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Opinion

Can Biden Save Americans Like My Old Pal Mike?

A childhood friend's deadly mistakes prompt reflection on our country's — and my own.



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YAMHILL, Ore. — Joe Biden's father struggled financially, at one point commuting long distances to clean boilers and later working for a time as a used-car salesman. The owner of the used-car dealership amused himself at a Christmas party by tossing out silver dollars to watch his employees scramble for them on the floor. Biden Sr. was repulsed: He and his wife walked out of the party, and away from his job.

President Biden tells that story to highlight his appreciation of the importance of the dignity of work. It's a tale my old pal Mike Stepp would have relished, because Mike spent his life scrambling on America's floor for coins — and not liking it one bit. Yet Mike, too, sustained his dignity and humor, which is an impressive feat when you're homeless, wrestling with addictions and sleeping in a city park.

Mike was a good man whom America left behind, and one measure of Biden's presidency — and of America's resilience — will be whether he can offer some kind of a Rooseveltian New Deal to millions of struggling Americans like Mike. As I see it, the nation's greatest challenge is to restore opportunity and dignity for the bottom third of Americans, not so much the middle class as the working class: white, Black and brown alike.

Biden's initial moves suggest he is taking that challenge seriously, pursuing an "American Rescue Plan" that includes the most serious antipoverty program, especially for children, in at least half a century. But the burden is not just on the new president, but on all of us.

It is easy for Democrats to blame Republicans for failings like America's lack of universal health care. But that lets too many of us off the hook. Mike was the kind of person that both political parties claim to speak up for, yet whom both parties betrayed over the decades.

Witnessing the torment of people I grew up with, like Mike, has led me to conclude that I was wrong in many of my own views. Like many liberals with a university education and a reliable paycheck, I was too scornful of labor unions, too unreservedly enthusiastic about international trade, too glib about “creative destruction,” too heartless about its toll.

Mike’s dad had a union job at a sawmill at a time when the timber industry offered well-paying work, and Mike had expected to get a job like that and ride it into a middle-class life. But those jobs disappeared, in part because of an environmental movement that ended logging in old-growth forests by championing a threatened species called the spotted owl.

I am an environmentalist and I love old-growth forests. Thank God we saved them. But we didn’t focus enough on the human price and didn’t try hard enough to mitigate it: I wish that we had shown as much concern for Mike as we did for spotted owls.



Lynsey Addario

Mike and his brother, Bobby, were my closest neighbors in the 1970s. They lived in the house just down the road from our family farm here.

Each morning, Mike, Bobby and I would walk to the school bus stop together, and then amble home from the bus in the afternoon. Mike was six years younger than me, exuberant, good-natured, a ham. Bobby was three years older than me, and equally good-natured.

That was a time when capitalism worked for many blue-collar Americans. My dad had worked in the woods in the 1950s, as a logger in Valsetz, Ore., after arriving in the United States as a refugee from Eastern Europe. He earned enough through logging to work his way through college. Today that would be impossible.

For the Stepps, even back then life had shadows. Their home was often violent, for Mike's father drank too much and then became abusive. "Dad beat him," Bobby recalled. "Hand, belt or switch, whatever Dad could get his hands on in a drunken stupor."

The family wasn't into education, and I don't remember a single book in their home. Mike and Bobby both dropped out of high school, figuring that they could get good jobs just as their dad had.

Good jobs were disappearing, however. That's partly because of the environmentalists' successes — indignant T-shirts back then urged, "Save a Logger, Eat an Owl."

But the owls were a scapegoat: Well-paying jobs were also lost because of mechanization, the decline of unions and other trends undermining blue-collar jobs generally. Successive American administrations also didn't do much to help. Average weekly wages for production workers in America were actually lower two months ago (\$860) than they had been, after adjusting for inflation, in December 1972 (\$902 in today's money), according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

Many of us didn't appreciate how devastating the loss of good jobs would be to the social fabric, and we had no idea that it would lead to family breakdown and a tide of alcoholism, addiction and early death. The economists David Autor, David Dorn and Gordon Hanson found that when trade cost men good manufacturing jobs, the result was more unwed mothers, more children living in poverty, more people dying early and more "male idleness."

