



Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated.

To come together to ensure that these rights be respected is our solemn duty.

October 17, 1987, Joseph Wresinski (1917-1988), Founder, International Movement ATD Fourth World

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Homes in Search of a House

By Charles Courtney

The holiday season, marked from Thanksgiving through New Year's Day, is now over. Families and friends have gathered in gaiety and grief, warmth and wrath, love and loathing; we have discovered anew the joys and struggles of being together. Each and every one of us can appreciate the old adage that *"it takes a heap o' livin' to make a house a home"* but, whether our experiences this past holiday season were good or bad, how many of us took the time to think about how fortunate we were to be able to go back to these houses and to visit such secure places?

The articles in this issue of the *Fourth World Journal* tell of those families whose experiences all but turn that old adage on its head. In the face of great difficulties, these families have built homes without the benefit of a decent house in which to do so. Conventional wisdom assumes that everybody has a house and that the task is to create a home, but the reality for these families and many others like them is that they don't have a house to begin with.

Listen to the words of Ms. Damonte in New Orleans or Joshua Donchance in New York and you will learn that Fourth World families do not wait for good fortune to turn their situation around. Instead, they invest themselves and their energies in those things that they know count most: love, trust and support. This is how, in the midst of uncertainties of all kinds, these families have made homes.

But these families deserve better than the situations they find themselves in. The truth is that their condition is unacceptable. Article twenty-five of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that, *"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care..."* Housing rightly has a place on this list of the most basic, most vital and most fundamental necessities of life; it spells out the reality that these families can make homes for themselves but still they will not enjoy well-being until they have a house. The stories that they share reveal hearts that need a dwelling place; a place with the unique sights and smells of a room, a stairway, or a kitchen that can be loved and remembered.

And what does the work of the Fourth World Movement contribute to this? It is through standing alongside and learning from those living in poverty that the Movement can share with you and with the world the truths contained in these pages and in these families' stories. These realities present us with the challenge to acknowledge that we all have a role to play in transforming society so that humanity becomes our primary value, that rights are respected and that all persons and institutions can meet their responsibilities. Then, and only then, will Fourth World families have a house in which to build their homes.

Eighteen Months in the Life of a Neighborhood

"There are Families Trying to Make Their Home Here"

By Corrinna Bain and Anne Monnet

Throughout the United States, there are many families living in persistent poverty who face the harsh, daily reality of having to raise their children in difficult housing conditions. However, this reality often goes unnoticed and the story of what these families endure remains untold. But, through our experiences as members of the Fourth World Movement Volunteer Corps and our relationship with one disadvantaged neighborhood in New Orleans, we want to share with you eighteen months in the lives of some of these families and the decline in their situation that we witnessed.

Our first contact with the neighborhood came through the Damonte family, who moved there five years ago. The Damonte children had grown up with *Tapori* and the family had been actively involved in different Fourth World Movement events. The neighborhood consisted of eight wooden houses, four of which were located at the back of an alleyway and hidden from the main street. The houses were old and it was clear that their general upkeep over the years had been severely neglected. The houses themselves were long and narrow, one room-wide and two or three rooms-deep, and are often called 'shotgun' houses because it is argued that one could fire a shotgun through the front door and have the shot exit the back door without ever having touched a wall.

We were in touch with the Damonte family every week through a Home Library, where we would visit them with books and activities, and over time we moved these visits outdoors onto a grassy area next to their home. As Ms. Damonte began to introduce us to her neighbors, other children in the area started to join the Street Library which we had now begun.

In early 2001, Ms. Damonte learned that we were trying to support another family in their search for a place to live. She informed us that the house next door was available and it was thanks to her involvement that Ms. Rogers and her family were able to move in.

The Street Library allowed us to maintain our strong links with the Damonte and Rogers families and helped us meet other families in the community. We saw families come, stay for a short length of time and then leave as discreetly as they had arrived. It appeared that many of these families lived under such precarious circumstances that they had to move from place to place.

Living conditions in the neighborhood have clearly never been easy. The houses rest on cinder blocks and, over the years, trash has built up and gathered under the houses to the extent that rats and wild cats can often be seen roaming there. Broken windows, rotten wooden panels falling off the outside of the houses, mold on the walls, holes in the roof and

the collapse of ceilings have been just a few of the problems that families there have had to deal with.

