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Interview with Author Jason DeParle

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OPERATOR: Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and welcome to the Center for Law and Social Policy conference call. I would now like to introduce your host Jodie Levin-Epstein. Ma'am, go ahead.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN, CLASP: Thank you very much and welcome everyone to today's audio conference call, an interview with Jason DeParle. Before we get started, I want to begin with a note of appreciation to my colleague John Hutchins who hosted CLASP's previous audio calls in 2004 while I was away in New Zealand on a fellowship. As those of you who tuned in know, John did a terrific job. What you may not know is that John is about to wed and with his bride will be heading north to work on communications for our colleague organization MDRC. Congratulations to you, John, and we know the big apple will never be the same.

On today's call we have an estimated 300 listeners from over half the states in the United States. I'd like to introduce to you to my guest. Jason DeParle is a Senior Writer at the *New York Times* and a frequent contributor to the *New York Times Magazine*. You may have caught his excerpt a couple of weekends ago. He's been a two-time finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and he lives right here in Washington, D.C. Welcome Jason.

JASON DEPARLE, NEW YORK TIMES: Thank you.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: My other guest today is Kathy Edin who's a University of Pennsylvania sociologist and ethnographer, best known for her co-authored book *Making Ends Meet* based on conversations over five years with approximately 375 welfare recipients and their children as they moved through the welfare reform programs in various states. She is co-author of the forthcoming *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*, based on a six-year study of low-income single moms living in eight poor Philadelphia-area neighborhoods.

KATHY EDIN, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSLVANIA: Your book was riveting, Jason.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: And also with me is Mark Greenberg, Director of Policy here at CLASP, a frequent guest on our program and a frequent guest probably in your state, too. Most states have seen Mark. I don't know the exact count, Mark, but I know you've not yet gotten to North or South Dakota. I think we need to work on that Mark, welcome.

MARK GREENBERG, CLASP: Hi, Jodie, and I hope to someday.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Excellent. In this audio conference call we'll be hearing from Jason about his new book called *The American Dream, 3 Women, 10 kids, and a Nation's Drive to End Welfare*. We'll see how it stacks up against Kathy's take away messages and themes from her research. And we'll delve into some possible policy implications with Mark.

Jason a background question; you're a *New York Times* reporter on the welfare poverty beat, but you've spent most of the last seven years writing a book instead of columns. Why?

JASON DEPARLE: There was a public reason for writing the book and a private reason. The public reason was I didn't want the public to lose track of the story and I wanted to humanize the people involved. I think Washington journalists have a tendency to follow the story right up to the beginning. In other words, we cover elections exhaustively. We cover bills relentlessly but we tend to loose track of what happens as a result. This legislation was so important that I wanted to stay with it and tell the full story, and there just was no way to do that within the constraints and conventions of daily journalism. Even at a place that was as extraordinarily generous to me as the *New York Times* was. They gave me an incredible amount of support and time and space to explore these issues but daily journalism just doesn't let you follow the same set of people over time and get to know them the way you need to unravel a story like this. The private reason was I wanted to satisfy my own curiosity, which is probably the best reason for anybody to write anything. I was captivated by the stories of these women and I think if I was, then someone else would be too.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Jason can you give us a 60 second sketch about what the book encompasses, just the topic that it covers.

JASON DEPARLE: Well the book is two stories on a collision course with each other. One is the political drive to end welfare. The book begins in October 1991 with a scene of Bruce Reed, then a speech writer to the long-shot presidential candidate Bill Clinton, writing the inaugural domestic policy speech of his campaign and trying to come up with a phrase that would capture some notice. He lit on one with a pledge to "end welfare as we know it." The other story line is that that very month as Bruce Reed was doing that, three women got on a bus—or two women and one soon to follow—they got on a bus from Chicago to Milwaukee to go on welfare there. They had a crisis in Chicago and couldn't survive there anymore and moved to Milwaukee to start their new lives there on the welfare rolls, having no idea that their new home was about to become the epicenter of this drive to end welfare. So these two narratives—the political drive to end welfare

and the women's move to Milwaukee to get welfare there—the two intersect in the 1996 legislation. The bulk of the book then explores their lives under the new law. There are several other elements to the book. There are six generations of a type of variance in the family history. It's an African American family, and I was able to trace their story back six generations to slavery and follow it through the sharecropping era. The family worked as sharecroppers on the plantation of the late segregationist Senator James Eastland. And there are also several chapters on the W-2 bureaucracy in Wisconsin, and what I think is a largely untold story of financial waste and client neglect there.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: I'm going to want to ask you a bit about that later. Let me ask you though, you wrote that "we live in a country where anyone can make it; yet generation after generation some families don't. To argue about welfare is to argue about why." You go on to say, "I'll be pleased if this story challenges and informs the assumptions on both sides as much as it challenged mine." Jason what's an illustration of an assumption that you held that was challenged?

