GVSU Awareness Program Overview

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The Working Poor: Invisible in America
by David K. Shipler (Author)
From Publishers Weekly
This guided and very personal tour through the lives of the working poor shatters the myth that America is a country where prosperity and security are the inevitable rewards of gainful employment. Armed with an encyclopedic collection of artfully deployed statistics and individual stories, Shipler, former New York Times reporter and Pulitzer winner for Arab and Jew, identifies and describes the interconnecting obstacles that keep poor workers and those trying to enter the work force after a lifetime on welfare from achieving economic stability. This America is populated by people of all races and ethnicities, whose lives, Shipler effectively shows, are Sisyphean, and that includes the teachers and other professionals who deal with the realities facing the working poor. Dr. Barry Zuckerman, a Boston pediatrician, discovers that landlords do nothing when he calls to tell them that unsafe housing is a factor in his young patients’ illnesses. He then adds lawyers to his staff and they get a better response. In seeking out those who employ subsistence wage earners, such as garment-industry shop owners and farmers, Shipler identifies the holes in the social safety net. “The system needs to be straightened out,” says one worker who, in 1999, was making $6.80 an hour, 80 cents more than when she started factory work in 1970. “They need more resources to be able to help these people who are trying to help themselves.” Attention needs to be paid, because Shipler’s subjects are too busy working for substandard wages to call attention to themselves. They do not, he writes, “have the luxury of rage.”

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Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life
by Annette Lareau, from Publishers Weekly
This accessible ethnographic study offers valuable insights into contemporary family life in poor, working class and middle class American households. Lareau, an assistant sociology professor at the University of California, shadowed 12 diverse families for about a month, aiming for “intensive ‘naturalistic’ observation” of parenting habits and family culture. In detailed case studies, she tells of an affluent suburban family exhausted by jaunts to soccer practice, and of a welfare mother’s attempt to sell her furniture to fund a trip to Florida with her AIDS-stricken daughter. She also shows kids of all classes just goofing around. Parenting methods, Lareau argues, vary by class more than by race. In working class and poor households, she says, parents do not bother to reason with whiny offspring and children are expected to find their own recreation rather than relying upon their families to chauffeur them around to lessons and activities. According to Lareau, working class and poor children accept financial limits, seldom talk back, experience far less sibling rivalry and are noticeably free of a sense of entitlement. Middle class children, on the other hand, become adept at ensuring that their selfish needs are met by others and are conversant in social mores such as shaking hands, looking people in the eye and cooperating with others. She claims that both methods of child rearing have advantages and disadvantages: middle class kids may be better prepared for success at school, but they are also likely to be more stressed; working class and poor kids may have closer family ties, but sometimes miss participating in extracurricular activities. This is a careful and interesting investigation of life in “the land of opportunity” and the “land of inequality.”

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Race in the Schoolyard: Negotiating the Color Line in Classrooms and Communities
by Amanda E. Lewis, Amazon.com
Could your kids be learning a fourth “R” at school: reading, writing, ‘rithmetic, and race?
Race in the Schoolyard takes us to a place most of us seldom get to see in action—our children’s classrooms—and reveals the lessons about race that are communicated there. Amanda E. Lewis spent a year observing classes at three elementary schools, two multi-racial urban and one white suburban. While race of course is not officially taught like multiplication and punctuation, she finds that it nonetheless insinuates itself into everyday life in schools.
Lewis explains how the curriculum, both expressed and hidden, conveys many racial lessons. While teachers and other school community members verbally deny the salience of race, she illustrates how it does influence the way they understand the world, interact with each other, and teach children. This eye-opening text is important reading for educators, parents, and scholars alike.

GVSU Awareness Program Overview
by Jennifer Stewart
Act on Racism: Taking Action
Act On Racism began in the Fall semester of 2005 as a idea between a few students and a professor about how to bring awareness of racism to the forefront of the agenda at Grand Valley State University. Increasingly marginalized students voiced frustration with the absence of action on the part of faculty and administrators to deal with increasingly vicious and potentially injurious behaviors on campus.
Beginning the first week of classes in Fall 2005, Professor Jennifer Stewart recruited a group of GVSU students for a “diversity troupe”. The troupe consisted of 15 students diverse in racial/ethnic backgrounds and in academic majors. Working from a series of homework assignments in which students relayed instances of racism, prejudice, and discrimination in their own lives, the troupe constructed a program designed to be performed within the parameters of a 50-minute class. The program included a series of skits, a student directed question and answer session, an emphasis on solutions open to students without money or power, and an offer to continue the discussion at a designated time and place. The title of the initial performance was “A Day in the Life of Grand Valley.” The purpose was to take audience members through a “typical” day of a marginalized GVSU student.
In Act On Racism’s first semester, they were invited into many of the classrooms around campus and also performed in the student center for an audience of about 150 people. The following semester they continued to carry out their mission of raising awareness by performing in more classrooms and began to branch out into the community by performing at the Wealthy Street Theater (a community owned and operated stage) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for an audience of about 100 people, and spreading a message of awareness and understanding outside the Grand Valley campus community.
Act On Racism receives numerous requests for performances within and outside of the university and continues to work on recruiting new members for the group. The group is committed to performing wherever invited in order to keep the message available to the public and constantly perfect the program. For more information about Act On Racism, contact Jennifer Stewart at stewarje@gvsu.edu.