

# *Restoring the American Dream:* **Fighting Poverty and Expanding the Middle Class**



*Former U.S. Sen. John Edwards delivered the keynote address at the inaugural Working in the Public Interest law conference held at Georgia Law in early April. Former Georgia Gov. Roy E. Barnes (J.D.'72) introduced him to a near capacity crowd in the UGA Chapel.*

*The former senator and 2004 presidential and vice-presidential candidate practiced law for 20 years and currently serves as the director of the Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

*Excerpts from the senator's speech, titled Restoring the American Dream: Fighting Poverty and Expanding the Middle Class, follow.*

*To listen to the full speech, please go to [www.law.uga.edu/news/index](http://www.law.uga.edu/news/index).*

**I** want to take some time today to talk with you about, to share with you actually, what I think is the great moral cause in America today - the 37 million people who wake up in poverty every day. And, for me, this is not a complicated thing. It's really a pretty simple thing. You know in a country of our wealth, and our prosperity, to have that many people who wake up worrying about feeding their children, clothing their children, having a decent place to live, if their children get sick being able to take them to the doctor and to get the health care that they need, this is wrong. It's not complicated. It's wrong. And, I think all of us have a joint responsibility to try to do something about it.

As a result of the hurricane hitting the Gulf Coast and what

everyone in America saw come streaming into their living rooms out of New Orleans ... this window sort of opened for America. A lot of America hadn't thought about families that live in poverty - to either know about it or didn't want to think about it - and all of sudden there was a window of opportunity. But the question, of course, was and still is: how long does the window stay open?

I have all these folks asking me - and you all probably got some of this too - just after the hurricane hit and just after the pictures started coming out of the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, "Why did these folks stay there? You know, they were warned. They were told to leave. Why didn't they leave?"

Of course, we all know now that they didn't leave because they couldn't leave. They didn't have a car or a bank account or a credit



card. They had no way to leave town. If they had been able to leave town, they didn't have any way to take care of themselves, to sustain themselves. And why did the poor get hurt the worst? Why did those in the Lower Ninth and the Upper Ninth and East New Orleans, why did they get hurt the worst? Because they always get hurt the worst.

They live every single day on the edge of a razor, and it takes something a lot less than a hurricane to put them in the ditch. And the problem is, once they get in the ditch, it is incredibly hard for them to get out. I heard Roy [Barnes] make mention of this just a minute ago, but the other thing that a lot of America saw is that poverty does have a face in this country, and it's largely a face of color, not entirely, but largely.

African-American families in this country today have an average net worth of about \$6,000, for Latino families that number is about \$8,000. But, for white families it's \$80,000. That gap means something in people's lives. We saw exactly what it means with people who lived in the Lower Ninth in New Orleans. When you don't have assets, you don't have anything to fall back on. You don't have anything to take care of your family. What happened to all these families in New Orleans is what happens.

I've been fortunate enough to be able to spend some time in Louisiana since the hurricane. ... Right after the hurricane hit, I was in an evacuee center, one of the big evacuee centers. Most of the people there had come out of the Lower Ninth, and I was walking down this long row of people who were lined up trying to get help. I came on this guy, looked like probably early - stocky, strong-looking guy - probably in his early 40s, I'd guess. I said, "How are you?" He said, "Well, I'm alright, but I lived in the Lower Ninth. When the water came, I lost my house but, worse than that, I lost my job. The place where I used to work is now under water, and they are not going to open. I worked there for 23 years." He said - but you've got to picture in your mind's eye, if you will, he's sleeping in a sleeping bag about 10 feet from where we were standing, lost everything he has - and he said, "But when I got here, they told me, 'If you go out front in the morning at 5 o'clock, sometimes people will come by in pickup trucks and pick you up and put you to work.' So, I've been here 10 days. Every day I've been out there at 5 o'clock." He said, "They haven't picked me up yet, but they are going to."

This guy represents what our country is supposed to be about.

This is what made America what it is. And you know, I know all of us know, that there are all these stereotypes about families who either live in poverty or near the poverty line - lazy, no account, irresponsible - it's not the truth. I know it's not the truth. ...

Over the last three years, I've been all over the country talking to people in America and listening to them. I don't claim to have all the answers about what we should do about poverty. I've got some ideas. I'm going to talk about them in a minute. But, there's one thing that I am absolutely certain of - there is a hunger in America, a hunger to be inspired again, a hunger for a sense of national community, to be engaged in something big and important that all of us can be proud of. ... People are looking for something they can feel good about. The other thing is they don't want to believe that they are out there on an island by themselves and, if something goes wrong, they're on



*Former Georgia Gov. Roy Barnes (J.D. '72) introduced the Working in the Public Interest keynote speaker, former U.S. Sen. John Edwards.*

their own. This is not the kind of country we want to live in.

America also understands - because I've heard it, I've heard it in their voices all over this country - America understands that when we help the victims of the hurricane, when we help 37 million people who live in poverty, this is not something we do for them. This is something we do for us, because it makes us bigger and better and stronger. It says something about the character of our country - how we treat those who live here and are struggling.

I often get hit with, "You know, we fought a war on poverty, Senator. We lost." Well, there is an element of truth to that, but there is a big part that is not true. It is true that when we fought the war on poverty, we made some mistakes. You know when America does big and important things, we're going to make some mistakes. We're human, right? But because of the war on poverty, we cut the poverty rate in half, almost in half - 23 to 12 percent. It's because of the war on poverty that today we have Head Start, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Medicare [and] Medicaid. These are laws that have benefited generations, millions of Americans. ...

