

Walking the Tightrope of Poverty *continued from front page*

near Kristof's family farm, four of the five children are now dead — one from liver failure from drink and drugs, one in a house fire after passing out drunk, one suffered mental illness and died from hepatitis as a result of drug use, and the fourth died in a fire when the meth he was cooking exploded. The fifth child, an elementary school math prodigy, survived, mostly, the writers surmise, because he spent 13 years in the state penitentiary, even though he is living with HIV and hepatitis and says he's had more broken bones than he can count.

Yes, Kristof acknowledges, some of the misery came from personal decisions that were self-destructive. But through their research, Kristof and WuDunn found that governmental policies, and institutional and societal structures, compound the effects of poverty.

In researching the book, Kristof and WuDunn visited all 50 states where they found, since 2000, American's average net worth has diminished, more people say they are dissatisfied with the way things are going in the country, people experience higher levels of stress, anger, and worry, and life expectancy had decreased for several years in a row.

In their travels they learned the loss of timber jobs in Oregon isn't that different from the loss of coal mining jobs in Appalachia or factory jobs in the north, and the pain they face is shared with neighborhoods in American cities. "...it struck us both how many commonalities there are between a white farm town in Oregon and a black neighborhood in Baltimore..." they write.

The book notes that many of the family stories documented started out with great promise several generations back — increased levels of education, living wage jobs, home ownership — in other words, a shot at the American Dream. "For much of working-class America, the dream is now dead. It's dead like all those children on the #6 school bus," they write.

While many Americans continue to see our country as the land of opportunity and power, and that is true in some regards, worldwide we have the top ranked economy and military. But dig a little deeper and you find a harsher reality in everyday life, especially for the working-class. Data from 146 countries around the world found the U.S. ranked 41 in child mortality, 46 in internet ac-

cess, 44 in access to clean drinking water, 57 in personal safety, 30 in high school enrollment, and 26 in citizen well-being. 68,000 people in this country die each year from drug overdoses, 88,000 from alcohol abuse, and 47,000 from suicide — what are considered "deaths of despair."

What exactly led to this downfall of so many working-class people in this country? The book goes on to explore a number of factors that, over the last 50 years, have led to whole swaths of citizens who are left out, despondent, and demoralized. Kristof and WuDunn don't shy away from self-responsibility. The families they talked with in Yamhill County were painfully honest about the causes of their troubles. But while there is a tendency to blame the victim, really there is plenty of blame to go around. Kristof points to politicians, journalists, religious leaders, and business executives who stood back and watched as communities crumbled, with no plan to address the compounding problems.

One of the kids the book focuses on is Kevin Green, a classmate of Kristof's who rode the #6 bus; Kristof and Green were teammates on the Yamhill Carlton High School cross country team. A weak academic student, Green excelled in shop classes and was a good mechanic. Short of enough credits to graduate, he earned a GED, becoming the first male member of his family to finish a high school equivalent education. Green's father Tom was illiterate but a hard worker who had managed to find a good union job, buy a farm, and had his family on an upward trajectory in the 1970s. Times were good in rural Yamhill County. But then, about the time Kevin graduated, things started to change. A local glove factory closed, sawmills started shutting down, and automation took jobs away. Kevin found a good job, but the factory then closed. He met his girlfriend who had two daughters and they had twin boys together. He found another good job as a welder, but the same thing happened, the factory closed, then his girlfriend left him, and Kevin's self esteem declined. He tried making furniture and selling it, but he got behind on child support payments, and (here's where policy impacted him) the state took away his driver's license as a penalty. He started using drugs, had a minor scrape with

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GATS Mural Painted in Vernonia

World famous and legendary street artist GATS now has a second piece of artwork in Vernonia.

The iconic mask that GATS is best known for now adorns the back side of the All In Pub on Bridge

surrounding building walls and other publicly viewed surfaces. In many instances it is intended to make a personal statement about the society that the artist lives within. It had its beginnings as graffiti and vandalism,



Street. The mural is part of a mural project and festival that will bring other street artists to Vernonia at the end of August and see several more murals added to the walls of local businesses.

GATS is an Oakland, California based artist whose work has appeared around the country, including the chip shed at the Vernonia Mill Pond, as well as internationally in places like Palestine, the Philippines, and Rome. But his work is best known in the Pacific Northwest.

GATS stands for "Graffiti Against the System." His real identity remains unknown and he does not allow his face to be photographed when he is working.

Street art is a form of visual artwork that is displayed in public on

but expanded to new modes where artists work to bring messages, or just beauty, to a public audience.

While GATS's work has become recognized worldwide, and now appears in both public and on private buildings by request (like the artwork at the All In Pub), much of his work is still done outside and without permission. In a 2017 interview with Portland based Street Roots newspaper, he said this: "I paint for the houseless because they are my most true audience. Most of my work is on the streets, under bridges, in abandoned buildings, on trains, in public restrooms, and on dumpsters. When it's in the streets, everyone owns it and no one owns it. Everyone can enjoy it."

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