

Below is the article that ran on the front page of the Community Section of the Charleston Gazette.

Treatment of needy inspires her to organize

Welfare workers pushed her to quit college, but Evelyn Dortch refused and created her own jobs

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By [Dawn Miller](#)

STAFF WRITER

In 1990, when Evelyn Dortch was pregnant with her fourth child, she left a bad marriage outside of Richmond, Va., and returned to West Virginia, where her grandmother still lived.

She applied for welfare, then called Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

Her Kanawha County caseworker pulled out a form and asked her when she quit high school.

“For your information, I did not quit school. I graduated with a 3.5,” Dortch recalls telling the man. The only reason she was in his office was because she picked a bad husband.

Dortch put up with the insult, completed the interview and signed up for benefits because she needed help to feed, clothe and house her children.

After her youngest child turned 2, she quit welfare and got a job. “I don’t like to leave them at day care until they can talk,” she said.

She worked at the YWCA’s Sojourners, a shelter for homeless women and their families.

“I met everybody when I worked at the shelter,” she said. “I met business people and some who had gone to school and some who hadn’t. I met people at the shelter who later became my babysitters. It’s not all these prostitutes and crackheads like everybody thinks.”

A job opened at the shelter that Dortch was perfect for, her supervisor told her. But she didn’t have the college degree required.

“What do you mean you don’t have a degree?” a supervisor asked. Staff at Sojourners pushed her toward college. She learned about college financial aid for the first time. Family members encouraged her. She signed up for welfare benefits to support her children while she worked on her education.

In 1995, Dortch enrolled at West Virginia State College and studied social work. Money was tight, but things were going pretty well until Congress changed federal welfare laws to make it tougher to get cash benefits.

Some of West Virginia’s rules in response to those laws have been tougher even than federal law requires.

A caseworker told Dortch to quit college and get a job or lose her benefits.

“He literally told me I had to go get a job at McDonald’s,” she recalled.

Dortch would not comply. She refused to quit school, so DHHR cut her benefits off for three months at a time.

“I lived on friends and family,” Dortch said. “They saw how hard it was for me to go to school and how I was doing and they didn’t want me to quit.” She knew other students who had no such help. They did quit.

After three months, the state restored her benefits. She collected a check until a worker told her to quit school again. She refused and they cut her off.

Under West Virginia Works, people who need help are supposed to negotiate an agreement with the state, called a Personal Responsibility Contract. It spells out what the recipient will do, including work, job searches or job training, and what the state will provide.

But there was no room to negotiate her contract, Dortch said.

“They write it out. If you don’t sign it, you don’t get your benefits.”

The state cut her off her cash for good during the spring of 2000, but she graduated — at the top of her social work class — and started working full-time.

In fact, as a college intern, she prepared the grant application that funds the job she now holds. She is the associate director for development of Community Development Outreach Ministries at St. Mark’s United Methodist Church. While cutting her cash benefits, the state also cut off her children’s Medicaid card, which is against federal law. The health insurance was later restored. Her children are now insured through the Children’s Health Insurance Program. Dortch does not have insurance.

About a year ago, she and several other parents spent an evening comparing stories of how they had been treated when they needed help.

That evening, Dortch created the Direct Action Welfare Group. Members inform poor people of their rights and inform the public on poverty issues.

“Education is the way out of poverty,” Dortch said. But there are still caseworkers who tell people they cannot go to school.

A 15-member board governs the organization. On a good day, the organization has 30 members, she said. On a bad day, only 15. Most of them are college graduates.

Her boss Jeff Allen at Community Development Outreach Ministries has generously allowed her space to get the new group going, she said.

The group is working on getting its own nonprofit status with the IRS. As of Sept. 1, she was able to pay herself and a co-director with a \$25,000 grant from the Public Welfare Foundation.

The group offers various opportunities for people to get involved. People may join, donate money, schedule one of their public speakers, join an e-mail or newsletter mailing list.

When Tommy Thompson visited last month, Dortch, two of her children and several supporters demonstrated their thought along his route.

As governor of Wisconsin, Thompson created a version of the welfare changes that were enacted nationally in 1996. President Bush named him secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

During visits to West Virginia as governor, Thompson told lawmakers and state welfare officials that helping people out of poverty and off of public assistance costs more money, not less. It costs more in child care, transportation, clothing, dental bills and education, things people need to work.

Now Thompson oversees the office that administers cash benefits that run out after five years, whether recipients have an education and paying job or not.

Dortch and others carried signs that said, “This is the face of poverty,” or “Tommy Thompson, walk a mile in a welfare mother’s shoes.” Others said “Stop the Clock,” or “Time limits on poverty, not the poor.”

They chanted: “What do we want?”

“Child care.”

“When do we want it?”

“Now.”

They drew stares, but not much interaction from the NorthGate office park neighborhood.

Dortch was surprised and impressed that Thompson stopped to talk with them. He introduced himself, took one of their fliers and went about his business, she said.

When state DHHR officials solicited suggestions on how to improve the state’s welfare system, Dortch prepared a four-page statement.

Since then, the group has created a list of suggestions for the state. Among them: let post-high school education count as work for people who receive benefits. Don’t limit the number of those who can go to school. Value child care and let mothers stay home with young children. Provide health care and child care help for low-wage families. Include current and former welfare recipients in policy groups, committees and other groups that advise DHHR.

“There is no shame in admitting that I needed help,” Dortch wrote to DHHR officials. “There is no shame in admitting that the only way I could leave a very abusive husband and care for my children was to get on welfare. I went to college and supported my children with welfare. I used the system to enable myself to make a better life for me and my children until welfare reform went into effect.”

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