



## Barbara Morrison

### Victorious Woman - April 2012

### The Stigma

Barbara Morrison was just six weeks pregnant with her second child when she left her marriage. At the time Barbara remembers weighing her options but didn't think any of them were great. Still, no matter what the future held, she believed she could handle it because, Barbara affirms, "I was strong enough to deal with it and I had a responsibility to my children. I was doing the right thing..." Once on her own, Barbara felt confident that she had prepared herself for the hardships of being a single parent. But she hadn't anticipated *the one thing* that became her *nemesis*.

Barbara Morrison was born and raised in an upper middle class neighborhood in Maryland. A child of the 1950's, Barbara's homemaker mother and physician father were typical of many post-World War II parents, enjoying abundance after their war-time sacrifices.

After high school, Barbara attended college in Massachusetts. Once there, with the "hippie" movement in full swing, she saw a different side of life. Then, like many of her generation, she rebelled against her upbringing and was in search of a more meaningful way to live.

In her journey, Barbara met and married a man who shared Barbara's thoughts and feelings. Together they embraced the belief that it was good to use what they had to help those in need. Both got factory jobs, worked the second-shift and put principle into practice. Living primarily on Barbara's income, her spouse gave most of his salary to those who needed it. Their openhandedness made the couple feel good – they were living their beliefs.

Life began to change when, during Barbara's first pregnancy, she switched to a day job. Then after the birth of their son, Barbara's spouse changed to third shift so he could be home with the baby during the day. But while shift work solved the childcare issue, Barbara was responsible for the housework, including the laundry, which meant washing diapers (no disposable diapers back then!). And, instead of sleeping while her spouse was at work, Barbara was up and down with her colicky son.

In spite of her efforts, it wasn't long before the young woman became run down. Barbara developed medical problems and couldn't work. Her job didn't offer medical leave. So she told her spouse she would have to quit. His response stunned her. "Who will pay the bills?" he asked, as though the household matters weren't his responsibility. Barbara wondered what they would do.

During the month that followed, the couple had too many arguments over too little money. Though her spouse paid the bills, he did it grudgingly; the relationship foundered and Barbara was hurt, angry and exhausted. A trial separation didn't help. Then she found out about the other woman.

The newly pregnant Barbara realized she and her son were on their own.

In the 1970's there was plenty of disapproval for single mothers – lots of judgment but few resources. Many encouraged Barbara to have an abortion. Being a single parent of a toddler was going to be hard enough, they said, but caring for a toddler and an infant would be nearly impossible.

Everyone made sense and every practical part of Barbara agreed with them. Yet she felt pulled in another direction. "Everything else that was emotional said, 'I love this baby'," Barbara explained. "Money didn't seem like a good enough reason not to have the baby."

With that in her mind, Barbara thought she would move in with her parents. But her mother disapproved of Barbara's "hippie lifestyle" and made it clear that her daughter wasn't welcome.

Next Barbara tried communal living, but it didn't work out. Then she became a live-in housekeeper, but when her employers found out she was pregnant, they asked her to leave.

So, with no job, no health care and no savings, when she was six months pregnant and with the help of a friend, Barbara went on welfare. She also received food stamps and emergency medical

assistance. Her background and education provided some advantages (she knew about nutrition, could cook, etc.). Still, Barbara remembers, “I was young. I was naïve. Many things confused me. It was a whole different culture.” The adjustment was difficult. And while the assistance was needed, Barbara’s main focus was getting off welfare. Of course, the birth of her second son gave her no other choice.

While being in a position to need welfare was bad enough, the shame associated with being in the welfare system was far worse. Barbara explains, “The welfare system stigmatizes a woman because [the government attitude was] ‘women are irresponsible and can’t handle money.’ So they manage everything because they think you can’t and they don’t want to be cheated. A social worker can come into your home anytime...it was a shock to me.”

While she was on welfare Barbara noticed that people labeled her as lazy and greedy, even in the food store. She felt like a Hester Prynne wearing a badge of shame that everyone could see. The stigma associated with being a welfare mom traumatized the young woman.

Of course, the same people didn’t know how many jobs Barbara applied for and how discouraging it was when she didn’t get them. They didn’t know that Barbara would sit on the front stoop of her apartment, in the Section 8 housing where many other welfare moms lived, feeling worthless, hopeless and thinking, “I’m going to be stuck here forever.”

Fortunately, through the disappointment and depression, Barbara discovered “People are very generous when it’s one-on-one. So many people helped me and made exceptions.”

One of those people was her neighbor, Jill, who decided to grow vegetables in a nearby vacant lot. Barbara says “Jill yanked me off the stoop” and off her pity pot, telling Barbara she was going to help grow the vegetables – *and Jill wasn’t taking “no” for an answer.*

The welfare garden was a turning point. The physical activity tired Barbara out but rejuvenated her at the same time. She was glad to be working so hard. And, when the seeds grew and Barbara had fresh vegetables for herself and her sons, she relished the sense of accomplishment.

After three years on welfare, Barbara applied for and received a one-year grant from CETA, a ‘70’s government program for the unemployed. Teaching workshops for the program fired up her ambition and Barbara decided to get her teaching certificate. However, she couldn’t get a student teaching assignment. Much to Barbara’s frustration, the grant ran out; she was still in the same place.

About the same time, Barbara’s father became seriously ill and her mother asked Barbara to help care for him. Moving to Maryland meant taking her sons away from the only real family they knew; it was a big decision. Again Barbara weighed her options. The better neighborhood meant better schools and a better education for her sons. Also she could get a student teaching job.

While she regretted leaving Massachusetts, the move paid off. Barbara taught in the Baltimore public school system and got her teaching certificate. A few years later Barbara went back to school and earned a degree in engineering. With that she found a better-paying job with good benefits and, most importantly, the kind of independence she wanted for herself and her sons.

Over the years, Barbara moved ahead but never forgot “the stigma” that she felt was imposed upon her as a welfare mom. Looking back, Barbara still isn’t sure she made all the right decisions. But time has given her perspective. “You can only make decisions based on the knowledge you have at the moment,” Barbara advises. “In the middle it seemed like there was no way out. Now I know it would get better. My goal was to give my kids a happy childhood – and I did that.”

And there was some good that came out of the experience. “It changed me,” Barbara admits, but explains further, “I was a very introverted, self-protective person and the experience helped me be more generous.”

Barbara Morrison’s challenges on welfare inspired her desire to change people’s ideas about women on welfare. Her book, *Innocent: Confessions of a Welfare Mother*, details her experiences. She also describes her journey through poetry in, *Here at Last*.

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