



Eastern Connecticut State University

NEWS

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Up and Out of Poverty

Willimantic, Conn. – On Dec. 7, Professor Jaime Gomez, chair of the Department of Communication at Eastern Connecticut State University, premiered his documentary, “Up and Out of Poverty: An Activists Perspective, in Webb 110 on Eastern’s Willimantic campus. Social activist Ron Casanova, the subject of the documentary, joined Gomez for comments following the viewing.

Casanova, whose name in English ironically means “new house,” was born in Puerto Rico and grew up as an orphan in New York. Following a life of street living, alcoholism, incarceration, drug abuse, and a HIV positive diagnosis, he has spent the better part of the past 15 years traveling the country to advocate for the homeless. His compassion for people and desire to help those in need is noteworthy for its directness, simplicity, and humility.

Casanova, who was involved in New York City’s Tompkins Square Park tent village and subsequent police actions to remove the homeless living in the park in the early 1990s, eventually became the national organizer for the National Union for the Homeless. He notes that today, the spirit and energy of the protests of former years seem to be missing. “The rallies, the protests, the demonstrations—you don’t see much of that anymore.”

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UP AND OUT OF POVERTY, PAGE 2

In the film, Gomez makes the point that the issue of homelessness is rooted in the causes of poverty — lack of education and gainful employment. “Building someone a home is nice,” says Casanova in the film, “but if they don’t have the skills or education to maintain that home and their lifestyle, we haven’t done them much good.” Casanova also said that homelessness is not limited to any single ethnic group or area of the country, with poverty existing next door to wealth in far too many instances. While Connecticut is arguably the richest state in the country, data cited in the film suggests that 41 percent of the children in Hartford live in poverty. And in New Haven, home to Yale University and its \$18 billion endowment, 33 percent of the children live in poverty.

Nor does the stereotype of the homeless as aging men hold credibility: national estimates are that as many as two million children in this country are homeless. The National Coalition on the Homeless says the average age of a homeless person in the United States is nine years. Worldwide, a child dies every three seconds due to poverty-related causes.

How long can we ignore this human suffering? As President John Kennedy noted in his inaugural address in 1961, “If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.” In fact, as we are seeing through the world today, the gap between the have’s and the have not’s is widening, and is the cause of chaos, violence, and terrorism throughout the globe.

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Eastern Connecticut State University is part of the Connecticut State University (CSU) system and is the state’s public liberal arts university. ECSU serves more than 5,000 students each year on its Willimantic campus.