



# THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.



Community Action

## Are young people our best hope?

A look at HBO Films' *Class Divide* (Part 2 of 2)

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Without question, the stars of *Class Divide* and perhaps the foremost reason for any hope at all in this neighborhood, are the young people whose daily lives straddle the same one block stretch of 10th Avenue, yet seemingly couldn't be more different. Among the Elliot-Chelsea residents, this includes school-aged children Rosa, Joel, and Alpha, as well as young adults Juwan, Hyisheem, and Brandon. Ranging in age from eight to 21, they are all acutely aware of their surroundings and generally assume it is only a matter of time before they are displaced from their homes. Hyisheem notes that the presence of Avenues across the street from his home feels like "a smack in the face," while nine-year-old Joel adds that he feels like a second or third-class citizen in his own neighborhood.

Perhaps Brandon, age 21, experiences the most paradoxical fate of all when he moves away from the Elliot Chelsea projects during the course of filming. It turns out that a number of new buildings in New York City are granted tax breaks if the developers make a percentage of apartments available to low-income renters. Through a lottery, Brandon is able to secure one of these apartments and even gets a job as a doorman at his new building. And yet, in what has to be one of the more insulting things I've ever heard of, Brandon is not allowed to enter his building through the

very door that he guards each day. Instead, he is forced to use a separate entrance for low-income occupants. The residents colloquially referred to this as "the poor door."

Back at Avenues, the viewer meets a handful of students that seem either unfeeling or are otherwise disaffected by the inequality that permeates their day-to-day surroundings. But then there are other students between the ages of 14 and 16 such as Yasemin, Luc, Isabella, Nick, Geoffrey, and Edgar, all of whom understand that something is truly amiss in West Chelsea. They wrestle with the pressure that they feel to succeed in both school and life, and acknowledge that they personally didn't earn the socio-economic status that they seem to both bear and benefit from. In addition, many of these students demonstrate an acute awareness of their privilege and believe in their heart of hearts that it is unfair. And while they shouldn't have to; a few of these young people appear to genuinely struggle with this reality and one or two of them even hint at feelings of guilt.

Toward the end of the *Class Divide*, it is revealed that 16 year-old Luc, one of the more sensitive individuals portrayed, has shocked his fellow Avenues students and teachers by taking his own life. To their credit, the filmmakers don't surmise as to what drove Luc to such an end. Personally, I would never dare attempt to speculate about a tragedy such as this either. Nonetheless, I am distraught over Luc's fate and cannot help but wonder what was troubling this introspective and inquisitive young man when he chose suicide.

Following Luc's death, Yasemin, also 16 and one of Luc's classmates established a project that she titled 115 Steps. This initiative denotes the number of steps it takes to walk from Avenues to the Elliot-Chelsea houses. Her efforts have brought young people from both communities together to address issues related to race, class, and justice. It is a welcome sight to see these kids engage in straightforward dialogue, which includes some hard truths about how they perceive the world.

Since it would appear much too late to undue the pain, sorrow and injustice wrought on the low-income residents of West Chelsea – both those already displaced and those still there – some may not think 115 Steps is that big a deal. Perhaps they are right. But I would like to think that maybe it's a start. I am hopeful that the wisdom, honesty, compassion, inquiry, and vision exhibited by the young people in this film might signify the dawn of a new breed of leadership for both America and the world.

During the end credits, the viewer learns a little more about what has transpired in the neighborhood since principle filming concluded. Among these disclosures is the fact that the founder and headmaster of Avenues has resigned his position. The filmmakers do not indicate why. The final reveal during the credits is that Avenues accepted its first student from the Elliot-Chelsea houses for the 2015-2016 school year. Technically, I guess you have to call that progress. Let's hope it doesn't end there.

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