

Simulation teaches students about living in poverty

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OGDEN — Rita Rogers had to stand in a long line to buy daily bus passes so she could drop off her 1-year-old son at a daycare, at a cost of \$100 a week, and make it to her part-time job.

Late for work, the 20-year-old lost a week's wages. Returning late to pick up her infant, Rita found her son had been handed off to Social Services, where he was registered under the incorrect name because of a clerical error.

That would have been a million times more tragic if Rita weren't fictional. Instead, it was just a role assigned to real Weber State University student Lisa Brimley, 50, of Kaysville.

"I will miss work, and they stole my baby," Brimley said of the soft cloth doll playing the role of her character's son.

Volunteers portraying social workers in the poverty simulation exercise Tuesday at Weber State tried to calm Brimley and handed her a form she could fill out to report a missing person.

About 70 students attended the poverty simulation exercise, and selected name cards that when flipped, revealed their assigned gender and an age, between 2 and 85. The students then sat in seats marked with their fictional family's name, and opened information packets that revealed assigned incomes and circumstances.

Jill Oberndorfer, of Ogden Weber Community Action, led the exercise.

"We want the students to learn what it's like for the poor, and what they do to survive," Oberndorfer said. "It could be their friend or neighbor who is living like this. We want the students to understand if there is an opportunity to assist, maybe even just baby-sit, they can make a difference in the life of someone who is struggling."

Oberndorfer asked students to be more aware of the people around them, and to pursue volunteer opportunities to help ease the suffering of others.

Ballroom B of the Shepherd Union was lined with tables representing employers, a public school, health care companies, a grocery store, utility companies, mortgage and realty companies, a pawn shop, a payday loan company, and a jail and juvenile detention area.

"Rita" sat with her fictional father, 40-year-old Robert Rogers (WSU student Jordan Grange), divorced by a wife who then disappeared. Robert's son was Roland, 9, played to the hilt by WSU student Luke Waldrop, 21.

"We are not pawning our television," Waldrop bellowed. "That is not up for debate, Dad. I miss my mom."

The Rogers' next door neighbors were the Bolings, including Ben (WSU student Taylar Bischoff, 21), 42 and a former computer programmer out of unemployment benefits, and receptionist wife Betty, 39 (WSU student Kimberly Tribe, 22). Their children were Bart, 10, Brian, 8, and Barbara, 16 and pregnant.

"We are using our credit card to survive, and it has hit its limit," Tribe said, reading notes from the family profile packet. "We have no insurance, \$22 in cash and \$200 in savings. I make \$9 an hour."

With the Boling brood off to school, "Ben"/Bischoff worked on the budget.

“We are going to be homeless,” she said.

Nick Husted, an AmeriCorps worker who helped organize the event, shared poverty statistics.

In Weber County, 11.5 percent of people live below the poverty rate, he said. Statewide, the number is 10.8 percent. At 21.3 percent, Ogden’s poverty rate is more than double the state average. Since 2007, the rate of individuals and families relying on food stamps has increased nearly 80 percent, he said.

Oberndorfer used a blaring air horn to alert participants when each of their 15-minute weeks was up. In the fourth and final abbreviated week, students seemed mentally exhausted.

Waldrop, acting 9 and acting out, had drawn his sister “Rita” and dad a family picture to make up, in part, for landing himself in juvenile detention. Mortgage payments were made, although wheeling and dealing was required as it was not the full amount owed. The family had forgotten to budget food for two weeks, but everyone defied science and survived.

“It’s so hard, just to prioritize and make things work, you don’t have time for the little things. Like parenting,” Grange said.

The Bolings did not fair as well. A circulating volunteer had handed them fate cards that gave them a flat tire and plumbing problems. They forgot to eat for all four of the 15-minute weeks. They were evicted from their five-chair home and forced to move to a shelter. But Betty/Tribe had managed to scare off a drug dealer targeting her kids.

“This was hard,” Tribe said, of the poverty simulation exercise. “I don’t know how people survive. I think I will be more aware, in the future, of how hard life is for so many people. I’ll be thinking about what I can do to help.”

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Dayanna McFarland (left) and Stephanie Wallace count their money after paying their mortgages during a poverty simulation at Weber State University in Ogden.