JASON DEPARLE: That passage is, in part, to convey that I really didn't want this to be an ideological book. I was generally against the welfare law in '96 when it passed but I took pains to try to wipe my own mental slate clean and to say, "Okay, this is an experiment, I want to come to it with as open a mind as I can." There were so many things that surprised me, but probably the biggest, most obvious, was that so many people could go to work. The book centers on a woman named Angela Jobe, who had been on welfare for 12 years and didn't have a high school degree. Yet within four or five months of the new law she went out and was able to become a full-time steady worker. Then there were a whole second set of surprises about just how hard her life remained. Even while she was succeeding as a worker, the economic hardships that she endured were daunting.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: You spent seven years zeroing in on the experience with low-wage work and with welfare and you did it through the perspective of three related women living in a single town, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. You sort of gave us a little bit of an intro to Angie but can you introduce our listeners to the three women as if they were here and you were about to introduce them. A real snap shot.

JASON DEPARLE: They're cousins, cousins and best friends, and for awhile they lived together. The three women are Angela Jobe, Jewell Reed, and Opal Caples. They start incredibly close to each other, but get launched on different trajectories and in the end wind up in different places, which is part of what makes the story interesting. Angie, as the new welfare law arrives, gets very invested in her work as a nursing aide. She works in a nursing home and really connects to her patients. She often had more patience for her patients than her children. Her work brought out a latent empathy and compassion, the kind of non-economic, spiritual rewards—self esteem, satisfaction—that sometimes got discussed in the welfare debate.

Jewell works successfully as well but doesn't care about it on any kind of emotional level. She's deeply in love with a man named Ken who's a drug dealer and a pimp and

winds up going to prison for several years; her life struggle is deciding whether or not to stay with him and whether or not she can get him to stay with her. So she's an avenue to discuss relationships with men.

The third woman, Opal, was the one who I initially thought would be the center of the book and the one I thought would be the biggest success; she was the only one of the three who'd been married, the only one of the three who had finished high school. She even had a semester of community college. What I didn't know when I first started reporting was that she had been using crack cocaine for a number of years. Her story is a sadder one than I would have thought possible when I first began; the cocaine use grows more and more damaging and the bureaucracy fails to help in any way.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Jason, I have an e-mail question from a reporter, Cecilio Morales of *Employment & Training Reporter*. He asks, "given that African Americans make up only 39 percent of the caseload, why do you focus on only blacks in a book that purports to illuminate on welfare reform?"

JASON DEPARLE: I didn't…

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Jason could you speak up just a bit, thanks.

JASON DEPARLE: Sure. The initial decision was to focus on Milwaukee because it was the unofficial capital of the end welfare movement. It was the first city to make a substantial cut in the rolls. And it just happened that three quarters or so of the welfare population in Milwaukee was black. The typical Milwaukee welfare recipient was a black woman from Chicago whose mother or grandmother migrated up from Mississippi, which is a description that fits Opal, Angie, and Jewell.

At the same time, I came to believe there is an advantage to seeing this story of welfare through African American eyes. While blacks and whites were about equally represented in absolute numbers on the welfare rolls, blacks made up about 70 percent of the long-term welfare population. And if you think about the history of our country that's not a surprise, given the history of racial injustice and the lack of economic opportunities that African American families have faced. And that's part of what makes the link to the Eastland plantation so important in framing the story. Some of your readers or listeners will know that name and some won't. For years James Eastland was the Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee and an unapologetic white supremacist who used to go around and say he had a pocket in his vest where civil rights bills went to die. So the fact that the mothers of Jewell and Opal grew up—I mean this is not way back, this is just their own mothers—grew up as sharecroppers on his plantation is a reminder of how recent that racial history is.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Jason, your book is an exploration of the role welfare plays in the lives of recipients. I'd like to ask you to read an excerpt to show us what you learned from Angie about this, and if you could just get to page 155 and start reading there, maybe even excerpting for us. What did you learn?

JASON DEPARLE: Imagine for a moment that you are Angela Jobe. You are 29 years old with four kids to raise. You have just quit your job. While you don't like to admit it, welfare is one of the few sources of stability in your life, and now in the summer of 1995 the country is in a fever to take it away. Black leaders warn of slavery's return. The priests say your kids will starve. What crosses your mind? "I don't pay no attention to that crap" Angie said, looking back. "I ain't thinking about welfare."

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Jason, you then wrote that these women, and I quote, "appeared to embody the one assumption that the partisans on both sides shared, that the program was central to recipient's lives, which made conservatives so keen to restrict it and liberals so afraid of its loss. But as Angie and Jewell saw the world, if the money was there, they were happy to take it. If not, they would make other plans. With welfare or without it Angie said 'you just learn how to survive,'" end quote. Jason play out for us; in addition to welfare, what helped Angie survive those years? Was it a picture of a lush lifestyle?

JASON DEPARLE: Gosh, Kathy knows better than anybody that nobody survived on welfare alone. Angie always had help from men and she often had help from an under-the-table job. She also had assistance from other government programs besides cash welfare. The welfare debate tended to assume that the entire economic lives of these women, for better or worse, depended on AFDC, when it was really a much smaller part of Angie's budget than that and even a smaller part of her emotional life. She just wasn't focused on welfare. In terms of your question on how well she survived, she faced an incredible amount of material hardship on welfare and off it. Even after she left welfare and became a successful worker, her lights got turned off three times in as many years. I mean her lights were getting turned off a month after she got her first 401-K. So if you wanted to tell an uplifting story about her journey from welfare to work you could focus on the 401-K. If you wanted to tell the full story I think you had to look at how many times she was without food or how many times she was without lights.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Part of the picture was that Angie worked to survive and she often worked off the books so that the welfare office wouldn't cut back or cut off her cash grant. Now some would say that working off the books made her a welfare cheat and cheaters are bad people. Others would say she was a worker trying to legitimately provide for her family because the government program was inadequate. What do you hope readers will appreciate as they read about Angie's as well Jewell's work off the books?

