

Saving Carren Hits Close to Home for Many Families

By Clare Kirlin

"I wasn't interested in filming reenactments of rape, suicide attempts, and prostitution," Deb Gregory confesses. But two thousand miles to the north, a very compelling story was waiting to be told.

Disabled in a violent criminal attack and newly retired from the LAPD drug task force, Ron Clem relocated his family to Kalispell, Montana in search of what he hoped would be a "joyous, unscathed childhood." Initially, his daughter Carren thrived within the idyllic confines of America's Last Best Place. She became an accomplished violinist. She was bubbly, talkative, and social. She was, in a word, normal.

As Carren approached adolescence in the late 1990s, crystal meth was gaining currency as a drug of abuse in the United States. Secure in the world of private schooling and father-daughter horseback riding sessions, Carren could not have guessed that her life was on a collision course with the world's most dangerous drug.

The ensuing nightmare is familiar territory to the 1.4 million Americans currently using meth. In two years, Carren survived two rapes at the disposal of Rohypnol, two suicide attempts, financial ruin, homelessness, prostitution, rehabilitation and finally, something akin to redemption.

When Carren completed the intensive rehab required to treat her addiction (over 18 months), she and Ron co-authored a memoir about their family's struggle, aptly titled *Loss of Innocence*. With even the most generous estimates putting a sober life within reach of just 20% of meth addicts, the Clems' story as extraordinary as it is uplifting.

But happily ever after? "That's not how it is," Carren stated in an interview from her current home in Montana. "To tell the story is hard. To watch the story is hard."

Enter Columbus-based businessman Bob Biondi. He first opened a copy of the Clems' memoir on an airplane. By the time his flight landed, Bob had resolved to bring their story to a wider public audience. With the intention of making a better society for his grandchildren, he founded the nonprofit organization Teen Crossroads to educate youth about methamphetamine addiction. Through a series of professional connections, Biondi tracked down local filmmaker Deb Gregory, who was likewise moved by Ron and Carren's story.

A talented documentarian with a knack for exposing the human dignity behind every heartbreak, Gregory agreed to take on the project in August 2008. Working with longtime friend and animator Heather Arment of Seattle, Washington, Gregory co-directed the feature length documentary *Saving Carren*. She draws on her experience with homelessness to bring the Clem's story to life; her father worked as a chaplain at a homeless rescue mission for the last fifteen years of his life. Her husband Jim, a professor at The Ohio State University, voluntarily lived in a shelter one summer in order to better understand the issues that the homeless face.

Gregory was thus able to produce a highly engaging and educational work that showcases local Ohio talent while exploring universal themes. Her hope is that *Saving Carren*, scheduled for release in early February 2010, will be used by educators and community leaders nationwide to empower youth.

"Obviously we're not all meth addicts," says Gregory. "But I think we can all relate to something about suffering and addiction. It touches all of us at some level."



The filmmaker took on the hard topic of youth drug addiction and made something beautiful out of it. Photo: Saving Carren Ad Kit

For many homeless, that level is fairly deep. In the Department of Health's last major survey on the topic, 38% of the homeless participants reported alcohol problems and 26 percent reported other drug use.

During her time on the streets, Carren was no exception. Her path to homelessness was paved at the age of 14. She skipped an afternoon of classes at her new high school with a friend she had met on the school bus. Within hours, Carren had been drugged with Rohypnol and raped by a predatory dealer that the girl introduced her to. When Carren's father mistook her unusual behavior for drunken rebellion later that same evening, Carren's world began to unravel. Weighted down by the pain of her rape and alienated from her family, she dove headfirst into alcohol, marijuana, and eventually crystal meth.

Saving Carren's co-director Heather Arment depicts this devolution with artistic forte; animated scenes present characters as stark paper doll versions of themselves. The pale hues and stilted movements of Ron and Carren's cartoonish avatars convey the ghastly reality that has overshadowed their American dream.

Interwoven into the scenes are present day interviews with both Ron and Carren. Their collective narrative lays out the circumstances under which an average teenage girl takes to the streets.

After being ejected from a distant boarding school as a "liability" due to her first suicide attempt, Carren moved back in with her parents to start life anew. She found work first at a plant nursery. She saved thousands of dollars and purchased a car. She then found work at a telemarketing firm. There, she reunited with the friends who had encouraged her to use drugs and alcohol in the first place.

At a party one night, Carren dropped \$600 dollars on what she thought was a "super diet drug." Little did she know that it was meth, and that 85 percent of those who experiment are addicted with the first use.

Overnight, Carren began living for her next high. Did she know that the euphoric effects of meth surpassed those of cocaine, heroin, and almost any other stimulant on the black market? No. She only knew that it helped to mask the pain and poor choices she had made. Did she know that possessing meth was a felony? No. But her father, a retired cop, certainly knew that.

When Carren refused Ron's help, he told her to leave home until she was ready for treatment. Carren walked out the door and began life as a homeless teen. When she ran out of money, Carren began selling herself in exchange for her drug. The irony of a private school educated violinist turned homeless prostitute is not lost on Carren.

Now the mother of a young child, she sees her story in a new light. "Who's to say that's not going to be our kids?" Carren asks. "Something has to be done and it's going to take all of us to step up and do it."

She is particularly concerned about the underground youth homeless, a transient population that roams from town to town in search of chemicals to fill the void left by far removed friends and family.

Along with her father Ron, philanthropist Bob Biondi, and filmmakers Deb Gregory and Heather Arment, Carren joins a team of artists and activists who want to spare our youth this ruinous existence.

