay by like quarter to 30- cents or something like that but it really is not my heart string, it is not my goal to be a mechanic.”*

Teresa’s comments reflected a sentiment heard among other Jobs Initiative workers who were hesitant about promotion because they were balancing work with family and community life: that it was not possible to have one without sacrificing another, and that the sacrifice was often not optimal for their children’s welfare. For Teresa, advancement would mean time and hours away from Tom and church activities, both of which were significant priorities. While the SJI sector manager deemed Teresa a good candidate for management, he spoke of advancement in terms of time: “If she finds time to get training, she can advance.” In contrast, Teresa viewed advancement in terms of time *and* priorities: advancement meant she would have to “find time” for the very things that already keep her days and nights filled and meaningful.

## Family Welfare and Resources

A house was one of the many resources Teresa was able to secure for Tom and herself. Teresa and Tom lived in the same Seattle neighborhood for eight years, one comprised of lower to middle-income homes, several corner stores and congregations, a block watch, and pockets of trees. Stores and human service facilities were nearby although the community was basically encapsulated by an interstate highway, an airport, and an industrial commercial area. Nevertheless, Teresa described it as “really a nice, quiet and safe neighborhood with many huge trees.” Teresa’s home was filled with collections of Tom’s sports trophies, pets, Asian bamboo paintings, decorative china plates and keyrings. As Tom described it: “We collect stuff, period.” Family photos adorned the fireplace mantle.

When she spoke of supports, Teresa rarely mentioned family. She offered only that she was the oldest of three children, had a father who lived out of state and a mother who lived several neighborhoods away. Teresa’s 26-year old son had lived with her mother since he was five years old. Teresa and her older son’s relationship was somewhat estranged although he stopped by the house from time to time. Similarly, although Tom’s father lived in Seattle, their most recent contact was 2½ years ago. That Teresa did not talk extensively about the earlier part of her life may reflect her desire for privacy as well as ambivalence about the past and a predilection for the present.

Teresa developed a network of social service providers, fellow parishioners, and other members of the community for the unifying purpose of meeting Tom’s needs. Whether using the food and clothing pantry at C.A.M.P., seeking

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Sunday school classes for Tom, or finding an alternative educational environment for him, Teresa provided material goods and enrichment experiences for her son.

Within this context, Teresa was able to support her family on the income she earned. Without a network of resources or the determination to find them, self-support would have been even more precarious. Teresa was fortunate to know where and how to look. When her 1985 Ford Bronco truck broke down, which it did frequently, she took it to her former SJI mechanics instructor at the Community College who helped her make repairs and taught her additional auto skills in the process. When she needed quality summer childcare for Tom, she called the Community Center and applied for a camp scholarship in order to “map out” Tom’s summer. When she endeavored to create a newsletter for her church, she found a printing shop that was willing to help her put things together affordably. In many circumstances, the potential and real barriers to her ambitions did not daunt Teresa, a key component of her success.

### Child’s Welfare and School

Tom’s health was generally good, although at initial contact Teresa was concerned that he had hit his head several times over the past few months. Later she reported that “he had a CT scan and it was no big deal.” Teresa switched from Medicaid to union health coverage when benefits began after 3 months of employment. Both Teresa and Tom used a community health clinic that they were very satisfied with.

Tom was a fifth grader [4<sup>th</sup> grade at study onset] who was described by his teacher as “creative, nice and friendly—well-liked by teachers and peers.” Although he struggled in reading and to a lesser extent in math, Tom was multi-talented. The fact that Tom played basketball, baseball and trumpet, performed double-dutch, and had been seen on a local TV show that featured a chess tournament was a reflection of both his natural abilities and Teresa’s resourcefulness. Tom’s chess class teacher described him as “strategic, careful and a natural.” Teresa’s description of Tom’s extracurricular schedule made clear how dedicated she was to his enrichment. Her involvement was admired by a staff member at Tom’s community center:

*“We see only about 30% of the parents, and only know about 10%. She’s a dedicated Mom, interested in Tom’s program.”*

Reciprocally, seeing to her child’s welfare contributed to Teresa’s work success, as another community center staff member noted:

*“Any parent who’s involved with their kid is bound to do better at work because they won’t get calls at work from the police saying ‘do you know where your kid is today?’”*

Expectedly, Teresa always knew Tom’s whereabouts.

Tom’s high activity level was also a reflection of his school, an alternative public elementary school that served children in kindergarten through fifth grade. The school was dedicated to holistic learning, parent involvement, the creative and performing arts, environmental education, classrooms that were multi-age groupings, and a non-graded system. Like Tom’s baseball team, the school was ethnically and racially diverse, with 57% minority student enrollment.

Conversely, Tom’s low reading and writing scores on state standardized tests were consistent with overall scores for his school (Seattle Public Schools, 1999). Lower percentages of fourth graders in Tom’s school met state standards in reading (49%) and writing (23%) compared to district averages of 56% and 39% respectively. Tom’s math scores were also “low, but not as low as reading and writing,” according to Teresa. Only 14% of alternative school students met state math standards compared to 36% of students in the district as a whole. The alternative school students surpassed district averages only in Listening. Overall, the alternative school’s percentages were lower than other district schools but on par with another elementary school in the same geographic area, raising questions about the quality of education available to children in Teresa’s mostly low-income community.

While Teresa was aware of Tom’s scores and had discussed with his teacher how to help him, she was preoccupied with where she would send Tom for middle school, in part because of his “sensitivity.” Teresa believed that by encouraging creativity, the school had the right priorities for teaching and learning. At the same time, she consistently oversaw his performance and knowledgeably identified his remedial needs:

*“[Grades last year?] He got average, they do numbers at his school, that’s 2 or 3, in reading and writing. He’s excelling in some—like math. I need to call the teacher to get some reading stuff for the summer for him. He needs some regular books. He needs to get his fluency down and his phonics.”*

Teresa’s hopes and goals for the next six months were focused exclusively on Tom’s academic development:

*“...that Tom does better in school when it comes to his reading and find out what the problem is with his reading out loud, why he reads so slow.”*

The fact that Tom struggled with the fundamental subjects of math and reading suggested a less-than-good fit between the school’s mission and his learning needs. Given Tom’s natural proclivities, one can see why Teresa believed he might one day be an engineer, although it was not clear he was being educationally prepared to do so. In addition to climate, a school’s capacity for preparation concerned Teresa greatly in relation to choice of middle school for Fall 2001. As with many JI participants and other residents of low-income communities, she was caught in an untenable “Hobson’s choice,” or lack of viable alternatives, between her child’s schooling, an affordable residential area, and access to her job:

*“If I can get him in there [a special African American school] for sixth, seventh and eighth that would be good, but I would have to check it out because right now there is no schools in the south that I would send him to and I work south, so he can’t go north. It is plenty of schools in the north end but I am not going in that direction.”*

Tom’s current school, and by extension Teresa and Tom, had the advantage of being part of the Powerful Schools network. According to its Director, Powerful Schools began in 1992 out of community collaboration: “About a dozen parents and community people and teachers got together to talk about how to create good urban schools in low-income areas.” These meetings coalesced around the dual goals of creating world-class schools in the community and strengthening the community in the process. The goals were manifested through low-cost or scholarship-funded enrichment programs in the schools staffed by paid and volunteer parents and community experts, during and after school, where parents helped kids and kids helped parents. According to the Director, “Tax money can’t cover all these services.” But tax money could, if national priorities were different.



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During Tom's 4<sup>th</sup> grade year, Powerful Schools meant classes in tap dance, jazz dance, African drumming, taekwondo, Lego, and cooking. In 5<sup>th</sup> grade, Powerful Schools also meant 2 computer classes, one on website design and digital photography and another on digital film editing. For Teresa it meant opportunities for her son, an opportunity to raise money for the community through organizing family dinners, and the potential to teach adult evening classes in auto skills and basic mechanics. The program afforded both Russells an opportunity to develop self-esteem, creativity, activism and relationship.

Given the above, it was not surprising that Tom and Teresa were described by Tom's school as a "good team." The team analogy was fitting in that it connoted shared responsibilities and described a relationship that developed under the circumstances of single parenting. Teresa was proud of Tom's accomplishments and Tom conveyed respect for his mother's accomplishments: "She does good at her job. She knows a lot." Tom's particular passion was baseball and his mother was a regular game fan, along with other parents and siblings. Tom's coach described him as "always a good sport," perhaps reflecting both his school's ethos and Teresa's community responsibility.

