

# NC CROSSROADS

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## WE ARE THE ONES THAT WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR

Who's going to hear  
our cry if we don't  
start crying out  
for ourselves?

—*Donna Latimer*



North Carolina Humanities Council  
*Weaving Cultures and Communities*

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**Donna Latimer** is Executive Director and co-founder of the New Life Women's Leadership Project, a grassroots organization of low-income women in rural northeastern North Carolina. Responding to the lack of job opportunities in their area, New Life has organized welfare recipients to secure extended benefits and training, and is exploring ways to create sustainable economic development. Latimer's experience as an injured poultry worker led her to a lifelong commitment to organizing. For ten years, with the Center for Women's Economic Alternatives, she organized workers and supporters to fight for fair treatment and safer workplaces, especially for ergonomic standards for repetitive motion jobs.



North Carolina Humanities Council  
*Weaving Cultures and Communities*

### NC CROSSROADS

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*This issue of NC CROSSROADS is dedicated to the memory of Donna Latimer's daughter, Latrasha Bazemore, 1976-2005.*

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***Please support NC CROSSROADS by sending your tax-deductible contributions to NCHC at the address shown above.***

Donna Latimer knows that it takes vision to see, to take in the world whole, to assess it and to act in it. To have vision you must be willing to look in all directions, not just at what seems to be in front of you. It takes listening to hear, not only sounds that are loud and obvious, but small murmurs so quiet or silenced. It takes voice to demand response from others, whether they want to hear or deny it. A resident of Williamston, Donna explains that among the most devastating consequences of her town's long-time poverty is that "people no longer envision having a better life, because when they dream, it's no longer a dream, it's a ... nightmare."

Donna Latimer's powerful and moving story was shared in an interview with NCHC's Jennifer Edwards. Her life experiences demonstrate how politics, economics, culture and society shape local poverty. No single change can eliminate it. For her, the process entrapping people in poverty is not just lack of wealth, inadequate health care or gender discrimination, though these are important parts of the problem. It's also how these are linked to and reinforce systemic problems: racism; lack of affordable and adequate housing; limited skills with no education providing hope for better jobs at living wages; the state's economic development policies; no day care for the children of working parents; domestic abuse; and an unworkable welfare system that isn't adequate for human needs and that punishes public assistance recipients for trying to get out of poverty. A social system that creates and underpins these problems makes it impossible for work, alone, to be enough.

Donna Latimer knows this and believes that there must be a strategy to connect the fragmented ways in which impoverishment breaks people's lives. It is why she turns to voice as a way of beginning to learn how to vision again. It's not so much that people have no voice; it's being able to hear, take in and reckon with the voices they already have individually and collectively. There must be environments that privilege people to tell their own stories and place those narratives in conversation with each other to weave a larger context, to reveal a deeper sense of how people make meaning through everyday life.

Donna Latimer has her own compelling and acute analysis and response to the complex problems of poverty that reveals the interlocking factors creating and sustaining impoverishment. She questions the limitations of prevailing scholarship, policy and programs that tend to focus on discrete statistics and programs to fix the poor. Increasingly, voices like those of Donna and the women she works with at the New Life Women's Leadership Project demand that the rest of society pay attention to the actual experiences of poor people and respond with respect to their dignity, hard work, spirit and courage. Donna challenges us to have the courage to see, hear and envision a very different world.

*Radio listeners can hear and reckon with many extraordinary voices like Donna Latimer's in an intensive radio series on poverty that will air on North Carolina Public Radio—WUNC each day from April 11<sup>th</sup> through April 22<sup>nd</sup>. As a whole, North Carolina Voices: Understanding Poverty, explores how different people define poverty, how those definitions relate to people's real experiences and if and how our understanding of poverty has changed through time. The series includes documentaries, audio portraits, interviews, news features and call-in programs. More information is available at [www.wunc.org](http://www.wunc.org).*



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### **Monday April 11th**

#### *Morning Edition*

What is Poverty?  
Seeds of Sustenance: The Story of the  
North Carolina Fund

#### *The State of Things*

What is Poverty?

#### *All Things Considered*

Seeds of Sustenance (special 30-minute  
documentary at 6 PM)

### **Monday April 18th**

#### *Morning Edition*

The Latina Paradox  
The Trouble with Teeth: Dental Care and the  
Problems of Poverty

#### *The State of Things*

Wealth and Wellness: Who Gets Sick?

