

The Poverty Post

San Jose, California

16 March 2013

*Springtime in the land
of milk and honey*

Beyond the
wildflowers blooming
along Coyote Creek
stands one of San
Jose's homeless
encampments.
Story inside.

Springtime in the land of milk and honey



This man was one of the few homeless people Cameron and I met who was willing to be photographed or allow us to look inside his tent home.



Louise Auerhahn is lead author of Working Partnerships' *Life in the Valley Economy* reports.

For years my colleague at Working Partnerships USA, Louise Auerhahn, has pored over the dry statistics of an economic story that few of the news organizations I deal with in San Jose wanted to tell.

Much of the problem was that economic journalism is mostly about the state of business – what the stock market is doing – and Louise's research was about how ordinary people were coping with things like rent, food and what the kids want from ToysRus.

Even with local stocks at record highs, Louise's biennial *Life in the Valley Economy* reports found that income for most families has been in a 10-year slide that's left them, on average, \$10,000 a year poorer
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Springtime in the land of milk and honey



Cindy Chavez, Working Partnerships' executive director, being interviewed for PBS' "Moyers & Company."

– *Continued from previous* today than in 2002. A decade ago one in four Silicon Valley jobs didn't pay enough to meet a basic standard of living. Today, after 10 years of no net job growth, even more – a third of all jobs – don't pay enough to live on.

The number of high school graduates here who go on to some kind of college has dropped by a third at the same time that tuition at schools like San Jose State has risen 141 percent. Few people are writing about cause, effect and what this means for the Valley's future.

One transmission rebuild, one broken arm or appendectomy, a divorce or a cross word to the boss, and people can be on the street.

But a week ago we caught a break with our story. Martha Mendoza, a national writer for the Associated Press, agreed to do a piece on San Jose's \$2-an-hour minimum wage increase, which we worked for and won in November's elections. In the process she began poking around in Louise's reports.

As one not steeped in protecting the local status quo, Mendoza found it intriguing and counter to the prevailing narrative that a valley best known for producing millionaires with every new IPO is actually getting poorer.



The trees along the winding course of Coyote Creek hide the tent homes of hundreds of San Jose's homeless.

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Springtime in the land of milk and honey



Associated Press reporter Martha Mendoza, right, whose story brought national attention to Silicon Valley's poverty, interviews a college student at our minimum wage press conference.

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The AP gets noticed everywhere: Washington, Calgary, Yahoo!, the Huffington Post, even FOX. I spent most of Saturday with producer Lauren Feeny from Bill Moyers' PBS show helping with her interview of our executive director, Cindy Chavez, and then taking her and her cameraman/husband Cameron to one of San Jose's homeless encampments.

Since Mendoza's story, the encampments have come to symbolize the hidden Silicon Valley. The one we visited stretches for nearly a mile along Coyote Creek and through the Los Lagos municipal golf course. Every few weeks the police sweep through, run off a few hundred residents and confiscate their tents and personal belongings. After a few days the residents return to rebuild their dwellings.

Cameron and I were trying to find interviews in tent clusters where most entry flaps closed on our approach when we heard a voice. "There's food coming down!" In a moment, a man and two women, carrying sandwiches and ramen noodles made their way carefully down steps cut into the hillside by residents.

While people emerged to accept the food, the donors told us they make this visit about once a week because they want to help. The encampments also get the occasional visit from church groups.

Local government recognizes the encampments are merely the tip of our homeless iceberg – many more are living in cars or crowded in with friends or family – but the response of our city council reflects

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PBS producer Lauren Feeny and her husband Cameron, who live in New York, interrupted their California vacation to spend time working on the Silicon Valley poverty story.

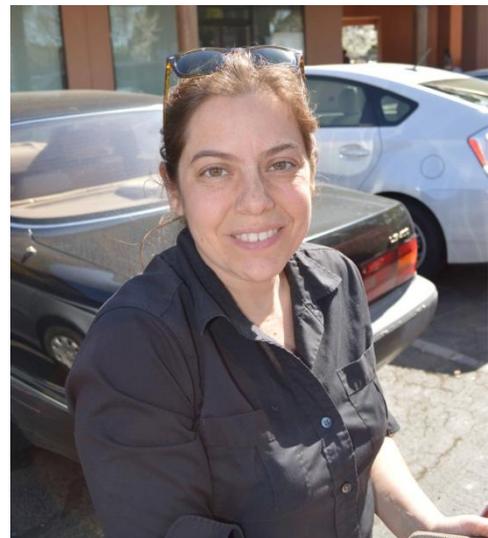
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an ages-old stigmatization of anyone down on their luck.

Four council members signed a memo earlier this week recommending what they described as a “tough love” approach to the problem. In addition to investigating the “resources available to bus homeless out of San Jose,” they are also considering making it illegal for anyone to bring food to those in the encampments.

They’re Democrats.

Almost everyone in San Jose – homeless and well-off – shares a common desire to hide their embarrassment, which makes it difficult to make progress toward a solution.

It’s a good time for outsiders to peek inside our tent.



Lauren Feeny



Occasionally people with food venture down the steps into one of the tent villages to help out the homeless folks living along Coyote Creek.





Richard, in the red shirt, said he was a certified A & P, which means he was an airframe and powerplant mechanic, before he was laid off from an airline and lost his home. He fixes cars and bicycles when he can find work.



Most residents zip themselves inside when strangers come around.