A Change in Perspective on Minimum Wage

Marissa Gooden
Xavier University of Louisiana, pathways@xula.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.xula.edu/pathways_journal

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.xula.edu/pathways_journal/vol2014/iss1/7

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by XULA Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pathways by an authorized editor of XULA Digital Commons. For more information, please contact ksiddell@xula.edu.
Marissa Gooden

*A Change in Perspective*

When I hear the term “minimum wage”, I tend to associate this word with a low-skill entry-level job, like janitor, fast food worker, or valet parker. In the United States, the minimum wage is $7.25, and some states go slightly lower, higher, or do not have a minimum wage at all. I have always thought that minimum wage was fair compensation for the people who received it because I felt your paycheck should reflect your degree of education. That is why a doctor, a teacher, and a lawyer make more than a garbage man and a dishwasher. I not only thought minimum wage was fair, but I also believed the jobs associated with minimum wage were not as valuable to society compared to higher paying occupations. That is why the president is lionized by the public, and a bus boy is not. I never saw the flaw in my perspective until I attended a Bridge Builders event.

Bridge Builders is a leadership program in Memphis, Tennessee, that brings youth from all over the city together to work at creating a community free of injustices. At one session, we talked about minimum wage versus living wage. Living wage is the minimum salary a worker needs for the essential basics—food, shelter, and clothing. It does not include luxuries, like cable TV and dining out and excludes money for the unexpected expenses like a car repair. This was my first time ever hearing this term, and this new knowledge changed my whole perspective on minimum wage. At this meeting, I learned that minimum wage is lower than living wage in many places including Memphis. In fact, they told us there have been a large number of families living under living wage since 1999. We also discussed whether or not it was inhumane to pay these people wages that are not even sufficient enough for the necessities of life. Are they less human than we are because of a job title? This group discussion caused me to do a lot of thinking.
about minimum wage jobs and the people who work them. I now view minimum wage as unjust, and I gained a new respect for the people who have a minimum wage job. I feel that paying these workers a salary lower than the cost of living in that city is saying that they do not deserve the basic necessities of human beings, implying they are less than human.

This injustice reminds me of the Memphis Sanitation Workers of 1968. These workers, mostly African American, were being paid low wages and worked under dangerous conditions. The protesters’ slogan was “I am a Man.” This phrase suggested that just because a person has a certain label, like skin color or job title, does not make him or her less of a man or woman than the next, and everyone deserves respectable treatment. This is not to say a garbage man deserves the same paycheck as a surgeon, but garbage men should earn a wage equivalent to the cost of living and should be respected for what they do because every job contributes to society. After that Bridge Builder group discussion, I showed a greater appreciation for those workers with minimum wage jobs. I smile and talk to them and thank them for all that they do. I even gave the garbage men a thank-you card that week after Bridge Builders. My changed perspective allowed me to gain a new respect for these people I saw on a daily basis.