Time, however, remained a challenge to the family's enrichment aims. Despite having a work schedule that ended at 2:30 p.m., Teresa did not have enough time for her responsibilities and activities: "I still don't have time. Monday and Friday are the only days we are able to come home and do things." In addition to work and school, Tuesday through Thursday were sports practice, house cleaning, caring for her goddaughter in exchange for morning child-care for Tom, choir practice, and Bible study for both Teresa and Tom. Tom's sports games and performances often took up Fridays. During the rare times they were home together, Tom often worked on the computer or Internet which Teresa tried to monitor when she could. The limited nature of this "home" time was best portrayed when Teresa was asked how often she braided Tom's hair, a style that he liked, and she responded: "When I have time. So far I haven't had enough time. It takes about two hours." Similarly, meals were often individually taken or skipped, which may have exacerbated Tom's fatigue:

*"[We] get up at 6:30. We don't eat breakfast usually. Tom eats at school or at my god-daughter's home. He can get lunch at school but often doesn't. He doesn't pack a lunch. Dinner is anytime – not scheduled or organized – anything that is around – but I often cook up a batch of something on Saturday or Sunday to eat during the week."*

At the same time, Teresa's procurement of sustained and enriching activities provided a kind of nurturance that was clearly of tremendous developmental value. As during the school year, Teresa arranged a steady stream of constructive activities for Tom during summer 2000: a 4-week program of creative arts, field trips, and swimming at the Community Center, a church trip to Richmond, a multi-week, day-long program at Bike Works that focused on bike repair and bike trips, which continued into the fall as "Earn a Bike" program, and a one-day family bus trip to Vancouver ["We had a ball!"]. Taking the initiative to find programs, applying for scholarships, filling out forms, arranging for transportation, and maintaining a varied schedule were time- and energy-consuming, as all parents know—all the more so when one is a single parent like Teresa with work, church, community commitments, and fragile finances as well.

## Church

An important extension of Teresa’s family life and network was her church, an Apostolic Pentecostal congregation in her neighborhood that she has attended for five years. Teresa became connected to the church by enrolling Tom in Sunday School; subsequently she attended services and “It’s been the center of my life since then.” The congregation was comprised almost exclusively of African American parishioners and typically reached between one half and two-thirds of its Sunday attendance goal of 100. The 16 pews were often filled with families, as older children were encouraged to participate in prayer and musical tribute. Parishioners’ engagement was evident in their display of well-worn, personal Bibles with tabbed and underlined passages.

Teresa regularly spent nearly the entire Sunday at the church. Three to four hours was spent in prayer and sermon which was followed by a pot-luck supper in the downstairs community room. On two of the three visits to Teresa’s church, Tom either napped on and off or asked to be excused due to not feeling well, both of which suggested that by Sunday his rigorous activity schedule caught up with him. On the other hand, a veteran parishioner attested to Tom’s involvement with Church activities and to Teresa’s parenting competence:

*“Tom is young. Teresa shelters him; she’s taken care of him. Tom is not surprised that his mother is doing well. Tom is “hands-on”—he helps actively at the church. He does all the activities that are available for youth of his age. [Teresa said earlier that Youth Night, announced for the following Thursday in the church program, had just lowered its eligibility age to 10, which now would include Tom who said he was going to participate in this].”*

Teresa’s church made an effort to respond to the real life concerns of its members, some of whom came from the surrounding community and others from farther afield. According to one parishioner, the church, like many of its members, “barely squeaks by” on the funds it receives. The pastor of the church wove his sermons from Biblical references and modern day stories about social issues, including youth violence, drugs, homelessness, poverty, and parental responsibility. The parishioners actively responded to the sermon, standing to give testimony of praise, struggle, or revelation. The overall pastoral message was one of acceptance and support:

*“You can be born a mess, the product of a mess, and God will still love you.  
God sees the potential he’s put in you.  
Whatever you need, God’s got it. God breaks cycles.”*

Within this context of acceptance Teresa found solace and a match for her convictions. As an extension of its mission, the church provided the kitchen space Teresa needed to perform her catering jobs. Teresa was well known and well regarded by fellow parishioners, several of whom attributed increased church participation, and hence increased community contribution, to her new employment. According to one long-time parishioner, Teresa’s new job gave her enhanced self-esteem, confidence and calm:

*“Since Teresa got her job, her self-esteem has really risen. She is more confident about herself. She is more sure of herself. She is more relaxed. She is more sociable. And she seems more comfortable at the church—she’s interacting more with members. She just seems happier. Now she’s a woman with goals and objectives to obtain those goals. She’s a woman who will go far fast. Teresa is doing well, as compared to the way she was doing before. [And before?] She was stable but searching—now she’s not searching; she has direction.”*

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These gains may also account for her having revamped the church bulletin on her computer and her desire to contribute to the church by starting a newsletter:

*“Since I got the computer, I’m starting a Church newsletter. I’m going to try to get it out once a month. Or at least once every 2 months. I’ve already revamped the Church bulletin. It was previously 10 pages. Now it’s 1 double-sided page. [Teresa then showed us a book she was studying about how to do church newsletters]. I’m going to get people to write blurbs for the newsletter and have them to me by a certain date. Already I’ve taken out the “newsy” items from the bulletin, and made it church information only. That’s what the book says to do. Now people won’t be reading the “news” during the church service. I’ll have a section for youth groups—a teens’ and a kids’ section.”*

However, time remained a barrier to Teresa’s desired level of community service, as evidenced by the newsletter’s delay: “I have gotten little ideas here and there; I’ve just got to find some time to sit down and put it all together.” While a noble pursuit, given the demands of Teresa’s daily life, it will be a significant challenge to find the time to reach her goal. Coincidentally, when asked in October 2000 what, if anything, would have been helpful during her SJI training period, Teresa’s response was time management:

*“I haven’t tried a time management class; that might help, but I know why I am so busy. Church just started an after school tutoring and I am one of the tutors and that is Monday, Wednesday, Friday 6:30-8:30 p.m., Bible study is Tuesday, and choir workshop is Thursday, Friday, Saturday.”*

Teresa’s tendency to take on obligations was not limited to Tom’s and her activities, as the Rental Car Company manager noted: “She is miss nice guy, helping everybody out,” at times to her own detriment. Teresa took on responsibility to others in much the same way she took in her four cats, her snake, and her various collections. Her work at Rental Car Company was a priority insofar as it paid the bills, bills that she struggled to pay each month. Her community and son took precedence, the one providing a vital network of resources she needed to financially and emotionally support the other.

## Follow-up May 2001 and Conclusions

When the Russells were recontacted in May 2001, 14 months after our initial contact, Tom and Teresa had just returned from a week-long trip with Tom’s school. As one of seventeen chaperones for 60 fourth and fifth graders, Teresa enjoyed herself:

*“It was beautiful. I oversaw a cabin of eight boys. The last day, I put someone else in charge. I got up early and went birdwatching and then went walking on the beach. It was wonderful.”*

This trip marked the end of another year of Teresa’s enthusiastic involvement with her son’s school. She continued her camp tradition of teaching fourth and fifth graders how to cook “gooey rice krispie cookies,” dubbed “blood clot chewies” by the same group that created fruit pizza the year before. In order to take the school trip with Tom, Teresa’s “straight vacation” from Rental Car Company became a “working vacation:”

*“We can work on holidays, but I said ‘no way.’ It was voluntary sign up. This one time—I wanted straight vacation. It was a working vacation, though, with the kids at camp. Then I came home and worked in the yard.”*

Teresa looked forward to two weeks in summer when Tom would travel to a family reunion in Michigan. However, when asked how she felt about having time to herself, she was ambivalent. Two weeks was the longest period of time Tom had ever been away from home:

*“I’m going to enjoy myself. It’s always ‘Mom this, Mom that’... The first 1-3 days, I think it will be like usual. Days 4-8 I’ll maybe feel lonely.”*

Tom unequivocally looked forward to his trip, particularly since it would be his first time on an airplane.

Teresa continued to stretch her already tight budget to make sure Tom could partake in summer and year-round activities. She described her finances as “running on empty” but made a significant change in her budgeting strategy by opening a savings account:

*“It’s automatic deposit. I love it. I put in \$25 per paycheck, for emergencies or church things. I hope to increase the amount next year.”*

Moreover, because she could not afford to fix her truck, Teresa now took public transportation to work, a change that required her to take two buses and extend both her commute and workday by 30 to 45 minutes. However, Teresa viewed the change positively because it was convenient, she could stay at work longer, and she could no longer “stop and buy things.”

Jump-starting her new savings plan and helping her in the new direction of building assets, Teresa learned she was still part of the Seattle Housing Authority’s Family Self-Sufficiency Program:

*“I thought it had been canceled, but it hasn’t. I have over \$2000 credit and haven’t put in a dime. HUD or SHA is putting money in for me—for a car, house or appliances.”*

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While Teresa described her participation in the SHA program as fortuitous, such a description belied her arduous efforts to secure housing and other resources. She continued to need money for YMCA summer camp and information about other subsidized or reduced-fee programs. Teresa revealed the kind of continued information SJI and other workforce programs could provide as she described a class her local bank offered on home ownership:

*“For as little as \$500 down, you can buy a house. I plan to take the class in July. I need to find out how to get my credit report perfect. I’m ready for it [a house] to be mine. I’d like to live...in my area now. It would be good if SJI had more information about home buying. They sent out a flyer that helped folks do income tax this year. That was good. They’re moving in the right direction.”*

Teresa’s suggestion for SJI was similar to that of MJI participants Kevin McDonalds and Hard Working Blessed who also identified the need for information and community supports for low-income, working families. Once again, that a parent as resourceful and involved as Teresa identified this need spoke to the needs of families less accustomed to self-advocacy and living in urban communities with even fewer resources. The articulation between systems that aided Teresa in her job retention (SJI, C.A.M.P., Community College, and Rental Car Company) demonstrated both the limits and possibilities of a strong work program network.