At the beginning of 2003, as the state of the housing continued to worsen, the owner of the properties told Ms. Damonte that he was thinking of selling the houses or possibly renovating them for government-subsidized Section Eight housing. We could feel the families' insecurity as they did not know what was going to happen to them.

To better understand the situation and keep track of what was happening in the community, we would speak to the parents and adults that we had come to know, but the information that we gathered from the families was often unclear. We could sense that the landlord never truly took time to explain his plans to the families, leaving them to rely on their own understanding of what was happening, which itself was often based on rumor and hearsay.

Then, in the spring of 2003, the families learned that the ownership of the houses had changed hands. The new landlord came to meet the families and promised that their houses



would be renovated and that conditions would quickly improve. There was a buzz of optimism from the families living there as they were asked to help clean up the area and we could see visible repairs being made to the outside of their homes.

As the clean-up began, a large dumpster was placed in the main walkway to the houses, meaning people had to squeeze past in order to get to their homes. The dumpster was filled within days and, with the hot and humid weather, it didn't take long for a strong smell to start to linger as its contents began to decompose. The families had little choice but to endure it; four months would pass before this obvious health hazard was finally removed.

As the summer of 2003 drew to a close, we could see that the renovation work had come to a halt and yet the families told us that they were still being asked to pay a higher monthly rent. A short time later, we heard that the owner had handed out eviction notices to some of the

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families, but no action would ever be taken. Ms. Damonte shared her sense of indignation at what was happening to the families there, saying, *"We're all trying to make a home here. A house does not make a home, it's the family that makes it a home and the family works real hard to make it a home. Some people only see the houses; they don't see that there are families trying to make their home here."*



A month later, the situation became much worse. The water was cut off as the owner had not paid the bill, leaving the families without water. By sheer luck, Ms. Damonte's house still had running water as her house was connected to another supply. She allowed the other families to use her water through an outside tap and water hose which ran continuously. We

saw adults and children having to fill up buckets with water. It didn't take long for puddles of muddy water to form and run under the houses.

The landlord was clearly unhappy at Ms. Damonte sharing her water supply with the other families, even threatening her with eviction if she did not stop. Ms. Damonte continued to take that risk. The families would be without running water in their homes for almost six months.

By the winter of 2003, most of the houses were lying empty and the area looked more and more abandoned. Ms. Rogers voiced her sense of outrage at what was happening to the neighborhood and said, *"This place is like hell on earth... Nobody should have to live like this."*

It was at this time that Ms. Damonte's family had the opportunity to move into a house in another part of the city. Her children moved out but Ms. Damonte was torn: she was worried by the continued insecurities being experienced by the other families still living there and couldn't bear to see them left without water. Ms. Damonte planned to stay until the situation improved but, for family reasons, she soon moved in with her children. She continued to be

concerned for the wellbeing of the families and would go and visit them to find out what was happening.

Ms. Damonte wanted very much to see the landlord be held accountable for the poor condition of the housing that the families were being forced to bear. She said, *"It's just not right. It can't be legal what [the landlord] is doing. He can't get away with this."*

Aware that the situation was becoming critical, we began to gather as much information as we could from a number of different sources – from public institutions such as the city's Sewerage and Water Board and Department of Health, from non-profit organizations including Fair Housing Action Center and Hope House (a community center reaching out to families in poverty), and from friends of the Fourth World Movement, one of whom is a lawyer – in order to better understand what legal rights the families had in such circumstances.