#### *All Things Considered*

The Trouble with Teeth (special 30-minute  
documentary at 6 PM)

### **Tuesday April 12th**

#### *Morning Edition*

Who is Poor?  
Looking Back: Poverty Then and Now

#### *The State of Things*

The Legacy of the North Carolina Fund

### **Tuesday April 19th**

#### *Morning Edition*

Jackson Hamlet: Race, Residence and Respect  
Making Ends Meet with HIV

#### *The State of Things*

Rural Poverty: What's Changed?

### **Wednesday April 13th**

#### *Morning Edition*

How the Poor Pay More  
Trading Poverties

#### *The State of Things*

Poverty and Public Opinion

### **Wednesday April 20th**

#### *Morning Edition*

Three Furies: Poverty, Addiction and Mental Illness  
Life After Lifetime Employment

#### *The State of Things*

Who Helps the Poor? The Role of the Church and  
the Role of the State

### **Thursday April 14th**

#### *Morning Edition*

Putting Poverty on a Budget  
The Promised Land Doesn't Hold Much  
Promise Anymore

#### *The State of Things*

The Big Picture: Poverty and the Economy

### **Thursday April 21st**

#### *Morning Edition*

The Need to Read  
There is Where You'll Find Me

#### *The State of Things*

Paths Out of Poverty: Literacy and Education

### **Friday April 15th**

#### *Morning Edition*

Empty Cupboards, Empty Calories  
Getting Off the Streets

#### *The State of Things*

Basic Need: Hunger and Food

### **Friday April 22nd**

#### *Morning Edition*

Dreamland  
Listener Letters

#### *The State of Things*

Paths Out of Poverty: Today's American Dream



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I come from a family of workers. I come from a family that understood the value of work and totally understood the value of a dollar. My grandfather sharecropped and worked real hard on the farm. From as far back as I can remember, I was getting up at five or six in the morning going in the tobacco fields just like an adult. I've always worked. I've always worked.

My mother picked peanuts forever. Then she got a job at a chicken processing plant and left home at 4:30 or five in the morning because she had to hitch a ride to work in the next county. She got home at 3:30 or four and would hurry up and cook dinner. Before she finished getting it on the table, her ride was out on the highway, and she would go pick peanuts until 11 at night. So we very seldom saw her. Our father was not there, so she was left with the task of raising us on her own.



My mother always worked, but it was never enough to move her from a destitute situation to a situation that made sense. Even though she was working two or three jobs, it was never enough. Because not only did you take on yours but you took on the family, and what we defined as family was everyone in the household. We understood what the village was and we operated under that spirit. We were part of an extended family, and my mother was the only one working outside the farm, so she carried the burden.

I really, really believe that she thought working was going to be the answer to the situation that she was in. But it never was, particularly when you're barely making minimum wages. And then she was out of the house. When we saw my mother it was probably an hour in the evening, and she was already worn out from the first job and had to prepare herself mentally for the second. Even Saturdays there was no rest for the weary; she cleaned houses for white families. Sundays we had to be in church, and us being in church was a time for her to get some sleep. It was a time for her to just be alone.

I don't know whether the woman side of my mother—the side of her outside of child-rearing—ever spoke to her and said, "This is who I am." It was not until years later that I saw my mother as a woman and not just as my mother. And then I saw that this woman had the same wants, needs and desires that I had, that this was a woman who wanted to be loved, to be held, to be touched and said nice things to. Oh God, another world opened to me! Because she had always just been the provider.

If I could use the "I Dream of Jeannie" concept and blink back into the past, I would love to hear my mother's voice on what she was going through, how she endured this hardship. But because she was never able to develop a voice, I never heard it. I never knew my mother to say, "Listen, this is killing me, this is stripping me of everything that I can be."

So I am passionate about what's happening with women on public assistance. Being taken from their children to work all these crazy jobs! Because there's never going to be enough; it is absolutely never going to be enough. I know women that leave their small children at home nights when they go off and work a job. We can't call ourselves stay-home moms, because we're considered lazy if we do. We can't make our men do the right thing, because society has not set up support systems for them to be able to do right. By not providing adequate jobs, jobs that pay livable wages, they're taking out of our communities men that are able to be fathers. Those jobs don't happen in places like Williamston. What does happen in the rural eastern part of the state is that prisons are popping up all over the place. They call building prisons in this part of the state "economic development."