**Work.** By May 2001, after 16 months of employment Teresa earned \$9.50 per hour. In January, after one year of employment she had received an automatic 50-cent raise. After the second year and all subsequent years she would receive \$1 per hour more. Teresa said she still liked her job, but wasn’t sure she’d “stay a million years.” Several obstacles could prevent Teresa’s long-term employment with Rental Car Company. For one, she did not foresee the possibility for promotion. The informal mechanism in place to learn parts continued to be ineffective:

*“They haven’t let me learn the parts. [Why?] I haven’t a clue. Even the union has noticed the disorganization. They’ve offered to help, but Rental Car Company declined. When it’s slow, I go into the office and do filing for new cars. The only time I can learn is when it’s slow and I watch the lead mechanic. The only computer entry I do is with recalls. If I could do more computer entry, I’d be able to order parts.”*

Pursuit of the ASE competency tests seemed equally fruitless:

*“ASE tests are too much politics in the company. It’s better for me to stay where I am. Even if I do ASE, there’s no possibility for promotion.”*

In addition to this obstacle, Teresa learned that Rental Car Company’s pay scale was the lowest of all the rental car companies. As she described it: “It’s at the very low end. I make at least \$1 to \$1.50 per hour less than other utility persons.” How this newfound information would impact Teresa’s job retention was not yet known. The positive aspects of SJI involvement (training, ongoing communication between the sector broker and employer) and Teresa’s individual success were, at present, unable to secure either more formal advancement opportunities or improved wages. The union was in the process of negotiations, but only regarding benefits adjustments, not pay scale. While Teresa acknowledged her pay was “only fair” she felt her benefits were “great,” which was critical to her as a parent: “For Tom, I have to have benefits.” Work benefits such as personal and vacation days were offered by her company, not the union. In addition, she supplemented her union medical insurance with Basic Health Plan, Washington state’s health subsidy for low-income residents, as some family medical care was not covered under the union plan.

Teresa said this supplementary practice was common among other family members who also struggled to make ends meet. Despite potential drawbacks, Teresa planned to stay with Rental Car Company for the time being. For the summer and fall, her goal was to work forty hour weeks.

**Tom.** In May 2001, Tom was completing fifth grade and looked forward to his summer plans. For a time, as a result of the bus schedule that extended Teresa’s work day, Tom was alone for an hour in the afternoon before Teresa got home. While there was presently no alternative to this arrangement and Tom periodically bemoaned his mother’s absence, Teresa said there was “no way” it would continue next year. As Tom got older, she wanted him to remain involved in supervised, structured activities. Until now, his activities had brought success: Tom’s batting improved, he planned to dance the “Boot Scootin’ Boogie” in an upcoming performance, and he crafted his own bike, “a BMX trick bike. I do freestyle.” When Teresa told her pastor about this latter accomplishment, the pastor encouraged Tom to show it to the congregation. While Tom spoke proudly of his bike, he said he was glad to go to a new community center next year because “people were mean and loud” at the last one.

For several reasons, Teresa was relieved that Tom would graduate to a new school next year. For one, while Tom’s grades improved (he expected As in Math and Social Studies, Bs for other courses), he was increasingly reluctant to go to school because of a teacher he thought yelled at him too much. Teresa, who was less alarmed, thought the teacher probably “went overboard” with her request early in the school year to help Tom focus. She also felt the teacher was “in a box,” citing his preoccupation with good handwriting in the computer era as an example of this. Tom preferred his math teacher who “gives me a chance.” During a repeat visit to Tom’s school, an Instructional Assistant reported that Tom’s “ability to concentrate in class is limited but will get better over time...he’ll do okay in middle school but will have to buckle down.” Teachers characterized Tom as “a good kid,” but also “not as much academic as he is creative.” Teresa felt Tom could not focus on reading if he lacked interest in the subject matter, but that he finished books he liked (i.e. Harry Potter). Tom was not retested for a learning disability; however, Teresa discovered he needed glasses.

Teresa was also relieved that Tom would attend her preferred choice of middle school in the fall. The school was a moderate distance from the family’s home, but was racially and ethnically diverse and ran both before and after school enrichment and tutoring programs. Tom’s chess teacher offered to start a chess club at Tom’s new school if there was not one already and if Teresa were involved. Teresa also liked the fact that Tom’s school required uniforms, a change of heart precipitated by Tom’s growing body:

*“I won’t have to buy him so many clothes. I spend a lot of money for his clothes because he is growing up fast. Even though I go to thrift stores—he has a 30-inch waist now and wears a 9½ men’s shoes size. I spent my whole income tax refund on clothes for Tom—over \$100 for shirts, pants, and shorts—and at the end of the summer, will they fit? I don’t know. Next year he’ll have to wear white shirts with collars and colored pants.”*

Listening to his mother describe next year’s uniforms, Tom responded with an age-appropriate “ugh, uniforms are evil. What if I don’t wear them?” Teresa said she thought he would probably be sent home if he didn’t, and that he was “moving up in the world,” to which Tom replied, “No, I’m shrinking.” Despite Tom’s take on his new predicament, Teresa’s words conveyed the high cost of clothing and feeding a growing, pre-adolescent boy on one income. Uniforms were one way to obviate costs.

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Test results for middle school Tom would attend in Fall 2001 were mixed. Standardized test scores (WASL) for 7<sup>th</sup> graders were lower than his elementary school's test scores for all subjects except writing: 19.4% of students met state Reading standards, 32.6% met Writing, 13.2% met Math and 57.7% met Listening standards. Even if recent questions about the WASL proved valid (Iversen, 2001c), the percentage of students meeting standards was still quite low. Direct Writing Assessment scores for 8<sup>th</sup> graders were more encouraging: 22.8% were rated as advanced, 67.3% within standards, and 9.9% below standards. Scores aside, moving from an environment that fostered creativity and where students referred to teachers on a first-name basis to a more traditional academic setting would be an adjustment for Tom. Teresa would most likely seek all the supports she could to help him, without which he might fall behind.

**Community.** Teresa and Tom were still actively involved in church activities. During our third all-day visit to the church, Teresa wore one of her many hats, this time as Sunday School Secretary/Treasurer. The quarters she counted underscored the pastor's repeated pleas to fill the baskets that circled the congregation several times before stopping. Without increased giving and enrollment, the church might not be able to sustain its activities. Already the congregation of low-income families struggled to provide such services as a weekend food pantry. Teresa's inclusion of "church activities" in her reasons for saving money was testament to this. The church continued to be a support to Teresa, as well as Tom, who benefitted from youth services that were in his mother's words "in tune with kids." The one thing Teresa had not yet completed was the church newsletter. She attributed this to the fact that "I don't have the right computer. I've been working on getting a new one since December." Whether she did not have the time or energy were not mentioned.

Teresa's family story leads one to question why the work world does not support such a dedicated parent better—one who has wrung life-blood out of economically-depressed stones in order to maximize her child's academic, social, physical and spiritual development. Given the high time costs of career advancement for Teresa, their uncertain return, the vital developmental needs of her pre-adolescent child, and the paltry opportunities available in low-income communities absent heroic efforts to find enrichment, Teresa's priorities at this time in her life may be absolutely right for her child's ultimate welfare.

# Moving Up is a Steep Climb

The “Tisha Shanks” Family Story

*Parents’ Work and Children’s Welfare  
in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jobs Initiative*



*Roberta Rehner Iversen  
with Kathe Johnson and Michele Belliveau*

April 2002



## Tisha Shanks” Family Story

**Resident Family:**

Tisha Shanks, a 33-year old Hispanic-American woman—ethnographic study key informant

Maine, Tisha’s 31-year old African American resident partner

Angelita Shanks, Tisha’s 15 year old daughter, in 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> grade

Juan Shanks, Tisha’s 14 year old son, in 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> grade

Amberia Shanks, Tisha’s 11 year old daughter, in 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grade

Study timeline: February through October 2000. Follow-up April - May 2001.

### *“MJI was like a stepping stool.”*

Thirty-three year old Tisha Shanks, the mother of three teenagers, unequivocally described the benefits of the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJI):

*“MJI was like a stepping stool. It led to Product Manufacturing Company employment that led to training and developing a sense within me to know I can go further. It’s not just training or a job, but training in how to get along with different people, different situations. The Product Manufacturing Company job encouraged me to go get it; gave me enthusiasm.”*

MJI gave Tisha an opportunity to earn a living legally, employ her talents, increase her self-esteem, vastly improve her children’s welfare, and make a positive impact on her community—giant steps forward from a past of drug selling and incarceration.

