

# THE CROSSING



By Todd Schwartz

Donna Beegle '90 is from a country that should not exist — a country she now battles every day. She needs your help.

There are 37 million people in the country where Donna Beegle was born and raised. Thirteen million of those are children. There are eight million families.

The topography of her nation ranges from bucolic rural areas to teeming cities. The borders shift endlessly. The ground itself can suddenly fall away from beneath people, families, homes. In the unusual instances when someone leaves this country for good, they often claim it never existed. There is much love and strength there, but happiness is harder to come by.

Seen on a map, her nation is shaped much like the United States, although it is made up of pockets and backwaters and segments — as though an image of the U.S. had been cut from steel and allowed to slowly rust away.

An ocean, narrow but deep, separates the land of Beegle's birth from the country where she now lives. The citizens of her land are not on good terms with those in our America, nor have they been for some time. As far back as the 19th century, British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli described the countries as "two nations, between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy, who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were ... inhabitants of different planets."

Born in 1961, Beegle traveled across her homeland for 25 years before she braved the difficult and perilous crossing to our America. By the time she was 12, she had learned from her extended family the body of knowledge, passed from generation to generation, that defined survival in her nation: Which churches and agencies give out free clothes and shoes. The dumpsters

where she could get returnable cans and bottles without being caught. How to give off an aura of violence to avoid trouble. How to fix a car without any money for parts or a mechanic to help. Where to cash a check without any identification. Where to go for help when her utilities were being shut off. How, when she was sick, to get free medicine samples from an emergency room. How to laugh when she was hungry, being evicted, and had nowhere to go.

She learned how to smoothly change the subject to avoid answering humiliating questions, how to fix her tooth-ache with super glue, how to get a two-week supply of groceries home without transportation. Even as a little girl she knew the rules for visiting people in prison and how to find out to which jail your relative has been taken.

Growing up here in our America, it is a safe bet that you did not learn these things. You probably didn't hike into the woods, pull moss from the trees, bale it and sell it to nurseries to make money for that night's food. It's doubtful that you know that, when sleeping in a car with your parents and five brothers, the seat next to the rear window is prime real estate.

The land where Donna Beegle was born is called poverty, and now she works every day to make certain no one forgets the millions of people who still live there.

She turns red, red as the berries she used to pick as a migrant worker. She spins among anger, frustration, and embarrassment as University of Portland professor Bob Fulford corrects her for maybe the 20th time in an hour: "What was that? You mean 'saw' him, not 'seen' him, Donna. And don't say 'aint'."

But she listens, because she knows this is the only way she can learn the language of her new land, Middle Class English. Weeks before, Fulford had taken notice of the slightly older student with the thrift-store clothes and the shy nature. She worked so hard.

The papers she wrote revealed rare depth, empathy, brains — and terrible grammar.

"I've noticed some problems with your speech," Fulford said to her one day. "Would you like me to correct you?"

"I'd love it," she answered. And even now, her face red as an eviction notice, Beegle knows that someday she will be bilingual, which is a vital step on the path.

It is memories like this that sometimes come now to Donna Beegle, Ph.D. in educational leadership and sought-after consultant across our America, as she prepares to step on stage to address a group of educators or legislators or police or social service workers. Her speech is perfect, confident, her posture is erect, her clothes are elegant. She has hosted television documentaries and written extensively. She lives in two worlds now, and is paid to speak for one to the other, to build bridges. She is the president of her own business, Communication Across Barriers. The product her company manufactures is understanding.

She was born near Phoenix, Arizona. It was January, and her parents, like their parents, were following the seasons, migrant workers who picked cotton, beans, onions, cherries, strawberries. For a time, Beegle's father had been a welder, but then came the cataracts, the failed operations, the bottle. Beegle was the fifth child of six, the only girl. For a few weeks at a time, always moving, she lived in Arizona, California, Washington and Oregon. In 1974, her family settled for a while in Portland.

They moved into a tiny house with no plumbing at 104th and S.E. Yukon Street. It would be just one of the 17 houses she lived in over 20 years. Her parents slept in the living room, Donna slept in the single bedroom and her brothers slept outside in an old U-Haul trailer. She started classes as a freshman at Marshall High School. Three months later, the family was evicted. For a while they slept in their car in

the back of truck stops, because her mother thought that was the safest place.

