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Monica Yant Kinney | The shame of Camden demands a response

By Monica Yant Kinney
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I am lugging around a videotape of last week's *20/20* tearjerker about kids in Camden, wondering where I should send it to make sure it gets into Gov. Corzine's hands.

To Drumthwacket, his state-owned mansion in Princeton? To his bachelor-pad condo in Hoboken? Or to the office in Trenton, where Corzine toils to deliver tax relief to the middle class?

You have to have property to pay property taxes, which is probably why that was never mentioned during *20/20*'s emotional hour with the have-nots in Camden.

When homeless 4-year-olds wonder if kids in the suburbs "hear gunshots where they live," \$2,000 rebate checks for the comfortable seem misspent. When a desperate dad mixes coffee-shop creamers with water to put "milk" in his hungry grandbabies' bottles, the wails of the well-off sound like whining.

Normally, Camden Mayor Gwendolyn Faison loves to chirp about how great things are in the city, where the average annual income (for those not in the drug trade) is \$18,000 and where 58 percent of children live below poverty level. When Diane Sawyer asked, Faison spoke the cruel truth.

How can it be that Camden was deemed the most dangerous place to live in America at precisely the same time that Moorestown, a mere 10 miles away, was declared the best?

Isn't anyone else even a little outraged that the poorest city in the nation festers in the richest state in the richest nation?

"There is no reason," Faison fumed, "that our children have to suffer like this."

New light on old woe

The story's so old, it almost seems not worth retelling. The longer you live and work around here, the easier it is to turn the page.

But then New Yorkers carrying cameras move in for a year, carefully choosing the saddest subjects in a city full of the forlorn.

Is there anything more moving than a kindergartner going to school on an empty

stomach and returning to a mom who can't read? How about one who's homeless? And one whose dad is a drunk. And the older kids rushing to finish their homework before dark because their rowhouse has no electricity or heat.

Like a professor of urban woe, Sawyer ticked off the statistics locals know by heart: Camden has a murder rate seven times the national average. Drug dealing is a \$43 million business, where adolescent entrepreneurs earn enough to rent a streetcorner for *10 grand a week*.

On the show, Billy Jo vows not to become one of them, pushing himself to be the first in his family to graduate high school, working at a suburban Quizno's to help pay the bills, sleeping on the floor with roaches and missing meals so his younger siblings can have beds and full bellies.

"Greatness," he says to anyone who'll listen, "requires sacrifice."

Watch and weep

The *20/20* segment aired Friday. Monday, the Assembly passed a \$2 billion tax-credit bill aimed at lightening the load for New Jersey's vast middle class.

Tuesday, lawmakers debated Camden's fate, hinting that while they may be willing to keep paying a \$175,000-a-year overseer, they have no plans to spend another \$175 million bailing out the gritty city.

"I don't doubt anyone's commitment to the city of Camden. But something has gone wrong," said Assemblywoman Alison Littell McHose (R., Sussex), apparently unaware it's a disaster 50 years in the making.

"One-hundred seventy-five million dollars is a lot of money," Camden's outgoing chief Randy Primas replied, "but in terms of revitalizing a community, it's a drop in the bucket."

Which brings us back to Corzine.

He can't change the fact that politics dictated that most of the \$175 million aided downtown institutions, not the needy in the neighborhoods. But he can't afford to ignore Camden.

Yesterday, Corzine's spokesman told me to save the postage, since the governor has a DVD of the show.

"All of us felt he needed to see it," Anthony Coley said.

But whether Corzine watched it and wept, or plans to respond, neither of us knows.