## Background and Pre-MJI History

Tisha left high school at the end of her sophomore year when she became pregnant with her eldest daughter. Although she later obtained a high school equivalency diploma, Tisha’s employment prospects were slim, yet she was determined to provide for her two children. When she was 18, a friend introduced Tisha to an occupation she could perform, if not comfortably at least well: dancing in a strip lounge. Working five nights a week, Tisha was able to earn enough to pay her bills. Her mother and stepfather told her to “be careful,” words that would be repeated at other points in Tisha’s life, but did not interfere. While Tisha developed keen self-protective skills, dancing led her to a more dangerous and lucrative occupation—selling drugs.

By the time Tisha was in her early 20’s with three young children, she averaged approximately \$800 per day and lived on her own. Raised without material comforts, Tisha expressed a mixture of pride and regret about her past fortune:

*“I had a really nice house, antique Victorian style, and my kids had good clothes. They didn’t want for anything. Now I got rid of most of those things; I don’t even want them. I want to get nice things, but I don’t want that furniture.”*

While she regretted the consequences of having sold drugs, Tisha cited the exigencies of having children and immaturity as her reasons for doing so:

*“I think it came from my upbringing. I think it came from my mom telling me if you have kids you have to raise them. ‘I don’t care if you have to scrub toilets, they are your kids and you take care of them, no matter what you have to do,’ and me being young and dumb at the time....”*

In her struggle to survive as a single mother, without the financial support of her children’s fathers and with few employment prospects, Tisha found an occupation that made her financially successful and unique for a single Hispanic woman from a poor community: “The guys were jealous of me because not many women got so much money with drugs.”

As a woman and drug dealer, Tisha created an informal network of other women who were involved in the business, a network with an ethos of informing and protecting one another, partly in response to their place within a male-dominated trade. Tisha also had a relationship with a woman who “all the men were scared of” and who “helped clean the house and did the laundry, and picked up the kids, and bought us stuff we needed...and said ‘I bet you couldn’t get a man to do all the things I do.’” Tisha’s position as a woman and mother determined both her intimate and tangible needs, as well as the way she ran her business, yet the consequences of her drug business were more painful than she could have predicted.

In 1995, in the first of two incidents that both scared her and led to eventual incarceration, the police raided Tisha’s home. Although she was not arrested at the time, Tisha saw the traumatic impact of her lifestyle on the “terrified” face of her eldest daughter Angelita, who at 9 years old was confronted forcibly by the police:

*“They put me on the floor and when I looked out my bedroom door, I looked straight into the dining room and living room and they had guns. One of them had Angelita pinned to the couch in the living room with a gun to her head. The look on her face, I can’t describe it. It was awful.”*

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In keeping with her network ethos, Tisha's friend took responsibility for the drugs and went to jail while Tisha took care of her friend's son. The following year, Tisha was arrested and again described the incident through the eyes of her children:

*"My kids were down the block in the sprinkler and the police were everywhere, even down the street, and they put me in handcuffs."*

This arrest led to two years of incarceration, during which time Tisha's mother cared for the children. Upon release from prison, Tisha decided to change both her neighborhood and the way she supported her family. The monetary benefits to her family of the drug business could never outweigh the danger, trauma and separation it caused. As Tisha later said, "when you sell drugs you end up in one of two things: dead or in prison." Tisha's partner was eventually killed as a result of their business, a death that the family still mourned. Because Tisha's children were of paramount importance, her challenge was to forge a new direction with uncertain assistance.

### **MJI Enrollment: Central City Worker's Center (CCWC)/ Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP)**

In the 9 months between her release from prison and MJI enrollment in September 1998, Tisha held three jobs—all of which she left because of low wages. She had worked 26 weeks in 1998 for a total income of \$6,000. Her most recent job, a cashier making \$6.25 per hour without benefits, lasted three months. As Tisha grew increasingly frustrated with her options, she was simultaneously introduced to the Jobs Initiative at the Central City Worker's Center (CCWC), a referral source for MJI that was sponsored by the Campaign for Sustainable Milwaukee (CSW). CCWC then referred Tisha to the Retention Specialist at the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP) who placed her in a job at Product Manufacturing Company. At the point of MJI enrollment Tisha was focused solely on getting a job; further training was not a consideration:

*"I would say 'no I don't have time to go to programs.' I am thinking, I got to work and she [Tisha's friend] said 'oh they will help you' and I said 'okay' and so I am thinking I got to go here, I got to go back to school, but that wasn't the case. I volunteered one day there and then WRTP came up with a job."*

Like other MJI participants, Tisha made her way to CCWC on the referral of a friend who had completed a construction apprenticeship at the Center. Tisha's friend also credited CCWC with her new path to economic success:

*"The people there were really a lot of help. At first I wasn't sure if I wanted to do it and then I thought about what else I would be doing, and how much money I would be earning if I didn't take advantage of the apprenticeship program. I knew I could learn the material if I studied, so I went for it. It was the best decision of my life as far as jobs are concerned."*

This time Tisha's informal network led her to an otherwise inaccessible path. Without this introduction, it was unclear what direction Tisha might have chosen, given the formidable tasks at hand. Tisha was faced not only with the financial support of her children, but with training program debt accumulated after her release from prison. Tisha's total debt consisted of \$5,700 from cosmetology school loans and \$3,100 in unpaid utility bills for lights and gas that remained on while she was incarcerated. She was also barred from having a driver's license. Tisha forged a

new path via CCWC and its workers who helped her with both moral support and such tangible needs as how to apply for an occupational driver’s license. Tisha excelled as a MJI participant, often giving inspirational talks at CCWC recruitment orientations. These talks, as well as her participation in the research study, allowed Tisha to serve as a role model, a role she was unfamiliar with but successful in filling:

*“If others look at me and the other families, they can say, ‘Tisha went through this program, let me try.’ It has to do with how much effort you put into it. You gotta want. A lot of them have let programs down too.”*

Tisha’s words described the transactional nature of program success; they were words her son would later echo in his own philosophy about personal achievement.

Given her experience with CWCC, Tisha was dismayed at the Center’s eventual loss of funding: “They were really for the people that had problems, low income mothers that wanted to try and do something with their life and you could see it. It is still alright, but it is just not there anymore.” Tisha’s memory remained loyal to the place that gave her an opportunity: “They’re the ones that got me connected.”

### **MJI Employment: Product Manufacturing Company**

In September 1998, after WRTP’s one-week training, Tisha was offered a union position as Cell Operator with Product Manufacturing Company, a manufacturer of propane tanks that was close to her home and paid her \$7.86 per hour with opportunity for regular wage increases: “They offered the best opportunity for you to survive and not struggle.” While medical benefits were available, Tisha and her children remained covered by Medicaid, despite uncertain eligibility: “I’m not asking. If they come to me and say I’m through, that I don’t qualify any more, I’ll just ask them ‘why?’” While she later talked of the struggle to make ends meet, Product Manufacturing Company offered her an opportunity she had never had before: the ability to move up based on merit and to support her family through safe and legal means. Because of MJI, Product Manufacturing Company gave Tisha this opportunity irrespective of her felony conviction. The fact that Tisha’s new position required her to work with a dangerous substance in a factory that “sometimes [received] bomb threats” may have paled in comparison to the risks she had taken before. The primary problem Tisha faced was having less time to spend with her children.

For several months Tisha worked the second shift (2:30 to 10:30 p.m.) and her salary gradually increased to \$8.20 per hour. While she was pleased with her work, she rued the hours away from her children who were aged 14, 13 and 10 at the time. Family and work life clashed:

*“I wasn’t seeing them enough and if I called home on break, my daughter was having trouble with homework and I wasn’t here to help her. I was uncomfortable and always thinking about what are they doing, are they having problems, did they eat what I cooked? I always wanted to go and call, is everything okay, are they arguing today or not, does everybody love each other or what?”*

Tisha was reluctant to make too many personal calls from work, but was concerned, among other things, that her two eldest children were taking public transportation to school for the first time unaccompanied by an adult. In addition, she was distressed about the effect her absence was having on the children’s school performance:

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*"[What made you realize that your absence mattered?] Yeah the schooling, when I found out they were having trouble with school work and their grades. I would talk to my son and daughter and they would say 'mom I just don't understand' or 'nobody is here to help me' and first it wasn't that bad but then it got worse."*

When the chance arose for Tisha to work the third shift, Sunday to Thursday from 10:30 p.m. to 6:30 a.m., she eagerly took it. Third shift was better for several reasons: an increase in salary, fulfillment of her "responsibility" to oversee the children's meals and schoolwork, and the fact that the children slept while she worked:

*"After I see my son off then I will lay down and I will sleep. I will sleep all the way until 3:30 or 4:00 and then I will get up and I will make dinner. We will go over homework and after that I lay back down about seven, sometimes my girls will lay with me. All three of us will lay down and my son will be watching TV and we will sleep and I will get up and get ready for work. I will leave them, and my son is sleeping by that time because he is young. So it works out pretty good. I am here to where if they need to go to the library after school, if they catch the bus they can go. When I was at work they could not go."*

The new schedule allowed Tisha to help the children with schoolwork which was extremely important to her: "Nobody can or wants to teach your children like you do." The new schedule also meant that the children were safer and less apt to do anything that might create a conflict between the responsibilities of work and home. Even though Tisha's mother was always on call, as was her boyfriend who lived with the family, Tisha assumed primary responsibility for the children's oversight. Tisha's elder daughter Angelita had also developed an acute sense of responsibility for her siblings, having grown up in the midst of her mother's drug business, such that Tisha entrusted her with keeping the door locked and responding appropriately to an emergency.