JASON DEPARLE: At one point, Angie was a temp worker at a post office and after months of not reporting the job, she figures out she better do it soon or the computer will catch her. By reporting the job, she wound up paying an effective tax rate of 61 percent, so she lost 61 cents of every dollar she made, due to reduced benefits. She was working for something like $2 an hour. So I said to her, "gee, why did you even bother?" And she said, "'Cause I like to work. It makes me feel good about myself and makes me feel like I'm doing something for the kids." I think if you read her story in context you wouldn't

come away from that thinking here's a woman who's cheating. You'd think, "gee, here's a woman faced with some unpalatable choices who is working even when working doesn't pay."

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Jason, focusing still on Angie's comment that you just learn how to survive with welfare or without it, I could imagine the possibility that a policy maker would hear that and see it as a signal that it would be no big deal to eliminate the welfare program. After all, it's not needed for survival. Angie just said that. Do you see that as a fair read?

JASON DEPARLE: No, I do think that it was less central to Angie's survival than either the left or the right feared. The left thought things would get a lot worse without it, and the right thought things would get a lot better. I think Angie just found something else to substitute for it for cash welfare. But I think if you read the book in context you wouldn't come away concluding that government support doesn't matter, because even as a worker she's heavily reliant on government support. The earned income tax credit is a good example. It provides about 20 percent of her annual income. She continues to get and to need food stamps. There's a scene in the book where a bureaucratic screw up cost her her food stamps and her 5-year-old boy is flinging himself to the floor because he says the house is out of milk. At some point Angie and Jewell both lose their health insurance. After years without it, they finally got on Badger Care, a government insurance program. But before that Jewell was getting her wages garnished to pay a medical bill because she was hospitalized with bleeding ulcers. Angie also got a government loan to buy a car, through the welfare system. So, if you read it all in context I think you'd have to say that even when they are successful workers they continue to need government support, and in some ways it's that government support that enables them to be successful workers.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Mark, if you heard that a member of Congress was going to put together a bill and introduce a bill to eliminate welfare based on the fact that Angie said "you just learn to survive" would you have anything to add to what Jason just said in terms of policy dimensions that that member of Congress and others ought to listen to?

MARK GREENBERG: First let me perhaps reiterate something that Jason said, which was that for the families that were working here in situations of low wages and unstable income, the crucial role that the earned income tax credit winds up playing is quite compelling. What's particularly striking as you read these stories and think about the situations of the families, is to consider all the ways in which the welfare system could have done more to help those families, and how their lives could have been less difficult if they had had the help.

In the Wisconsin structure the rules were basically designed so that once you went to work you no longer got cash assistance from the W-2 system. The working families would surely have been in a better situation if they had some ongoing cash help. I think for the other family, Opal's family, as one reads the story of what happened what's striking, and I suspect Jason will talk about this more, are the missed opportunities of a government structure to intervene and help address her situation. So what one's left with

here is not the sense that welfare was unnecessary. Rather, I think one is left with the sense that there is an extraordinary need for a helping system and that it did not perform that way that it should have.

JASON DEPARLE: Jodie, at one point Opal was homeless, pregnant, and living in a crack house and the welfare office did a home visit, not knowing it was a crack house. Somebody showed up at the door and delivered a notice saying "you're due at your appointment" and the proprietress of the crack house said "thank you" and took the note and closed the door. The home visitor had no idea where he had been. Opal had six different caseworkers over three years, and none of them figured out she was on drugs.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: And what they were really doing too, right? Speaking of reality, Mark let me take you back to Congress and go away from the hypothetical to the real. Congress is back—what's going to happen with welfare reform in 2004? Is the bill going to come up?

MARK GREENBERG: The current situation is that the current extension, we're now in our seventh, goes until the end of September. It is still not impossible that Congress could act this session. If one were betting, certainly the most likely thing is that we're now looking at another extension though we don't yet know how long the extension will be or under what terms.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Let's turn to the relationship of welfare reform and the notion that welfare reform meant that income from work would replace income from welfare. Jason, again I want to ask you to read, this time from page 303; could you give us a glimpse of Angie's life as a nursing aide? And where you're picking up is at the point where she got her annual raise that's on 303.

JASON DEPARLE: "The weekend she picked up her car she got her annual raise: 20 cents. 'Cheap bastards,' she said. 'I'm a damn good worker. I'm worth more than 20 cents.' A few weeks later she came home from work to find her lights shut off. Opal had given her some money for the bill but Angie had bought school clothes instead. The cut off was her third in as many years. How the power got reconnected is a bit of a mystery. Angie said she got a note from the asthma doctor reiterating Keshia's need for a breathing machine. Angie said Opal said Angie's cousin broke the lock and turned it on. When her vacation arrived Angie got no further than the neighborhood bar. She spent the night dancing alone. One evening after the lights returned Angie dragged in from a double shift. It was nearly midnight and she'd worked 16 hours. She was due back at dawn. Out of toilet paper, Angie had tried to swipe some from work but even there she'd met with defeat. The place had been picked clean. Angie usually treats her set backs with maudlin humor. This night she wasn't laughing. 'Ain't got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of,' she said. 'Why you working so hard?' her friend Barbara asked. Angie shot her a withering look, 'I got bills to pay.'"

