

What You Need to Know About Ending Poverty From Someone Who Overcame It

The New York Observer, by Josh Keefe, August 8, 2016, 9:19 a.m.

C. Nicole Mason seeks to make the study of poverty personal in her new memoir

Dr. C. Nicole Mason's new memoir *Born Bright* tells the story of a smart and determined girl fighting her way out of poverty in Los Angeles during the late eighties and early nineties. The precocious Mason navigates street politics, a physically abusive mother, a sexually abusive, drug-dealing stepfather and an indifferent school system as she struggles to be the first one in her family to graduate high school.

She succeeds, and more: Dr. Mason, a leading scholar on poverty, now serves as executive director of the Center for Research and Policy in the Public Interest (CR2PI). *Born Bright* not only recounts how Mason overcame long odds but examines the odds themselves. Mason spoke with the *Observer* last week about her memoir, poverty and the policies that could alleviate the national scourge.

You're an expert in the field of poverty research and policy. Why did you want to write this subjective, personal account?

What I was interested in doing was telling a different story about poverty in the U.S., one that is humanizing and lets people see the real challenges from the inside-out. A lot of times we hear these stories from the outside-in from people who may or may not have lived in poverty. What I had was both those things; I was both an insider and an outsider. I have the policy training and background so I know the conversation at the national level. I also had this other perspective of having actually grown up facing some of those challenges that people talk about in an abstract way.

Do you come across many other researchers who have that kind of dual perspective?

No. So what's interesting is I'm usually in policy spaces or research spaces or I'm at conferences where the overwhelming majority of speakers and attendees are white. White men, really. They're researchers. They take a very technical approach to the issue, "here are the numbers, this is what's going on within a map of these communities." But when women or families are asked to speak at these conventions it's usually to tell their story. They're not considered the experts. I'd be hard pressed to say that none of the people there have experienced hardship or poverty, but my experience is that there are very few researchers of color in this space and then there's very little conversation about their history and background and what brings people to the work.

You mention at one point that when poor kids are asked to draw their world, they're likely to draw their neighborhoods. While middle class and upper class kids will draw countries or the globe. How do you think that difference in the understanding of geography, and the child's place in it, is affected by poverty?

There's the problem of never leaving your neighborhood and geographic isolation. There's a lack of access to bridge opportunities. It wasn't, for example, until I left in 1994 to go to Howard University that I had ever been on an airplane. I know a lot of my friends from my old neighborhood have still never been on an airplane. Or been outside of their community. Even thinking about LA, I say I'm from LA, and people say "What about the beach? What about Hollywood?" That's not the LA that I know. What I think is true is that poor kids in poor communities are geographically isolated and tend to stay in their communities because they might

not feel safe, they might not feel comfortable and nobody has invited them outside of their community. And when they're in school the message they are getting is: this is all there is. This is this it. Nobody is saying there are other places outside of here.

The other side of that is all the moving around you do in the book. You talk about your friends coming and going. They are also moving around a lot; their families are moving around a lot. It seems like there are two forces: there's an isolation, but within that isolation there's a transience.

There's a lot of people coming and going because of insecurity and vulnerability. So neighborhoods are destabilized. Unless there is subsidized housing where the housing is secure or rent stabilized, you stay in one place. But what is really interesting to note is I moved a lot but I'm moving to the same types of neighborhoods. It's not like I'm moving from this low income neighborhood and the next week I'm moving to this really affluent neighborhood. I'm moving from place to place, and sometimes it's a block away or a couple miles away but the neighborhood looks the same.

The book is really honest about your experiences and your family and friends. Have any of them read it?

My mom read it. You can imagine. (Laughs). The first 200 pages or so she said, "Well, it's your story to tell." And then the last 40 pages she said she didn't like the way she was portrayed at the end. I said "I don't know what to say. Its true." She took issue in the beginning of me calling us poor. She told my father "She's telling everyone we were poor!" I said "Well, its true." Now the truth of the matter is we never thought we were poor. I didn't know we were poor until I went to college. But we were poor. And that's okay, it's not a bad thing. It's just true.