In addition to providing shift flexibility, Product Manufacturing Company offered the context for Tisha to employ her strong networking and communication skills in a constructive capacity. Not long after she began work, Tisha's supervisor asked her to be a mentor to new employees as part of the company's new mentor program (Glander, 1999). Mentoring was a role that suited Tisha who had good managerial skills and was already someone her co-workers approached for help: "Every time somebody has a problem I am always an ear." The solidarity she felt with others who were struggling made her a natural candidate, as did her loyalty to Product Manufacturing Company. Tisha recalled one meeting where workers complained about the company's lack of a pension plan, a complaint that bothered Tisha who, as a result of her felony record, was grateful for her job and more focused on meeting her present needs than those of the future. Only later, when she felt more confident and had met her family's basic needs, did Tisha appreciate the notion of a pension plan.

Serving as a mentor was a positive step for Tisha. Although fledgling, the program had strong organizational support: "The managers get really involved and I like that. They are really good about it." However, managerial support did not extend to offering mentor training during work hours. When Tisha worked the second shift, the mentor's meeting began after the shift ended at 10:30 p.m. This meant she seldom got to bed before 2 a.m., which pitted getting sufficient sleep against getting the children off to school in the mornings. While she continued to mentor, she did so less frequently, although her popularity never waned.

**Advancement.** Into her second year of work, Tisha's employment success was featured prominently in an article in the union newsletter. Nevertheless, lack of confidence to apply her skills in a higher position obstructed an available opportunity for advancement:

*“I like to work with people. There was a supervisor job but I thought you needed experience so I didn’t apply for it. I wish now that I had. I’d like to find some way to get experience or education or something to help along those lines.”*

While she eventually got further training, it was not in managerial skills but in construction. Tisha gradually grew accustomed to advocating for herself, at one point voicing concerns about her supervisor’s unprofessional manner directly to the supervisor, with favorable results. Tisha called upon the researcher as a sounding board and editor for this task, suggesting the utility of an official retention resource:

*“Just like you and me talked about, when you were there, the things that we put on the list, that’s how I did it. Since then she’s been really nice. She found out I just wanted to make it better at work.”*

With practice, Tisha felt she could eventually be a supervisor: “Maybe I’ll be a shop supervisor one day.”

**Income Adequacy.** While Tisha made what she considered a family supporting wage at Product Manufacturing Company, although later she said it was not enough, her final wage of \$9.71/hour (\$10.51 when 3rd shift) resulted in an annual income of \$19,420, exactly poverty level for a family of 5. Accordingly, she also received food stamps, qualified for free lunch for the children, paid her utility bills piecemeal, and was eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit. Regrettably, her EITC rebate “went to the cosmetology school that went out of business while I was going to it.” Tisha worried about the high cost of feeding three teenagers and relied on the study honorarium to “always come just when I had a bill.” Despite these hardships, the stability of her MJI job and income allowed Tisha to purchase her own home in a new neighborhood distant from the old, which was a source of deep pride. Her mortgage for the new home was \$653 per month, the approximate cost of rentals in her neighborhood, but a punishing 42% of her monthly gross income.

### Post-MJI Employment: Steel Company

After 19 months of steady work, Tisha was temporarily laid off from Product Manufacturing Company due to a decrease in orders and production. Although this period only lasted one week and was accompanied by Unemployment Insurance benefits, Tisha began to question the reliability of her employer and enrolled in carpentry classes at CCWC to prepare for the apprenticeship program. Likewise, Tisha was displeased that she had to return to the daytime shift, losing time with her children and the night shift premium. She also questioned whether union membership aided job retention: “I wonder if I should stay in the union. I’m thinking about letting that membership go. If you can’t get and keep work, then what’s the point?” Having missed the carpentry apprenticeship test because of a required court appearance, Tisha decided to focus her skill development more narrowly and enrolled in a dry wall apprenticeship. This period was invigorating for Tisha, but also taxed her energy stores and left little time for family: “Home, [school], and work—I was tiring myself out.” Tisha soon decided to look for another job and began work on her resume. She also stopped pursuing the dry wall apprenticeship, due to time constraints and the closing of CCWC.

After almost two years at Product Manufacturing Company, in August 2000 Tisha obtained a new job as a Spot Welder for Steel Company. Her starting wage was \$10.93/hour, Monday through Friday from 6 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., a schedule that worked well with her parenting responsibilities: “We all come in about the same time.” Regular overtime raised her annual income potential to approximately \$28,500—a \$9000 increase over her annual income at Product

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Manufacturing Company. Although the new income was just short of 200% of the federal poverty level, her partner's new income of \$18,000 elevated the family above poverty. By April 2001, Tisha earned \$12.50 per hour which put her \$43 over the threshold for food stamps eligibility. Tisha described the paradoxical loss her advancement incurred:

*"\$43 can't feed 5 people. If it wasn't for Maine, I don't know how I would make it. If I had to do it myself, I'd have to call mom. We get up in the morning to milk and cereal that Maine has provided."*

Tisha's new company offered greater advancement opportunity through a process of bidding on other jobs after passing skill mastery tests. The wage ceiling for non-managerial workers like Tisha was \$19/hour. Although not a union position, the array of benefits Steel Company offered impressed Tisha so much that she brought them to the attention of her former employer. Both employers offered health benefits, but in contrast to Product Manufacturing Company, the new employer offered funeral leave, life insurance, a pension plan and tuition reimbursement for children's college. Tisha's appreciation of these benefits marked a new, longer-term view compared to her earlier focus on meeting the basics. She particularly valued the availability of inexpensive life insurance coverage for herself and each of the children and the tuition benefits for their college: "Even though they're all talking now about the Air Force, at least there's an alternative with the reimbursement." Tisha was also thrilled to be able to work overtime hours resulting in a potential annual income of \$30,600—just short of self-sufficiency according to the Self-Sufficiency Standard for Wisconsin (Pearce, 2000), a more nuanced, contextual calculation of income adequacy than the federal poverty guideline:

*"I'm working 9½ hours a day and 8 hours on Saturdays. All I can think about is dollar signs. At my previous job, I could barely make ends meet. I couldn't do the things I wanted to do, like fix up the house and family activities."*

In actuality, Saturday work was mandatory. If she worked two Saturdays in a row, she was able to take the next two off. Although the long-term effects of this schedule on her children's needs were uncertain, Tisha rejoiced in a family outing that resulted from the extra money. They went out to dinner and to a drive-in movie, the type of evening they had not experienced for a long time or perhaps ever.

When asked how she found her new job, Tisha's reply displayed a confidence that she attributed to MJI and two years of successful employment:

*"I just happened to call the Human Resources guy Don. I said, 'Don, this is Tisha.' Don asked, 'Tisha who?' and I answered, 'Tisha who is interested in a job.' When I went in, I'd come from work and was dirty, head to toe. I told Don, 'I dressed up just for you.' Don said, 'I like you already.'"*

Once employed, Tisha again approached Don about the possibility of starting a mentoring program like that at Product Manufacturing Company. While Don felt such a program was not necessary at Steel Company, it was significant that Tisha attempted to initiate change and had developed enough confidence to make managerial suggestions. She thought she might eventually ask the WRTP Retention Specialist to advocate with her for the addition of mentoring.

Two months into the new job, Tisha enrolled in a new series of dry wall and paint classes through a program located at the YWCA. While this program would help Tisha develop her skills, it was not an apprenticeship program. The only way Tisha felt she could enroll in an apprenticeship program would be to stop working, which she was not economically prepared to do:

*“You have to take a big pay cut. My friend [who first introduced Tisha to MJI] keeps trying to persuade me to do it. After the first year, I’d be making more than now. I still want to go on, but not right now. It’s on hold.”*

Similar tension between advancement opportunities through apprenticeships and the economic and interpersonal demands of family members was experienced by other Jobs Initiative families.

