



Melanie's Story

Melanie is a sociable 10 year old girl who loves school; she has many friends both at school and in the low-rent apartment complex where she lives with her Mom. Mel's mother works long hours at two low paying jobs in order to provide the basic necessities. In the past, life was easier for this single Mom and her daughter; for 10 years she worked for a hospital and was well paid and worked a regular 40 hour week. She and Mel had time to do fun things together. However, that job was 'contracted out' and she had to look for new work.

This has brought big changes into their lives - they had to move to lower cost housing and Mom now works two low wage jobs, often 50 hours a week, to provide for their basic necessities. Mom is always tired and doesn't have the time, money or energy to do some of the things they used to enjoy doing together.

One day Mel brings home a letter from school announcing that the school has made arrangements for three free swimming lessons for everyone in Grade 5. The children are excited, and when Melanie tells her Mom that she needs a swimsuit for Monday her mother tells her that she can't do it by Monday as she won't be paid until later in the week and she can't even get to Value Village to look for a second hand one because she has to work some extra hours. Mel is angry and tearful and tells her mother that she will be the only one who won't be going and that she will look stupid if she can't go. Mom reacts angrily, telling Mel she doesn't understand how hard it is for her to say she can't afford things and the evening ends in tears, anger and guilt.

On swimming day Mel tells her Mother that she is sick and can't go to school. Mom knows what is happening but has to rush out to work and tells Mel to stay indoors all day and she will try and get home early. After a couple of hours Mel is bored and angry and she decides to walk to the mall on her own - something she is not allowed to do.

She wanders around looking at swimsuits and the thought goes through her mind that she could probably take one and no one would notice. However, she decides against that and just mooches around trying on clothes. Her mother phones home to see how she is, and when no one answers the phone after two or three calls, Mom is frantic and calls a neighbour to ask her to check up on Mel. The neighbour goes over to their apartment and finds that Mel isn't at home. Mom rushes home, missing two hours of work, to find Mel arriving back from the mall, and another angry scene erupts.

Next day Mom makes sure that Mel goes to school and Mel tells the other children that she is sick and isn't allowed to swim. She tells them that she doesn't like swimming anyway so she is pleased she doesn't have to go with them. Mel spends the time they are at swimming in the secretary's office doing some school work.

When everyone arrives back full of enthusiasm for their swimming lessons, she feigns indifference and walks away. After a number of events like this, and a couple of birthday parties she can't attend because she can't afford a present, Mel progressively excludes herself from her group of friends, feels angry and her school work starts to suffer. Her mother doesn't know what is happening to her once happy, sociable daughter and feels anxious and helpless and a failure as a parent.

Lessons:

- Poverty hurts
- Poverty creates inequality
- Poverty is unfair
- Hard work doesn't help if wages are too low

Some of the solutions are:

- Affordable, high quality child care
- Affordable housing
- Living wages
- Increased levels of child and family benefits