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"Male idleness" is one way to describe Mike Stepp. He bounced among unsatisfying low-wage jobs, and he and his buddies escaped their frustrations by turning to alcohol and drugs, periodically tangling with the law. His wife, Stephanie Ross, who had gone out with him when she was 14, kicked Mike out of the house when he began leaving needles where their two young children might find them. They divorced in 2003, and he eventually landed in the streets of the nearby town of McMinnville.

“I like it out here,” he told me one time when we chatted in the park where he slept, and then he said with a laugh, “This is the great outdoors!” But it was just a line. He was often lonely, cold and wet. Previously, he had lived under cover in a county parking garage, and when he was forced out, he broke down and wept on the street.

In his shopping cart, which he took everywhere, Mike carried a couple of my books that I had signed for him. We would catch up when I visited McMinnville, and I would also fill him in on Bobby, who was serving a life sentence in a Colorado prison and whom I corresponded with.

I introduced my wife and children to Mike, and he charmed them with his easy humor. As he walked the streets, picking returnable cans out of garbage cans to make a few dollars, he had cheery greetings for everyone who passed.

“Mike always greeted me with, ‘How you doin’, kid?’ and a big smile,” recalled Casey Kulla, a county commissioner. My mother told me to be nice to Mike in writing this article, because “he never asked for anything.” That was the thing about Mike: He was homeless but rich in friends.

So what went wrong with Mike?

“He didn’t want to work,” Stephanie told me. She is angry at Mike for abandoning his kids and failing to pay \$68,000 in child support, but then the anger passes and she wistfully refers to him as “the love of my life.”

Perhaps Mike was lazy, but there’s more to the story. Everyone agrees that Mike had mental illnesses that were never treated, and in any case, this wasn’t one person’s stumble but a crisis for an entire generation of low-education workers. Mike and his cohort weren’t dumber or lazier than their parents or grandparents, but their outcomes worsened.

So, sure, we can have a conversation about personal responsibility. But let’s also talk about our collective responsibility: If the federal minimum wage of 1968 had kept pace with inflation and productivity, it would now be more than \$22 an hour, rather than \$7.25. We also underinvested in our human capital, so high school graduation rates stagnated beginning in the 1970s along with blue-collar incomes, even as substance abuse soared and family structure for low-education workers collapsed.

One consequence is that an American dies a “death of despair” — from drugs, alcohol or suicide — every two and a half minutes. Long after the coronavirus has retreated, we will still be grappling with a pandemic of despair.



Lynsey Addario

The United States has a mental health crisis that is largely untreated and arises in part from high levels of inequality. Researchers find that poverty causes mental illness, and mental illness in turn exacerbates poverty. It's a vicious cycle, and 20 million Americans, mostly poorly educated, describe every one of the last 30 days as “bad mental health days,” according to David G. Blanchflower, a Dartmouth economist.

I also know this: Taxpayers spent large sums jailing Mike, whose arrest record runs 14 pages (mostly for drug offenses). That money would have been better spent at the front end, with early childhood programs and mentoring to support Mike and help him finish high school and get a job.

Yet politicians have mostly been AWOL. In the 2020 Democratic primaries, the presidential candidates had healthy discussions about increasing college access but largely ignored the reality that one in seven American children don't even graduate from high school. The term “working class” is rarely mentioned by politicians, who prefer to appeal to people a notch higher, in the middle class. And many government programs that are nominally for the benefit of the middle class — such as the mortgage interest deduction, 529 college savings plans, state and local tax deductions and “middle-class tax cuts” — actually primarily benefit the rich.