It was clear that the families could take the landlord to court but this would open the families to great risk: a court case could take months or years, the families would have to reveal much about their personal circumstances and

the owner would still be able to ask the families to leave even if they won the case. There was, however, another possibility; the families could write a letter to the owner appealing to him to pay the water bill and fulfill the promise



of desperately-needed repairs to the houses. We accompanied Ms. Damonte as she spoke with the other families about this idea. As we did so, we were acutely aware that they were the ones who were running the risk of possibly losing their homes. Ms. Moore, whose granddaughter was a regular participant in the Street Library, clearly expressed her reservations against writing such a letter when she said, *"[The landlord] is probably going to knock down all these houses anyway, so what's the point?"*

In the early spring of 2004, the families learned that they had a second new landlord. On doing our own enquiries at City Hall, we

Appalachia: The Story of the Ties That Bind a Community and Its Land

By Jason French

Images of old coal towns and secluded houses that are little more than shacks hanging onto hillsides may be the stereotypical view of mountain communities that we all know, but so much more exists in these areas than that. The people, the realities and the images that I have met go much deeper than the stereotype ever could.

Up on one ridge, I met a retired couple who have lived in their present house there for forty years, raising six children and plenty of crops and animals in that time. The wife worked the land, raised their children and made forty quilts per year while the husband made his living as a mechanic. Their house is perched on the very top of the mountain, far from anywhere, and they share the ridge with all kinds of wildlife from the mundane, such as racoon and deer, to the more exotic, such as bear and bobcat. In spring and summer, it is idyllic; winter can be harsh but beautiful, and sometimes they can't get off the ridge for the snow and ice. Fruit, vegetables and other essentials are canned and frozen for winter and hard times. All they have for heating is a wood burner,

for which they have to lay up the wood during the year. Their sense of attachment to the land is tangible; they say that they love their mountain and will be buried in the cemetery a little up the way.

The contrast of this with the town, where the identical houses reminded me of the monotony of inner-city social housing but here set against a backdrop of soaring ridges and small, mountain creeks, was incredible. Like much around here, it is a remnant of the coal



industry from when company towns sprang up all over the region, luring people away from the traditional country life by promising a richer, brighter future under the ground. The coal companies have moved on but the old towns remain. People lost many of their ties to the land during this time and, just like in the inner-cities, social problems spring up where life is hardest.

Almost every other house in the town is abandoned or burned-out, and most of those that remain are in a sad state of repair. When others in the area talk about the town, they invariably mention drugs and alcohol. There used to be a store in town but it couldn't stay open. There is a feeling that the coal and lumber companies took more from the area than just natural resources.

And yet, even with the starkness of these images, seldom have I felt more welcomed in a strange place.

My family and I arrived here in July, sent by the Fourth World Movement. As a way to get to know the area and its people, I started to work alongside the visiting church mission groups that are hosted every summer by the Binns-Counts Community Center in Dickenson County, Virginia. The groups come from far and wide, like the group of teenagers from Chicago, Illinois and the intergenerational group from Mississippi, and many come back time and again, like the group from Richmond on their second visit to the area or the group from Charlottesville which has been coming for several years. They come to work for one week on



house improvement projects in the area co-ordinated by the community center. Applications are made the previous year by householders who feel that they need the help, either because they cannot bear the financial burden or because they are physically unable to do the work. The projects are usually financed by the church mission groups themselves with support from the community center, while households contribute to the cost of materials as much as they can.

The groups varied immensely, but all had in common a real desire to give the best of themselves and to take in the best that the area has to offer. One group supervisor told me that these trips are important for his students, who tend to come from affluent backgrounds, as they gain first-hand experience of the problems that people face when living in a rural, depressed economy. For the

discovered that ownership of the houses had in fact changed hands at the end of 2003. For those families who were still living there, this news sparked renewed insecurities as to what might happen. By this point, nearly all of the houses were empty. The families who had stayed had to endure yet more rumors, including the possibility that they were to be evicted by the end of the month and the houses demolished to make way for a parking lot. This despair then turned to renewed hope; the water supply was reconnected and the new owner spoke of serious, long-term renovation work for the houses and said that those who were already living there would be allowed to stay.



It can be hard to understand why these families have remained in the neighborhood, endured such conditions and not simply moved elsewhere. But, in

New Orleans, there is a critical shortage of decent, low-income housing and there are very few shelters or temporary housing solutions available for families living in poverty. Many of the public housing projects are currently being torn down and families have had to turn more and more towards accommodation offered by the private sector. Privately-rented housing often asks for a security deposit and the first month's rent usually has to be paid in advance; such realities make it extremely difficult for families in deep poverty to secure housing.

