

# Reflections

## on Paul Ryan's listening tour

*I wanted him to see that we can progress past the ideological logjam to effectively address poverty*

By Robert L. Woodson Sr.

When I received the call from one of Paul Ryan's aides just six weeks before the close of the 2012 presidential campaign, I admit that I was suspicious. I was asked if I would assemble a group of community and faith-based leaders to meet with Paul at Cleveland State University in Ohio in early October.

It was obvious that candidate Mitt Romney's remark about 47% of Americans was fatal to his presidential campaign and doomed any chance for him to attract minority votes. I wondered if this was just a last-ditch effort by his running mate to counter the perception that Republicans were not concerned about the poor. While I would meet with any politician, left or right, who I believed was earnestly seeking to help the underserved constituents that my Center

for Neighborhood Enterprise was created to serve, I would never allow those committed leaders to be used in a political strategy.

My suspicion about the request was tempered by the fact that Paul, before he was first elected to Congress in 1998, had served as a staffer to Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas and as an aide to U.S. Rep. Jack Kemp — who was authentically committed in his work to empower public housing residents to manage their properties and revitalize their neighborhoods, despite criticism from the establishment in his own party. In addition, my oldest son, Rob, had worked on the Hill and knew of Paul and never had anything but good things to say about him. All indicators were telling me that Paul Ryan was, in the words of the old



social norms. There is a critical need, instead, for the interventions that bring about cultural and social transformation before self-sufficiency can be learned.

This is where the crucial, unique and indispensable role of the people Paul Ryan was meeting came into play. In neighborhood after neighborhood, he was talking with men and women who provided oases of excellence in the midst of devastated communities. Against the odds, some had led successful lives and equipped their children to do so as well. Others had found the strength to halt the disintegration of their lives and reclaim their futures. Most inspiring of all, they have committed themselves to help others do the same.

These are the extraordinary leaders Paul Ryan met on his journey over this past year. They have generated health and wholeness in the midst of the most crime-ridden, drug-infested, socially and economically isolated neighborhoods in the nation. Just as the human body is oriented toward healing and sends the strongest antibodies to the most afflicted areas, the power of these dedicated neighborhood healers is the greatest in these most disadvantaged communities.

Throughout his journey through Washington, D.C., Cleveland, Indianapolis, New Jersey, Milwaukee and San Antonio, Paul Ryan has witnessed unforgettable transformations. He has met men and women who have reclaimed their lives after 20 years lost in addiction. He has seen a church-based project ignore the excuses of an entrenched foster care bureaucracy to place more than 250 children in loving, permanent adoptive homes. He has seen individuals who have returned from serving lengthy prison sentences to become responsible spouses, parents and even successful entrepreneurs, and he has met once-violent young offenders who now serve as ambassadors of peace in their schools.

All of these transformations were possible through

the unwavering commitment of individuals who have sometimes offered encouragement and other times provided the necessary “kick in the pants.” They alone have the power to reach and change the hearts of others because, by example, they have earned their trust and respect.

These neighborhood healers are not anomalies; they are present in every city Paul has visited. The next and critical step is to develop innovative and creative ways to provide resources, funding and technical assistance



*At a poverty-directed “listening and learning” tour stop in San Antonio, Ryan and other participants engage in an impromptu prayer.*

to support their efforts so that these antibodies can serve as a virtual immune system that can restore the health of our communities and the wholeness of our society.

The American people, tired of partisan gladiator combat, will gain inspiration and enthusiasm through this effort. Jack Kemp once said, “The leader who serves his nation first serves his party best.” Paul Ryan, I believe, wants to do just that. ■

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