She dropped out of high school soon thereafter — school had always been meaningless in her life anyway. She wasn't a terrible student, and she liked writing, but school didn't put food on the table, didn't get the power turned back on, didn't get you anywhere that she could imagine back then. It was just a place where most people treated her like she was stupid and constantly reminded her of the things she didn't have. No one in her family had gotten past the eighth grade. All of her brothers, her father, and her uncle had done time in jail or prison.

When she turned 15, her boyfriend decided to go to California to pick cherries. To Beegle, it seemed as good an option as any. A man could take care of her, and leaving one less mouth to feed for her alcoholic father and put-upon mother made sense. In order to go with her boyfriend, she got married. By 17, she had a baby. By 21, she had a 4-year-old daughter, a 2-year-old son, two miscarriages, and a failing marriage swarmed by unpaid bills and dead-end jobs. By 25, Beegle was a divorced mother with a ninth-grade education and no job skills, living on \$408 a month in welfare and food stamps. Her rent was \$395, leaving \$13 each month to pay for utilities, clothes for herself and her kids, transportation, the laundromat, soap, toilet paper — everything that food stamps wouldn't buy. Soon she came home to find the all-too-familiar eviction notice on her door. Her social worker responded by demanding that Beegle take money-management classes.

Now, almost two decades later — when, as she tells her audiences, the average welfare check for an adult with two children has risen to all of \$468 per month, while the average rent for a modest two bedroom apartment is more than \$700 — Beegle recalls taking the social worker's subtext to heart.

"I was stupid, I was lazy, I was deficient," she says. "I was too dumb to make \$13 do all of those things. It was the same message that me and everyone in my family had heard from the day we were born, and I believed it. And now I had failed myself, my marriage, and my kids."

Beegle went to the county relief agency, explained her desperate straits and was told that all they could offer was to pay the electric bill — in the apartment she no longer had — for one month. It was 1986, the center of the Me Decade here in our America. She slumped in the chair, too tired even to cry. A woman stepped forward.

"I couldn't help overhearing your situation," the woman said, "and I wanted to let you know there is a new program that might be right for you."

A few days later, Beegle left her kids with her mom and showed up at a three-week life-skills program for low-income homemakers called Women In Transition. She had no illusions that this was some heaven-sent second chance, in fact she had no interest whatsoever — except for the low-income housing certificate that came with the deal. That was gold in her country.

"Everything changed with the first speaker," Beegle remembers. "A woman walked to the front of the class, poised, well-dressed, and well-spoken. And I hung on her every word. She had been born and raised in poverty. She had been a single mother on welfare. And she had escaped. She had a college degree and commanded respect. I was mesmerized. It wasn't that I saw some blinding light telling that I could do the same — but for the first time there was a glow of possibility."

Across the ocean, on the far horizon, the clouds parted for a moment. Now she knew someone much like herself who had actually gone to the other country to live, sailed away to Middle Class America. Slowly, Beegle began to build a boat.

It would take her nine years to complete the crossing.

**T**here are nearly 1,100 people on the football field, participants in one of Beegle's seminars, and this will be the largest Class Continuum she's ever done.

She asks everyone to form a straight line, facing her, along the length of the field.

"Take three steps forward if your mother graduated from college," she says into the mike. People separate themselves from the line. "Take one step back if you ever had your utilities shut off."

The questions come — Have you ever been evicted? Did you have an allowance? Have you ever been arrested? Has anyone in your family ever been arrested? Did you have a teacher who cared about you? Did you have a family doctor? Have you ever traveled out of the country? — and soon there are a few people who have stepped very far forward and a few who have stepped quite a ways back. Strangely, in this setting at least, those who keep stepping ahead look as embarrassed as those who keep moving backward. The majority in the middle have stepped a short way forward, and they look surprised that not everyone had the things







they took for granted, like a doctor or a family vacation.

“Look around you,” Beegle says. “This is a living picture of class in America.” And then, because this group contains neither homeless people nor software billionaires, and mindful of the fact that less than 1 percent of America’s population holds 54 percent of the nation’s wealth, she reminds those in the front that they are not really in the front — and those in the back that there are many, many more behind them.

