

Families First

ON THE FRONTLINES OF REFORM
WITH WRITER SUNNY SCHUBERT

*E*loise Anderson has spent most of her life swimming upstream, battling currents of prejudice and perception, as well as the onrush of “big government” programs she has always believed are wrong for America.

From a childhood spent in a blue-collar home in a blue-collar town, she rose to head the California Department of Social Services, the nation’s largest welfare program.

Now, at 73, heading Gov. Scott Walker’s Department of Children and Families, she is in the fight of her life: Trying to save low-income families by saving the men who have largely been forced out of them.

“The only way we do this is to give men some of the same things we give women,” says the woman who oversees the state’s welfare system.

“We need to give men the resources to step up and raise a family. We have to have a societal change of the notion of marriage. We need to support it, value it.”

It is yet another battle in her lifelong war against the 50-year-old Great Society campaign launched by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

As noted by the Heritage Foundation, the federal government has spent more than \$22 trillion on Johnson’s War on Poverty — three times the cost of all military wars since the American Revolution — yet has not budged the needle on the U.S. poverty meter.

Or, as Anderson testified before a Congressional subcommittee two years ago: “The federal and state governments spend close to a trillion dollars a year on these benefit programs even before the costs of Social Security and Medicare are added.

“Based on Census Bureau poverty estimates, our current

welfare spending totals four times more than what would be necessary to bring all of the poor above the poverty line if the taxpayers were to simply give them a cash payment.”

Putting it more bluntly, Anderson says: “Everything I know about what the federal government is trying to do, it’s doing wrong.”

Anderson started learning that lesson from history books

she read while growing up in Toledo, Ohio. She was an only child. Her father was a tool-and-die maker; her mother worked as a “domestic.” But both believed that, with a good education, their little girl could do anything.

“I come from a city that is very similar in culture to Milwaukee. I grew up around Germans, eastern Europeans, Russians, Czechs, Poles, Italians. I never met a WASP [white Anglo-Saxon Protestant] until I was in my 20s. Oh, I knew white people, and I knew Protestants — Lutherans, mostly — but I was thrilled to meet a real WASP,” she remembers, laughing.

Anderson, like many of her neighbors, was raised Catholic. Her faith remains strong and guides her principles. She is also a lifelong conservative, although she says she’s become more moderate as she grows older.

Anderson attended Ohio’s Central State University. She toyed with a history major. “I was fascinated by the Civil War — by the notion that all these Northerners were willing to fight and die for people they had no relationship with. But I couldn’t figure out what I would do with a history degree, so I ended up in anthropology.”

From there, she moved to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in planning and urban affairs — and to the ministry.

"I wanted to be a Jesuit priest," she says, "but my priest said I had a 'plumbing problem.'" She grins broadly. "I could be a Lutheran minister — I have the credentials. But I'm a Roman.

"It takes those old guys a long time to change," she adds with another smile. "In 1962, when they had Vatican II [the conclave famous for modernizing Catholic rituals], that was their response to Martin Luther," who had launched the Protestant Reformation nearly 450 years earlier.

After grad school, Anderson got a job in Milwaukee working for the state. Republican Warren Knowles was governor, "and I was a mouthy woman who said the Great Society was going to kill us, and we shouldn't be going down that road." Then Democrat Patrick Lucey became governor, "and my supervisor said if I wanted to move up I had to move to Madison.

"I really wasn't interested," she says. She and her husband, Patrick, had two children by then. "I liked Milwaukee, and I didn't understand Madison. But then my boss said, 'We want you to be here.' So we packed up and moved."

To this day, she doesn't much care for Madison. "Milwaukee is ethnic. Madison is prejudiced, and they don't understand how prejudiced they are," she says, adding that the Madison mindset is not so much prejudiced against people of color as against people who defy the liberal orthodoxy.

"In Milwaukee, you can actually disagree with someone and remain friends. You're not put down, you're not dismissed, just because you happen to have another point of view."

But her first job in Madison gave her plenty of reasons to get out of town: She was in charge of moving government employees throughout the state to a merit-based personnel system.

"I visited every county in the state. I got to know Wisconsin very, very well." It was the 1970s, and her travels occasionally took her to towns where black people were warned to get out by sunset. "But I was never afraid," she says, adding "There have been many positive changes since then throughout Wisconsin."

She got her introduction to the welfare system when Dane County Executive George Reinke asked her to serve on the county welfare committee. One day on the street, she ran into Jonathan Barry, a former Democratic legislator who was the newly elected Dane County Executive.

Barry, who would become a lifelong friend, asked her to come

to work for him. Her job was to build political support for operating regional services on a metropolitan basis.

Most people thought that because Anderson is black, she would work with urban communities. But because of her experience bringing counties into the merit system, she again defied the stereotype.

The metropolitan government plan succeeded in moving the Henry Vilas Zoo, the Dane County Regional Airport, social services and 911 from the city's purview to county government.

Then things got complicated, mostly by Barry's ambition.

"Jonathan wanted to be governor," she says, so he switched his party affiliation from Democrat to Republican. But he wound up losing the 1986 Republican primary to the Assembly's GOP leader, Tommy Thompson. Thompson went on to hold the governor's office and dominate Wisconsin politics for the next 14 years.