For Ms. Moore, the education of her granddaughter, Alyssa, means everything to her. Ms. Moore has made it clear that she would love to be able to move but wants to stay in the same area so that Alyssa can continue to attend the local school. For Ms. Rogers, it is her fear of what moving to another neighborhood might entail that keeps her where she is. She is afraid that the conditions of the housing and the community could be even worse than what she and her family have to endure now.

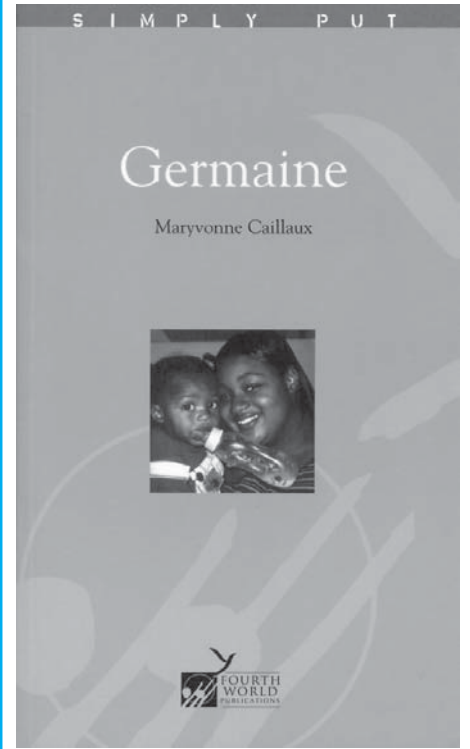
The Rogers and Moore families are now the only families living in the neighborhood; all the other houses are empty and have been boarded up. We can see that the

houses around them are now undergoing renovation work. The contractor who is working on the houses has told us that two will be ready for families to move into by early this next year. It is not clear however, if Ms. Rogers and Ms. Moore will be given the opportunity to move into these newly renovated houses.

We continue to remain in close contact with these families and run a Street Library in the area. Each time we visit, we discover something new which helps us to learn more about the struggles that these families in this neighborhood face. We know that we have to find ways to remain close by their sides. The story of these families and families like them has to be told and their continued efforts to make a house into a home for their children, whatever the circumstances, must be recognized.

Editor's note:

To respect the privacy and protect the identities of the families involved, all the names have been changed. As a result, the photographs that accompany the article, while taken at Street Libraries in New Orleans, do not portray the children of the families in the article.



To learn more about the work of the Fourth World Movement in New Orleans, read *Germaine* by Maryvonne Caillaux: the story of one young girl and her family that, in the midst of homelessness, health problems and neighborhood violence, never lose hope for the future.

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students, the mountains of southwestern Virginia are beyond their everyday experience and can help them develop an understanding of the people and the area which goes way beyond the persistent rural stereotypes that they may have grown up hearing. The visits are also opportunities for the students to experience the rich, cultural heritage of the area, the genuine warmth and generosity of the people here and their strong relationship with the land.

The difficulties of the housing in the area can be seen in the work that the groups undertook over the summer. Some of the jobs were of the everyday kind, such as painting the exterior of a house, fixing up the interior,



digging ditches and doing a myriad of small repair jobs. Other tasks were much more substantial, such as building a room on the side of a trailer and constructing steps and a deck. But even the work we did brought us back to the people that we were supporting.

The roofing job was for a former coal miner. He worked the mines for eighteen years but can't work now because the mining destroyed his back. Hauling seventy-pound loads every day, often bent over a thirty-six inch coal seam, can do that to you. He said that coal mining can wear out your body in twenty years and afterwards you can't get a job because you don't know how to do anything else and, in any case, there is very little else to do in the area apart from mining-related jobs. He was injured in mine collapses, and a friend of his was killed by one when replacing him because he couldn't get in to work. Mining leaves its marks on the landscape as well as the people. It is ever-present: from the open strip mines and the gas-well roads to the bare and so-called 'reclaimed' hillsides; from the twenty-ton coal trucks that barrel crazily along Route 63 to the one hundred-car coal trains that snake across the county. There is no doubt that this is still coal country and it is in people's blood. It is in their lungs and in their skin, too.