Beegle herself was very far back on the continuum as she sat in that first Women In Transition class back in 1986. But the first day’s ray of light stayed with her as she found yet another dirt-cheap place to live, and scrounged up money to get to class. To the surprise of her teachers in the program, Beegle earned her high school equivalency degree in weeks.

She had to fight against the endless soundtrack in her head, a chorus of no confidence that sung to her of inadequacy and failure. A few years later she would study the writings of the Brazilian educational thinker Paulo Freire, who illustrated how poverty in America is internalized — something that seldom happens in other countries. This, he posited, is why immigrants who arrive here with nothing often do better than those born here with nothing. Immigrants see the U.S. as the land of opportunity, they believe that there is hope for a better future. Americans born into generational poverty, Freire wrote, are socialized to believe that they will never rise, never belong, because of some basic flaw in their character. You aren’t smart enough, you don’t work hard enough, you are, and will always be, simply not as good a person as someone in the middle class — let alone the rich.

Why? It’s as obvious to anyone in poverty as an unmarked police car in a bad neighborhood: You work long hard hours, when you can find a job, and still you have nothing. The middle class has all the right things, the things the TV says everyone should have. Maybe you depend on welfare, where you are most often treated like a highly suspect child. You don’t belong because you don’t deserve to — it’s your fault.

“Ours is a blaming society,” Beegle says. “In America we socialize people to believe you have to have a certain kind of shoe, a certain kind of clothing, a certain kind of house, a certain kind of car, a certain kind of job. And, if you don’t have those things, you are not normal and you don’t belong. This

is why you see a lot of families from generational poverty with a cell phone, or a big screen, or cable TV — when we know they can't even afford to pay their rent. What we tend to do is judge them and say "They're irresponsible. I wouldn't do that kind of thing!" But the reality is they are simply trying to belong, hoping that having something a middle class person would have will bring them closer to what that life must be like. Picture that parent with two children living on \$468 a month — they don't have enough money anyway, and they want their kid to belong, so they will say, 'OK, get your Starter jacket' or 'Get your Nike shoes.' Whatever it is that might help them fit in."

She doubted she would ever fit in, but after graduating from the WIT program, Beegle worked up the courage to enroll at Mount Hood Community College in Gresham. That day she felt something foreign to her: pride. She began to tell her welfare worker of her plans. The woman cut her off in mid-sentence.

"You can't do that," she said flatly. "If you do, your welfare will be cut in half."

Beegle stared at her. The woman was asking her to choose between poverty with no future and even greater poverty — with maybe a glint of hope. *Don't be stupid*, Beegle told herself, *you aren't smart enough to get your degree anyway. You have two kids. Don't lose your welfare.* She sat on the shore of her nation of poverty, scared to death. She stood up.

"Cut me," she said. "I'm going to school."

**I**n 1964 President Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty. More than 40 years later we are still losing the war. The U.S. Census Bureau says 12.7 percent of Americans lived in poverty in 2004 (up from 12.3 percent the previous year). That's 37 million people. The poorest state was Mississippi, with a 22 percent poverty rate. New Hampshire and Connecticut had the lowest poverty rates, at 8 percent. Oregon stands at 12.1 percent.

Nearly 25 percent of blacks live in poverty, as do 21 percent of Hispanics. For non-Hispanic whites it's 8.6 percent, for Asians 9.8 percent. Nearly 18 percent of all children in America under 18 years of age live in poverty, as do almost four of every ten single mothers.

But what do these numbers really mean? The poverty line that Mollie Orshansky of the Social Security Administration drew back in 1964 was, even then, a sort of best guess. She simply calculated the cost of meeting

a family's nutritional needs and then multiplied this figure by three, because families in that era spent about a third of their income on food. Surely there are more sophisticated formulas today? Surely the Census Bureau has recalculated the cost of an adequate diet or remeasured the share of income spent on food? Four decades, several economies, and a few technological revolutions later, other than adjusting for inflation, Orshansky's formula is completely unchanged. The borders of the nation of poverty are defined by what it cost to feed a family in the 1960s, in today's dollars.

