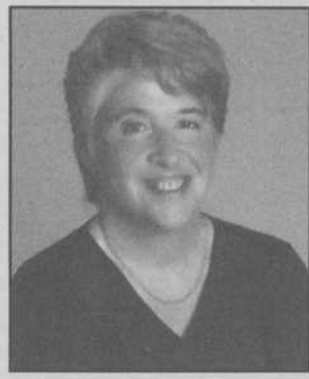


Mothers



"I came to Las Vegas in 1992 on Labor Day Weekend. I heard a story of a poor mothers' movement that happened in West Las Vegas 20 years earlier."
— Annelise Orleck
Author

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build the historic Westside. At the lecture, Orleck took her spot in front of the crowd as women in the movement sat in chairs nearby.

"I came to Las Vegas in 1992 on Labor Day Weekend. I heard a story of a poor mothers' movement that happened in West Las Vegas 20 years earlier," Orleck said. "I found it inspiring because it was a movement heavily based on love," she said.

Orleck spoke about how segregated it was in Las Vegas. In her book, she refers to the city as "the Mississippi of the West." The separation was so distinct that even railroad tracks seemed to be the dividing line, railroad tracks that still exist today.

In 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson announced a War on Poverty followed by the Economic Opportunity Act, Orleck explained. "The common view was that it was going to be a failure," she said. "But people still thought about the change in their community."

The separation of the Westside soon became an advantage. Relatively everyone knew each other, so spreading the word to reform was fairly easy. But igniting the flame to fight was trickier.

People on welfare were being stigmatized as lazy and incompetent by the media and political figures. People were being dehumanized, Orleck said. Welfare workers would inspect homes in the middle of the night just to see who was sleeping there, she said. "Then people had benefits ripped away, no discussion."

But the mothers of the Westside were sick of seeing their children hungry, Orleck explained. So the mothers embarked on a movement.

The founder of the movement was Rosie Seals, and it was led by Ruby Duncan.

"I was trying to wake up Las Vegas, let people know that we had rights, like anybody else," said Rose Seals, as quoted in Orleck's book.

Mary Wesley, Alversa Beals, Essie Henderson, Emma Stampley, Diane Guinn, Harriet Trudell and

Renee Diamond were prominent in the movement and present at the lecture. Most of these women were welfare mothers during the movement.

They created the Clark County Welfare Rights Organization (CCWRO). For many, it was the first time they had seen the words "welfare" and "rights" put together, Orleck said. They wanted to get their word out. "If they're single mothers it doesn't mean they're doing less work, they're doing more," she said.

The welfare mothers, now known as welfare rights activists, went door-to-door talking to mothers on the Westside.

"You got all these little kids," Pearson said. "If you want to hold your head up high as a mother, go out and fight for you children." Ethel Pearson, an activist in the earlier part of the movement, said this to Alversa Beals after she knocked on Beals' door, as written in Orleck's book.

"It was poor mothers talking with poor mothers, peer one-on-one counseling, single mom to single mom," Orleck said.

They set off Operation Nevada to gain their legal rights back, she said. "Welfare was not a gratuity, it was a right."

People outside the welfare circle were beginning to take an active stance toward the movement, Orleck said. Celebrities such as Jane Fonda and civil rights activist Rev. Ralph Abernathy publicized their support. Father Vitale of San Francisco was very significant in the movement's organization.

"Young law students even went around on the Westside to find out the number of people getting deprived," she said.

Meanwhile, the women were conceiving a plan.

"Mothers decided to play hardball and take a huge risk," Orleck explained. They were going to try to shut down the Strip.

On March 6, 1971, thousands of welfare mothers, their children, and civil and human rights activists,

marched down the Strip and into Caesars Palace — attempting to stop gaming.

They chose Caesars Palace because it was the biggest, the fanciest, and it was the symbol that everybody knew, Orleck said. They carried signs that said "We Can't Eat Moon-Rocks" and "Nevada Starves Children" and sang civil rights songs.

Tourism in Las Vegas was cut in half as they protested all week. At the end of the week they marched to the Sands. The doors were locked, but they sat down on the Strip and sang.



Eighty-six of them, including Father Vitale, were arrested that day.