It meant another shift for Anderson. She ended up in the state Department of Health and Human Services under Secretary Gerald

Whitburn. They laid the groundwork for one of Thompson's seminal achievements: Wisconsin Works, known as W-2, an attempt to reform welfare and turn it into more of a job-training program.

The goal then, as now, was to shorten the time low-income people spend on the government tab by helping them transition to the work force.

Anderson's efforts to reform welfare caught the eye of a prominent Republican: California Gov. Pete Wilson, and in 1992 he lured her to Sacramento.

"I thought California would be way ahead of Wisconsin, and wondered why they were bringing in 'the yokel,'" she says. "But it turned out California was not ahead of Wisconsin at all — it was just bigger." Way bigger. Anderson oversaw

4,200 employees and a budget of \$128 billion. Her duties included child-support enforcement, foster care, adoptions, child-abuse prevention, child care, refugee support, emergency assistance, and services to the elderly, blind and deaf.

She enjoyed some success.

As the Claremont Institute, where she later served as a fellow, noted:

"As head of the nation's largest welfare system, [Anderson] had to cope with a system that consumes one quarter of all the



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money spent nationwide on welfare, a soaring out-of-wedlock birthrate, and a teen pregnancy rate higher than any other state.

“She demanded that parents be accountable to their children by ensuring that kids attend school and be immunized as a condition of receiving aid. . . .

“Her view that the state’s 58 counties be empowered to design what is best for their local communities is now a centerpiece of the Golden State’s innovative approach to welfare delivery.”

Anderson enjoyed living in California, particularly the mountains. She also enjoyed the state’s diversity. “It’s not like when you get off a plane in Wisconsin and it’s all. . . vanilla. There are communities of people from all over the world there,” she says.

That diversity just underscored what she has always believed about the U.S. federal government: One size does not fit all.

“One of the reasons our welfare programs don’t work as well as they should is because our programs are driven by federal thinking, not state thinking,” she says.

“We were not founded to have a national government. We were founded to have state governments within a federal system,” she says. “Our founders had a vision in mind, and we’ve got to get that back.”

After 18 years in California, she came back to Wisconsin to work for Gov. Scott Walker.

She finds herself fighting the same battles — including the stereotype that poverty and welfare dependency are strictly a black problem.

“Take color out of the equation,” she commands. “It’s not valid. The truth is, where you have poverty, you have teen pregnancy. Black people are ghettoized, so we stand out, but color has nothing to do with it.

“Here’s what the War on Poverty did under AFDC: In the olden days, when a girl got pregnant, daddy had a shotgun and she was walking down the aisle. But under AFDC, she’d get a grant to help support her and the baby.

“And the girl would say, ‘Well, I’m not getting along with my mother these days’ — of course not, she’s pregnant! — and under AFDC, she’d get an apartment of her own.

“We created these communities of 16-year-olds with no idea of how to parent. And every time they had another baby, we’d give them more money. It can be anywhere from \$20,000 to \$40,000 a year these girls are getting.

“What poor man can compete with that?” she demands. “We set up a system to kill the family! We need to figure out how to get men back in the family.

“What we see in Milwaukee and most inner cities is the result

of the Great Society programs. The only way we can solve this is to give men some of the same things we give women: the resources to step up and raise a family.”

Job training for low-income men is a huge component, Anderson says. “Women don’t like men who don’t have jobs. We have to get low-income men working. We need to give men the ability to compete.”

That means getting the correctional system on board as well, Anderson says, because too many of the fathers of low-income children are behind bars. “We have to be ‘second chance’ people. Anybody can make a mistake; we need to help them not make the same mistake again.

“People go to prison, and when they get out, they can’t get a job. We’ve got to help them get skills so they can get jobs. It costs us, what, \$30,000 a year per prisoner? Without job training, that’s just a waste.”

She also believes in discouraging teen pregnancy, but says providing contraceptives is not part of her job description. “I’m old-fashioned on this. I’m old enough that when I was hitting puberty, there was no birth control. The nuns told me, and my parents told me, ‘You’ve got to be careful about who you give yourself to.’ Girls need to hear that today.”

But when babies are born to low-income mothers, the state can still help, Anderson says, by improving child care. The state subsidizes child care, she says, but too many providers in the low-income community are just looking to be baby sitters.

“We know how important early childhood education is. It’s absolutely critical to preparing a child” to learn when he or she starts school.

Financed by a three-year, \$34 million federal Race to the Top grant, Anderson’s department is requiring some child care providers to receive training in early childhood development. “But too many of them have to be dragged kicking and screaming,” she adds.

It’s one more battle to be fought, but worth it, Anderson says, because studies show that every dollar spent on early childhood education in the low-income community returns \$8 to \$16 in the long run.

She remains hopeful that, with innovative thinking at the state and local levels, the long-term damage caused by federal anti-poverty programs can eventually be reversed.

“Those programs,” she adds, “were well-intentioned — but you know what they say about roads that are paved with good intentions?”

And she laughs again — ruefully.

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