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Wow. Jason, not only do the women face bills but they have to pay them while they're addressing health issues—their own and their children's. Do the women use these health problems as reasons to stop working?

JASON DEPARLE: You know Jodie that passage?

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Yes.

JASON DEPARLE: That's half, and a very important half, of Angie's experience as a worker. But I think it's probably also worth just noting that there are other passages in the book where Angie talks about how much she enjoys the patients. And one of my favorite stories about Angie is when one of the patients, an old white woman, barks a racial epithet, as Angie is trying to clean her up. On the streets that's the kind of thing that might have set Angie fighting. But in the nursing home it just made her laugh. And she said, "This epithet is cleaning you 'cause you're too sick to clean yourself, so you might as well let me." The work brought out this level of empathy in her, this vein of generosity.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: The work did this?

JASON DEPARLE: Yes, at the same time though it just paid so little. So she had these dual experiences. I just wanted to note that so it didn't seem like her work was entirely unrewarding. It was rewarding in one way and unrewarding in another. But as for Angie's health problems, one of the risks of being a nursing aide is back pain. Nursing aides actually get hurt more often than coal miners, from all the lifting they do. Angie tells a story of how they would sit around in the break room all complaining about the pains shooting down their backs. Angie eventually got those back pains. But Jewell had the worse health problems with her bleeding ulcers, and as I mentioned before, she wound up hospitalized because of them. Perhaps the most daunting part of Jewell's story wasn't just as she got hospitalized and had her wages garnished but what she said about it. She said, "That happens to everybody in Milwaukee."

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: What happens to everyone in Milwaukee?

JASON DEPARLE: They lose health insurance and have their wages garnished when they go to work. She said, "Everybody in Milwaukee owes a hospital bill." The idea that working people would get sick and have health insurance seemed to be beyond anything she'd imagined. She thought, "Well of course I got my wages garnished."

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: So they keep working in spite of these health problems and in spite of being garnished on their wages?

JASON DEPARLE: And in spite of lots of other things. I mean the stuff that Angie and Jewell went though. Angie got shot at one night and got up and went to work the next day. Angie worked under the kind of adversity that I could scarcely imagine.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Well one of the adversities that you do mention in the book is that you found empty refrigerators at the end of the month in families where there were workers. And I wonder if you think most Americans would be surprised that many welfare success stories—workers—have children that go hungry, not to mention the workers themselves.

JASON DEPARLE: I was surprised by the level of the hunger that I saw, so presumably if it surprised me, it would surprise some other people as well. It's not so much I'm surprised that there would be hungry people in the country. But Angie out-earned 85 percent of the people who left the welfare rolls in Wisconsin. So if there was hunger in Angie's house one would have to assume there's hunger elsewhere.

I went to a high school to interview some kids of welfare working mothers, but not about food. I wanted to talk to them about the role model question: How did they feel about their moms working? Did it inspire them to do different things with their lives? But the teenagers commandeered the conversation and wanted to talk instead about food. They started making macabre jokes about Raman noodles and generic boxes of cereal. I finally asked, "How many of you have gone to bed hungry because there wasn't enough food in the house?" And four out of the five of them raised their hands. One burst into tears. Tommy Thompson invited a former welfare recipient, Michelle Crawford, to address the state legislature. She told a wonderful story that paralleled Angie's about finding a certain sense of satisfaction in moving from welfare to work. But she, too, had problems keeping food in the house. As I visited her over the months that followed she kept running out of milk. She bought powdered mix, put it in the milk jug, and sweetened it with sugar to fool the kids. Then she told me "We ran out of sugar."

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Kathy, Jason's told some unbelievably compelling stories about hardship, and in *Making Ends Meet* you address hardship as well in your interviews with low-wage working single women. And one of the things you focus on is the instability of income and its influence on the ability to provide just basic necessities. Could you play out for us what you found with respect to the instability of income and how it affects the capacity to purchase and plan?

KATHY EDIN: That's a great question. Turning the phone back on after it's shut off costs money; same too for electricity and gas. Not being able to pay your rent on time incurs late charges and the anger of your landlord. And in some cases, of course, you may be threatened with eviction or even become homeless. And when you're paying on time for the living room couch or the bed for your child's room, as the working poor often are, missing one of these payments to one of these rent-to-own stores can result in repossession and all the payments you've made to date go down the drain. Then you've got to start over. It's simply a fact that work is usually less stable than welfare, and in the families we met in the early 1990s and followed between 1996 and 2000, it was this income instability rather than the mere low level of the wages themselves that usually led to the material hardship we observed.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: It's almost like you're describing a sort of tax on instability.

KATHY EDIN: Right.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Those add-on costs of instability.

KATHY EDIN: Exactly.