Which results in these figures: for a family of four, an annual income of \$19,307; for a family of three, \$15,067; for a family of two, \$12,334; and for an individual, \$9,645. As the Census Bureau itself is the first to admit, the poverty line "is not a complete description of what people and families need to live." For one thing, housing takes a far greater share of income than it did all those years ago: nearly 33 percent today. For another, the free child care often provided by the mothers and grandmothers of the mid-20th century is now a serious expense. Neither does the measure take into account what the government provides to fight poverty: non-monetary benefits including food stamps and the earned income-tax credit for the working poor.

The Census Bureau, along with the federal government's Office of Management and Budget, have experimented with new, more up-to-date measures, but there has been one large problem: any honest change to the formula will likely raise the official number of Americans living in poverty. No administration, red or blue, wants that. After all, when it comes to the world's 17 leading industrial nations with the largest percentages of their people living in poverty, America is already Number One.

**B**eegle's welfare check had been cut to \$250 a month, and not long into her first year at community college, she was evicted yet again. She managed to find a Community Action Agency voucher for a seedy motel on Sandy Boulevard.

"It was better than the streets," Beegle says, "but for two months my little boy and my 6-year-old daughter were exposed to a lot of crime and drugs. I left them with my mom as often as I could."

She pressed on across the ocean. She enrolled in the journalism program. Her family lived on food stamps. She published her first article in the

school paper. She got her clothes from relief agencies. She learned everything she could from every class. She hid the fact that she didn't understand many of the words the teachers and other students used. She wrote them all down in her notebook, and at night she'd look them all up. She had no phone. She struggled to find Section 8 housing. *Just give up, the chorus sang, get some job, maybe find another husband.* She almost quit more than once. But in June of 1988 she walked across a stage at Mount Hood Community College and was handed a diploma — the first in her family's history.

People encouraged her to go after a bachelor's degree. She couldn't believe she was even considering it. But on a campus visit, Beegle fell in love with the University of Portland, and her high grades and low income won her a few scholarships and some financial aid. Could she and her kids stay above water for two more years? She gathered her transcripts and sat down with Steve Ward, then head of the University's communications department. He began to scratch off the courses: "We can't take these credits. Or these. Or these..."

Beegle began to cry. The chorus in her head reached a shrill crescendo. She wasn't going to make it after all. She had to complete her degree in two years or lose her housing, and she just wasn't going to make it. She left, still in tears.

Two days later, Ward called her. "He told me that he'd had a talk with his wife about me," Beegle remembers, "and he thought could find a way to work things out. It wasn't the only time that someone at UP would change my life."

She'd rarely felt so out of place — she was older than most of her fellow UP students, who all seemed to have nice cars and new clothes and money to spend, and a few of them laughed at her outfits and her speech. But by the end of the first semester, Beegle was on the honor roll. Her financial aid and a job on campus paid for tuition with a few hundred dollars left over each semester, so she was weaning herself off welfare. But something was still tugging her back toward the shore she was trying to escape.

"The hardest thing I had to do to move out of poverty was to violate my entire system of values," Beegle says quietly. "I was raised with the belief that if you had two dollars, you should give somebody in the family one of them. That if there was some space on the floor, someone who needed a roof should be sleeping there. Whatever belonged to person belonged to everyone."



"So I'd get my financial aid and go home and my brother's power would be shut off and he had a new baby, or my mom would be down to milk and bread — and I'd have to say 'No, I can't help you.' I knew they'd give it to me if they had it. But I also knew that it only perpetuated the cycle. If I gave away what I had, I would never escape, never be in a position to really help. I cried myself to sleep many nights, because it went against everything I was about. Those were some of the lowest points."

Beegle went to her family's home less and less often. There was always chaos, always some kind of crisis. Days in her new country were full of ideas and insights and possibilities. She just couldn't afford to be dragged back, not when she was this close. So she left her family behind.

She became fluent in her new language, won awards, met new people, followed opportunities. Few other than journalism professor Bob Fulford knew she was from a distant land. But late at night, every night, she felt empty.

One day in a theology class, Beegle was given what seemed like a simple assignment: write about how freedom, or the lack of it, had affected her. That night something opened up inside of her. It was instantly clear: What was wrong was that she had abandoned her roots, and since poverty would always be a part of her, no matter how successful she became, abandoning her roots was abandoning herself. She would never be free of her story until she told her story. For hours she poured words and tears onto the keyboard.

