

OUT AND ABOUT

‘No space on the paper’: Our Poverty Challenge continues

Kingston’s role-playing learning sessions have become portable, with versions in Ottawa, Sudbury, Guelph, Belleville, Muskoka and St. Catharines



Poverty Challenge participants have often filled the auditorium at Duncan McArthur Hall at Queen’s, Photo courtesy of The Poverty Challenge

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OPINION

By **JAMIE SWIFT**,
The Kingston Local

Back in 2009, a group of Kingston social justice activists that included veteran educators organized an experiential learning exercise. The first [Poverty Challenge](#), aimed at high school students, brought some 500 teenagers to Queen's west campus where they learned from people whom the organizers dubbed experts.

These experts weren't academics or other oracles of received opinion. After students from across the region piled out of their school buses, they began a role play that put them in the shoes of local people forced to navigate the thorny thickets of the welfare system. Assuming fictitious names, they struggled through a hazardous maze, learning along the way that the system is often stranger than fiction.

In the end, they sat around in a circle doing a debrief. They shared stories of frustration, anger and disbelief. Then they discovered that one of the experts was sitting right there with them. Turns out that the roles they'd been playing were not fictional tales. They were based on the real life experiences of people in Kingston. The debrief wound up with not a few hugs and tears.

Poverty Challenge participants from Napanee and Brockville to downtown Kingston headed home carrying kits that included bookmarks reading "Living in poverty is like being punished for a crime you didn't commit."

The organizers started from a simple premise that has long underpinned anti-poverty advocacy. Amplifying the voices of people with "lived experience" has long been standard practice in social justice advocacy circles. People should actively and effectively participate in decisions affecting their lives — the distilled essence of democracy.

“Nothing about us without us” became a signpost used by disability activists in the 1990s. People with disabilities have formed the core of the dozens of experts who, over the years, have generously shared their Poverty Challenge stories.

Fast forward 12 years. Twenty Poverty Challenges were held in Kingston. Kingston’s Poverty Challenge became portable, with organizers in Ottawa, Sudbury, Guelph, Belleville, Muskoka and St. Catharines putting together sessions. Along with secondary students, participants came to include faith communities, Queen’s medical students, social service students, and members of the general public.

Following a Poverty Challenge for Foundation supporters — conducted in collaboration with the [Community Foundation for Kingston and Area](#) (CFKA) — organizers Martha Rudden and Judi Wyatt cooked up a project they called “The Poverty Challenge – Next Level.” In 2019 the Foundation awarded the Challenge (and its Social Planning Council sponsors) a grant to update all their materials, emphasizing an easy-to-use do-it-yourself kit. According to Rudden, the Foundation support “helped us spread our wings.”

The Plague hit soon after the project — aptly named “The Next Step” – began. But Rudden and Wyatt still managed to make a great leap forward. With the help of temporary staffers, they found new experts. They updated social assistance policy details to reflect changing regulations. They also designed a new toolkit to show people anywhere how they can organize Poverty Challenges of their own. The hope being that challenging stereotypes about poverty will become commonplace.

“More recently I participated by walking through the challenges of getting welfare, a safe place to live and dental care,” she said. “It was heartening to hear that Judi and Martha were able to use the CFKA grant to update the program

information and to secure a ‘home’ for the project. This was essential, helping carry on the very worthwhile work that was started over 10 years ago now.”

That home is the [Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa](#), a coalition advocating for structural change through education and mobilization. It seems like a perfect fit. Structural change means confronting the punishing inequalities that bedevil one of the world’s richest countries. A typical Poverty Challenge includes an exercise called Wealth Squares in which participants learn about Canada’s stunning disparity in wealth distribution. Not something that mainstream charities like food banks tend to emphasize, the numbers tend to shock.

Using a 2020 report of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, Wealth Squares shows that one per cent of Canadians control a quarter of the country’s wealth.

Organizers spread out 10 newspaper sheets, each representing 10 per cent of Canadian wealth. One participant – representing the richest 10 per cent of Canadians — lies down, taking up more than five whole sheets of newspaper. Typically male, this person represents more than half of all wealth.

At the other end, four participants represent 40 per cent of us. They find themselves at the end of the line. Two manage to get a foot on the last sheet. But two of the final four don’t get any space on the paper. They’re the poorest among us, likely women, with no assets at all.



Figure 1 Self Portrait by Michael Sage

“There is no place on the paper for them,” explains Rudden in the voiceover for this alarming Poverty Challenge video.

Another new video features [interviews](#) with the new poverty experts. They include a portrait artist on disability benefits. Michael Sage cannot afford

the canvas and paints for a work he has always yearned to submit to the Kingston Prize — \$20,000 for the winner. The middle-aged fellow says he's no longer an emerging artist but a "submerging artist."

Over the course of 12 years of organizing, Rudden and Wyatt became experts of a different sort, skilled at making common cause for the common good. They're two of the most energetic and empathetic people you could hope to meet. During her Poverty Challenge years, Wyatt has befriended dozens of experts she has recruited, gaining an intimate understanding of what it's like to struggle with so very little.

"My life has been changed," said Wyatt. Enthusiastically.

Jamie Swift is a long-time Poverty Challenge volunteer.