JASON DEPARLE: That was clearly the case with both Angie and Jewell. After leaving the rolls, they each experienced major fluctuations in their earnings. From one year to the next, Jewell's earnings fell by nearly 60 percent. Both of them had one great year followed by one disaster year.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Jason, in reading the book…and I was so glad to have a chance to get a copy of it and it's all dog eared now…I noticed that the word exploitation crept in a few times in descriptions of the low-wage labor market. And it wasn't just when you were describing Jewel's mother who was living in Missouri in 1960 working as a field hand and as a domestic when you described her as working in quote "a rigged labor market designed for exploitation." It also came up when you described Angie decades later deciding to quit her Post Office job because "the job market for low-skilled workers is stressful and exploitative." Clearly this low-wage market takes a toll, and not just on women who try and work in it. Could you, Jason, describe for us the toll it takes on Michael, a W-2 caseworker.

JASON DEPARLE: Michael is an unlikely hero in this story. He's a guy who has fallen on hard times. He's been drinking for about 6 months. He's lost his job; he was a roofer and a sheet rock guy and had a little business mowing city lots. Loses his business, loses his wife, he's sitting around drinking. Then he goes out with an old high school buddy who happens to be Director of Case Management at Maximus, and he tells Michael to come in as a caseworker. That's the last thing Michael wants to do, but he needs the money. So he goes in and becomes a caseworker, and to his surprise he gets invested in it. It's sort of parallel to Angie, the way he feels invested in his work. He decides that maybe he could be a good caseworker, maybe he could really help people because he's been down on hard times himself. But the office is in complete disarray. The guy they sent to train him would play his clients' voice mails on the speaker phone, and as soon as he heard their voice would delete them, saying "heard that, no thanks, never mind." And Michael immediately, just by looking at this guy, could tell there were problems with him. Apparently whoever hired him couldn't because Maximus hired him when he was….

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Maximus being?

JASON DEPARLE: Maximus was one of the private agencies running the welfare program in Milwaukee.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: OK.

JASON DEPARLE: They hired this case worker—his name was Corey Daniels—while he was on parole for committing fraud. He was a convicted felon who was a check forger and he was soon back in court. Four or 5 different clients came forward saying he was shaking them down for kick backs, that he wasn't giving them their checks unless they gave him some of the money in return. That's just one example of what Michael found in terms of colleagues in the office. And I could go on; there were many others: drug use, theft, a caseworker who was quietly forced out the door after impregnating a client. The office was a mess.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Mark, Jason has a line in the book in which he states that at $5.15 an hour the real value of the minimum wage is lower today than in 1950 when Hattie May, a grandmother to the children in these stories, was still picking cotton. Angie describes herself as treading water and we know that lots of low-wage workers, including low-wage workers who've never been on welfare, feel like they're not getting ahead. Mark, the question to you is how much of the problem relates to this inflation factor and that inflation has really eaten away at the wages so they simply just don't buy what they used to?

MARK GREENBERG: I think that's one piece of the problem. Actually I want to respond to that and then I'll also say a little bit about Jason's comments on the W-2 system. Certainly part of what one sees throughout this book is the impact of families who are working and are not able to make ends meet. And a part of it is because of the instability of the jobs, part of it is because of the wages. In the broader sense, certainly a big part of what has happened is the steady loss in value of the minimum wage, and the way in which the earned income credit is essentially used to compensate for what we've lost in the minimum wage. A part of this is also declining real wages for workers with limited education over time and a broad trend over a number of decades.

To emphasize again the theme of the missed opportunities to have provided help: This was not a structure that helped to connect people with better jobs. Once they were working, it did not help them advance to another job, and while we sometimes talk about a system of work supports, this system of work supports worked in an exceedingly uneven, inconsistent way. There wasn't consistent access to health care; there wasn't consistent access to food assistance. If we want to assure that lives can be better for families who are working, there is a very broad agenda suggested here by looking at the things that didn't happen.

Having said that, I also want to say I think one of the challenges for all of us in reading Jason's book is keeping in mind the stories of the families are extraordinarily compelling but these are three families out of a system of many millions of families. They certainly represent some families in the system, but by no means do they represent all. Similarly when one sees the story of what happened in the W-2 system in Wisconsin, and particularly in Milwaukee, there are, I think, horrendously troubling things in the lack of an effective program for these families. I think it raises important questions certainly that I expect people in Wisconsin will be talking about. But, we shouldn't treat this as representative of the entire country. It was an examination of W-2.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Jason, on that W-2 point, we have an e-mailed question here from Pam Fendt of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, and I wondered if you'd take this one on. She writes, "The experience of the women in your book reveal a lack of meaningful work experience sites in W-2. Given the hype of the program, this is a particularly interesting finding. Can you talk more about this?" Jason?

JASON DEPARLE: Yes, the ethos of W-2 is that everyone would have to work for a check, no matter what level of work abilities they had. Even someone who was disabled or someone with a limited mental capacity—W-2 would customize some sort of job for that person to do. The idea was universal work—that was the mantra—and many journalists wrote about it, I'm afraid, including me. By and by it dawned on me that I hardly ever saw anybody in a community service job. Many people were coded as being in community service jobs. You know, they were getting a check for being in community service jobs, but they weren't actually at the community service job. Some of them had assignments that they were ignoring; a good number never got any assignments and still got checks. At one point an internal report showed that 8 percent of the Maximus case load was actually working for a check, in a program that advertised itself as being 100 percent work.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: If we could just turn back to something you mentioned earlier. You were describing how you'd had a conversation after school with some adolescents where you thought you'd be talking to them about the role model theme—the value of welfare moms working as role models. And the kids commandeered the conversation and turned it into one about how hungry they were. One person who was quite focused on the role model issue and welfare reform as providing mothers as work models was Bill Clinton. He was quite smitten with it. Tell us about his Lillie Harden story and why it resonated with Clinton.

