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# Finally breaking free of welfare safety net

This column, originally published on Dec. 19, 1994, placed first in the Daily Nebraskan Publications Board opinion category.



## Rainbow Rowell

Sometimes I think they can tell. "They" meaning everyone, meaning you probably. "They" meaning professors and friends and prospective employers.

Sometimes I think that it shows in everything I do and say. In the way I walk and dress. Sometimes I think they smell it. Beneath my perfume, seeping out from beneath my well-soaped skin.

Sometimes I think that no matter how hard I study and smile and struggle, the poverty is still in me, rotting in my breath, devouring my stomach, burning in the back of my throat.

In my eyes.

And sometimes I think they can tell.

Because it's still there. It will always be there. Keeping me on the run, making me think that if I sit still it will catch me again. It will catch me and hold me for good this time.

That it will turn off the heat and take away my shoes. That it will empty my refrigerator and make my mother cry.

And so I run.

I excel. Not out of pride or achievement. Out of fear. Fear is my motivation and drive. My muse. Because if I make everyone happy and pass every test, they can't send me back. They can't. They can't.

But it can. It can catch me, and it can catch you. Don't every think you're too smart or too clean. Don't every think that you're too hard working.

"I don't like welfare," someone told me yesterday.

I don't like welfare either. I hate it. But I don't know where I would be without it. I hope that I would still be here. On the run from poverty, but not in its clutches.

But I doubt it.

My mother went on welfare when I was eight. My father left us — three kids, a pregnant wife — on a farm in eastern Nebraska.

A farm with no phone. No car. No heat. No electricity. And a few weeks before they turned off the running water. No nearby family to step in. No benevolent private sector.

We needed a safety net. And I thank God — and this state and this nation —

that there was one. Being on welfare was hard. Harder for my mother than for me. The monthly check was hardly enough for a family of five, and our rent was high because she refused to live in the housing projects.

But we were warm and safe and fed. Above all, we were together.

Now, I'm at a university in Lincoln. For the first time in my life, I'm not wearing used shoes and I own more than two pairs of jeans.

I'm two semesters away from a degree. I have a decent shot at being middle-class. After a few years in the job market, my income taxes should pay back those welfare checks, food stamps and public school lunches.

I'm hearing more and more about welfare. I hear important men and women talking about trimming the fat from the budget. About setting loose welfare queens and cheats.

About the government's role. About waste. About orphanages. Welfare, it seems, is dragging our nation down.

But Aid to Families With Dependent Children saved my family. Welfare gave me a chance.

Most people on welfare aren't lazy. Aren't dirty. Most people on welfare are children, children neck-deep in poverty. Children who already face more obstacles than they should.

And I don't want them to fail. I want them to have the same chances I had. The same hope that maybe someday they'll crawl out of poverty. That if they work hard enough they can get away.

That if they study and smile and struggle, they will rise above it, beyond it. And maybe no one will every know.

Rowell is a senior news-editorial, advertising and English major and a Daily Nebraskan senior editor.

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