Gregory echoes the sentiment. "All people come from a mother somewhere and have dreams and visions for their life," she points out. *Saving Carren* shows us how anyone can run astray of that. But it also shows us that there are people standing by with open arms who want to bring us home again.

In our telephone interview, I asked Carren what she would say to a homeless addict who may come across this article. Her advice came from the heart of someone who has been there, and come out on the other side all the wiser for it:

"Make that first step. Be clean enough to get into a shelter, and start there for the night. Someone is always extending a hand, someone who doesn't want your life to be like this. There are people in downtown Columbus who are constantly trying to outreach to the community. Even when you're down and out and at your very worst, you always know that when you're ready to make that choice to be different, even for a minute, you can grab on to the one place that you know you can go. When that moment hits you, when you want things to be different, just go."

Youth, educators and parents are encouraged to read further at www.savingcarren.com

An Answer to the Unemployment Question

Editorial

By Mary Loritz

Over the past year, we have watched nervously as unemployment has climbed to over 10 percent. Voices all over are calling for more jobs, more jobs, we must stimulate job creation, how do we best stimulate job creation?

This is the wrong question. The average American might need more money, but we do not need more jobs. Who do you know that, except from necessity, wants to work more? Yet paradoxically we, the people, the government, and the media are all clamoring for job creation.

Firstly, the jobs that are being created are not the sort that most people aspire to. Over twenty years ago the AFL-CIO reported that:

"The new jobs being generated in most cases now involve a lower standard of living - for the individual worker and for the society as a whole. ... The occupations experiencing the largest net growth in number of jobs demand little skill, are only weakly organized into unions, and usually offer little pay - ranging from building custodians to fast-food workers."

This unfortunate trend continues today. Indeed, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the top ten jobs predicted to have the greatest number of openings through 2014 include: retail salespersons, cashiers, food service workers, laborers, office clerks, janitors, and customer service representatives. Such jobs are mostly low-paying and can be monotonous. Yet, the kind of work that we really need more of as a society -- in education, health care, and the development of sustainable infrastructure -- is not profitable (health care is profitable, but only when supply is restricted), so employment in these areas is sadly limited.

The question should be: why do we need so many jobs in the first place? What work exactly is it that needs to be done?

There is no lack of resources in this country; there is a surplus. Over half of all food produced in the US goes to waste; 19 million homes sit vacant, while an estimated 3 million individuals are homeless, according to the Urban Institute; and the Department of Transportation reports there are more registered vehicles than there are people to drive them.

Excess commodities gather dust on thousands of store shelves before they go to rot in landfills, and in most sectors of service labor options are equally abundant. Want a coffee? There are twelve shops within walking distance. Need insurance? You

can find seven companies big enough to advertise on television fighting over your business.

We have an overabundance of everything... except, it seems, jobs. What is the point of this? We obviously don't need more production— at this point in America, having more stuff will not contribute to an increased standard of living so much as it will environmental crisis.

So if we have an overabundance of everything, shouldn't we be able to work less?

Economists have shown that as a society we can function on far less labor.

In her book *The Overworked American*, Harvard economist Juliet Schor demonstrated that a four-hour-day could have been implemented in the United States back in 1990, without any decline in living standards.

If a four-hour-day does not seem feasible, think about this: In 1886, workers across the country struck for and won the 8-hour-day, making the same amount as they were for 10, 12, and 16 hour days was of course part of the demand.

Now, over 100 years later, despite enormous gains in productivity, we are still working the same amount, and many Americans work much more -- 50, 60, and even 70 hour weeks are not uncommon in some professions, and many work two jobs.

We produce much more than we did 50 years ago, let alone in 1886. Thanks partially to technological advancement and to more education, worker productivity is continually on the rise.

During the postwar years, American workers reaped the benefits of this and from 1947 to 1973, real wages grew by 104 percent. From 1973 to 2006, however, wages only grew by 20 percent, while productivity has grown by about 48 percent, according to a report by the Center for Economic Policy and Research.

Most of this wage growth is concentrated at higher income levels. In 1967, a minimum wage worker could support a family of three over the poverty line. Now that same full-time, minimum wage worker makes 40 percent less than the poverty line for a family of three. This lack of wage growth, though workers are producing more than ever before, is the reason that we still have to work so much.

It's also why we're in a recession.

Stagnant wages have meant that Americans have only maintained our standard of living by working more, more people working and by accruing debt. The inability to repay debts because our wages will not keep pace with them was a large part of last year's economic collapse.

Instead of the excess productivity going to workers, it has gone to profit the few, and led to a concentration of wealth. This is why we now have CEOs making over 400 times that of their average worker, and why 5 percent of the population controls 59 percent of the total wealth in America.

While many workers suffer from stress and a lack of leisure time, the unemployed, working zero-hour-weeks, suffer from terrible financial worry and hardship. The stress of work, financial worries and debt puts a strain on individual psychological wellness and relationships. This increased stress in recent years has contributed to today's major societal problems such as mental illness, divorce, and of course, homelessness.

Working less is not only a way of reducing stress, it could also be a way to recover from the recession, because if people work fewer hours then more people can work! If those of us who work too much worked less, we could all have jobs. Germany has been weathering this recession relatively well, largely because they introduced a policy incentivizing companies to reduce worker hours instead of imposing layoffs -- and it wouldn't be so difficult for our government to do the same here.

If we worked less, we would have the free time necessary to pursue the happiness that is our constitutional guarantee. We would have time to learn, play, create, and spend with the people we care about. All of the things we long to do and do well, but never seem to have enough time for, could be within our reach.

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