JASON DEPARLE: Lillie Harden was a welfare recipient in Arkansas who had gone through this program and gotten a job when Clinton was governor of Arkansas. He met her at an event and asked her what the best thing about being off of welfare was. And as Clinton told the story "she looked me in the eye and she said, 'Now when my boy goes to school and they ask him what does your mama do for a living, he can give an answer.'" This was a story that Clinton told a number of times as governor, as a candidate, and again as president. I think Clinton was genuinely taken with it, probably as a result of his own experiences as a child. I was able to interview him for the book and I asked him what got him thinking about role models. He said it was his own life and experience of growing up with his mother in a troubled, chaotic household. Every day she would get up and go to work, he said, and that was a source of stability for the family and the source of meaning and inspiration for him. That's something we all would like to believe—the notion of a working mother as a role model has an intuitive appeal to it. I'm just not sure that the children of most low-income single mothers do much better when their mothers leave welfare for work. To go back to Lillie Harden, the boy that Clinton talked about—"now when I ask my boy what you're mamma does for a living he can give an answer"—by the time he was in high school was arrested for a shooting. Between the time that

Governor Clinton was telling me the story and the time President Clinton was repeating it, he had already served two years in juvenile detention center. He's now 30 years old and had been arrested, oh, I think it was 20 times in the last 10 years. That's not to take away from Lillie Harden's efforts as a working mother, but I think the lives of poor kids in dangerous, inner-city neighborhoods are much more complicated than a story about their mother being a role model would imply. All three of the women I followed had working mothers growing up. Angie's mother was the role model from central casting. Adamantly anti-welfare and worked two jobs to put her through parochial school, and Angie still wound up pregnant and dropping out of high school.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: One of the things you found when you looked at role models, as you just noted, a lot of the women were in fact working but many were working and their kids were quote unquote "kids with lots of unsupervised time." For example, Jewel's mother, after her son Squeaky was murdered, determined to leave the projects. So she worked at the lounge nights, which quote "left the kids home unsupervised" and that happens time and time again with these role models. A question to you, Jason, is a complicated one for you as an author. Do you think that people who will read about these mothers who went to work and left their children unsupervised will come to view these mothers as irresponsible?

JASON DEPARLE: There are some examples of irresponsible behavior in the book. But there are also examples of strength and resourcefulness and resilience and generosity. I think when people read about women on welfare trying to work they're generally sympathetic to them Opal, Angie, and Jewell would all say there was a period of irresponsibility in their lives, especially when they were younger and making decisions to leave high school and get pregnant. You can screw up at 30 and recover but it's hard to drop out of high school and have a baby and still get back on track. At that point, their lives were heading off in a different direction. Jodie, can I say one thing in a spirit of spontaneity on a different subject?

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Sure, with that intro.

JASON DEPARLE: What I said about W-2, the problems I found in the W-2 bureaucracy, especially at Maximus, were very disturbing. But I do think the system helped Angie and Jewell. It helped them not so much by giving them a caseworker who was going to sort through their problems with them; it helped them merely by putting up enough screens—making the costs of getting welfare high enough—to prompt them to go become steady workers. I think they both would say it did them a favor that way. They do say that in the book.

Opal's a different story. As a drug addict, she needed something different and didn't get it. But for Angie and Jewell the system sort of worked despite itself. And even in an overall bureaucracy that often performed poorly, there were some examples of remarkable caseworkers and I tell a couple of them in the book. Some extraordinary people did extraordinary things on behalf of their clients. So I know there are some state officials listening in and people who work hard everyday to try to bring service to clients.

I don't want to leave the impression that I found nothing but failures. I found some people working very hard, often against hard odds, to do really hard things, and I'd think the system probably delivers more service now than it did under AFDC. The issue is, as Mark put it, missed opportunity, and we probably both agree it could and should be doing more.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: I'd like to shift gears now and rope Kathy in and talk about fathers, because Jason in your epilogue you suggest that there should be an investment in the fatherhood initiative, you write, "to help inner city men find jobs and reconnect with their kids." Jason let's say there was such an investment. What should it's over arching goal be? Fathers as role models, father as second earners, something else?

