

Tikun Olam Award
Address to the Kol Ami Congregation
Second Night of Passover
March 28, 2002

Good Evening and thank you for inviting me here to receive this wonderful honor. It was a beautiful day here in this wonderful nation of ours, I only wish that things were better for everyone around the world, and that we could be celebrating a new and solid peace accord.

We are very lucky to be here and among friends and family in this incredible country. Two weeks ago, I ended up in the President's limo literally arguing with him about Welfare Reform. I couldn't help thinking afterwards how amazing that was – for me to debate the leader of the free world. In so many other countries, my family and I would have been eliminated for less than this act. The President agreed with one of the points I made and next week, we are going to discuss the issues with his Domestic Policy Staff. Hopefully, we will be able to convince them to change their approach so that poor women will be treated more flexibly.

But I didn't come here tonight to talk about the world or our country; I wanted to bring you a sobering message about what goes on everyday in the city. We are in serious crisis today – one that crisis exists amongst the very poor. Our communities have been severed from each other, our neighborhoods are divided, and, by and large, we do not feel bound up in one another the way we used to.

Many people who live outside the city probably do not realize that during every minute of every day in this country, one baby is born into poverty, or without health insurance, or to a teen mother. A record 12 million children live in poverty today, and three-quarters of them are growing up in the homes of working families – a situation which did not exist 20 years ago.¹

Today, we live in very different cities divided much more by race and class than was the case in the past. Today young middle class couples don't even consider marriage unless they have assured themselves of a home that they own, fully furnished. Their counterparts across town are living on an incredibly meager welfare check – without an increase for the cost of living for more than the last ten years. This past fall I went to talk to a group of students at Haverford high school and asked which of them worked over the summer and how much they earned. Most of them earned more than minimum wage – at least \$7/8 an hour. Over the summer months they made more than a single mother of one child makes the whole year long on welfare. And, they didn't have to pay for. A mom with 2 children earns just \$100 a week on welfare. Unlike the teenagers on the Main Line, she must use that meager allowance to cover housing, clothing, baby needs, transportation, everything.

Young upper class couples are waiting for decades to have their first child, until Mom and Dad have moved into an economic comfort zone, which makes them feel secure. And they are naming their children gender-free names like Monroe, Madison, or Jackson after either dead Presidents or State Capitols. These little ones are treated to nannies, personal computers, and spring water while their parents worry about the stock market. Meanwhile, their low income counterparts are dropping out

¹ This information and much more can be found at the Children's Defense Fund website at www.childrensdefense.org.

of high school to have children at increasingly younger ages, with no prenatal care, and no family support. Their siblings are being shot and killed in the streets as innocent victims of drug wars. These children are growing up recognizing the sounds of gun shots and police helicopters as the day to day city background noises. These mothers are giving their babies African-sounding names – about as far as they can get from our founding fathers. Their children are being raised in homeless shelters or doubled up with other families or grandparents, in destitution and without hope. These families live in homes without computers or spring water and without beds of their own much less rooms of their own.

And, let me assure you that things are getting worse, not better. Over the past 20 years, the gap between the highest income families and the lowest income families has grown. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington looked at the census data and then divided everyone in the United States into 5 income groups, from high earners to low earners. By the end of the 1990s, the average income of families at the top level was 10 times that of the average income of families at the bottom level. And it seems that those at the top are getting wealthier and wealthier -- in Pennsylvania the average income of just the top 5% of families has nearly doubled over the past twenty years.²

We might hope that those in the bottom 20% will be able to catch up, or did some catching up during the economic good times of the 90's, but they did not. And, the future bodes poorly for them. I believe that you and I live with a very serious and disturbing threat each day. The violence in our schools and our city neighborhoods is horrifying. The poverty is massive and enervating. There are countless families and individuals who have no hope of escaping from a nightmare hand-to-mouth existence in which each day is a struggle. Their social system is one where everyone is either predator or victim and the toughest, meanest, nastiest people get the most respect.

It is these families and individuals that we must serve.

We do this everyday at PEC, helping each family somehow surmount the seemingly overwhelming barriers to just living life. This work is essential and necessary, but sometimes it can wear us down. However, at PEC, we have been blessed with regular injections of resources and systemic change which give us hope and courage to move forward and which make a difference in helping to clear up that day's problems. That change is the result of the assistance of concerned people, students, adults, legal volunteers, accountants, and politically connected people who care. They have worked side by side with us on the little things that make a lasting impact on the lives of the homeless families we serve. And their counterparts, other volunteers have had an equal impact on other children and families in different places. Their work makes our work easier.

I am here to tell you that I do not deserve the Tikum award, because no major social change has been made by a single individual or group struggling for itself. Poor people – especially today – are struggling just to live. Social workers like us have our hands full meeting basic needs and putting out fires. We need your help and support to make a difference.

We need lawyers like Mark Levin and Sue Strong who devote their lives to crucial work in the trenches. We need accountants and financial experts on our boards of directors and as volunteers to

² All of their reports can be found at the Center For Budget and Policy Priorities website – www.cbpp.org

non-profits to help us manage day to day. We need you as parents to encourage your children to pursue work which will help the entire community like social work, counseling, or legal careers so that they can join us in the trenches. We need teachers who are willing to go into the city and teach youngsters to read and write, and who are willing to work with the kids who have been left behind by society. We need young parents who will teach their own children the most basic and Just ways of thinking – from an early age, we need Moms and Dads who teach inclusion and fairness, not hatred and racism, sexism or homophobia.

We need you to continue the extraordinary tradition of charity that I know about first hand. At PEC we have been blessed with so much outpouring of help from the Jewish community each year, it is something that people rarely talk about but I know about it because we get this help. It is not surprising that we get some very large gifts from people who are capable of making those gifts and we surely appreciate those donations. What touches my heart are the two girls who do not celebrate Christmas but who go shopping each year to buy brand new Barbie dolls for homeless kids who do celebrate Christmas. Or the many youngsters who save some of their Bar or Bas Mitzvah money and bring it to us, to help children who aren't as fortunate as they are.

I see first hand the devastation that comes with the lack of a warm and nurturing family. The other side of that coin is the immense strength that you encourage each day in your children by being loving, encouraging, and compassionate parents who guide by modeling and by teaching. We need parents who are involved in their children's lives and who reach out and continue to reach out to kids who are isolated and lonely and who may be so sick in their hearts and minds that they turn to violence. We need young adults who are willing to speak out about injustice in their communities and we need everyone to register and vote for politicians who represent the entire society, not just the very rich.

I know that I am preaching to the converted... and that each of you has the courage and leadership that I have personally witnessed on so many occasions and the willingness to fight for what we know in our conscience and our heart is right. Even tonight I was able to join you in your prayer "The God-inspired know that people must aspire to the service of the Highest in order to be free."

I want to give you my support in your struggle to move into a home in a nice neighborhood that you deserve.

I want to ask you to keep us in your prayers and especially to pray that our message on welfare reform be heard in the White House next week.

And, I want to thank you again for this wonderful honor.

Gloria Guard
Executive Director
People's Emergency Center
325 North 39th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104
215-382-7522 ext. 244
GGuard@pec-cares.org

Please visit us at www.pec-cares.org