

## **Jacky Rieke - Raise the Wage OpEd**

Owner of Nutty Steph's in Middlesex

As a business owner, I'm concerned about the challenges faced everyday by thousands of workers in Vermont who don't earn a living wage. Raising the minimum wage would present a two-fold benefit for business owners like myself. I would have a more dignified & less stressed workforce to employ, and I would sell more when VT workers, with expendable income, buy more of our high quality chocolate and granola. In fact, they will spend a lot of money on Vermont products, and this will strengthen my small business and many others.

Our society on its face appears affluent, but in reality so many in our state are suffering under poverty, lacking resources, lacking time and lacking community. Most of us have a car but tens of thousands just drive them to and from work, earning barely enough to cover their insurance, gas and keep up with maintenance.

Over half a century ago we created a minimum wage, about which President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said in 1933, "By living wages, I mean more than a bare subsistence level — I mean the wages of a decent living." Along the way the purchasing power of the minimum wage has dropped as inflation and the cost of living have outpaced wages for millions of Americans.

Though Vermont has made improvements in raising the minimum wage in recent years, we have not gone far enough to address the rising inequality in our state. While the share of total income in VT going to the top 1 percent has gone up, the rate of childhood poverty has and homelessness have also increased. The cost of basic necessities like childcare and health insurance keep rising, and wages have not kept up with the cost of living. Over half of our single mothers with young children live in poverty, and nearly 3,000 more children live in poverty now than in 2008. Raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2020 will not only put more money in the pockets of our most vulnerable workers, those workers will spend in their communities, spurring local economic growth.

And now tens of thousands of average Vermonters, like millions of average Americans, have no expendable income, no savings, no free time, no capacity to resist the trickle down economic policies that have been growing ever stronger since Reagan.

By moving our minimum wage up so it's much closer to a livable wage, we'd help our state a lot and as a bonus, we'd raise the American boat. We would join the states that have already accomplished this progress, and we would be showing the country that we do not all have to follow Trump's agenda of dismantling worker protections and benefitting Wall Street and massive corporations.

You don't have to look beyond these pages to see we face challenging times. We are constantly bombarded with information — facts and opinions masked as facts. That constant pounding batters our psyches. It affects our moods, our attention spans and even dictates how strongly we might respond to something we read or heard. Likewise, it may drive some of us into the quiet corner of submission.

Regardless, the toll is measurable. It takes great effort to get out of the rhetorical rut and get ourselves free from its stubborn, messy grasp.

Thank heaven for April. Sure, it might be mud season, but with the showers throughout the past few days, winter finally is in retreat, and we can almost imagine the greens of summer. But April also is National Poetry Month. That actually means something in Vermont.

Around the state, poets of all shapes, sizes, ages and experience — thousands of them — offer their work for public consideration. It happens on most college campuses and in high schools. But for years now, Montpelier has devoted its streets and businesses to verses of Vermont-made poetry.

As part of PoemCity, more than 500 submitted poems are on display in businesses, public spaces, and even along lamp posts up and down the Capital City's streets.

Throughout the month, there are events scheduled featuring notable poets (this weekend the poet laureates from Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine will appear at an event together), as well as readings and open mics for other, lesser-known poets. There are workshops aimed at getting creative juices flowing and many years there have been daylong seminars on book-making and letterpress printing.

In nearby Randolph, they do PoemTown using a similar format. And Norwich University in Northfield has gone out of its way to stage a community/campus poetry project to emphasize its town/gown connection.

Stopping to read some of the poems around Montpelier this week, a theme emerges.

While the poems are representative of our state, in promoting diverse ideas and provoking certain responses, particular issues arise: confusion, anger, injustice, fatigue, inertia, apathy, as well as calls for hope, compassion and love. Many of the poems have a strong sense of place and imagery that seeks comfort.

That is what poetry is designed to do: give glimpses through words.

Robert Frost may have stated it best, "Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought, and the thought has found words."

Certainly writing poetry is not that easy, as nearly any poet (or poet wannabe) will tell you. Distilling complex ideas into the "right words" is hard work. But it is inspiring to know that there is a legion of creative people who live in our state who take pride in thinking for themselves, working hard to string ideas together and craft them into something worthy of sharing.

PoemCity and its companion projects are the welcome pause we need right now as we dissect and attempt to understand the news, the high emotions and the opinions all

around us. We need the break from it in order to put ourselves — as readers and listeners — in front of other perspectives and ideas. We need to challenge ourselves to disagree and dislike in a thoughtful manner, so that we might have that better understanding for what is being said.

Poetry is not for everyone. And, clearly, its in-your-face presentation in some communities this month annoys some people. But we must celebrate this creative process that is ingrained in our social fabric as much as agriculture, hunting, hiking and skiing. It is as much a part of community building as attending church or protests, shopping and meeting at the fence to talk to a neighbor. It is expression.

We can all agree that in these tenuous times, when algorithms are helping to dictate what we see and share, the echo chamber can get a little tough to bear.

For the next few weeks, poetry is all around. Go out and see what your friends and neighbors are saying. You might just feel inspired, too.