JASON DEPARLE: Jodie, the main thing that got me focused on fathers wasn't any kind of predisposition toward it myself or policy discussion. It was just listening to the women and kids themselves. So often they brought it up, as we were talking about seemingly unrelated things. They themselves talked about how much of a yearning they had to know their fathers. Of the three women and their 10 kids none of them had a relationship with their father, none. And for all of them, it is an ongoing source of pain in their lives, even as grown women. By her own account, Angie became a nursing aide in part to overcome her sense of guilt for not having taken care of her father when he was dying as an alcoholic. She said she wanted a chance to care for others since she felt bad that she hadn't taken care of him. Her daughter Keshia at 14 chose a magnet school with a pre-law program that was all the way across town because she had convinced herself she could be a lawyer to get her dad out of prison. So it was really the yearning for fathers that got me thinking about that as opposed to any personal conviction about what kind of fatherhood program would work. I think the fatherhood field is where the women's employment fields were 20 or 25 years ago, which is to say the very rudimentary stage. I don't know whether marriage promotion would work or Marriage-Plus or any of the other policy formulations. So my own thought would be try a bunch of stuff and evaluate it and let's see. But I do feel a sense of urgency about doing something to bring the men into the families' lives both as earners and as nurturers.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Kathy, in your interviews with single mothers in Philadelphia you may have, since you had a broader group to interview, somewhat of a different experience in terms of relationships of fathers to their children. And your focus is on the decision to raise a child while not married. In your sample and the women you've come to know, are the children's fathers involved in some percent of these households?

KATHY EDIN: Surprisingly Jodie, given the stories Jason tells, at the time of the child's birth, nearly all, in fact roughly 90 percent of the dads are involved. In fact, up to half are actually living with the child and its mother at the time of the birth. Furthermore, both the mother and the father usually have strong intentions to stay together and raise their child together. Amazingly, even eight in 10 plan to marry. Now, in the end, few act on these marriage plans, only about fifteen percent, though most who do not marry do stay together for a time. However, by the time the kid enters preschool most will have broken up. And most all unmarried parents of newborns believe the father should be involved

regardless of whether the couple stays together. Most fathers who break up with their child's mother also disengage from that child.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: For the ones that are staying engaged is there any sort of way of characterizing them? Do they tend to have a steadier job, more education? Is there some sort of characteristic that runs across the more involved father?

KATHY EDIN: You know that's interesting. It really seems that with these unmarried couples the relationship between the father and child goes through the mother, the relationship between the father and the mother. Multiple partner fertility is so pervasive among these couples.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Could you explain that term of art for the audience? Say it again and then explain it.

KATHY EDIN: OK, multiple partner fertility is when you have a baby by more than one partner. And for 60 percent of unmarried couples, at the time of their child's birth, there is already an outside child from either the mom or the dad's side, a child from another relationship. Now this complicates the picture enormously. It's partly because when the dad goes to visit his other kids, the new mom is also often jealous that he will reconnect sexually with the other partner, the past partner. In fact, sexual infidelity is probably the main problem, along with domestic violence, that plagues the relationships of these couples. So when mom and dad break up it's often for fairly serious reasons, and this makes it very difficult for them to effectively co-parent a child together after their relationship ends.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Your research, as I understand it, explicitly considers why the mothers did not marry or why they divorced, and you've mentioned some of the factors here, sexual infidelity being one of them. And you suggest that another key factor is the economic instability of low-wage men. Could you play out what you found on that point, the economic instability of low-wage men?

KATHY EDIN: Sure Jodie. Both moms and dads hold a very high financial bar for marriage but the bar really isn't about having enough money to set up a common household. After all, like the women in the book, most are living together with their partners already. Instead it's about having enough money to stake a claim at a sense of working class respectability. When we asked these couples what it would take for them to get married, they typically say they want a mortgage on a modest home, a reliable car, some money in the bank, and enough left over to host a decent wedding. Marriage used to be the mark at the beginning of the road to working class respectability. Now for these couples it seems to be the frosting on the cake of a working class respectability already achieved. Critics, of course, say that their poverty results from their lack of marriage, but these poor couples say that their poverty is what makes unstable marriage and that they do believe overwhelmingly that one shouldn't marry unless it is for life.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Kathy, in Jason's book Jewell wants to marry Ken, who's out of prison and the father of the youngest of her three children. He's employed as a pizza deliverer. Why do you think Jewell wants to tie the knot but Ken does not, given your research in which you've found that the women didn't want to marry someone who might be economically unstable over time?

KATHY EDIN: As you point out Jodie, Jewel's case is somewhat unusual. You know in our study we found that both the moms and the dads do want to marry eventually and in fact usually the man wants to marry more than the woman does. So this is a little different from the story of Jewell and Ken. But I have the feeling that we didn't quite get the whole story here.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Oh, play that out.

KATHY EDIN: What I suspect is that what we're really hearing from Ken is that he holds a kind of high financial bar for marriage I spoke about earlier. But he doesn't feel his current job as a pizza delivery man makes him suitable for marriage. Now if he got the brick layer job, the certificate he got in prison but can't find a job for now, things might change between him and Jewel.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: So are you saying Kathy that you think that some low-wage men might have the same bar that low-wage women have with respect to marriage, which is they want to be able to offer economic stability. And he doesn't feel he's gotten that.

KATHY EDIN: Absolutely. We have another study where we actually follow couples over time and we're finding that the fathers have the exact same financial bar that the mothers do. And they really don't want to enter into marriage or in their words desecrate marriage, unless they could do so "the right way." And that means having the kind of stable job that makes them feel they have some piece of the American dream in their pockets.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Speaking of the American dream, Kathy, what is your take-away having had a chance to look at the book in its entirety? Compare it to your many years of research. And knowing that the audience hasn't yet had a chance to read it, what are some big picture issues? Not just necessarily in the fatherhood area, which is your particular area of expertise, but taking the book as a whole, as a picture of a welfare population. What would you encourage people to do as they set to open the book? In what context would you recommend folks read it?