When I see something as mean-spirited as welfare reform, I think, "Welfare for who?" All these loopholes for corporations and banks, but they have targeted the poorest and the most vulnerable residents in this country to try to fix something that they broke. My mother didn't

survive on it and these women out here now are not surviving on it. Why would people think that taking two or three hundred dollars a month away from a family is going to balance the national budget? That is the dumbest thing I ever heard!

What has to happen is that adequate support services and programs need to be put in the community to actually speak to the true needs of folk. The true needs. And people need to stop being penalized when it's not there. You got a woman who's told to go look for so many jobs a week—now, how many jobs are in Martin County?! And then she'll get penalized because she doesn't get to these places over and over and over. So, because I can't find a job, my time clock is ticking. McDonald's, Hardee's, Burger King can only hire so many people. Wal-Mart, as huge as they are, can only hire so many people. So what happens in a community where there are no jobs?

What I see in my community now is my mother, that's what I see. I see women walking around like zombies, trying to figure out what the next move is going to be. It almost feels as if we are chess people: you move here, I'm going to do this, I'm going to block everything that you do. So I no longer envision a better tomorrow. I'm having a nightmare; I stay in the bed. There's nothing to wake up to.

I think the thing that kept my mother from committing suicide was knowing that nobody was going to love us the way she did. I think that's the thing that kept her and that keeps many women like my mother from committing suicide. No one is going to love your babies the way you do. No one. "Where're my babies going to be if I don't at least stick it out and give them what I got to give them?" I see that with women now. I see my mother in my community now. Some forty years later, I see my mother.

So the system has not improved our situation. The system has continued to destroy what we know and what we thought we knew by telling us that if we work, and if we work real hard, we'll escape this thing called poverty. My mother didn't escape it. I didn't escape it. The women in my community didn't escape it. Working is never enough. It's not enough. And it will never be enough to move people from those horrible situations into situations where they can come home and feel good about their lives.

It's harder on rural women. In places like Raleigh, Greensboro and Charlotte, there are jobs. But once you get on the other side of 95, past Rocky Mount, you become part of the Lost Colony, particularly if you are a woman of color. It's already hard to develop a voice, because as women we're so invisible anyway, and as a woman of color, you really don't exist. So, who's going to hear our cry if we don't start crying out for ourselves? And we cry out different ways. We're crying, but no one is hearing it. No one is hearing that we rate high on every measure of economic deprivation. Every single measure.

I think about why 64% of all new HIV cases being reported to the CDC are among low-income African American women. It goes back to women not having a voice, or not utilizing their powers to say no to their participation in risky sexual behaviors. Out of her fear of rejections and his fear of decreasing his manhood the voices of many women can be heard from the grave. So we have to develop that voice.

I'm talking about developing a voice in our local community where we're going to be heard. And because no one has ever wanted to hear our voices before, then we have to develop grassroots leadership that's willing to step out there and be the sacrificial lamb. Somebody has to say, "If I'm blacklisted, if I'm whipped, if I'm ridiculed, I still have to step out there and be a voice for what's going on." I cannot tell you all the things that have happened to me as the result of even when I began to speak out about working conditions at Perdue Farms.





I went to Perdue because I had absolutely no skills. I had just left a very abusive marriage and had to figure out a way to earn an income so I wouldn't have to go back. My mother was at Perdue, and every night when she got home she would put her hands in hot water because they hurt so bad. I said, "Oh, this isn't going to happen to me." So I went to Perdue. The first month was okay, but after about three months, I developed tingling in my fingers. My hands

would hurt, my wrists would hurt, my shoulder would hurt. I kept going to the company nurse, saying, "My hands hurt."

The nurse's suggestion was, "Go home and go on welfare." Not that welfare is such a bad thing, but my family was working-class poor folk! My mother didn't trust welfare, and my grandmama said, "Don't let no folk ever get in your business." Meaning white folks. "If they get in your business, they can break your back." So I said, "No, I can't do welfare. Mmm mmm, can't do that."

