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HOME Offers More than Handouts

By Molly Ivins

COOLNESS in the summertime – it’s such a concept. Whoever thought of it should be congratulated.

We know who thought of another stunning concept here in the cool north country – an economic cooperative for poor people located in Orland, Maine. It’s called HOME and was started in 1970 by ex-Carmelite nun Lucy Poulin as an outlet for home-worker crafts, particularly quilts. And from there, it grew like crazy.

Homeworkers Organized for More Employment now includes a free health clinic, a soup kitchen, a food bank, homeless shelters, a learning center with day care, job and craft training, a farmers’ market, a sawmill and a shingle mill. “We are,” says Poulin with more shock than pride, “the third-largest employer in Hancock County,” with about 50 people now on the payroll. HOME also has a land trust of about 700 acres on which it builds homes for the homeless, thus providing more employment; the homes come with life tenancy but cannot be sold out of the trust.

Perhaps the most impressive thing about the whole operation is that it is not terribly impressive, if you see what I mean. There is no posh administration building, no fancy anything anywhere.

HOME is part of the world Emmaus movement, a Christian organization that believes in making do and that in fact does quite well by taking things that others do not want and finding a use for them. Nothing is wasted or thrown out. Almost everything around HOME is made of waste or scrap or is recycled. This is the logical obverse of a consumer society in which planned obsolescence is the foundation of the economy.

And as our society seems to regard more and more people as disposable, the need for another way becomes clearer and clearer. The hundreds of people who have come through HOME over the years and have moved on and returned to give back are themselves the most remarkable part of this story.

Some are battered women, most are children, a few are retarded, but most of them just plain need work. Although Maine’s long-suffering economy is now making a comeback in the south, unemployment in the northern part of the state still runs over 9 percent.

HOME has always provided more than a handout, but you will not find here any of that simplistic “throw-’em-off-welfare” nonsense or that pompous, condescending “this-is-for-your-own-good” kind of “tough love” for the poor. Too many people who have never gone hungry a day in their lives are given to sanctimoniously announcing, “Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day, but teach him to fish ...”

As you may have heard, the waters off Maine are overfished. The logging industry is shutting down mills. (Two Mexican workers were killed and 10 injured in a van accident while on their way to brush-cutting work here this past weekend; instead of asking why poor people don’t get jobs, you might ask why the international corporation that owns the paper company is bringing in Mexican workers.)

As Sister Marie Ahearn of the Sisters of Mercy, who is part of the cooperative, observes, poor people may need work more than anything else, but they never have just one problem. You can get a job, but who takes care of the kids? If you find someone to take care of the kids, what do you do when one of them gets sick? If you need a dentist? If you are functionally illiterate? How do you get to work in a rural state with little public transportation?

And perhaps hardest of all is the problem of hope and self-respect. “Those foolish people who say, ‘Just say no,’” muttered Lucy Poulin. “It’s easy to say ‘no.’ It’s much harder to say ‘yes.’” In secular terms, most very poor people are probably clinically depressed to some degree. They think it’s their fault that their lives have gone off the rails. Convincing them that they are people of worth may be the hardest work of all.

One way to do this is to let them make their own decisions and then to train them as leaders. Oscar Wilde once observed, “The trouble with socialism is that it takes too many evenings.” So does real democracy. Letting every jackass have his say is an often tedious process, and suffering does not necessarily make people noble. Nevertheless, Poulin believes it is the only way to make a real cooperative – a real community – work.

And the results are impressive. You cannot tell the difference between those who came to HOME as homeless, jobless poor folks and who now pitch in even though they are working, and the college kids and do-gooders who occasionally come to help out for a while.

Poulin, who grew up poor on a Maine farm, later went to work in a chicken plant. She vividly recalls the difference between the way she was treated when she was a chicken plucker and when she became a nun. “But I was the same person.” She believes that the way to judge a society is by how it treats the weakest people in it. The most powerful country on Earth doesn’t rate high on her scale.

Among the enterprises around HOME is a small herd of Norwegian fjord horses, a small workhorse perfect for harsh winter climes. Two adorable foals frisked around Mandala Farm; the breed is becoming popular with horse people, and selling one a year covers the property taxes at Mandala. A herd of Angora goats is another serendipitous enterprise –

some guy needed to leave town and dumped 40 goats on the place, so now they're in the Angora business. And a goat is an excellent thing to have on a place where "waste not" is the motto.

The cooperative has had some bumpy times with suspicious rural neighbors. "One lady told us she had heard we were a bunch of New Age people who hid pregnant women," said Sister Marie with a gleeful snort. This cooperative is distinguished by such practical, hardworking, common-sensical Yankees that it's hard to think of anything airy about it. Their only rules are no violence, no drugs. The beautiful houses they build are allocated according to need.

Ivins is a syndicated columnist.

One of their many enterprises is selling Christmas wreaths all over the country. For more info or contributions: HOME Inc., P.O. Box 10, Orland, Maine 04472, or www.downeast.net/nonprof/home.

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