

## **Beegle: Fight the poverty, not the people**

**April 6, 2017**

Donna Beegle, Ed.D., inspired and educated hundreds of Rapid City community members during multiple presentations on poverty March 28-29.

Beegle is a nationally-known speaker and author recognized as an authentic voice from generational poverty. She spent the first 28 years of her life homeless, although she told the crowd on hand for her first presentation last week that her family was never really “homeless.”

“We were *camping*,” she said, getting a collective chuckle from the audience.

The daughter of migrant farm workers and the granddaughter of a cotton picker, Beegle said her family “worked that day for food that night.” She was married at 15 to another migrant farm worker who, like herself, grew up in extreme poverty with little education. At 17, she gave birth to her first child, a premature baby girl who lived only nine hours.

Beegle was 26 with two small children of her own and a teenage cousin in her care when she was encouraged to participate in a welfare-to-work pilot program. Passing the General Education Development test would qualify her for low-income housing. She admits she wasn’t really interested in the GED; her motivation was getting her kids into a home. But that program became her safety net, and she went from earning her GED to getting a doctorate in 10 years.

Beegle now travels the country and the world helping businesses, organizations and communities become poverty-informed. She told the more than 1,200 community members at the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center Theatre last Tuesday morning that she believed for many years that “people don’t care.” She came to learn that people *do* care, but they “don’t have a clue.” She said most people who teach, train and research poverty have never lived it. She encouraged all of us to “fight the poverty, not the people” and to “seek to know the *why*.”

“There’s a ‘why’ behind every single behavior,” she said in sharing how mortified she felt when she was invited to speak at a law firm years ago and scarfed down her buffet lunch before anyone else had taken a bite. (As a child in poverty with five brothers, she explained, a girl had to eat what she could or risk not getting any food at all.)

Beegle said part of the reason people don’t understand poverty is because the term itself is not well defined, and one definition doesn’t suffice. She identified four different types of poverty in her presentations: generational, working-class, immigrant and situational.

She also said the answer to poverty is people: building relationships that matter and helping those in need navigate the middle-class world. Beegle credits one of her college professors with helping her learn the middle-class language, including proper grammar and basic sentence structure. Before she became “fluent” in this language, she said she felt as though nobody heard her.

Beegle offered several suggestions to make a positive impact on those living in poverty – some as simple as calling people by name and really listening to them, to helping those individuals see what they *can* do, not focusing on what they can’t do.

She also said we must tap into untapped resources in our organizations and our community to have a greater effect.

Oftentimes we don’t know people or what they can do, she said. “You can’t fight poverty like that.”

Beegle’s visit to Rapid City was made possible with support from the South Department of Labor and Regulation, the John T. Vucurevich Foundation, the Prosperity Initiative and Rapid City Collective Impact.