One morning an African American female and a white female knocked at my door. They said, "We just started a new organization called the Center for Women's Economic Alternatives, and we want to talk to you because we found out you were injured at Perdue. Did you know you had a right to file Workman's Comp and get compensation for your on-the-job injury?" I didn't know; nobody else in the plant knew. It was like it was a secret.

I went back to the nurse and said, "I need to file a Workman's Comp claim." He said, "We don't have any Workman's Comp claims here." I said, "You don't have any? Oh, okay. I'll just go get one from somebody else."

The next morning he called and said, "We just set you up an appointment to go see a doctor for your hand." And this doctor they sent me to diagnosed me as having tendonitis. The ladies came again, told me I had a right to a second opinion. That second doctor diagnosed me as having carpal tunnel syndrome. He did a nerve conduction test where the diagnosis was real clear and said I needed surgery. And he said, "Well, you're going to get compensation."

To this day my mother can't make a fist. Has she ever been compensated for it? No, because she was taught not to complain. But what changed my life and set me on a course to where I am today was those women equipping me with information so that I could make intelligent decisions about my next steps. Because I couldn't have endured it like my mother!

Then you have people like those in the Heritage Foundation saying, "Let's promote marriage among these people. Let's do this marriage thing among po' folk. If they marry, they can combine their poorness and reach this rate where they're no longer *real* poor, they're just poor." They saw that we're out here doing all this frivolous sex and having babies and just having ourselves a good old time. That's a *slap* in our face. It was never our desire to have children that didn't have fathers. It was never my mother's desire to bring eight babies into this world and not have a father there for them. It is not a woman's desire. Women don't wake up and say, "Let me have another baby to see how much money I'm going to get." We wake up and think, "Man, maybe today is the day that I have enough to meet my needs."

So you're going to promote marriage into our communities where drug use is a major issue. Where abusiveness is a major issue. Where all of these social ills are major, major issues. You haven't put jobs there so that the man I marry will maintain a good job. It is a *horrible* experience for a man not to be able to provide for his woman. And what happens is that she gets the backlash from that. She enters into an abusive situation; she enters into not only trying to take care of her children but to take care of him, and an array of things happen.

What this has done—it has stripped our community of vision. People no longer envision having a better life, because when they dream, it's no longer a dream, it's a freaking nightmare. Seeing my mother working all those jobs, and never knowing her, left us vulnerable to all of these ills in our community. That was in the '60s and '70s and look what's before us now.

The scriptures clearly say that without a vision, the people perish. My community has to be taught how to vision again. The New Life Women's Leadership Project was started to talk about real sustainable economic development. We realized that we had to be the ones to really begin to look at our community and what our needs were. We could no longer wait for our town officials to say, "Okay, we got to look at our skills and try to figure out how to turn those skills into something that's viable." If I have a talent of canning or preserving, how do I market that? I don't know too many African American sisters that can't cook. Well, can I envision me owning a restaurant or a catering



service? I can clean a house and fix the bed; can I turn this into a cleaning service for me and not have people penny, nickel and dime me to death because I am a low-income African American woman? Because I'm a nurturer, can I own my own daycare center? Let's look at some of those things.

My grandmother used to say that we're gonna wake up dead and not know what we died from. Well, a lot of us wake up dead every morning, and we don't know what's ailing us. We don't have the ability to get up and move forward with an agenda. A lot of us don't participate in our children's schools, because our own experiences with the school system growing up were so bad, and we've never healed from it. And our anger may not be about what's going on with the kids now, but what happened with us! Because no one told us how to dismantle what was within us. We have internalized it. We got to stop and dismantle the racism that's within us. That process is still to come.

And so, helping people to shape that and shape their voice and to tear down those walls within them. So you can hear your own voice. When is the last time you heard yourself cry? I can remember the times I've gotten to my house and I've yelled to the top of my voice. Just to the top of my voice. Just so that I could hear me. I needed to hear me. I needed to hear me say to me: "This ain't right. This just ain't right."

We don't have time to develop one voice at a time anymore. That time is done. There has to be a unified voice that's coming forth now in our communities. And so we have to raise up grassroots leadership. We are the ones that we've been waiting for. We are truly, truly the ones that we've been waiting for.

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