We fret about competitive challenges from China, but the best way to meet them is to elevate our capabilities at home. China built new universities at the rate of one a week, while the number of colleges in the United States is now shrinking — and as many Americans have criminal records as have college degrees. “Holding hands, Americans with arrest records could circle the earth three times,” according to the Brennan Center for Justice.

America cannot succeed when so many Americans are failing.



The author with Mike Stepp.
Nicholas Kristof/The New York Times

Joe Biden has a fighting chance to make progress on these issues. Partly that’s because he’s impossible to mock as a wild-eyed socialist, partly because he and his team understand that we have a better chance of making progress if we frame the issue less as one of “inequality” — a liberal word — and more as one of “opportunity” and “dignity.”

That comes naturally to Biden. He intuitively understands working-class angst and mental health crises, having himself contemplated both suicide and an escape into alcohol after his wife and daughter were killed in a car accident in 1972. Biden also has spoken candidly and lovingly about his son Hunter’s struggles with addiction.

Biden’s American Rescue Plan includes a \$15 federal minimum wage, initiatives to expand medical care and reduce homelessness and, most striking, a historic plan to reduce child poverty by about half.

When I’ve previously written about Americans falling behind, readers have challenged me to say what would make a difference. So here are five policies to create opportunity:

1. A national high-quality early childhood and day care program, modeled on the one provided by the United States military for service members.
2. A higher minimum wage and broader effort to train people for well-paying jobs by scaling up proven initiatives like Year Up and Career Academies.
3. Huge expansion of drug treatment programs. It’s scandalous that only 20 percent of Americans with addictions get treatment.

4. A child allowance, the heart of Biden's plan to fight child poverty.
5. "Bandwidth for all" to expand high-speed internet access, modeled on rural electrification from the 1930s to the 1950s.

Rural electrification was part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, and the New Deal is a model for what we need in the 2020s. Is that feasible?

Some liberal initiatives ("defund the police," banning ICE) are unpopular, but the kinds of populist programs I just listed poll well and have some Republican support. Seventy percent of voters support expanding early childhood programs. The Republican senators Mitt Romney of Utah, Marco Rubio of Florida and Mike Lee of Utah are among those who have endorsed serious initiatives to address child poverty. And nothing would do more to expand opportunity and build a better future for America than to slash child poverty.

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Mike struggled in the last couple of years. He had a bad bicycle accident, circulation problems, gangrene and a toe amputation.

"I'm doing well," he told me, typically ebullient, the last time we spoke, in late November. "But it's a little hard to balance without a toe. I never thought it would matter."

Mike was found on a sidewalk one night in December after suffering a heart attack, and he died soon after in a hospital at the age of 55. Even in a pandemic, people came together to mourn him. A remembrance at a bus shelter where Mike had sometimes stayed drew 30 people who recalled Mike's generosity and good cheer.

"He would give you anything," said one man, showing off a cap that Mike had handed him. The headline in the local newspaper, The News-Register, declared, "Beloved Downtown Homeless Man Dies."

Mike was a good man who had endured a painful life, and he knew he had inflicted pain on his wife and children.

"It's strange to me that people remember Mike fondly," his daughter, Brandie Stepp, 29, told me. She said she had mourned losing him not now but two decades ago when he left his family. But she also believes that his failures were complicated, originating with neglect as a child and compounded by mental illness.

I liked Mike. I respected him. I miss him. I hear constantly from wealthy Americans griping about some setback or pleading for special consideration, and he was a homeless man who sought nothing and would joke about the upside of sleeping in a city park.

There are many complicated Americans like him, struggling in a miasma of addiction, despair or mental illness, suffering unbearable pain and also inflicting it on their loved ones.

Can Biden and all of us rise to the occasion today, as Roosevelt’s generation responded to the Great Depression with the New Deal? Surely we can come together to offer struggling Americans better options than scrambling for coins on the nation’s floor until they die.

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