

Keynote Address
MALTA FOOD PANTRY
June 20, 2014

I would like to thank Dr. Pauline Olsen, Sheila Flanagan, and other members of the Malta/St. Justin's Food Pantry Board of Directors for inviting me to speak with you today. As a member of the Board of Directors of the Covenant Soup Kitchen in Willimantic, I have seen how poverty can threaten a family's daily survival. I am inspired by what you are doing at the Malta Food Pantry.

In only 18 months, you are now serving more than 100 families a week, and have served almost 1,000 families in that short time. You have picked the right mission field—Hartford's North End has historically been the home of some of this city's most disadvantaged families. Your partnership with Food Source and events like today's fundraising luncheon also demonstrate your vision for the future. The families you serve are very fortunate to have such caring, loving stewards.

So why are we here today? In the simplest terms, we are here to support the work of the Malta Food Pantry, and I want to thank of all the Pantry's supporters who are here today.

I know you give from your heart, you give because you know that hunger, especially among our children, is life-threatening. Feeding families allows them to have hope, allows them dignity, allows them to tackle the other challenges they face. People can live in cardboard shacks and wear Salvation Army clothes. Without food, they die. Let me put this picture into a global context.

All of us have seen photographs of starving children in Africa, in India, in other parts of the world. Did you know that 15,000 children die every day on this Earth due to malnutrition? 15,000! Every day! That is five million children a year, dying from starvation.

One of eight people around the globe— 900 million—suffer from chronic malnutrition. One-third of all the children in developing countries suffer from hunger and all of the health problems that it creates. Yet the agro-economists tell us that there is enough food on Earth, enough growing capacity, to feed the world's 7.1 billion people.

We are not here to plan an assault on the world's hunger problems—the work of the Malta Food Pantry illustrates that hunger is a grim reality right here in Hartford.

However, knowing we are part of a global problem should motivate us—hunger is a human tragedy, not one defined by local, state, or national boundaries.

So what are the numbers like here in Hartford and Connecticut? Fourteen percent of Hartford households suffer from “food insecurity” according to Gallup polls. And while a third of all Connecticut students qualify for the free lunch program (up 8 percent from last year), 90 percent of students in Hartford qualify for the program, and 50,000 students were in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program.

It is no surprise that Hartford is third in the nation in terms of the number of people living below the poverty level. Children in our cities are especially hard hit by poverty in Connecticut. Whereas 15 percent of all Connecticut children fall below the poverty line, 40 percent of Bridgeport children and almost 50 percent of Hartford's children live in poverty.

These statistics are heart-wrenching, and they make us want to do something. But the work that you do is not about data—it is about real people, people who deserve to be known as more than mere statistics. They deserve respect as human beings.

Let me tell you a brief story about someone in my own life who reminds me of the importance of respecting each individual and giving them the dignity they deserve. I want to tell you a story about my maternal grandmother Ramona.

Sixty years ago as a young child, I would go with my family to visit Ramona in San Juan's filthiest slum. It was a shantytown called El Fanguito," made up of make-shift shacks teetering precariously on stilts over the muddy shallows of San Juan Bay's mudflats.

El Fanguito means "Little Mudhole" in Spanish. Drinking water had to be carried in with tin cans. The shacks were made of rough-hewn boards and timbers pilfered by the squatters from construction sites or garbage dumps, and were connected by a maze of footbridges made of planks that hovered on stilts over the mud and water, much as the shanties were.

It was there in El Fanguito that I would go to visit my grandmother. Ramona was a single mother, and still had one of her eight children living with her when we would visit. She built her shack out of "borrowed" boards and other materials.

It was one room, with cots on the side of the room where her family slept; they also slept on the floor. In the corner of the room was a wood-burning stove on which she would cook meals.

One of the ways Ramona provided food for her children was her chickens. The house was up on stilts, but under the house she had a cage where she raised chickens and gathered their eggs each day. And she made the best chicken soup I have ever eaten in my life! She had a little table in the corner where she would put out a bowl of soup for me and everyone else in the family. Usually the soup also had some rice in it, but it was real chicken soup.

I will never forget the first time I realized how Ramona made her chicken soup. I vividly remember when she turned to me and said, "Elsa, come outside." Everybody else stayed in the house. I think it might have been raining but she asked me to go outside to help her catch one of the chickens, because once she opened the coop, sometimes they would escape. A chicken did come out and she and I chased it. I thought it was so much fun chasing the chicken on the planks. And then my grandmother caught the chicken.

What I hadn't realized was that as soon as she picked it up, she was going to break its neck—it was to be our dinner.

The other thing that the chickens provided the household was eggs, and Ramona used them in many ways. One treat that I always enjoyed was her meringue. She would take the egg whites, beat them, and add a little sugar to make these fantastic meringue desserts. There we were, visiting my grandmother in her one-room shack in El Fanguito to enjoy a big bowl of delicious chicken soup and a wonderful dessert of meringue—you would think we were at the Ritz. She would make an amazing dinner out of nothing, out of nothing because she didn't have anything.