## Neighborhood and Family

The Milwaukee neighborhood where Tisha and her family lived was residential, the blocks lined with well-kept one and two-family homes. However, the urban neighborhood lacked the convenience of corner stores, something that bothered Tisha who cited her son’s five-block walk to purchase a soda as indicative of the problem. With unflagging business sensibilities, Tisha mentioned her desire to open a candy store to fill the need for local commerce. The fact that Tisha had to do the majority of her shopping outside of the neighborhood meant she ran into people who knew her from “before,” something she tried to avoid. Tisha’s past made her, however, somewhat of an urban expert, not only in neighborhoods and their varying degrees of safety, but also in personal safety. This expertise extended to her children who would not go to other children’s houses without Tisha’s approval of the home and who gave themselves pseudonyms when approached by strangers. Tisha’s past also created a loyalty and mutual protectiveness among the siblings: “They can get on each other’s case, but other people can’t.” This otherwise functional loyalty had, on at least one occasion (relayed below) been problematic.

Tisha’s home was marked by an absence of yelling as well as buoyancy. Family members rarely screamed to one another across rooms; they were also rarely observed sharing moments of lightheartedness, perhaps an effect of the myriad changes they had experienced together and the intensity of their daily lives and responsibilities. Common rooms in Tisha’s home had evolved over time into comfortable living spaces decorated with family pictures and art chosen carefully at yard sales. Tisha insisted that there be no television in the living room because “as soon as I came home from work, I’d be tempted to just sit down and not get up.” The children each had their own bedroom. During her brief period of unemployment Tisha considered leasing out a portion of her home, but decided against it based on the family’s need for personal space.

Tisha shared her home with Maine, her boyfriend of three years about whom she did not divulge much, except to say: “He really takes a father role. He is good with the kids and will do anything I ask of him.” During the course of Tisha’s research participation, Maine remained an enigmatic but supportive figure in the family’s life:

*“He praises me on them [work successes] a lot. If I say I just don’t feel like going to work, he says ‘come on, you gotta go,’ and I go.”*

Maine was newly employed at Product Manufacturing Company and during Tisha’s temporary period of unemployment helped pay her bills. He also supplemented the children’s summer savings with his earnings in order to maximize their ability to buy school clothes and supplies. However, Tisha expressed a reluctance to deepen her commitment to Maine, despite their talk of marriage: “I’ve been almost married three times...I’m the major breaker-upper.” One aspect of Tisha’s hesitation to marry Maine may have been reluctance to rely on anyone but herself for



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resources, particularly a man. Tisha had not pursued her children's fathers for child support despite the fact that both were employed, largely because one was an active drug user and the other had another family to support. Tisha's reluctance to count on the finances of a partner, as she regarded Maine's contributions as supplementary, was something she learned from her mother and was passing on to her daughters:

*"My mom told me that a woman should always have her own money that a man knows nothing about, just for emergencies. You never know what can happen. I have a few hundred dollars. Not much. But it's there."*

As Tisha explained this philosophy, her daughter sat at the kitchen table nodding in agreement.

Tisha's mother Elena, who Tisha characterized as "my best friend," figured prominently in the life and history of the family as a crucial and reliable family support. Tisha revealed that her mother was a Holocaust survivor, a fact that Juan's teacher accused him of fabricating in an essay he wrote for class, which precipitated Elena's talk with the teacher about the danger of assumptions based on skin color. When Tisha was recovering from surgery, her mother stayed with the family, cooking and cleaning for them throughout the recovery. Moreover, in summer 2000 Tisha's youngest child, Amberia, went to live with Elena.

Elena's personal aspirations were both eclipsed by and embedded in the sacrifices she had made on behalf of her grandchildren, perhaps in part to atone for time lost with Tisha during her several years in foster care. Elena was also very attached to the children, providing them a room in her home, and even providing Amberia, whose father was absent, a room in her best friend's home. At one time Elena studied for a nursing degree, but was unable to continue because of what she described as "stuff with Tisha." This "stuff" included not only caring for the children for two years while Tisha was in prison, but also paying the rent during this time so the children could return to Tisha's care without intervention from child protective services. Elena's friend described her accordingly: "You're always helping someone else out... it's time you have something for yourself." Tisha's new employment and stability may have allowed Elena to heed her friend's advice.

Aside from her mother, Tisha had few immediate family supports, as her two siblings were both struggling in their own right. Her brother occasionally picked up the children from school, but had his own family and financial burdens, and her sister was preoccupied with an untrustworthy partner. Nevertheless, Tisha was still able to support others. Through the summer and fall she served as an "informal" foster parent to her 16-year old "niece," the daughter of a friend who had drug problems. Although Amberia lamented insufficient time with her mother because of the family addition, Tisha felt compelled to help this disadvantaged youth:

*"She's really sweet. She gets on the honor roll and everything at school. But sometimes she doesn't even have enough to eat, because of her mother. I've taken food over to her."*

Tisha's sense of responsibility had always extended beyond her family, something that helped her succeed as a MJI participant. However, only with the advent of new employment and life after prison did she start to think more globally about her efficacy. In a discussion of voting, Tisha said:

*This will be the first time in my life that I've ever voted. I never knew the importance of it, especially until I got the privilege taken away. Now I can do it. I plan to vote in November.*

Angelita and Juan’s civic engagement developed alongside Tisha’s as they participated in a rally to protest funding reductions in Milwaukee public schools. Their ire was generated by the felt infringement on equal opportunity: “Schools of the arts are the only way the minority students have to get [exposure] to artistic events and education.” After 18 months of growth through employment, Tisha was in a position to support Juan when he said, “I think people should say what they want.” By May 2001, at study end, Tisha had voted in the November election as planned. She had also spoken before an audience of 3,426 Brownies and Girl Scouts who had gathered at a local University to hear Tisha and others describe their jobs. She was pleased to report the girls’ reaction to her story:

*“We talked about our jobs, why we liked them, why we picked them. We told them that we picked them partly because we didn’t see any women doing our jobs. Their eyes widened open when we said we didn’t see women doing it.”*

Amberia attended with Tisha, passing out pencils and hearing her mother proudly describe her entry into non-traditional employment.

## Parenting

Tisha described her children as respectful of her wishes and indicated she would not have it otherwise. She was committed to parenting and expected them to respond in kind, by doing regular chores and taking appropriate responsibility for themselves. In turn, she made time to attend their recitals, braid their hair, and read with them. She was also able to parent without the role confusion that resulted from combined parenting and drug selling. While Angelita could assume the role of eldest sibling, she no longer had to tell her mother to “be careful.” The children had been taught that actions have consequences, both from observing their mother’s incarceration and her more positive experience working. Tisha did not shelter her children from the realities of her life and the streets, although she worried for their safety and gave them responsibility more out of necessity than preference. Tisha was reluctant to let Angelita apply for her first job without Tisha as well, to make Angelita “more comfortable.” Some of this protectiveness was due to Tisha’s time in prison, when she was unable to care for her children, and some to Angelita’s petite stature which Tisha feared made her more vulnerable. This protectiveness abated as she grew more accustomed to having the children take responsibility for themselves and as she excelled at Product Manufacturing Company. In summer 2000, Angelita and her brother Juan worked full time at a fast food outlet and Tisha taught them fiscal responsibility through the opening of passbook savings accounts:

*“I’m making them save it [the money they earn] though. They have savings accounts. I made them open them. \$10 or \$20 every time they get paid. That money they can’t touch. The rest of the money they can spend on whatever they need it for.”*

Tisha’s three children inherited their mother’s negotiation skills, as all had been peer mediators in their schools. However, as expected, each child was unique in his or her needs and attributes. Tisha attempted to treat each child as an individual, despite the energy it took. When Tisha cooked Tacos for dinner one night, she anticipated the protests of Juan and cooked his meal with ingredients separate from the rest of the family. Tisha was clear that this was a “once-in-a-while thing” but that she tried to accommodate her children when it was easy enough to do so. This attention to Juan may also have revealed his status as the only boy in the family, a traditional status that was alluded to only occasionally in such comments as, “I always taught Juan to stand up for his sisters, and he does.”

### Children's Welfare and Schools

The Fall 2000 report cards for all three Shanks children exhibited A's and B's with an occasional C. All three also attended what were considered to be exemplary Milwaukee public schools; the high schools chosen through consultation with middle school counselors. The children pursued their homework after school whether or not Tisha was present to supervise it, and the fact that their mother was at "school" too, at her carpentry classes, was a source of identification and pride.

**Angelita.** Angelita was a petite 16-year old adolescent whose stature was partly the result of rheumatic fever that she contracted as a child and for which she continued to take penicillin. Despite her age, in the 1999-2000 school year Angelita was in the ninth grade, having repeated the first grade because "she needed glasses." Similar to other adolescents, Angelita vacillated between bouts of responsible and irresponsible behavior. Her mother became exasperated with her when she lost her savings passbook, but in the same breath said she knew Angelita would come home on time. As the primary witness to her mother's previous lifestyle, Tisha felt that Angelita received a sobering introduction to adulthood: "She had so much experience with my past." Despite the past, and perhaps owing to a different present, Angelita was doing well academically after the period of struggle that coincided with Tisha's period of 2nd shift work.

