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Inner City Blues

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Book Review

ROSA LEE: A Mother and Her Family In Urban America

By Leon Dash

Basic Books. 279 pp. \$ 23

"MAMA, have the checks come in yet?" That's the greeting Rosa Lee Cunningham's drug-addicted daughter, Patty, would shout to her when Rosa Lee walked through the apartment door. This cruel version of how other children might greet a homecoming father or mother epitomizes welfare's role in sustaining her family's drug- and crime-ridden life.

Patty and one of Rosa Lee's sons owed money to two teenage crack dealers who, like other pushers in the neighborhood, waited for welfare checks to arrive in the mail to "begin their rounds, making new sales and collecting old debts." As soon as Rosa Lee paid off her children's debt, they went "off in search of more crack."

Rosa Lee may be America's most famous -- or infamous -- inner-city mother. We first met her and her woe-begotten family in Leon Dash's 1994 Pulitzer Prize-winning series for this newspaper. Working over a period of six years, four of them full-time, Dash learned many of her family's deepest secrets and witnessed countless scenes like the one described above. Dash has now transformed his remarkable piece of reporting into a chilling, book-length description of Rosa Lee's journey through teen pregnancy, stealing, prostitution, drug pushing and drug abuse, child sexual abuse and exploitation, and death from AIDS at age 58.

In a book filled with image after image of human degradation and depredation, certain ones stand out: 9-year-old Rosa Lee stealing the lunch money of her fourth-grade classmates; at age 12, stealing money from the coat pockets in the church cloakroom; testing the potency of heroin on her drug-addicted teenage son; turning tricks in the same bed as Patty from when she was 3 years old to when she was 10 and, in an unforgettable passage, describing the girl as "sitting up in the bed, wide awake, watching us"; selling 11-year-old Patty to her johns for \$ 40 a trick; introducing the girlfriend of one non-drug using son (and the mother of her grandson) to heroin; sharing hypodermic needles with four of her children; teaching her 8-year-old granddaughter and 11-year-old grandson how to shoplift; and using her 5-year-old granddaughter "to ferry heroin through a street drug market."

Rosa Lee taught her children well. Of her eight children ("fathered by six different men"), six became drug addicts and were in and out of jail for various criminal acts. For \$ 22, Patty betrayed a boyfriend who had shown her nothing but kindness, allowing two thugs into his locked apartment, where they beat and killed him in a failed attempt to steal whatever cash he might have. Patty even propositioned Dash "in an unsuccessful effort to get \$ 5." One of Rosa Lee's sons began "burglarizing homes, stores, schools, and churches when he was as young as thirteen." (She was his fence.) Two of her AIDS-infected children regularly had unprotected sex for hire, usually without telling their customers that they were HIV-positive.

THE PATTERN has continued into a third generation. Patty's son, Junior, for example, is an angry and violent 24-year-old who has been in trouble with the law from the time he was 10. He is now in jail on various charges, including a robbery, kidnapping, and assault with a dangerous weapon.

When The Washington Post series appeared, Dash was criticized for reinforcing harmful stereotypes about African Americans. Perhaps it is easy for a white person to say, but that's a bum rap. Reportage like Dash's is essential if we are to understand the depth of pathology in some inner-city families. Dash is to be applauded for a piece of tough journalism that is in the finest traditions of his profession.

But Dash's critics do have a legitimate grievance: His unflinching portrait of Rosa Lee implies that she is representative of most inner-city blacks on welfare. The book jacket, for example, describes Dash's work as "an effort to capture the stark reality of life in the growing black underclass." At another point, Dash suggests that there are 2.7 million people like Rosa Lee and her family, that their numbers are growing by eight percent a decade, and that 57 percent are black. (Interestingly, it is the book that says all this. The Post series did not treat Rosa Lee as emblematic of the urban underclass.)

There are certainly many Rosa Lees. But such behavior is not nearly as widespread as Dash suggests. If it were, urban America would truly be a ticking social time bomb.

Rosa Lee simply does not epitomize the "underclass." Dash went to a D.C. jail in search of an apt subject for his reportage. What he found was a member of a much smaller, profoundly dysfunctional group: the under-underclass. His failure to draw this distinction makes the urban underclass seem much more menacing than it really is, makes its problems seem much more intractable than they are, and lets inner-city institutions off the hook for their failure to protect innocent children from unambiguous abuse and neglect.

Dash goes to great lengths to blame "sexism and racism" for Rosa Lee's behavior and for how her children turned out. He traces her roots to the poorest of rural blacks who came north unprepared for the world they found, and he emphasizes sexual exploitation and rapes suffered by many black women. The harsh conditions that women like Rosa Lee faced while growing up may have contributed to inner-city poverty, but they did not predetermine her life as a drug addict,

prostitute and child abuser. As Dash himself reports, eight of her 10 brothers and sisters "moved from poverty into the working and middle classes." So did two of her own children.

Dash's focus on the two "isms" to explain three generations of anti-social behavior obscures the real culprit: the failure of public agencies to react to repeated evidence of the pathology of certain parents, in this case the behaviors of Rosa Lee and, later, Patty, which surely amounted to child abuse.

FOR decades, D.C. agencies were on notice that something was seriously wrong in the Cunningham home. Both Rosa Lee and Patty dropped out of school at 14 and had babies out of wedlock. Patty never made it past the fourth grade. Her prostitution at age 11 resulted in gonorrhea. Although she spent a number of days in D.C. General Hospital, no report was made to the authorities. For most of the Cunningham children, the school years were characterized by spotty attendance, misbehavior in class and illiteracy. And despite Rosa Lee's long history of anti-social behavior, the D.C. courts actually gave her custody of her granddaughter when Patty went to jail. Junior, when he was age 10, was arrested six times in 10 months. This was in 1982, long before crack increased the intensity of street crime and violence.

The failure of various societal institutions to respond to the way Rosa Lee was maltreating her children is the proximate cause of the three-generational tragedy of her life. Significantly, the only two of her children who made it were supported by adult mentors (two teachers and a social worker) from outside the home.

The nation is about to embark on an unprecedented experiment in welfare reform. Leon Dash's searing depiction of three generations of Cunninghams is a warning -- ignored at our peril -- that more than welfare payments is to blame for the pathology of such under-underclass families and that more than time-limiting welfare benefits will be needed to reverse three decades of downwardly spiraling dysfunction. Feelings of guilt about past injustices notwithstanding, inner-city institutions simply have to do a much better job of protecting children from abusive and neglectful adults.

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