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The Times

# LIVING

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SECTION **B**

## Writer continues crusade for social justice

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Special to The Times

Barbara Ehrenreich can talk to anyone. She speaks to the readers of The New York Times in the same way she connects with the country's lowest-wage workers.

She gets through to college students. At The College of New Jersey, she opened a recent keynote address on social inequality with remarks about underage drinking.

Make it legal, she says.

Students applaud wildly. They know she's not pandering to them. The freshman class read her book, "Nickel and Dimed," as a summer assignment, so they're well aware — and supportive — of her political leanings.

Ehrenreich has become one of the country's most

well-known social advocates. As a freelance journalist who shuns objectivity to provoke social change, she has gone undercover among welfare workers for "Nickel and Dimed," challenged the conservative ideology of the current administration and sparked a national conversation about social reform.

Her ideals were shaped by the activism of the 1960s. Many of her fellow students at Reed College in Portland, Maine, "dropped their careers they had prepped for to become activists." After dabbling in the sciences, Ehrenreich, too, changed her life's work.

"I got involved in the anti-war movement," she said during an interview before her talk. "I decided I did not want to be an experimental researcher. I wanted to be some kind of social-change agent."

Her words have been at the forefront of social change, though she still thinks she has a lot of people to talk to.

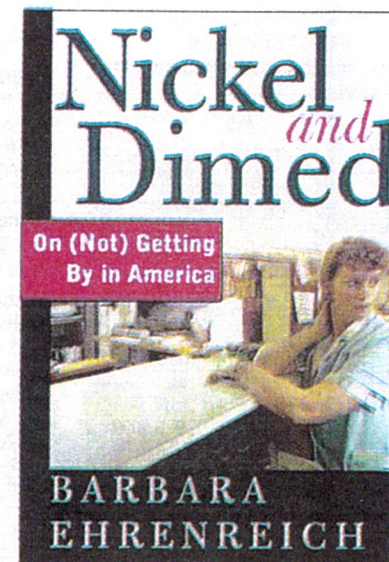
"I wish I could tell you I've done more," she said. "Sept. 11 erased (domestic) issues from the national mind, but I think we've been fighting our way back to attention to domestic dangers like extreme poverty."

Ehrenreich knows poverty — not because she is a freelance journalist who lives article to article, but because she lived among women in low-wage jobs for a freelance assignment.

While at lunch with an editor of Harper's magazine, Ehrenreich expressed how frustrated she was that nobody seemed to see the gap between wages and rent in the United States. Her concern was how women leaving welfare could survive.

"I said (to the editor), 'You should find someone to go out and do the old-fashioned kind of journalism on this. Find someone to live on these wages themselves

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# EHRENREICH

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and write about it," she said. "I did not mean me."

When the editor said, "Brilliant idea Barbara, you do it," she had no choice but to leave her family and start hunting for a job and apartment.

For three months, she would have to perform the same search a number of times. When rent got too expensive, she'd move from a small apartment to a hotel room. She had a total of six jobs — a waitress at two restaurants and a hotel maid in Key West, a housemaid and nursing-home assistant in Portland, Maine, and a Wal-Mart employee in Minneapolis.

Even though she had advantages over her co-workers — she knew she was going back to a comfortable lifestyle, she had no one else to support and she had white skin — she did not feel successful in making ends meet.

Her greatest struggle on her \$7-per-hour earnings was rent, which averaged \$600 a month.

"If you're making \$7 an hour, that's \$1,200 a month. Take away \$200 for taxes and add utilities

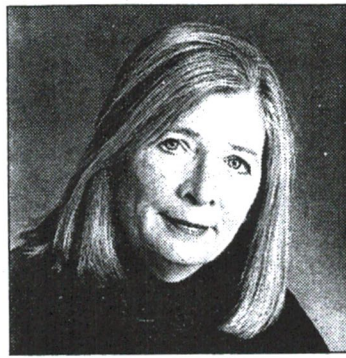
... If you had child-care expenses, which would be very conservatively \$400 or \$500 a month, you are in negative numbers before you buy one bag of food. It's just not possible," she said.

And she felt humiliated. Frequent drug and personality tests during job interviews became "a ritual of humiliation to get you in the mood for the job that was coming next."

Potential employers wanted to spare Ehrenreich that shame. They said she should work in a coffeeshop, a more suitable endeavour for the suburban housewife wanting to re-enter the work force that Ehrenreich said she was.

She insisted on the tough jobs and found they required just as much skill as other "skilled" jobs. She said the work was physically hard and mentally challenging.

"As a person with a Ph.D. who has written a number of books, I had a hard time learning to do each job," she said. "I never use the word 'unskilled' anymore to describe any job. All jobs take skill, intelligence and a great deal of concentration."



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She also learned how meaningless the official poverty level is in the United States, she said. According to the federal government's definition of poverty, Ehrenreich was not poor earning \$7 an hour.

That calculation is based on cost of food, said Ehrenreich, adding that food costs have remained relatively stable. Housing costs, on the other hand, have risen dramatically.

"If you calculate what people really need to live on at a very basic level, you come up with very different numbers. Some of the numbers that different groups — including the Department of Labor — have come up with recently range from 20 to 33 percent of the population really living in poverty."

Ehrenreich said it wasn't difficult to fit in with her co-workers. She wore the same clothes, did her hair the same way and didn't have to act.

When a former colleague saw her at her book signing in Key West, she told Ehrenreich she knew she had been hiding something.

"I thought she could tell I was really middle class," she said. "But she said, 'I knew you were just out of a shelter or jail.'"

That could have been the future of Barbara Ehrenreich, the daughter of a blue-collar miner from Butte, Mont.

But when she was young, her father worked his way out of the mines into an executive position, bringing his family to a comfortable, middle-class status.

"It was like going on a tour of the social class system of America, except for the top parts," she said. "It's something that sticks in your mind. These are your roots. Your cousins are miners, waitresses and factory workers. That's your family."

Ehrenreich feels the Iraq war

has made the United States more vulnerable; she fears for the safety of her two young granddaughters.

"I guess you can call me a security mom or grandmom," she says about the group that has taken the place of "soccer moms" as an electoral bloc. It's causing her to side with John Kerry — the candidate she's been warming up to since her original choices, Dennis Kucinich and Howard Dean, left the race.

"I've never been so emotionally dependent on one man as I am now," she said.

She knows, however, that one politician will not change the state of poverty in the country.

That's why she prefers to talk to the common people. For her next book, she is hanging out with middle-class folks who planned for financial security but lost everything to a suffering economy.

"What is the economy for if not to provide people with a decent life?" she says. "If the economy can't do that, I say change the economy."

She suggests implementing universal health care — "other countries have figured that out already." Form more unions, support affordable housing, she says.

While it may not stop poverty completely, it may bring some reprieve to "the real philanthropists" of America. These philanthropists are not the rich people whose names are on cornerstones of buildings, Ehrenreich says, but the low-wage workers who do many of the jobs that the middle class takes for granted.

"Clean hotel rooms, clean offices and low-priced food are there only because of someone else's exhausting and underpaid labor," she says. "Well I think it's time to end the involuntary philanthropies of America's working poor."