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In today's economy, poor gotta have heart

By Rheta Grimsley Johnson

It might be a different battle in Madison or Missoula than in Montgomery, but, then again, maybe not.

Fighting on behalf of the poor is never a glamorous job. Especially given today's harsh political climate.

Alabama Arise is located in the tired old Bell Building downtown. In the elevator, I keep expecting to see a disheveled gumshoe named Philip Marlowe riding along; it's that kind of retro scene.

The office suite, located next to the ACLU, is adequate, far from fancy, but better than the single desk that used to "house" Arise. There is a touch of unexpected drama, however, in the plain-Jane headquarters. The view from the ninth floor is spectacular, the gleaming white State House framed, as if a target, by every window.

The view is appropriate, given Arise's mission of lobbying for low-income families, and considering Alabama's 1901 constitution that allows a lopsidedly powerful legislature.

Arise has a small permanent staff and a host of members statewide; the coalition consists of 150 church congregations and other concerned organizations, plus hundreds of passionate individuals who believe the poor are treated unfairly. A local newspaper proclaimed Arise "the conscience of Alabama." Right-wing radio calls it a nest of "bed-wetters."

Being the conscience of Alabama has to be discouraging at times. I can say that, having grown up here. Alabama is, after all, a poor state in a poor region with regressive taxes and a seemingly never-ending romance with the status quo. It's the same state that recently enacted a bill bent on making life miserable for undocumented workers and

their children. Basic human services like health care and transportation and education are too often legislative afterthoughts. Alabama is one of only two states in the nation that applies its full state sales tax rate to groceries. Groceries!

But there's hope. The current struggles of the middle class mean every day a broader population is affected by the problems Arise has tried for two decades to correct. Some issues no longer belong exclusively to the poor. Making ends meet is now a middle-class preoccupation, too. With each passing day, it makes more sense to more people to arise and fight for change — instead of consistently voting against their own self-interests.

How hard is it not to lose heart?

“I take the long view,” Kimble Forrister, executive director, says. Forrister has a beatific countenance and a master's degree in divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary. “One day there will be no state taxing groceries. The arc of history bends toward justice.”

It might bend faster beneath persistent lobbying efforts of Arise. Pres Harris, chief organizer, sees it as a matter of getting citizens to set aside what they think they know in order to listen to the facts. There's a steep learning curve, she says.

Maybe it's tilting at windmills in a nation that for eight years under George W. Bush awarded \$2 trillion in tax breaks to the wealthiest of Americans and spent \$1 trillion on two wars.

Brenda Boman, a former English teacher and Arise development director, says if she could wave a wand and get fellow Alabamians to realize only one thing, it's this: “Charity is essential, but not enough.”

Back in the old lift, going down, I sense maybe things are looking up. At least some here are trying.

Rheta Grimsley Johnson, who grew up in Montgomery, writes this syndicated column that appears each Monday. To find out more about her and her books at visit www.rhetagrimsleyjohnsonbooks.com.