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“Living in a Shelter as a Teenager is Not Easy”

By Joshua Donchance and Lisa Steinbrueck

Joshua: Living in a shelter as a teenager is not easy. I know this is true because my family and I have lived in shelters for almost two years now. I want to share some of my experiences because I think it's important for people to know how hard it is for kids and their families. Some of you who are here today might know a lot about how hard people's lives are in other countries. But there might be situations right in your own neighborhood or your own city that you don't know about.

Lisa: I've been running a Tapori activity with children and young teenagers in a shelter in another part of New York City for the last two years. I see many strong families and creative, compassionate children. But I also see how limited families' privacy is. I see how much of their personal life becomes public in the context of the shelter.

Joshua: Where I'm living now, things are a little better than where I was before. The activities for children and teenagers are fun and organized. And our family and friends can come and visit us just about anytime. But it wasn't always like this. For more than a year we lived in another shelter where things were really hard. Our family could not come visit, not even on holidays. And there is not much space for a family when you live in a shelter. I have a big family and we don't have much space at all. This means we have almost no privacy. There's no privacy for us inside our own family because all of us are living in such a small space. Also, the staff at the shelter come into our apartment whenever they want, many times without our permission. It's like being in a jail. You don't have a space you can call your own and keep private.

It's also hard to stay peaceful with other kids.

A girl I know, who also lived in a shelter for a long time, said, “If someone else there wants to fight you, there's no place to go to avoid them.”

Lisa: Living in a shelter can have bad effects on children's education as well. Families are often faced with a difficult decision: do they keep their children in their old schools, to avoid the academic and social difficulties of switching schools in the middle of the year, or do they choose a new school closer to the shelter which might drastically decrease commuting time but may not be close to the apartment they find when they move out of the shelter? One teenager I know spent four months not in school because of difficulties in transferring records, as well as school administrators who were reluctant to have ‘shelter kids’ at their school. Other families I know have chosen to keep their children in school in their old neighborhood. But this can mean close to two hours' travel time in each direction. It is extremely difficult for children in this situation to get the sleep and food they need, not to mention time with their family...

Joshua: I believe parents should be the ones who decide what's best for their children. But when you're living in a shelter there are so many people involved in your private life: social workers, security guards, other people on the staff. It's not fair that, just because a family doesn't have their own place, parents aren't allowed to play the same role in their children's lives.

It might be hard for some of you to hear this, but parents get threatened and intimidated a lot. Sometimes it's in a quiet way, like a social worker tells you the woman who lived here before you got her kids taken away. Sometimes it's more direct; I heard a social worker say to a parent, “Be careful! I'm not afraid to call the authorities who will take your children from you and put them in foster care.”

Lisa: We hope that the things we are telling you give you a more accurate picture of some of the challenges that families living in a shelter can face. But we also want to remind you how strong and compassionate people can be, even in situations like this. I told you about the teenager who missed four months of school. During that time she volunteered in the shelter's after-school program, helping younger children with their homework and facilitating poetry workshops.

Joshua: Living in a shelter is not something you expect to do. I think people should know it's something that could happen to anyone, anytime, any day, any place. It's hard for me and for other kids but, after a while, you've just got to get up on your feet and bear with it. And even if your parents make you mad, you've got to bear with them too. Because your parents have to go through the hard times just the same as you do, but your parents are feeling it more because they're feeling it for you AND for themselves.

The last thing I want to say is my wish for everyone else in the world who is going through hard times. I learned last year on October 17 how hard some people have it in Guatemala. Every year I come here I learn about things people are experiencing all over the world. I'm going to keep coming, I'm going to be a part of October 17 every year. I think it's not fair, the things that some people are living. And my wish for those people in other places is for you to know that some people right here in the United States understand because they go through the same things that you go through.

Lisa and Joshua: Thank you.

Testimony given for the occasion of the *International Day for the Eradication of Poverty* on October 14, 2004, at the United Nations.

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The Fourth World Journal aims to bring together different points of view, especially those of the very poor themselves, on topics related to extreme poverty. We encourage our readers to share with us their reactions and comments.

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