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Headline: INNERVIEWS 'A CAR IS THE MISSING LINK'

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Her passion, she says, is helping the poor. From anyone else, that might sound trite, corny and goody-goody. But we're not talking lip service here. Barbara Bayes puts her work where her mouth is.

Influenced by her rural roots in Carter County, Ky., she has committed her working life to helping poor people help themselves, first as director of the Legal Aid Society and now as director of the Good News Mountaineer Garage, a program that provides cars to people needing transportation to vocational training and jobs.

At the helm of the garage since its inception in 2001, she announced last month that the program is expanding statewide.

Thirteen years ago, her busy life was dramatically altered by a horrific car wreck. A brain injury sidelined her for five years. She still can't talk about it without crying.

"I GREW up in Carter County, Ky., in Willard, population about 60. Dad had a grocery store. He sold hay and fertilizer, and we had a farm. I grew up with poor people. I saw kids come to school without shoes on. That was eastern Kentucky back in the '50s.

"There were six in my family, and we always had other people living with us. My great grandmother lived with us, and my grandfather and uncle. We had one bathroom for 9 or 10 of us, but my parents always had room for someone else. They were very nonjudgmental. They grew up in the Depression. They knew being poor was not your fault.

"I thought about being a math teacher because I was good at it. I started school at 5 and could already read. I crossed a swinging bridge and went to a two-room school. There were two other people in my class and one was my first cousin who lived next door. In high school, there were 120 in my freshman class but only 44 graduated, so there was a huge dropout rate.

"I left home when I was 17 and wandered around in the late '60s for about five years. I got in a couple of years of school in different states, majoring in math. I went to the West Coast a couple of times, trying to be a hillbilly hippie, but I didn't do drugs. Growing up in a rural, impoverished area with an accent and with the Beverly Hillbillies on TV, the West Coast wasn't some place you could go where people thought you were cool. Even in Pittsburgh, I got called a snake. I said I hadn't heard that, and they said it's what they call people from West Virginia because they crawl down from the hills.

"I finally decided to finish school, so I went to Morgantown and decided to try social work. Coming back to Appalachia after being gone, I saw that things were a lot better in the rest of the world. I had a professor there, Jon Blair Hunter, a senator now, who probably had more influence on me than anybody about what I did. He left West Virginia and came back. He told me I could do something to help, and I've been doing it ever since.

"I started with the Welfare Rights Organization in Fairmont and worked with the Black Lung Association. I did legal services as a paralegal. In 1976, I went to southern Virginia and helped establish legal services down there. After I finished at WVU, I went to Texas for graduate school and worked in legal services there in administration.

"I loved Legal Aid. I didn't want to give people clothes and counsel them. I'm a pragmatic person. I like helping people by getting them a monthly check and a medical card and food stamps, concrete things that help them get on with their lives.

"In 1984, Mike Kelly and Dan Hedges talked me into applying for director of the Legal Aid Society here. I was only 34. Out of 300 programs in the country, there were only 10 directors who weren't attorneys. I was the only female.

"I worked with brilliant people. We started the State Bar's pro bono program. That has been a good program, private lawyers working for the poor. It is my passion, helping people on welfare get some tools so they can get on with their lives.

"I directed Legal Aid for eight years. Then I had a car wreck. It was 13 years ago this week. I was driving home and hit a rock cliff and went up a tree and rolled down the mountain. I don't remember how it happened because I got knocked out. I didn't work for 5 years. I crushed my ankle. I still can't move it. And I had a brain injury. People with brain injuries, 80 percent of the marriages break up. Mine did.

"I couldn't read for a year. Then, when I could read, I couldn't remember what I'd read on the page before. I was freaked out. I didn't know how I was going to live.

"My children were 6 and 10, and we lived in the country and had eight horses, and I couldn't do anything. I didn't walk without assistance for two years.

"My 'wasbund' I call him, was a science teacher, and he got a science news thing that had snippets about science studies. I read about a guy in Boulder doing research on brain injuries and doing biofeedback stuff, and I called him and he called me back and talked to me for an hour. He said he'd had 100 percent success. This voice from the Rockies helped me so much. He gave me hope that I would get better.

"I've worked really hard, and I'm still not out of it. When I can think about it without crying, I will know I'm over it.

"I started back by working part time. The court monitor asked me to do some investigating about a patient at Huntington State Hospital. I was scared, but I could work on my own time, and that job really helped me a lot.

"I've always been independent. I was working in my parents' store by myself when I was 12, pumping gas, doing inventory. I could set a fence and can food and cook for 15 before I ever left home. So it was a real ego thing for me not to be able to work. Next, I monitored grants for the criminal justice department. Then this job came along.

"That was 2001. It was a wild idea, but I knew poor people needed cars, and I thought it could work. We got a \$100,000 grant from Benedum and they hired me. We have gotten over 850 cars donated and have given out 375. We just got our contract expanded statewide. We need to give out 100 cars by June 30, and we're going to have to have about 200 donated. It's a short time frame but we're going to do it.

"A car is the missing link. Can you imagine a young single mother with two kids age 2 and 3 living in Alum Creek and trying to get to job training and get her kids to day care without a car?

"It's hard without cars even here in Charleston. We gave a car to a woman in Charleston who closed up the Food Court at the mall at 11 each night and walked up the hill to Roseberry Circle. Buses stop running at 5. It is such a gift to do the kind of work I do.

"Right before I wrecked, I went horse riding in Spain for 10 days. One of my fondest memories is galloping on this ridge looking at the mist of the Mediterranean. I rode a horse all my life. I literally rode to school. I can't ride now.

"I spent some time in Albania as director of Albanian Legal Services, and I went to Cuba. Going to these Third World countries, you think you are going to see all this misery, and it is hard, but you also see kids playing outside and laughing. You don't hear them whining at the grocery store for this and that. I think there's so much more to get pleasure from than money and material things.

"My daughter went to work for AmeriCorps and my son is in pre-med. I always told them, don't do anything for the money. Do it for your passion. Do it for other people.

"When I was in my 20s, I decided I was going to have babies, get a farm and go to Europe before I was 40. I got my master's degree before I was 40. I didn't get to Europe until I was 42, but I got it all done. So I don't have dreams anymore, just practical dreams, like getting people cars.

"I feel great about my life. I've got my mind back, and my kids turned out OK, and I feel I have kept my family tradition and been a good, decent person and worked hard."

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