

Caught in the trap

IT'S budget day for Charlene McClusker. She says she's been worried for the last week about an overdue gas bill and now she'll need to "rob Peter to pay Paul" in order to see off the debt. Her husband Wullie recently took the decision to give up the dole and take a low-paid cleaning job, an hour's journey from their home in Girvan. He's barely better off than when he was on state benefits but, still, it gets him out he says.

Combined with bringing up a two-year old child, life has become a careful balancing act for the McLuskers, as documented by photojournalist Morag Livingstone, who spent a month last summer capturing the lives of three Scottish families desperately trying to escape from a cycle of low-income employment and poverty.

The result is a remarkable and sometimes unsettling account of life on the breadline in Scotland, exposing the relationship between the haves and have nots in a country which has some of the highest levels of child poverty and widest health inequalities in Europe.

Livingstone, originally from Aberdeen, gave up a career in the City of London to embark on the project. She contacted two Scottish charities, Stepping Stones for Families and One Plus Childcare, to help her track down families willing to participate in the multi-media presentation, which includes photographs, interviews and poverty statistics, and formed part of Livingstone's photo journalism MA.

Her original inspiration for the project was a book, Danziger's Britain, which she read while stationed in Africa as a commodity trader. A picture journey through some of the most deprived areas of the country, Danziger's book laid the foundations for Livingstone's heightened social conscience and an about turn with her career.

"I felt I could make a difference through photography by telling real life stories through pictures," she says. "You get a lot of information about low income in this country but you don't actually see it. You become immune to the specific problems poverty causes in people's daily lives and I wanted to capture that."

All three featured families, the McCluskers, single mother Angela Maguire and Jane (an assumed name), a part-time cleaner with one daughter living at home, agreed to the scrutiny of Livingstone's camera lens.

"They were a bit reticent for the first few days," says Livingstone, "but then they slowly accepted me into their lives. It happened quite naturally. It's a strange delineation point as a photographer when you see that they are gradually accepting you into their lives and the camera becomes an accepted part of that."

While the pictures reveal some of the most candid aspects of the families' lives, Livingstone says they were never ashamed or embarrassed by their lifestyles. They were, however, angry.

"All families were trying very hard to change their situations, either working part-time or full-time but the results were thin on the ground," she says. "They were more ashamed of their environment, than the fact that they were trapped in low-income. This at times would lead to anger at the way the system discriminated against them and huge frustration that their best efforts could not affect their circumstances."

Angie McGuire, who narrates the DVD with her own poetry and is one of the featured families, has



turned her frustration into activism. She's currently training to become a financial inclusion officer and has set up a campaigning group in Glasgow's Possil Park with other mothers.

"That's the kind of positive result many of these people come up with," says Livingstone. "It's a testimony to their spirit and their drive to continue to fight against a system that traps them in an undesirable lifestyle. They've the same desires as the rest of us, just less opportunities to succeed in achieving them."

Isobel Lawson, chief executive of Stepping Stones for Families, says this kind of attitude is prevalent in many of the parents her organisation deals with. The charity runs a financial inclusion project in South Ayrshire, offering advice with budgeting, and helping people plan how they can move from benefits to employment.

"They have to be strong willed to live this kind of life because it's not just their life at stake but their children's also," she says. "And despite what

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people think about the unemployed not wanting to work, parents want to do the best for their children and will often take up employment just to give their kids a bit extra – even though by doing so they won't be much better off."

Practical, often innovative solutions are offered by charities working on the families side of social care but often it is not enough. Lawson says that while some initiatives from the Scottish Executive have been warmly received, resources are at times inadequately, and thus unfairly, distributed.

"People should be entitled to the same services across the country," she says. "When the government introduced the Working for Families Fund, we were encouraged by its commitment and the support it would provide for families wanting to work. However, South Ayrshire didn't qualify for this funding as the area did not meet the criteria for deprivation. East and North Ayrshire qualified but next door didn't. So we are putting in services to counteract the shortfall but it is very, very difficult.

Morag Livingstone gave up a career in the City to photograph families living in poverty. Revealing the harsh reality behind Scotland's appalling poverty figures, the photographs aim to change the public's perception of people living on low incomes, writes **ROBERT ARMOUR**



"There needs to be more done for people who want to work and to sustain employment," she believes. "There's not enough resources or attention directed to this issue. They need more support and greater job security because they truly are at the bottom end of the employment market."

But by highlighting the personal stories behind the statistics, anti-poverty campaigners believe they can fight low income poverty on a new front.

"Government initiatives in terms of child poverty have tended to centre on employment and welfare to work," says Marion Davis of lone parent charity One Plus. "But this format highlights the issues people face when they are in work and that poverty is still not forgotten. Having to pay for school meals, transport, and the lack of play facilities in some housing estates, may seem like small problems to those who have the luxury of being able to escape from their circumstances, but to families trapped in poverty these are big problems.

"Lots of organisations are trying to raise these

issues but very often it is the people affected by poverty who are the hidden voices. This presents an opportunity for parents to be at the forefront, to hear the parents tell their own story. All the facts and stats are becoming like wallpaper. Nobody believes or sees them anymore because everybody thinks they know what they are going to say."

Livingstone said the experience challenged every stereotype she had of poverty and hopes the politicians and decision makers will be similarly affected when the DVD is launched at this year's Civicus World Assembly, in Glasgow in June. "I still cannot equate in my own head how this can go on in Scotland," she says. "It's changed the way I live and the way I look at other people. There's this belief that everyone is middle class and sometimes it's easy for us all just to accept that. But it's not true and we need to challenge this perception if we are to eradicate this kind of unacceptable poverty which exists on our own doorstep."