

“The Birth of CCHF through the Eyes of John Perkins”

Christian community development, as we know it today, began in Mendenhall, Mississippi. When my wife, Vera Mae, and I moved back there in the sixties after years in California, we could see that little had changed. Success for the young people in this little rural town was to leave Mendenhall and not come back.

U.S. poverty was "discovered" and first responded to in Mississippi. Up until then, poverty had always been accepted by the poor in America; there had never been an "attack" on it. Then Dr. Robert Coles, who was both a pediatrician and a nutritionist, did a study in Mississippi and Louisiana on the relationship between malnutrition and learning. A friend of the Kennedy family and therefore having some influence, he became convinced that children who grew up in poverty without proper nutrition were significantly disadvantaged. Coles believed that children who came from very poor families and did not get proper nutrition could not compete with those kids from homes that had good food and other advantages. He proposed that integration was the way to solve racial problems as well as health problems in impoverished American children.

During this time I testified before Senator McGovern's nutrition committee. I shared how my mother died from malnutrition when I was seven months old. By this time, scientists had discovered that if a mother didn't get the right food and nutrition, her child would likely be born with defects and might never catch up.

Out of Coles' study and additional research came the Headstart program. My wife was one of the founders of Headstart in Mississippi. When a tornado struck there in the late sixties and killed many people, Vera Mae got involved in recovery efforts. The President sent support staff to our Headstart headquarters, which became a relief center, supplying food and medicine for those in need during that disaster.

The President's advisor, who came to determine how bad the devastation was, could see beyond the tornado. When a tornado hits, it's one thing; but a hit among very poor people was devastating. He said to Vera Mae, "If I get you a grant, would you study and document the poverty in this area?" He gave her a two or three-year grant.

After about six months of study, Vera Mae said, "This is terrible." She was finding that the girls were getting pregnant and their babies were dying. Sometimes the mother would die, too. Some of those children had never had a sugar diabetes test, had never been to a doctor at all. Vera Mae would come home and say, "We need to do something about this." Of course, when your wife gets all upset about something, you can't sleep at night either. We had a volunteer nurse and after some intense discussion decided to develop a health center. We found a doctor, but he stayed with us for only a year or so. We had to close this health center, which had given people new hope, until we finally found another doctor willing to serve Mendenhall's poor.

During that time, I was writing my first book, *Let Justice Roll Down*. I was in New Hebron interviewing people who knew my mother when I was a baby. One old lady told me that my mother "just died," that she was nothing but "skin and bones." She remembered me as a little baby, sucking at my mother's breast but getting very little milk. She said I was nothing but just skin and bones, too, when my mother died. After her death, my grandmother, who had been the mother of nineteen children, took in us five kids. (My father was a weekend alcoholic and had left town.)

My family didn't have a milk cow, but one of the old black ladies in the neighborhood did. Every day she would bring a quart of milk to our house. And they watched this little baby of skin and bones start to perk up. I began to develop.

As this lady was telling me this story, I sat with tears in my eyes. "What happened to that lady?" I asked. She died almost the same way my mother did. There hadn't been a doctor in this town in ten years. I wanted to do something for that lady's family. I had never heard that part of my story before.

Out of that story, the New Hebron Health Center was born. It sits just across the street from where my brother was shot. He died in the hospital in Jackson, fifty-two miles away, because back then there was no health center in town.

When we started the health center, we desperately tried to motivate doctors to come to rural areas. For a while we went without a doctor. Then we decided that we had to raise up and train doctors to work with the poor, to develop an association of people in medical care who would have a unique concern for the poor. CCHF was created to help serve those poor who had little or no health care accessible to them. Many of you are doing just that today --and to you I say thank you.

I survived infancy because of one kind woman--and the grace of God. I know that many more children are surviving, and even thriving, because of your willingness to go and serve them. For that I--and they--am very grateful.

--John Perkins