The state of Nevada reinstated welfare benefits, but money was still being selfishly distributed. Orleck said people were even urging welfare moms to get jobs as prostitutes.

Health care was minimal on the Westside since there was no health clinic. A study showed that poorer children stayed sick longer than other children and their conditions were worse, Orleck said.

The CCWRO urged national and local officials, including medical agencies and doctors, to turn their attention to the mother's and their children's immediate needs, but no one came through. The group of welfare mothers then decided to do something that was unprecedented.

They opened the first medical facility on the Westside. It was an early screening clinic. The clinic was one of many programs developed under Operation Life, an organization that the mothers launched in late 1972.

In 1973, the mothers es-

tablished headquarters for Operation Life at the abandoned Cove Hotel in their neighborhood. The hotel was formerly a place where Black entertainers would stay because strict segregation laws prevented them from staying at the Strip hotels where they performed.

The women developed hot breakfast, nutrition, daycare and job training programs. They were creating a one-stop shop for social services, Orleck said. They also established the first Westside library. Operation Life programs also opened jobs for

ished," Orleck said.

An evaluation on Operation Life was conducted. Evaluators said that the programs and the women running the programs, more than any other organization, embodied the spirit of what all welfare programs should be about.

Orleck said other organizations, such as the labor unions, started changing their views about a woman's ability as a worker.

"The union began offering more jobs to women that they normally kept for men," Orleck said.

Nevertheless, behind the support and praise came a blinding defeat. Operation Life closed its doors because of the sudden lack of federal funding.

But Orleck said people shouldn't think that it was an unhappy ending.

"We fed a lot of hungry children," Orleck quoted Duncan. "It generated self-esteem, saved people in the clinics, and gave empowerment," Orleck said. "It's a hopeful story at such an unhopeful time."

After Orleck finished her lecture, she urged the women of the movement to share their thoughts and stories.

Seals, founder of the movement, spoke first. "I saw too many babies were left alone and it was pretty rough for the Black women in Vegas," she said. "It wasn't just Black women, it was White women, too. They didn't have anything to buy for their babies either."

"It hurts me right now when I have to think about how hard we had to struggle," Seals said as she looks down trying to fight the tears. "Women are going to have to wake up and start marching again," she shouted. "We got to start doing something for ourselves."



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Beals spoke next. She told the audience about her experience with raising 11 children. "I fed them, but they didn't have clothes to wear."

Jack Anderson, an attorney who helped the movement in its legal and corporate aspects, spoke on the behalf of Ruby Duncan who was not present at the event.

Duncan had sent him with a message to tell younger women to believe in themselves and take an active stance. She wanted to remind young women that if a group of mothers who never graduated high school could run a clinic, then they could as well.

"Don't let someone else set your horizon," Anderson included.

Diamond, one of the movement's organizers, left the audience with her piece of advice. "Live your life like tomorrow is the last day, and, trust me, you won't regret it at 68," Diamond laughed.

"Never give up and never give in. Promote this book ["Storming Caesars Palace"]; it's beautifully written," said Trudell, another activist in the movement.

Wesley told a story about a protest, known as the "eat-in," she had organized in February of 1973.

The lecture was concluded with a book signing. Orleck and the women of the movement signed books, mingling with each other and family. The event was emotional since many of the women hadn't seen each other for a while.

As they gave each other hugs, it was clear to see that the women remembered everything. The smiles, the pain and the struggle streamed back with every touch. They were together again to continue their fight. But this time, they were passing their power on.

Westside residents.

"They used these programs to get people off welfare," Orleck said. Therefore, the programs that were helping poor mothers were also being run by poor mothers.

In the mid 1970s, Operation Life organizers were discussing plans to redevelop the Westside.

In 1977, Operation Life was recognized nationally as the only organization of its sort to be run by poor women, Orleck said. It was also recognized as being one of the largest employers and received more federal money.

Ruby Duncan, the movement's leader and a Westside mother, even advised President Jimmy Carter on welfare jobs and programs, consulted with Senator Ted Kennedy on healthcare reform and shaped the U.S. Women's Bureau initiatives for bringing women into male-dominated trades, as written in Orleck's book.

Then there came Ronald Reagan and the 1980s.

"All major programs were cut to the bone, and community agency funds were abol-