

Tough enough to be poor, tougher yet in Marin County *written by Dr. Joan Hangarter*

Dr. Joan Abramowitz Hangarter used to live and work in San Francisco. She was a chiropractor before she hurt her right arm. She got her degrees from Boston University, Long Island University and Los Angeles College of Chiropractic. Now she's 52 and a single mom. She lives with her two children, a girl, 11, and a boy, 9, in Novato, of all places. And now she is broke and struggling daily. Here is Hangarter's story in her own words.

In search of enlightenment I moved from my native New York to California, the land of opportunity. I did well, only to experience a major catastrophe in my 50s, rendering me flat broke. I lost everything except my two children.

Now I am a member of Marin County's impoverished poor. While many of you have the luxury of sitting with your family at the dinner table, with greens and arugula topped with walnuts and goat cheese and tossed in balsamic vinaigrette, my staples are Top Ramen and macaroni and cheese.

I have a personal relationship with hot dogs and beans. I can pretend it is glass of chilled Chardonnay, as I am sipping my overripe wine from my child's plastic cup decorated with trains.

For two years, my sole shopping destination has been The House of Safeway. I am determined to get the most for the \$20 that is all I have. I need food as well as light bulbs, toilet paper, detergent and other such items. One-hundred and fifty bucks are required, not the paltry bill in my hands.

I have one treat, which I call my forbidden luxury. I am addicted to vanilla bean coffee that I must have with half and half. It is prohibitively expensive, but I rationalize that I cannot afford not to have it. My sanity depends upon having that cup every morning. Then I know that I am safe. At least for today.

Each month, on the ninth or 10th, I receive my allotment of food stamps, \$230.00, to feed a family of three. That is \$7.60 per day. Despite rationing, they are quickly spent. By week four, our diet is top ramen in the morning, top ramen in the evening, top ramen in the summertime! I cook for the children and have long since learned to ignore my hunger.

Real pinto beans

Some days, the refrigerator and the cabinets are empty. It can't be helped. The kids know when I cook the pinto beans and take out the tortillas that we are back on rice and beans. The first time I went to Human Needs, I requested pinto beans. I was handed a can of refried beans.

No, I replied, following her into the storeroom, "I want pinto beans, the real one." She replied, "These are reserved for the Hispanics. Caucasian women never get this." On my second visit, she said the exact same thing when I followed her into the storeroom. I left with several pounds of pinto beans.

I am scared 864,000 seconds a day. The grip on my heart never lets up. My worst fears have been realized. The sky has fallen.

I don't turn on the heat when I am cold. It is too expensive. Electricity is a luxury. I wear long underwear from November through May. Restaurants, theatre, music are vague memories of the past. That was another person. That is not me now. Today I am a bag lady. I have nothing.

I cook for friends, and they buy the food. On those days, I cook a real meal, with greens, and chicken, and soups or desserts. I make everything from scratch. On those days, I am not a poor person in my gloomy kitchen. Fresh foods revive my spirits. I am cooking a real meal with real food for real people.

One of 1.2 million

In September of 2000, shortly after I went on welfare, or "cash aid" as it is called now, 1.2 million others were recipients of aid in California as well. I wasn't alone.

Sitting in the social service office, waiting for my name to be called, I was taking the final step of a series of humiliations, tragedies and setbacks. Without going into my "story," from riches to rags, I lost my house, my car, all my furniture and belongings as well as all my clothes.

One day I woke up and there was no money. There was no food, and there was no place to go. I cannot go back to sleep and restore my wealth. My nightmare never ends.

It occurred to me that I had hit bottom when I took my place in line at the Social Services Office. I signed permission slips to open the entire book on my life, to every government agency possible.

Last month my "nervous breakdown" was broadcast to Children's Protective Services. The social worker took both children from their classrooms to interview them about their life at home. I held my breath in fear until the worker completed the inspection of my home and announced me "fit." Fit for whom? I no longer live a "normal existence." We are on the fringe.

I am certain that I got off at the wrong train station. I don't belong here. If I could just figure out how to get back on the train. But it is going too fast and doesn't stop for me.

I want you to know

I want to share the experience with you. I want you to know how it feels to be without in one of the wealthiest counties in the country.

Poverty is humiliation.

Poverty is wondering how you will ever be able to afford paper products such as toilet paper, or paper towels. Its saying goodbye to simple luxuries such as light bulbs, batteries, butter, shampoo or soap. I have heard of some people who ration toilet paper, allotting so many squares per visit to the bathroom. Sometimes, its easier to move the lightbulb from room to room.

Poverty is feeling rich when you trade with your friends, and score six rolls of toilet paper.

Poverty is constantly obsessing how I am going to spend the money I don't have, and how I will make do with the money I have. I never win. There are always far more needs than resources.

Poverty is trying to scavenge up 11 quarters to do a load of laundry and multiplying that eight times.

Poverty drains my vitality. I never have enough good healthy food. I cannot get vitamins, supplements, homeopathic remedies, or herbs on Medi-cal. Wellness and alternative medicine have no home among the poor.

Poverty is trying to laugh when my cousin in New York says cheer up, sit down and have a cup of coffee, when I haven't been able to afford coffee for weeks.

The Grinch this year

Poverty is signing up with Human Needs because I am determined to give my kids a holiday dinner and a holiday present. It's swallowing my pride, because, if I had to do it just for me, I would skip Christmas.

I am the Grinch this year. I pace my tiny apartment in two left slippers, my Christmas present from Human Needs. My daughter cried with sorrow and frustration, when we opened the wrapping on her beautifully decorated gift.

Poverty is the sadness on her face when I explained to her that this will be a very simple Christmas and she will have to get by on love and music and song. And watching her pull out pictures of former happier times when we were a family and had a house filled with fire and laughter. In those days, the refrigerator was always full. "Mama, will we ever be normal"? she asks. I have no answer.

Poverty is the acute sense of longing and nostalgia I get when I see the advertisements for the Nutcracker.

Poverty is driving a car without heat that shakes, rattles and rolls. I am grateful for my chariot and am desperately afraid to jinx my good fortune at having the car in the first place.