

Walking the Tightrope of Poverty *continued from page 5*

the law, and ended up with a criminal record, which made it harder to find a job. Debts mounted, he gained weight, was isolated and lonely, and continued to spiral downward. Then his boys started getting into trouble, beginning in fourth grade for stealing, later for drug felonies, sex abuse, and probation violations. Neither finished high school. Kevin wasn't lazy – he'd walk for miles collecting cans on the side of the road, loved to hike and fish, especially at Haag Lake in Yamhill County, and would help Kristof's mother with repairs on her farm. Kevin suffered from obesity and diabetes without health care and in 2014 his organs began to fail. He died at home in January 2015 at the age of 54. Kevin's brother Clayton found himself on a similar path, addicted to meth, obese, unemployed, with a criminal record; Clayton died in 2019 at the age of 57.

Kristof and WuDunn follow two main themes in the book – the causes of the collapse of working-class families which often goes unnoticed in more privileged parts of the country, and the decades long social policy decisions that have been implemented – the war on drugs, the indifference to blue collar job losses, lack of adequate health care, tax breaks for the wealthy, unequal educational opportunities, a biased justice system, and lack of investment in children's and community services like drug treatment. We've become a country that can be oblivious to the reasons people fall behind and can't lift themselves up, with no comprehension of why many children grow up with the odds stacked against them from day one.

Filled with stories similar to Kevin Green's, you're probably thinking this sounds like a depressing book, and much of it is. Many of the stories are brutal gut punches filled with heartbreak.

But a third theme does emerge as you move through the chapters. The subtitle of the book is *Americans Reaching for Hope*, and Kristof and WuDunn do find these huge challenges are not insurmountable and provide multiple ideas for bipartisan policies and social programs that could give a hand up to those in need and help reduce suffering. "We aim to nurture understanding, empathy, and a willingness to offer helping hands rather than point fingers," they

write.

They share the story of Mary Daly who grew up as a good student in a small town near St. Louis. Family issues caused Mary to drop out of high school at 15; she moved in with friends, got a job in a donut shop, and aspired to become a bus driver. A school counselor helped her pass the GED and paid for her first semester of college. Mary immediately excelled, earning a degree in Economics from the University of Missouri, then a master's and a PhD. She went to work at the Federal Reserve where she was mentored by Janet Yellen, and is now considered "one of the most powerful shapers of economic policy in the United States." Daly was lucky – she had someone who took an interest and provided some support at a key moment in her life. Daly says there are "a lot of little diamonds" who slip through the cracks.

Obviously, not everyone in Kristof's high school failed, so the book looks for influential factors in the lives of these "escape artists," as they are termed in the book. Several went on to earn PhDs or find successful careers as a pilot, banker, teacher, and dancer. Of these kids, most had engaged parents who valued education and were involved in the community; Kristof's parents were academics who also owned a small farm. These successful kids learned money management from their families and were involved in school activities. They had strong peer groups which often competed for academic achievement. There was a strong Mormon community which offered fellowship and after school activities for youth – the Mormon kids didn't seem to find themselves getting in trouble. Some successful kids joined the military which taught discipline and future job skills.

Researchers at the Brookings Institute found that young people who follow three rules, called "the success sequence" have a much higher chance of avoiding poverty later in life. Those that followed the three rules – graduate from high school, get a full-time job, and get married before having children – had just a two percent chance of ending up in poverty, while 79 percent of those who were unable to do any of the three things, live in poverty.

The book provides an exten-

sive list of ways people end up trapped in those cycles of poverty, sometimes due to their own bad decisions, but often exacerbated by policies, and find themselves unable to access support or find that helping hand. But for each problem, Kristof and WuDunn also offer solutions. Here are a few examples:

- The U.S. leads the world in incarceration rates. Kids who make bad decisions and get in trouble early in life, often find themselves enmeshed in the criminal justice system and have a hard time getting out. The war on drugs, monetization and inequitable sentencing, and lack of access to legal aid, all disproportionately lead to the poor ending up institutionalized. Statistics show half of America's crime is caused by just five percent of the population. Convicted felons can't join the military and often have trouble finding a job. The book proposes creating universal preschool which is key to child development, other school programs to help keep kids away from crime, along with more prison programs to help inmates adjust to life outside. They also support the idea of national service opportunities, especially for at-risk kids who don't graduate from high school or who have a criminal record, similar to the Civilian Conservation Corp from the 1930s.

- Outcomes are statistically better for kids who grow up in a two-adult, stable household, while children from fragmented families often struggle within a society that does not support single parent families, and can moralize the issue. Students who grow up with just one involved biological parent are 40 percent less likely to graduate from high school. With high rates of teen pregnancy and divorce, that leaves a lot of children starting out with one factor already against them. Mass incarceration rates and the loss of blue collar jobs have exacerbated these issues. Kristof and WuDunn found that access to family planning, employer provided family leave, vocational programs in schools, and subsidies like the Earned Income Credit help increase the chances families will succeed and provide a more stable home life for children.

- Drug and alcohol addiction played a major role in the downfall of many of the family stories in *Tightrope*. Statistics show addictive behavior is often he-

reditary – children who grow up in chaotic and dysfunctional circumstances, often caused by addiction issues in their family, can experience higher levels of stress, unemployment, chronic disease, psychiatric disorders, and early death. And yet access to effective rehab programs remains expensive and difficult to obtain. Funding addiction treatment, suicide prevention, mental health care, early childhood intervention, and after school and mentoring programs, have all been shown to have positive impacts in reducing addiction problems.

Kristof and WuDunn conclude that the biggest indicator of success for children as they move into adulthood is often just luck – being born into a family not struggling with the effects of poverty – and little else. Kristof was lucky and won the parent lottery, where the Knapp and Green children were not. The causes of poverty are complex, as are the outcomes. Changing those outcomes is challenging, but not impossible, as shown by the many programs *Tightrope* explores.

The book ends with a list of eight somewhat lofty proposals that could help reduce poverty and lead to a better life for many of our citizens – ideas like universal high-school graduation and health care, eliminating unwanted pregnancies, a monthly child allowance, ending homelessness for children, and support for living wage jobs.

Understanding the reasons people struggle, providing funding for support, and investing in children, should all be goals our society strives for and embraces.

Tightrope, *Americans Reaching for Hope* by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn is available for check out at the Vernonia Public Library.

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