



## Soul support

### **As providers and protectors, many single mothers face a daunting emotional struggle**

---

By Sally Apgar  
May 11, 2003  
Honolulu, HI

Four years ago, when Nanette Miles' children were in elementary school, she sold handbags at Liberty House to support them and to pay for their one-bedroom Makiki apartment where they lived on a lot of saimin, rice and peanut butter sandwiches.

"I had a full-time job, but I just couldn't make ends meet," said Miles, who is 39 and working towards her masters in speech pathology, a discipline that requires skills and education that will give her the living wage that selling handbags could not.

Remembering back to the rough days when she had few skills and worked retail, Miles said, "I just couldn't figure out why checks would bounce and I had no money and there was nothing in the refrigerator."

Miles is one of the thousands of Hawaii's single moms who work every day to support their children financially and emotionally. In Hawaii, the number of families headed by single moms is growing just as it is nationally. In 1990, about 15 percent of Hawaii's households with children were headed and supported by single moms. By 2000, single moms were heading 19.6 percent of families with children under 18, an increase of 30 percent in 10 years.

Nationally, about 20 percent of families are headed by single moms, according to the latest U.S. Census.

The number of single moms increased nationally to more than 10 million in 2000 from 3 million in 1970, according to the census.

Meda Chesney Lind, a professor of Women's Studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, said, "We may have a holiday for mothers, but we don't treat them well or make their lives easy, and that's clear when we look at the lives of single mothers."

Lind noted that "child care is a huge problem for single working moms. The average single mom earns \$22,000 a year and one-third of that is paid to childcare. France and other countries help women with childcare."

Single moms face many stereotypes and social judgments, but experts agree that most did not set out with being a single mom as a life goal. According to national statistics, divorce accounts for 46 percent of all single-parent households and separation is responsible for 21 percent. Unmarried mothers explain another 25 percent and 7 percent are attributed to death of a spouse. Among divorced moms, only half due child support receive the full amount and 25 percent get nothing at all.

Nationally, about one third of all families led by single mothers lives in poverty. With welfare reforms of the 1990s designed to get families off of public assistance, many single moms were forced into the work place for the first time to find only low-paying jobs because they lacked skills, education and experience. At the end of 1999, single moms were more likely to work than married mothers for the first time in 15 years.

But critics say the welfare reforms that pushed women back to work focused on jobs, not education, so that many of these women simply moved up in economic status from "poor" to "working poor." Like Miles and others, they were not making a living wage that could pay their bills without public assistance, social service programs or help from friends and family.

A study prepared for the Hawaii State Commission on the Status of Women and released last month shows that Miles needed to make \$15.46 an hour to live on a bare bones budget in Makiki without public support, which is more than double the \$7 an hour she was making selling handbags.

The Hawaii study is part of a national project conducted by Wider Opportunities for Women, a 38-year-old national organization that focuses on women's employment and economic independence.

For years, the 40-year-old federal poverty measure has been criticized as unrealistic, in part because it is based only on food costs. WOW sought to devise a "self sufficiency measure" that would factor in costs such as housing, health care, childcare, food and transportation to determine what is a realistic living wage for families living in different regions.

The WOW study, conducted by Diana Pearce of the University of Washington, takes a market-basket approach to tallying up costs for daily necessities.

"These are no-frills budgets that don't include a take-out pizza, a (McDonald's) Happy Meal or a latte," Pearce said.

The study takes into account that the expenses for a family with one adult and two teenagers are different from one with preschoolers requiring daycare. The standard has 70 family profiles and determines the basic living costs for each of those families.

"It's not that poor, single moms are bad at budgeting or making financial decisions," Pearce said. "The problem is the wages, particularly in a service economy like Hawaii's that relies on tourism. People are not paid a living wage."

"Hawaii is a very difficult situation because it is an isolated economy dominated by one industry," said Pearce.

According to Pearce's study, Miles, living in a rented apartment in Makiki, relying on the state's A+ after-school program for her children and the city bus system for transportation, cannot make ends meet for less than \$37,752 a year. Her study notes that the best Miles could do in retail is about \$13,156 a year.

Miles took a course at Kapiolani Community College called "Turning Point," which helped her decide that education and new job skills were the answer. She has relied on programs at KCC and Bridge to Hope, a program at UH designed to help single parents. As a junior at UH, she is well on her way to becoming a speech pathologist.

"I still take things, live things, day by day," said Miles, who lives in the same Makiki apartment.

"I am the sole support for my children. My daughter is now 16 and a drama queen and I am applying for five and six scholarships. I am either doing homework, paying bills or running to water polo practice or clarinet lessons."

Jennifer Greene was a waitress when she became pregnant with her daughter Adriana. She took a \$9-an-hour job working with special education children. She rented a one-bedroom apartment on Piikoi Street, qualified for food stamps and got some state aid for childcare. But there were times she couldn't afford shoes for Adriana's fast-growing feet.

"The food stamps didn't last the month and I couldn't keep diapers on her butt and worried the rent check would bounce," said Greene, who is a junior at UH working towards a degree in nursing and a certificate to be a midwife.

"I finally realized that I couldn't support the two of us and the system couldn't do it. So, I went to a program for single parents at KCC. The KCC program got me back into school and they held my hand to get me through. I went to KCC, got honors and moved to UH."

According to the self-sufficiency measure, Greene needed to earn \$16.38 an hour or \$34,605 a year to support them when Adriana was an infant. When Adriana hit preschool, that changed to \$17.01 an hour or about \$35,930 a year.

As a registered nurse, Greene should do better. According to the self-sufficiency study, when Adriana enters elementary school, Greene will need to make \$30,147. As a registered nurse, the average pay is \$55,043 or \$26.46 an hour.

Greene isn't going to let financial problems make her bitter. She survives day-to-day by two philosophies. When she's burned out she says, "Lord, take me now." But when she feels better she turns to Nietzsche; "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger."

Greene said, "I have learned that I shouldn't waste all my time being frustrated or stressed at what I can't pay or can't do. I should focus on what good I do have, and that's my child."

---