I tell you this story because I know there are many other women, Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, African Americans, and yes—poor whites—living in Hartford and facing similar conditions to those that my grandmother faced. Single parents, with not enough money to take care of their children, scratching and clawing out whatever subsistence they can find.

It is for these women and their children—and yes, sometimes their husband is in the house and yet they are still poor and hungry—that you do this work, that you support programs such as the Malta Food Pantry.

What causes hunger? The most obvious answer is that poverty—lack of financial resources—puts families in the position of not being able to afford to buy the food they need to live on. But what causes poverty? (Keep in mind that almost 50 million Americans are part of

the world's poor.) The causes of poverty are many, and are typically found together, creating a cycle that many families are never able to overcome. Lack of nutrition, lack of education, unemployment, urban violence, teenage pregnancy, drugs—at some point the symptoms and the causes overlap and the cycle seems to be impenetrable. But we have to start somewhere.

As an educator, it is my responsibility to advocate for educating all people, including those long denied access to education. The food pantry's goal is to keep families alive, feeding their children so that they have the energy and health to pursue their dreams.

Your efforts to feed the poor in Hartford neighborhoods, and my efforts to educate students from all backgrounds must be part of a larger social movement.

We know that all of the issues that co-exist with hunger are found in the neighborhoods of Hartford. With low-skilled manufacturing jobs all but gone from Connecticut, if you don't have an education today, you face chronic unemployment or underemployment. Youth unemployment in Connecticut is twice that of the general population; 50 percent of all youth in Bridgeport are unemployed, and African Americans and Latinos are twice as likely as whites to be unemployed.

For Latinos, there is the additional issue of literacy. More than 80,000 Connecticut families speak only Spanish in their home. When Latino preschoolers enter first grade without English proficiency, they are immediately one year behind the other children, the day they walk into school. By the fifth grade, they are two years behind.

So we have many issues to deal with as a society. But today, let us keep it simple. If you can feed the body, and we can find ways to support inner-city youth in finishing high school and attending college, we can put more of our children on the path to success.

Let us take one student—one fictional student—for a moment, someone whose family is a client of the Malta Food Pantry. Let us call her Maria. She is Latino, goes to high school here in the city, and despite all the chaos on the streets around her, Maria is determined to have a better life. Her English writing skills are not good enough for her to go to college, yet she has a dream. How can we help Maria?

Seven years ago during my first year at Eastern, a student like Maria was in my mind's eye. How could Eastern help her and students like her here in Hartford? We created what we call the Dual College Enrollment Program, partnering with our local community college and Hartford Public High School. Students who had the drive and determination but not the grades and test scores to attend college—students like Maria—came to our campus.

They enrolled for a semester in remedial classes at Quinebaug Valley Community College, but from day one, they lived on our campus, held down campus jobs, participated in social activities, and were treated as one of us. By their second semester, they were full-time students at Eastern. Since 2008, dozens of students from Hartford and now also Manchester have gone through the program—we have graduates taking advanced degrees in social work and child psychology, and others earning master's degrees at such prestigious schools as Providence College—and we continue to refine and improve the program. We have been fortunate to have many financial supporters, including the U.S. Justice Department, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, and the SBM Charitable Foundation—Thank You Sheila!

But let me stop describing our success. As I said, your work—and ours—is about real people, individuals. I would like to show you a short video so that our dual enrollment students can tell you their own story.

(run video)

Thank you. Let me conclude. I am inspired by the work of the Malta/St. Justin's Food Pantry. I am grateful for the support given to the pantry today by our luncheon sponsors. What the food pantry and Eastern are doing is not simply a moral imperative—doing the right thing. Feeding the poor, educating their children, and giving them the social and economic power to be part of the mainstream is essential to the long-term economic vitality of this state and our nation. We know that the children in our inner cities deserve a better life. We know that two-thirds of the jobs of tomorrow will require some form of college education. We know that our growing Latino population deserves to be part of the American Dream, and America cannot survive if they are excluded from that dream. It is a daunting task, but one that everyone in this room has already signed up for.

Let me leave you with one more statistic. This is one time when I feel that data brings the story into focus. As part of the No Child Left Behind program, the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests children in our schools in reading, writing, and mathematics—at grades four, eight, and twelve. They also test infants.

Here is what the data on infants show: **children at nine months of age, regardless of ethnicity, socio-economics, or whether or not the mother is single or finished high school, all exhibit the same levels of mental acuity and physical motor skills.** All of them perform equally except for one group—babies whose birth weight is below average. What does this data tell me? First, that all children—like our Founding Fathers said—are born equally, they all can succeed if we give them the tools. But it also reminds us of how important pre-natal nutrition is and why programs like the Malta Food Pantry are so important. This data should be uplifting to all of us in this room—the nutrition of pregnant women is critical to their children's future. And all our children can have a successful future if we do our job as a society.

Again, I commend you for your commitment to improving the lives of those less fortunate here in Hartford and elsewhere. I thank you for your support. God Bless, and God Speed.