She wrote about all the freedoms she had never enjoyed. Freedom to not see her mother crying, to not watch her father unload trucks full of watermelons for 16 hours then try to decide whether to spend the handful of cash he earned on food or shelter. Freedom to not watch police take her brothers away, to not come home to an eviction notice, to go to the doctor when she was sick, to hold her head high. And the most important of all, the one so many people had helped her discover: freedom to get an education.

The instant she turned the paper in, she was certain she'd blown it. Everybody would know she was an imposter, just a dumb poor kid pretending to be someone else. When she got the paper back, she could only stare at the words scribbled across the top by her professor: *A+ . Best paper I've ever received.*

She began to tell her story again and again, speaking to various groups and being interviewed by journalists. She completed her major in commu-

nication. In the spring of 1990 she graduated with honors, and the University named the woman who spoke Middle Class English as her second language its student Communicator of the Year.

Professors encouraged her to go to grad school. Eventually she earned her master's, taught at Portland State University, began, with her mentor Bob Fulford, the consulting business she owns today. She received her doctorate in 2000. Her dissertation focused on students from generational poverty who go on to earn college degrees — how, in other words, to make the crossing. Within her family, the seed planted by her education and escape is growing: two of her brothers have graduated from college, and she has nieces and nephews who grew up living in a car who are headed for grad school.

The big new house on a cul-de-sac in Portland's suburbs makes Beegle uncomfortable. She and her second husband, an engineer, have recently moved in, and some of the rooms aren't completely unpacked. They came to the neighborhood for the very good special programs in the schools — their 6-year-old daughter Juliette is autistic. (Beegle's son Daniel is now 22, and well on his way to being a golf course architect; her daughter Jennifer, who had just been accepted to Columbia University, died in a car crash one wet night in 1996.)

"I'm having a hard time with the house," Beegle says one afternoon. "I still find it sort of distasteful to have this much space. But I'm sure I will fill it up with people!"

When she's surrounded by her many friends and family, Beegle slips back into the "aints" of her old language. Everyone talks at once, and it soon becomes apparent why Bob Fulford (who died in 2000) once called Beegle the most "oral-cultured person" he'd ever met.

"That's the language difference between my people and the middle class," says Beegle. "Everyone talks at the same time, and the subjects are usually the latest crisis or someone's relationship or what happened to someone. It's as though when all you have is the people around you, that's what you focus on. And it's the difference between oral culture and print culture. People get almost all of their information verbally. There's lots of repetition and spontaneity. Compared to the middle class, people stand closer and talk louder. Middle-class people usually talk one at a time, and the subjects tend to be travel and food and

money and what they've bought for their homes."

Beegle does have middle-class friends, and enjoys a fine meal and a good glass of wine, something that didn't exist in her homeland. She's always amused when these friends ask her — she who spent so much time homeless, endured countless evictions and slept so often in the backs of cars — to go camping.

"Sleep outside in a tent?" Beegle says. "But I've just gotten used to heat and running water!"

Beegle is, though, not completely at home in her new nation.

"There are aspects of the middle and upper class I don't respect," says Beegle. "So many find it so easy to write another human being off. I'll never be able to do that."

Neither will most of the people she trains, from teachers to prison guards to judges to politicians.

"I grew up believing that no one who wasn't in poverty cared about poverty," Beegle says. "What I've learned from my work is that you can *make* people care, once you help them see the ways people are like each other, regardless of social class. We have the same needs, the same emotions, the same desires. When I can show someone of privilege how they and I are alike, it's transformative for them. In education, in social work, in law enforcement, in government, once people put aside the assumptions and stereotypes they have always used to get rid of guilt, they can really begin to *connect*, to understand the real causes and behaviors of generational poverty. Most of these groups are trained to keep their distance from the people they work with, and that couldn't be more wrong. As long as we are 'other,' we'll never break through."

A few days later, a woman walks to the front of a group of single mothers on welfare. She is poised, well-dressed, well-spoken. She commands respect. Perhaps someone in the audience will hang on her every word. Perhaps there will be a glimpse of a distant shore. Donna Beegle begins, "A few years ago, I was sitting where you are ..." □

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