

## Poverty not limited to poor

By Susan Owen Atkinson

Barbara Ehrenreich's recent speech, sponsored by the Citizens League of Central Oklahoma, provoked unease in the standing-room-only audience. As Ehrenreich described personal experiences with working poverty that resulted in her book, "Nickel and Dime: On (Not) Getting By In America," liberals felt guilty and conservatives felt picked on.

The fact is the explosion of not making it in America is not a partisan issue at all. And seemingly, neither is it an issue on any politicians' radar screen.

In 2000, Ehrenreich went undercover, working in a series of low-paying jobs as a waitress, maid, nursing home aide and sales clerk. The resulting book, "Nickel and Dime," is an old-fashioned, in-your-face exposé, forcing readers to acknowledge the often-desperate plight of Americans working for minimum wage.

Ehrenreich writes, "In the buildup to welfare reform (in 1996), it was generally assumed that a job was a ticket out of poverty and the only thing holding welfare recipients back was their reluctance to go out and get one." Trouble is, there are jobs and then there are jobs that pay a living wage.

An enormous gap exists between poverty and economic self-sufficiency. Oklahoma's official poverty rate, which is based on a bare-bones food budget times three, hovers around 15 percent. For a family of two adults and two children in Oklahoma County, poverty means an annual income around \$18,800. But according to the Oklahoma Self-Sufficiency Standard, the ability to survive without public or private subsidy means those same parents must earn around \$42,000 a year. No amount of better budgeting or belt-tightening will close that gap. People working full time at Wendy's or Wal-Mart can only dream of those wages.

The reality is far more than 15 percent of us live in poverty. Given incomes required for self-sufficiency, Ehrenreich asserts the actual portion is closer to 30 percent. Ehrenreich observed that despite her comparative advantages of being white, English speaking and without children, she failed in her experiment to earn basic living expenses in three cities on wages a hair above minimum.

Though groceries are expensive, food costs relative to other household items have shrunk in recent decades. Still, the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma, which provides assistance to 56,000 Oklahomans a week, reports nearly half of households receiving assistance include at least one employed adult. The Department of Human Services reports statewide applications for food stamps have risen 62 percent since 2000.

The combined costs of child care, health care and housing gobble up family budgets. Ehrenreich spent much of her six-month experiment living in outrageously priced residential motels, a situation all too familiar to anyone lacking a security deposit and first month's rent for an apartment. Affordable housing, even here in Oklahoma, is shrinking to nil. Ehrenreich observed that several women with whom she worked had no home, but did not consider themselves homeless because they lived in their cars.

Ehrenreich asserts that the working poor are the major philanthropists in our society. "They neglect their own children so the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high." No matter what tax bracket you are in, you have a stake in the issues raised by "Nickel and Dime."

Atkinson is executive director of the Citizens League of Central Oklahoma. For more information on the upcoming Citizens League panel discussion, "Working Poverty: Is Raising Minimum Wage the Answer?", visit [www.clco.org](http://www.clco.org) or e-mail [citizensleague@sbcglobal.net](mailto:citizensleague@sbcglobal.net).