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Flashes of reality in N. Phila.

Given cameras, women in Drexel project reveal tough lives.

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In the tight rowhouse streets of North Philadelphia, people share walls and worries.

Few outsiders see, know or feel the cycle of want and chaos that a week of deprivation creates.

To show what life north of Spring Garden Street looks like to some of the people who live there, Mariana Chilton, a professor and anthropologist at Drexel University's School of Public Health, gave digital cameras to 40 women.

Out of a simple idea, complex images and narratives emerge. An exhibit of the photos, called *Witnesses to Hunger*, will open to the public Dec. 11 at Drexel's Bossone Center.

The women aimed their cameras at precious children and faithless lovers, falling-down apartments and asthma nebulizers.

They also shot empty grocery carts and unstocked refrigerators, sewage puddling in the street, clouds and sky (to show elusive freedom, Chilton said), and food-stamp forms and child-care subsidy paperwork, because to be poor is to be, among other things, a harried bookkeeper.

At turns hopeful and desolate, the *Witnesses* pictures are the unvarnished view of blunt women whose life visions have been planed down to their irreducible essence.

The women know Philadelphia better than they want to.

"My 4-year-old son saw a shot person and has prostitutes in his face," Tianna Gaines, 29, said in an Inquirer interview in her crowded apartment. "This is not *The Cosby Show*. That wasn't a stunt double dead in front of my son. I know a woman who sells her body to buy Pampers. This is the real world."

Chilton's aim was to have the women illustrate their crushing circumstances to policy makers - the daily hurt of hunger and the myriad ways, she said, that government fails poor children. The 40 were allowed to keep the cameras and were paid up to \$125 each.

"These women are experts, with something to teach," said Chilton, 40, a nationally recognized authority on hunger who lived and worked in Chile and in Oklahoma, among the southern Cheyenne. She's also the principal investigator of the Philadelphia GROW Project, which she founded to improve children's growth and nutrition.

"Some people think the poor deserve their fate," Chilton added. "That kind of thinking kills off a generation."



Whitney Henry takes a digital picture near her North Philadelphia home for "Witnesses to Hunger," coordinated by Drexel University's Mariana Chilton. The project's images, a mix of deprivation and striving, will be exhibited next month.

Erica Smalley, 24, an unmarried mother of two who works for Comcast, turned the camera on herself as she was crying.

"I was in Maryland visiting my mother, and it was time to go back home to Philly," said Smalley, explaining her photo in an e-mail. "Back to crackheads, alcoholics, drug dealers . . . all the obstacles I have to face. I was thinking, when is it my turn to be happy?"

Depression is as much a part of *Witnesses'* lives as deprivation. Thirty-six of the participants report that as children they were raped or sexually abused by relatives, Chilton said.

"We talk about shootings in North Philadelphia, but the violence by men against women inside homes as they grew up is debilitating," she said. "It's hidden, and it's generations deep and cripples self-esteem."

Melissa Haynesworth, 27, explained that she had taken photos of her children because she saw them as a balm for the horrors visited on her years ago.

"I was raped and beaten in foster care," she said. "I was forced to eat food out of a trash can.

"So I had my three children to have someone to love me. The men run off, but I still have my babies."

Chilton is often asked, "Why do these women have so many kids?"

"If you're driving by North Philadelphia and wonder why your tax dollars go toward supporting poor children, you can't judge these women because you haven't lived in their shoes," Chilton said.

Gaines explained it this way: "You're being manipulated by a man you want to impress. He says he'll love me if I don't ask him to use birth control. Your mother says you're a loser, and your father's on drugs. You just want to be loved. And here's this man asking for only one thing - no condom. So you do it."

To suggest, as some do, that women have babies to score welfare money, is "bunk," Chilton said. "Having a child sinks them more."

Beyond that, benefits are difficult to maintain. So often, *Witnesses* women say, programs crash into each other.

Say you're on welfare and get a job through the program. You'll need full-time child care for about \$170 a week. You can't work until you get your child-care subsidy, which could take six weeks. And by then you've lost the job.

"You get just enough assistance," said *Witnesses* participant Crystal Spears, 29, "to let you know you're poor."

Even when you work hard you can't seem to get anywhere, said Imani Sullivan, who cleans 12 bathrooms every day for a janitorial service.

In her apartment one day, the walls were sweating from the pots of boiling water she uses to heat the place. "I don't make enough to support my children the way I want to," she said amid the steam. So she took a photo of one week's paycheck: \$111.20.

Small money and a limited role to play on the planet are realities that Ashley Ortiz, 23, also understands. A waitress with a 2-year-old son, Ortiz shot a photo of a vial of "wet" that her son had picked up on a playground.

"It smelled like mint and dead people," she said of the street drug, which combines marijuana and embalming fluid. "I can't deal with having no good place for my son. But the rest of the world needs us bottom feeders."

"Who do you get to step on if not me?"

It's not the way she or the other *Witnesses* women want it. Most work to improve their lives, but the odds are long. So they hope something comes from their project.

"These cameras have allowed a lot of families to let the outside world in their lives," Gaines said. "I pray it's not for nothing."