During her freshman year Angelita was proudly elected homecoming princess by her classmates. Outside of classes and weekend/summer work, Angelita did not participate in extracurricular activities, although she used to dance. Her preference for work over activities may have been partially the result of Tisha's new work and a preoccupation with material goods. While this was not unusual among adolescents, it evidenced Tisha's concern that the family used to have more material goods as a result of her drug business and was adjusting to having less. As Angelita's sister Amberia told Tisha, "I wouldn't want to live in a house like, you know, where poor people live."

Angelita attended a city high school that the Washington Post ranked 107<sup>th</sup> among the top 230 high schools in the nation. The Post report highlighted the list of Advanced Placement courses available to students. For the 1998-99 school year, Angelita's school had the lowest dropout rate in the Milwaukee public school district (Milwaukee Public Schools, 2000). These positive attributes notwithstanding, the average percentage of tenth graders scoring Proficient or above across five subjects was 46%, somewhat higher than average for the district, but considerably lower than the Wisconsin state average of 63%. These figures suggest that Angelita's school provided those students who were above average with several outlets to excel, but only moderate outlets for the majority of students to master the basics. Where Angelita fit in this schema was unclear. Angelita also emphasized that her school was "nothing like Amberia's school [which she attended previously]; it's just different. The teachers are different." By this she meant that her teachers paid more attention to the students. At Amberia's school, she said, "you have to make it on your own." A visit with Angelita's school principal, however, indicated that administrative involvement with students and their families occurred only in the event of a "serious" situation. Absent a serious event, children such as Angelita were considered generally good students. Whether more individualized attention was provided by teachers was not known.

**Juan.** Juan was a ninth grader at a different public high school that received accolades in a 2000 Newsweek article ranking the top U.S. high schools. Like Angelita's school, Juan's school had a low dropout rate in 1998-99, but a higher percentage of tenth graders scoring Proficient or above for five subjects (52.8%) (Milwaukee Public Schools, 2000). His school also had an International Baccalaureate program that allowed students to obtain college credit

and, in some cases, enroll as sophomores in college. Juan was enrolled in this program and by sophomore year had already been offered a full scholarship to a college in Tennessee. However, Juan wanted to go to Harvard or, more generally, a “place like New York or Chicago or California” and didn’t think he would “like the South.”

Juan was a shy, quiet, and sensitive adolescent who preferred writing poetry, artwork, and listening to music to going to parties with friends. Perhaps in being sensitive to his mother’s full schedule or from past conditioning, Juan had developed an unhealthy level of stoicism, waiting twice until the last minute to tell his mother he was experiencing tooth pain so that in both instances he needed a root canal. While he also preferred to keep his poetry private, he considered showing it to us “if it’s going to help other people.” Juan was the most hesitant to be interviewed for the research, yet he offered the greatest insights into his mother’s new lifestyle. He was afraid that speaking to outsiders meant “they are going to mess something up for us again,” illustrating that he was still acclimating to his family’s newfound stability. He believed MJI “helped her [his mother] and the family” and that success was achieved through balance and meeting the right people:

*“You have to work. And you have to look for what you want. You should give up some things to get what you want, but you shouldn’t sacrifice too much. My mom’s made a lot of sacrifice. She works hard and she likes her job. She gets interested in a lot of stuff. I think the job training is a good thing because it’s helped her go on to stuff and she learns about a lot. She seems really interested in what she’s doing. It’s helped the family in general.”*

**Amberia.** Tisha’s youngest child, Amberia, was in the seventh grade at study onset at an arts-focused middle school in whose environment her artistic talents in dance and violin should have flourished. Fifty-two percent of eighth graders scored Proficient or above across five subjects for the 1998-99 school year, significantly higher than the district percentage but lower than the state average of 69.4% (Milwaukee Public Schools, 2000). Thus the school was successful relative to its urban peers but below state proficiency averages. Whether it stood alone as a positive learning environment was questioned during an initial visit to the school where we observed teachers losing their temper and yelling contemptuously at students who, in turn, refused to listen. One teacher spent 20 minutes criticizing the students, during which time many students were inattentive. In contrast, when he addressed the subject matter the students attended fully. The researcher reported that another teacher spent 40 of 45 minutes in “the most shocking display of negative adult behavior that I have ever witnessed in a school setting. The teacher’s shouting hurt my ears.” In response to a student who coughed, this teacher yelled: “GO. Get out of here. Go NOW! Just Git! I’m so sick of you kids and noise and you bad kids. I will get rid of anybody who makes any noise.”

A follow-up visit to Amberia’s school in April 2001 gave a similar impression. Any visible changes instituted over the course of a year were technological. Adults carried two-way radios and used them to communicate with the Vice Principal, while the hallways housed closed circuit television monitors. An administrator, overwhelmed by students’ disciplinary problems, referred the researcher to a student counselor for feedback on Amberia’s school performance. The counselor described Amberia as a “good kid” whose primary fault was her talkativeness. School records showed 8 suspensions for Amberia since September, a number the counselor said was both small relative to the 30-40 of some students and of lesser severity, in that most reflected lateness or absences. Teachers’ written comments about Amberia were unanimous: Amberia had the potential to do better.

Amberia was noncommittal about how she experienced her school. When asked about a teacher whose sarcasm towards her could be interpreted as malignant, she replied “He jokes around with the kids. He’s my favorite teacher.”

## Moving Up is a Steep Climb

While this response illustrated Amberia's self-confidence, it may also have indicated the tough front children develop in an environment that consistently challenges their vulnerability. Another of Amberia's teachers, who confused her with another student, described her as "mature for her age," while still another said "she gets pretty wild in here." These were comments Tisha was either not aware of or chose not to focus on, fixing her attention instead on Amberia's good academic record. In a large class, Amberia was one of the few children who had the required textbook in possession, again testament to Tisha's focus on meeting her children's learning needs.

At home Amberia displayed self-confidence and was the most outspoken with Tisha. This contrasted with the more compliant behavior of Angelita and Juan who, because they were older, experienced their mother's incarceration and previous lifestyle differently and perhaps more acutely. Amberia was the child who spent her summer with Tisha's mother while Juan and Angelita teamed up to work at McDonalds. It was not clear whether the temporary change of residence was remedial or "exile." Regardless, in tandem with Tisha's job turmoil, Amberia's summer at Elena's provided respite for everyone. Elena enrolled Amberia in several summer programs, one of which involved both bicycling and animal care at the Humane Society shelter. Participation in this program required a written recommendation from a teacher or school authority to verify that a child had a behavioral problem at school. Amberia's second summer program involved being tested at a local college to assess her academic needs and began with a two-week program of remediation and computer training followed by an IMAX art enrichment program. Amberia's final activity of the summer was Girl Scout Camp that her grandmother financed. In contrast to the behavioral and academic remediation focus at 2 of the 3 programs, Tisha's view about the past school year was that "Last year Amberia had a few problems, but it wasn't much." The tension between these two positions was not resolved by Fall 2000, although Tisha had instituted a "no phone calls during the week" policy to reduce Amberia's tendency to "socialize a lot." At a later point, when asked whether she would like a mentor through school, Amberia said she could probably benefit from some help.

Amberia's older siblings were protective of her, having been expelled from their school in the past for fighting a boy who was bothering Amberia. In many ways, because of her age at the time of Tisha's incarceration and subsequent MJI participation, Amberia had the greatest freedom within the family to express her thoughts and feelings. She expressed a characteristic balance of filial duty and self-determination when she referred to being a good violinist: "I practice because mom makes me. Anyway, I want to."

## Follow-Up April-May 2001 and Conclusions

**Work.** In May 2001, 15 months after our initial contact and 7 months after we saw her last, Tisha was permanently laid off from her position with Steel Company. Tisha had survived seven previous company lay offs but had prepared herself and her children for imminent unemployment. In anticipation of this lay off, which was occurring at “all the manufacturing companies right now,” Tisha took union and non-union apprenticeship exams. Although she passed all but one section of the union exam, Tisha would have to wait 6 months before retaking the exam. Alternatively, she took and passed the non-union exam that qualified her for a non-union apprenticeship in any carpentry trade. The non-union status did not daunt Tisha who believed that her apprenticeship wage, which was equivalent to her employment wage, would be the same whether union or not. She applied for a non-union apprenticeship, using the letter she received from the Apprenticeship Advisory Committee, and the confidence it inspired, as her entry point. If accepted by a company, Tisha’s apprenticeship wage would be \$13-\$14 per hour and the YWCA would pay her tuition. The YWCA’s “Specialty Job Center,” part of the Milwaukee Job Center Network formed under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA), specialized in nontraditional training opportunities for women such as Tisha.