KATHY EDIN: First of all buy the book, it's terrific. Second I think it's important to remember that in terms of the personal problems these three women have, they're quite unusual both in the number and the severity. Now there is an important….

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: What do you mean by number?

KATHY EDIN: They have a lot of problems and the problems are fairly serious personally, and you know there is a subset of the welfare population that has problems of this severity and number, and so that's important to pay attention to. But on the other hand although they're more disadvantaged personally, they're unusually lucky in the labor market, and so they may be in the top 20 percent in terms of earnings, at least Angie and Jewel, but in the bottom 20 percent in terms of personal problems. If we keep that in mind, I think the story is amazing and compelling and it also points to the important problems that can result from privatizing welfare services, which I think is one of the most important take-away messages from the book.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: I think what you're beginning to talk about is the specialness of Wisconsin. Mark, can you perhaps comment on the labor market situation in Wisconsin during this period of time?

MARK GREENBERG: It was a strong labor market in Wisconsin, as in the country, over this period. Let me underscore the point that Kathy referenced about privatization though. One striking part of the W-2 experience concerns the issues that arose in its privatized administration. As other states and localities consider privatization possibilities, it's important to look at this experience, in which the accountability structure that one would have wanted to see in place simply did not appear to be operating. Also, there were a number of problems concerning the nature of services, the ways in which money was spent, the incentive structure that was operating for the entities. I think it's important to look at this experience and say, "What do we learn from this about ways in which you don't want to do it?"

JASON DEPARLE: Jodie, can I interject something just very quickly. The argument of the book isn't that privatization is bad per se. The book is neutral on the issue of privatization. It simply says that this particular experiment in privatization went awry and wasn't properly supervised.

MARK GREENBERG: Yes, and let me also emphasize that I'm not meaning to say that all privatization is wrong. What I am saying is that serious problems occurred in the absence of an adequate accountability structure here.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: I'm afraid we are running out of time and I want to ask you, Jason, to help us close this conversation. Hopefully a bunch of people will go get your book and read it as a result of this audio conference call because they've been teased. And I think what we have had an opportunity to do here is tease people because there's just so much more in your book that we haven't had a chance to cover. And I'd like to ask you to offer the listeners today some of the take-away observations about what your experience of writing this book has meant to you and, as well, about what you think it maybe ought to mean to us with regard to how we all approach poverty in America. And with that small task Jason could you offer up some advice?

JASON DEPARLE: Yes, as we've been talking today, there are some daunting things in the book in terms of hunger and neediness and loneliness and stress and pain and

difficulty. But for all that, I found the story, in the end, to be hopeful on two levels. One, the women show an extraordinary amount of resilience. You know Senator Moynihan used to talk about the poor as "dependents" and said "to be dependent was to hang," as though people were really passive and weak. Angie never saw herself as hanging on anything. She saw herself as a strong, self-reliant woman, and she overcame challenges that most of us can't imagine. We used to talk about the poor being mired in a culture of entitlement. One thing that I took away from the reporting was just how little Angie and Jewell felt they were entitled to, even once they became workers. Not to heat, not to lights, not even to food. That's what Jewell's story is about when she says, "Everybody's going to get their wages garnished." She didn't even feel entitled to basic medical care. They didn't have a sense of entitlement. They became workers and I think as a result they *are* now entitled to something more than what they've received.

So I feel hopeful about them. And secondly, I probably feel a bit more hopeful than maybe you and Mark about the country as a whole. I started writing about low-income issues during the Reagan years when the political mindset, not only of the administration but of the country, was mired in defeatism. Ronald Reagan reinforced that sense of futility when he said, "We fought a war on poverty and poverty won," which was a quip but a damaging one. I went to a poverty conference in the early '90s once where Robert Lampman, one of the founders on the war on poverty, did a spoof about how successful they'd been in lifting people out of poverty and raising their wages and then he stopped with a line from Saturday Night Live: "Not." There was just a sense of gloom and hopefulness in the field and one of the legacies I think of the last 10 years has been to dispel that. Some things did work. Poverty rates came down, employment went up, wages rose. The EITC is now larger than AFDC ever was; child care subsidies have doubled. God knows the incredible amount of hardship that exists. But there at least was a start towards building a work-based safety net, and I think the record shows that there's more we can do, and I feel hopeful that somehow we will.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: And Jason has your book hit the streets yet?

JASON DEPARLE: The stores Jodie, the stores.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Sorry, sorry!

JASON DEPARLE: The pub date is Monday and I'm told that Amazon is shipping today.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: OK. I want to thank you very much Mark Greenberg for joining us.

MARK GREENBERG: Thank you.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: Kathy Edin from the University of Pennsylvania.

KATHY EDIN: My pleasure.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: And thanks so much Jason DeParle for being with us today.

JASON DEPARLE: Thank you.

JODIE LEVIN-EPSTEIN: And I hope the audience has a great weekend, a refreshing weekend, and we'll be back at work on Monday. Take care everybody, have a good one. Bye bye.

OPERATOR: Thank you this does conclude today's teleconference. You may disconnect your lines at this time and have a wonderful day.

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