

Hartford Courant

Real World of Minimum Wage

By Helen Ubiñas
May 1, 2005

If Rep. John Hetherington wants proof of his argument against raising the minimum wage, he has only to motor the 20 miles from his suburban Fairfield County home to Bridgeport, where Brandy Fortson lives.

"I would say there is virtually no one in Connecticut who supports a family on the minimum wage," the Republican legislator declared last week.

Got that right. Fortson tried supporting her family last year on two jobs that paid minimum wage, or just over, and couldn't make it. She's up to \$9.60 an hour now at the Stratford Wal-Mart, and by moving in with her mother, she and her two kids get by. But she still wouldn't say she "supports" them.

"You tell me what I'm doing," she says. "I'm too tired to give it a name."

Last year, the 26-year-old single mother of two had two jobs: a full-time job at Wal-Mart that paid \$7.35 an hour and part-time work at Shaw's Supermarket, which paid the minimum of \$7.10. They were both in the same shopping plaza, which was convenient considering she didn't have a car.

Still doesn't. Fortson either gets a ride from her mother or a friend. If they're not available, then she takes the bus.

One of her biggest luxuries, she says, a dreamy look crossing her face, is being able to afford the \$10.25 cab fare from her house to her job.

"You're alone and you can close your eyes and think for a minute," she says.

About what? I ask.

She laughs. "Oh you know, about how you're going to pay the rent, and the light bill

and the phone." About buying groceries. She likes going to Price Rite; they have some good deals there.

She thinks about how nice it would be to be able to finally buy her kids something they want.

"It's about getting them the things they need," she says. "But you try telling that to a 4-year-old."

Last year, she was living in her own apartment in Bridgeport. She was paying \$700 for a one-bedroom, which was cheap, she says, when you consider how expensive housing is in Fairfield County. She turned the living room into a bedroom for her kids, worked every day at one or both jobs. It was tough not seeing her kids until they were already in bed sleeping. "But at least I was providing," she said.

And then she said her manager at Shaw's told her she had to choose between the jobs; they were competitors, he told her. They both sell food.

"Yeah, I didn't get it either," she said when she saw the confused look on my face.

So she kept the job that paid her more and, in desperation, started moonlighting at the neighborhood strip joint. She couldn't stand that, so she moved in with her mother. She still hopes to find a job that can give her and her children their independence.

When I told her about Hetherington, she wasn't surprised.

"They have no idea what the real world is like," she said. "It's like they live in another world."

Fortson wasn't with me when I took a ride to Hetherington's house in New Canaan, but

she couldn't have nailed it better if she had been riding shotgun. They may live just a few towns apart, but their worlds couldn't be more different.

Hetherington's house is a monument to his world, a sprawling home on a bucolic road with two convertibles parked outside-a Volkswagen and a BMW, it appeared from the road. The dog on the lush lawn - was it a golden lab? - was a nice touch.

When I talked to him later in the day, he repeated his assertions that only a "handful" of folks support a family on minimum wage. He cited an Office of Legislative Research study that said a considerable number of folks who make minimum wage are waiters and waitresses whose real income is in tips, and most of them are young.

I offered him my own numbers. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2003 more than 10,000 families in Fairfield County made less than \$15,000 - just a few bucks more than the annual pay of someone working 40 hours a week at minimum wage.

In fact, according to the **self-sufficiency standard** calculated for the state Office of Policy and Management, it now costs \$61,590 to support a family of four with two children in the Stamford-Norwalk region.

We continued to discuss dueling numbers until he said, "clearly we aren't going to settle this discussion with numbers."

So I took another approach. It's a long, numbing ride from New Canaan to Hartford, I told him, and I was thinking there had to be a few places to stop - a coffee joint, maybe, or Fortson's Wal-Mart - where he might come across folks who are, in fact, supporting a family with minimum wage.

He hasn't met any. But to prove he isn't totally clueless, he told me about his own minimum wage job. No, not the one he had as a 16-year-old cleaning bird cages for 75 cents an hour. The one he has as a state representative making \$32,000 a year.

He admitted he was being a little flip, but not much. "Actually, when you consider the hours we spend going back and forth,

reading all the material we need to read and everything else that goes with the job, it's less than minimum wage."

I thought about telling Hetherington that the 32-grand he makes as a part-time legislator - never mind his day job as a lawyer - is close to twice what Fortson earned all last year. But then I thought better of it.

This is Hetherington's world, and poor people like Fortson are just unlucky enough to be living in it.

Helen Ubiñas' column appears Thursdays and Sundays. She can be reached at Ubinas@courant.com.



FOR BRANDY FORTSON of Bridgeport, above, earning little more than minimum wage in costly Fairfield County means she and her two children have to live with her mother to get by. Fortson helps her 4-year-old son, Khalil Murray, get dressed before she heads off to her job at Wal-Mart in Stratford. When Fortson had two minimum-wage jobs she was able to afford a one-bedroom apartment, but she lost her Shaw's job when a supervisor forced her to choose between the two stores, saying they were in competition.
(JOHN LONG)