A consummate networker, Tisha referred four people from work to the YWCA apprenticeship program. Similarly, she felt MJI should present their program in the prisons, to let people know there were legitimate employment options open to them. After holding a “family reading” of her MJI experience, where the researcher, Juan and Angelita took turns reading, Tisha expressed a desire to write a book about her life. To that end, and in hopes of providing a home-based study resource for the children, Tisha purchased a computer for \$329. While this sum, almost the equivalent of her paycheck, worried Tisha, she was convinced of the long-term benefits of her investment. At the same time, Tisha revealed a new willingness to rely on the income her partner provided: “Maine will pay the bills that I couldn’t pay because I bought the computer.” While Tisha remained reluctant to formalize her commitment to Maine, she viewed their family expenses as shared. Maine’s sustained employment at Product Manufacturing Company, earning \$9.71 per hour with no foreseeable layoffs, may have contributed to this subtle change.

**Children.** At follow-up Angelita and Juan were both still steadily employed. Tisha upheld her rule about no weekday work, with the exception of school vacations. Angelita had briefly worked in the food service department of a nursing facility, an environment she initially liked but soon left as a result of hostile coworkers. She returned to her weekend shift at McDonalds, earning \$5.75 per hour. Juan earned \$6 because of his uninterrupted tenure. Both teenagers described their schedule of 7:15 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday as tiring but worth the sacrifice. Juan and Angelita each gave Tisha \$55 per month for car insurance, as both were learning to drive and had learner’s permits. Juan had two separate savings accounts: one for a car, and another for an undisclosed purpose. Angelita had her own phone line and bill to pay. Angelita explained, “I want the things my mother can’t give us” and modeled an elegant, expensive dress she purchased with her earnings that she would wear to a Black Achievers Prom with her new boyfriend. Juan continued his studious behavior and was described by Tisha as “up doing homework all night.” Juan’s teacher reported outstanding results from Juan’s regimen, linking them with family oversight:

*“Juan’s parents must be doing something right. He’s a joy to have in class. He’s polite, gets his work done, and does a good job. He’s very mature.”*

Juan’s maturity enabled him to recognize the sacrifices his mother had made. After reading his family’s story, he said: “It [MJI] should work around kids. I can see from the story that mom didn’t have time to do a lot of things she wants to do.” A profound statement from a recipient of a parent’s conflicting work and family responsibilities.

## Moving Up is a Steep Climb

Despite earlier misgivings about Amberia's school, Angelita planned to attend its sister Arts high school in fall 2001. She missed dance and a curricular emphasis on the arts. At the same time, Angelita expressed a desire to go to college to be a pediatrician, although she also realized that this goal was incompatible with the school change:

*"At [current high school] there's a medical field; it would prepare me more for being a pediatrician. At Arts, there's no telling what I'll decide to do because I won't be prepared for being a pediatrician."*

Arts would not require as much from her academically, which was good in her estimation since she was not used to working so hard. That Tisha did not appear concerned about Angelita's decision to change schools may have reflected several things. For one, Tisha recognized the unique qualities each of her children possessed and may have tailored her expectations for their education accordingly. Alternately, she may have missed signs that Angelita was shying away from an academic challenge. Since this did not qualify in the school's eyes as a "serious" situation, there was no obvious cause for alarm.

In April 2001 Amberia was suspended from school for a kicking incident in the hallway. She had also sprained her ankle twice, once from unrelated kicking in her hallway at home. Tisha felt Amberia was most like her, as they were both a little "wild, energetic and confrontational." Tisha found it difficult to set limits with Amberia, in part because Maine had difficulty enforcing them. On the day of her suspension, Maine had been the one to get Amberia at school and enforce her punishment which was extra chores around the house. Tisha later discovered that Maine paid Amberia for these chores, somewhat obviating the "punishment" aspect. It was also difficult for Tisha to set limits, as Amberia's outbursts and coming of age coincided with Tisha's growth outside of her family and work roles. The tension this caused was only partially buffered by Elena's involvement. Tisha's recent unemployment and desire to begin an apprenticeship could further strain the energy she has to steer Amberia through adolescence, potentially reversing the progress Amberia's teachers reported:

*"Amberia has generally improved in her deportment and grades. Amberia shows a lot of improvement over last year when she was quite a handful. Her parents must be doing more work with her."*

As with other Jobs Initiative families, parent oversight was only one part of the "formula" for children's success. A school counselor rued that the school had insufficient supports to steer the "Amberias" onto a fully constructive path:

*"I'd really like to have a mentoring program in place for some of the kids in this school like Amberia. . . but with the budget cuts, we only have one counselor—me. All of the teachers and staff are overworked and we don't have the extra-curricular activities that we once did, before the funding cuts"*

State budget decisions also played a critical role in the progress of children from hard-working families:

*"The projected MPS [Milwaukee Public Schools] budget shortfall for 2001 will mean cuts in services for students with special education needs; the loss of music, art, physical education, library and reading specialist services; outdated textbooks; deferred maintenance; and less support for the most needy students from educational assistants, social workers, psychologists, and other staff (Copeland, 2000)."*

**Conclusions.** In the face of similar budget cuts for adult education and vocational training, the Jobs Initiative played such a role in the lives of these children’s parents. At the end of our contact with the Shanks family, when asked what made MJI a “stepping stool,” Tisha credited the supportive relationships and connections:

*“I think the program is a substitute for some people who don’t have a family or family support. The job program is a substitute. A person has to dig and find people though—[like the CCWC staff]. They let me know I was better than I thought I was. They’d say ‘What do you mean you can’t do it? You can do it’...and I think they’re saying it for a reason, not just because they’re your daughter or mother.”*

For Tisha, who had never received support outside of her family relationships, MJI offered the opportunity to see her efforts come to fruition, to be rewarded by the world of work, and to make a positive impact on her children and community. Despite friend and family resources, Tisha needed to see her work judged on its merits in a new context. In the process she provided her family with a work ethic that fortunately emphasized personal accomplishment as well as the acquisition of material goods, as these were still hard to come by. Tisha continued to struggle to make ends meet and awaited the return of her full driving privileges, but her job pathway brought her closer and closer to a family-supporting wage.

Tisha’s goal-focused orientation and dogged motivation combined with the opportunity MJI afforded her to produce greater material comfort, constructive role modeling, and more consistent parenting for her children than were possible in her past life. The children’s academic performance, social interactions, and views about possible futures strongly reflected Tisha’s advances. Remaining challenges were both particular to the Shanks family and similar to those expressed by other ethnographic study participants.

The long-term tension between mandatory and/or voluntary overtime and meeting children’s needs, as noted in other Jobs Initiative families, was particularly challenging for Tisha as she balanced her desire for an increased standard of living with the character of her parenting. Related to this, Amberia’s school performance, Angelita’s concern about sufficient time with her mother, and Juan’s reticence led us to wonder whether the children had been afforded adequate time and consultation to process the traumas of the past: police confrontations, absent mother, and residential moves. Tisha’s perspective was that this time was over: “If it comes up, we talk about it, but that doesn’t happen too much. It’s in the past.” However, the children’s perspectives suggested that these earlier traumas were not fully resolved, hinted at by Juan’s hesitancy to talk with the researcher and Tisha’s recounting of Amberia’s reaction to a recent police incident:

*“So I got pulled over and then I got a ticket for driving without a license because I don’t have a license until that morning. So what affected me was my younger daughter was in the car with me, she was in the back seat sleeping and the officer when he ran my name came up and said I was driving without headlights, he asked me to step out of the car and he asked me if my daughter was a minor and I said ‘yeah’ and so he searched me and he asked me if I had any weapons on me, can I search the car? This was just maybe a month ago and he searched the car and my daughter is looking at me and my daughter has a mind that that is over with, it is no more fear, it is supposed to be done and because she had so much experience with my past, she just started crying and I said he is just doing it, just don’t panic, ‘you sure you are not going to jail mommy?’ and I said ‘no we are going home,’ and after he gave me the ticket then we got back in the car and she was like ‘my mom ain’t going to jail.’”*



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Tisha was also reluctant to explore emotionally-charged incidents of her own past, including a tumultuous period of foster care and an unsuccessful try at living with her biological father. These unresolved hurts may have impacted her choice to sell drugs in her youth and also her hesitance to accept promotion opportunities at the Product Manufacturing Company job. Increased competence-building experiences through work and apprenticeship will likely fill such cracks in her self-confidence over time. Considering the breach in felt-support from her family of origin, despite their closeness now, the importance of adults in supportive and motivating roles through the Jobs Initiative takes on increased salience for Tisha's future advancement and overall family well-being. A possible resource, both in terms of Tisha's employment and family needs, was WRTP. Tisha had not had recent contact with anyone at WRTP, but was open to such contact, expressing fondness for her retention specialist. Additional retention-focused contact could help sustain the significant gains Tisha and her family have made through MJI. Fortunately, the help she received through MJI/WRTP resulted in increased willingness to seek resources. Equally important, Tisha gained knowledge about *how* to use resources to augment her notable contribution to her family's welfare.