But, my view, when I talk about America being inspired again, my view about this is there is a void in moral leadership in America today - a huge void in moral leadership.

And, by the way, we should never think for a second that we're the only ones [who] saw those pictures streaming out of the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans. The whole world saw them everywhere. I actually saw a publication from overseas not long after the hurricane hit the Gulf Coast. It had photographs of victims from the Lower Ninth Ward and this huge headline. The headline was "The Shaming of America." The world knows that we are the most powerful, most prosperous nation on the face of the planet. They want to know now are we actually going to turn our backs on 37 million of our own people, who are worried about feeding and clothing their children. And, they are watching. This is part of a bigger issue for our country by the way. Not only is there a void in moral leadership in America, there is a huge void in America's moral leadership around the world. ...

There are dangerous issues that America has to confront, but here's what the world sees from us. They know we're powerful. They know we're prosperous. They know we're wealthy. What they want to know from us is do we actually care about the great moral issues that face the world. Do we care about 37 million people in our own country who wake up every day worried about feeding their kids or

their children getting sick? Do we worry about those families I saw in the slums outside of Delhi? Do we worry about the extraordinary poverty in sub-Saharan Africa? Do we care? Do we care? We have declared [the] situation in Sudan and Darfur a genocide. What have we done? Nothing, nothing.

The world needs to see the real character of America. They need to see what we are made of. They need to understand that we are strong. But they also need to understand that we care and that we have a moral vision of what the world should be. ...

There is a great opportunity for us to do something right here at home. There are also extraordinary opportunities to do things around the world, to show the world what our real character, what our true character is. And I say this to the students who are here, young people on college campuses have changed this country before, you can do it again.

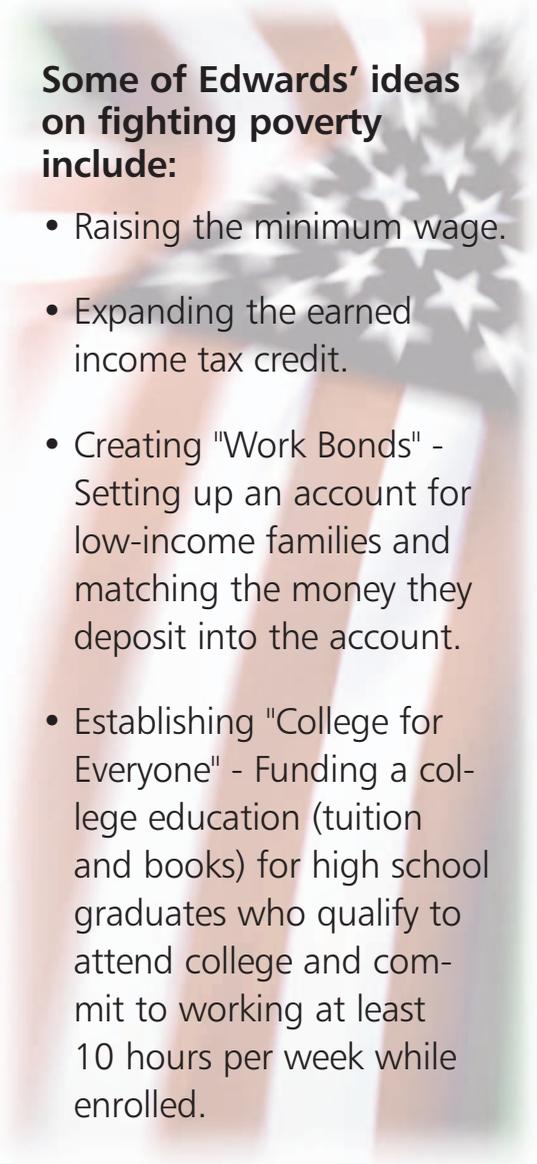
I saw it. I was a teenager when I saw young people on college campuses lead the fight for civil rights in America - not watch, not wait for their parents or their elders to tell them what was wrong. They knew what was wrong, and they set out to right it, with passion, with backbone, with courage - that in many cases their parents weren't willing to show. The same thing happened on the war in Vietnam. The same thing happened more recently on the Apartheid regime in South Africa. Young people on college campuses helped bring that regime down.

I want to ask you to embrace this issue as the cause of your generation. You can make such a difference, such a difference. ...

I'm here to tell all the young people - you, those of you who are here, your friends, those others who are on [this] campus who are not here today to join in this cause - you can make such an enormous difference. You can be the champion for 37 million people who

are having a terrible time just surviving every day. This is not the country we want to live in. We are better than this. You know we're better than this.

So, I leave with a line that I've stolen from an extraordinary woman activist. She was a social activist and an organizer. She passed away a few years ago, but she would always end her speeches by saying - when rallying people around big and important causes - she'd end her speeches by saying, "You know, the leaders we've been waiting for are us." She's exactly right. We can't wait for someone else to do this. All of us have to do it together, and together we can build a moral and just America and lead in a moral and just world. ■



## Some of Edwards' ideas on fighting poverty include:

- Raising the minimum wage.
- Expanding the earned income tax credit.
- Creating "Work Bonds" - Setting up an account for low-income families and matching the money they deposit into the account.
- Establishing "College for Everyone" - Funding a college education (tuition and books) for high school graduates who qualify to attend college and commit to working at least 10 hours per week while enrolled.