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30 years later, a nation adrift



WORCESTER - OUTSIDE one door, 46 people with children in tow stood in line beneath a cold drizzle, waiting patiently to put their names on a Christmas toy list at Salvation Army headquarters on Main Street, located directly across from the welfare office. The battalion of the poor stretched half a block and the

faces represented, along with the languages spoken, symbolize how much the country has changed in the 30 years since a president's limousine slowly took a Texas corner and parked in our collective memory.

"How many toys do you need?" a young woman was asked.

"Well you can only get two for each kid in your family," Isabel Rivera said. "So, I will get six toys."

She held an infant in her arms while a 3-year-old clung to her side and a toddler slept in a stroller on the wet sidewalk. The mother said she was 20 and that she came here six years ago from the Dominican Republic because there was nothing to hold her to the island and friends told her about welfare in America - \$579 a month, plus food stamps and rent voucher - and the fact that any babies born here automatically would be citizens.

So she came, registered in school, got pregnant the first time, dropped out, signed up and has never held a real job in her new land. Inevitably, for too many, the helping hand of a generous nation has dissolved into an easy handout.

Fifty feet away, a few of the genuine poor -

men and women broken by the bottle or homelessness - were going downstairs for a hot shower and fresh clothes. The men call it a "warm-up" because they are allowed to remain inside the building for two hours before hitting the street again.

The Salvation Army also runs a daily lunch program in this tired, old industrial city of hunched shoulders and abandoned storefronts. Tonight, it will serve Thanksgiving dinner to perhaps 180 families who will try and make the memory last through Thursday. It dispenses free bread, clothes and advice on how to combat the depression that often accompanies deep poverty in a country of exceptionally vivid contrasts.

"Excuse me," an old man in the bread line said. "I'm a close friend of Frank Sinatra and I need a quarter."

"For what?" he was asked.

"Wine," he replied.

"What kind?"

"White," the old guy said. "Hell, you seem like a nice enough guy so I'm not gonna lie to you. Doesn't have to be white. Any kind of wine will do. Red. Rose. Doesn't matter."

"My son lives on Malibu Beach," he was saying. "That's where I got to know Sinatra. Him and me, we're good friends. My son knows him too. Imagine that: My son's got a big beach house in California and I'm a drunk here in Worcester."

In the blocks south of the welfare office and the Salvation Army, Gaelic used to be spoken by other new arrivals who fled another island where the British tried to steal their language and starve them to death. Today, the same area is crowded with Spanish markets and Vietnamese variety stores.

In a way, people who show up now have a harder time than the Irish who flooded these shores. In 1993, they are surrounded by crack, lawlessness, a horrendous level of violence and a society so immune to the most shocking crimes that very little bothers or disrupts us from our daily routine. We look this weekend at replays of an assassination and file them away as an anecdote, a minor entry on a blotter clogged with more and more victims.

When immigrants got off trains in Worcester, having traveled from Warsaw, Minsk, Galway and Palermo, they were intent on working hard. There was no television so they told stories and read books to keep cultures alive while studying with an endless appetite to learn all they could about where they were.

Now, we are mesmerized by cheap celebrity and so accustomed to being drowned in an ocean of information and appearance that what is new and interesting this morning becomes old and boring by nightfall. Why, does it not seem as if Clinton has been president forever and is this not a result of the fact that the man is on television more than a game-show host? And what would occur on Main Street if the intensity given NAFTA were turned toward the crippling problems that result in human beings standing in a cold rain for

food and toys?

Thirty years ago, Kennedy got killed; that's history. Right now, welfare, drugs, illiteracy, a lack of respect for almost everything and the unraveling thread of a drifting nation push us ever closer to chaos. That is reality.