I really wanted to be honest but also to not judge the people in the community and my life. And also not do the same thing that happens to poor people all the time, which is they are made into spectacles. Or a prop or a pathology. I was really mindful to write it with love and understanding and compassion. Even when some of the things they were doing were not okay.

On one hand it is this kind of up-by-the-bootstraps, Horatio Alger-type story. But on the other hand it's the exact opposite. It shows how you are an exception that proves the rule. Is that a tough line to walk while you were writing this?

Well, first of all, there were smarter kids than me in the neighborhood. I saw the smartest kid in the neighborhood, and it wasn't me. I saw what was happening. I think that was sort of humbling. I could say, "Yeah, I have this sort of exceptional narrative and I did it so you could do it too." I knew that would be a lie. It would make people feel good, who say "Well, she did it so everyone can do it." I just know that that's not true and it's really dishonest. And so what I try to do in the book is really complicate it a little bit. Make it more complex.

If you could change one policy or law or implement one piece of legislation to help people living in poverty, what would it be?

Universal childcare, because that consumes a large chunk of people's income. The second thing I would do is change education policy, where schools get funds based on their tax allocation.

Because schools are funded by the local tax base.

And it shouldn't be that way. I would really work on equalizing the schools, the resources and the quality of teachers. I think schools are fundamentally important as a pathway out of poverty. And of course, I can easily say we should do something about welfare reform. We could or we could not. I think there's so many things connected to that. But we could do better by our children at the start through schools and education and making sure parents aren't spending all their money on

childcare. Universal childcare, I mean, good luck getting that passed. But doing something about the quality of schools from K-12 would radically transform kids' lives.

Throughout the book, you write about many friends whose lives were derailed by pregnancy. At one point you compare it to the equivalent of being jailed or the threat of violence for poor young men. But at the same time there was no discussion of birth control or safe sex. It's just sort of "don't get pregnant." Is that something that's changed since you were a teenager?

Well, there are a lot of different sex-ed programs, and they've done away with abstinence only programs. But I think in general across race and across class sex is a very hard thing to talk about. I think for my mom, because she knew what it was like to be a young mom, she was really very vigilant. I think she did it subconsciously, I don't think she was like "don't end up like me" but more like "be careful."

I think this is the issue: the conversation is never about if you become a teenage mom, how do you make sure you stay in school, maybe go to college? Because you still have hopes and dreams, you just got pregnant. But that's not the story. The story is you got pregnant so your life is ruined. And that's not the way it should be. It's like "that's it, you have a mark for the rest of your life." And that's not true. You can still be productive.

The book ends with you moving into your dorm at Howard University. But there are hints that the transition is not going to be easy. What happened after the book ends? How was adjusting to Howard?

Thankfully, I was at Howard. Compared to other schools, and predominantly white schools, there was a high number of first generation college students there. So I wasn't alone in that experience. But it was a middle-class, private institution. So there were those kinds of challenges. Learning rules, learning how to dress. There were just a lot of things I had no idea about. Now these days I say, "I'm from a little town called LA," because even though I'm from a big city I felt like I might as well have been coming from a rural town in South Carolina or something. I felt very supported in my classes and I quickly learned middle-class codes. So nobody knew where I came from. And that was okay. I think it was tough in the beginning because I realized what I didn't know and what I didn't have. And I realized in that classroom the first semester that I was actually poor. I realized, 'Oh my god, they're talking about *me*.' But it was really an affirming place.

How do you feel about universal basic income?

When you asked me what policy I would implement, that was the first thing that popped into my head. But I know people push back on it a lot. I think the main thing is that what we've been doing has not been working. Period. There's no way around it. The number of people living in poverty has not significantly changed over the last 20 years. I think it's really time for us to start thinking about overhauling our systems and start thinking about what we could replace them with. If we gave everybody universal basic income, would it cost more than the programs and bureaucracy we are running now?

But it's really time for us to take a sobering look at what's not working and say "what can we imagine?" How can we move people out of poverty that makes sure they stay out of poverty? I believe universal basic income is worth exploring. It's not worth adopting flat out. And if that happens, what can we do away with that isn't working or hasn't worked? I just think we need to be imaginative about our policies, and really start looking at our own biases and what's underlying our thinking.