

Carson's positions on poverty create tension with rags-to-riches life story

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Where is Ben Carson from?

DETROIT — Ben Carson was born on the southwest side of this city to a mother who could not read. He spent much of his youth in what he has described as “dire poverty,” but his neighbors kept their lawns trimmed, and parents called other parents if they saw kids stirring up trouble. Compared with the Boston ghetto where he lived briefly in elementary school, Carson says, it was “like Beverly Hills.”

Today, the roofs have caved in on some of the houses on Carson's old street. Half the children in Southwest Detroit live in poverty. Weeds have overrun the courtyards at his old high school. Soon, workers will knock the school down, pounding to dust another cornerstone of the community that nurtured one of America's great against-the-odds personal stories.

Carson, 64, who built a world-renowned career in neurosurgery and now leads some polls in the Republican campaign for president, broke the cycle of poverty. His neighborhood slid deeper into it.

Carson's positions on economic issues, particularly combating poverty, were forged in his extraordinary rise from what is now a riverfront slum in the shadow of a long bridge to Canada. But those positions have created a tension in his run for president.

Carson holds up his life story as proof that anyone with enough faith and drive can climb the economic ladder — if they can avoid dependence on welfare. Critics say the decline of his old neighborhood underscores just how rare it is for someone born into Carson's circumstances to do that without government help.

On his way up the ladder, Carson benefited from several government-assistance programs for the poor. In his autobiography “Gifted Hands,” Carson also praised the help he received from public school teachers, a federal jobs program, community mentors, government-supplied eyeglasses and, crucially, food stamps, without which his family “couldn't have made it,” he wrote.

But he also wrote that his mother shunned dependency, citing her high expectations and his Christian faith for lifting him up. He says that throughout his life he was struck by poor people he met — first as a child, and later working in a hospital — whom he regarded as reliant on government checks.

“By the time I was a young attending neurosurgeon,” he recalled in an interview, “I was really struck by the number of indigent people I saw coming in who were on public assistance and who were not working. They were able-bodied people, and they were not working. I thought, ‘This is out of whack.’”

He added: “I don't want to get rid of any safety net programs. I want to create an environment where they won't be needed.”

Experts point out that much of the social fabric that helped Carson has crumbled in Southwest Detroit today. Schools and churches have closed. Many good jobs are gone. Homes sit vacant. Storefronts are shuttered.

“Neighborhoods were a lot stronger around here when Doctor Carson was growing up,” said John Van Camp, the director of a local nonprofit social service agency who has been

working in the area for more than 40 years. “I’m not sure that people were more self-reliant then. The system was just there” to support them.

On a notepad in his office, Van Camp began to draw a series of dots. Each one, he said, represented a piece of the Southwest Detroit community that, in the past, helped kids get ahead. One for churches, for families, for good jobs. “When those dots get removed,” he said, “the government is the last resort.”

Only 1 in 20 children born into deep poverty in Detroit will climb into the top quintile of income earners when she or he grows up, according to research by economists at Harvard, Stanford and the University of California at Berkeley. Barely 1 in 450 will rise, as Carson did, all the way to the top 1 percent.

By almost every conceivable metric, young Benjamin Carson defied the odds. His mother was one of 24 children. She had a third-grade education. She married when she was 13 years old and had her first child at 20. When her second child, Ben, was 8, she kicked her husband out of the house after discovering he was a bigamist. She moved her children to Boston, and then, when Ben was in fifth grade, back to Detroit.

Sonya Carson worked two or three domestic jobs at a time, Carson recounts in his autobiography, caring for children and cleaning houses. She drilled her boys on the importance of studying and hard work. “If you don’t succeed,” she would write in the introduction to “Gifted Hands,” “you have only yourself to blame.”

Carson calls his mother “a huge influence” on how he thinks about poverty. “She worked very hard, leaving very early in the morning, getting back very late at night,” he said in the interview. “Sometimes we didn’t see her for a week. She didn’t like the idea of dependency. Even if she sometimes took government aid, she always wanted to be independent. She would get in arguments with others who would say, ‘There’s aid for dependent children — you don’t need to be working.’”

Carson writes that, in fifth grade, he was the worst student in his class. Classmates teased him for failing tests.

Carson’s turnaround began when school officials checked his vision, and he could barely read the top line on the eye chart. The school gave him free glasses, and his grades began to improve. They improved much more when his mother limited him to watching three television programs a week. Carson threw himself into reading, math and science. The more he succeeded at them, the more he wanted to be the smartest kid in his class.

In seventh grade, Carson won a school award for top academic achievement. His grades slipped again in early high school but surged again before graduation, with the encouragement of several teachers who stoked his passions for science and classical music.

In those years, Carson developed a deep faith in God, which he credits for helping him let go of what had been a temper. He excelled in the Junior ROTC program at his school, and he caught the attention of college recruiters. He chose Yale, and he knew from the start he wanted to be a doctor.

Carson worked summers throughout college. A high school counselor found him a gig at Ford Motor Co. in Dearborn, Mich. The next two years he was a supervisor on a highway cleanup crew, funded through a federal jobs program largely for urban youth. Then he worked on a production line at a Chrysler plant.

He went on to medical school at the University of Michigan and did his residency at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where he went on to have a decorated surgical career — most famously, he and a team of colleagues were the first to successfully separate twins

conjoined at the head. In the hospital, he saw more signs of low-income patients growing dependent on government.

At that time, Carson began listening to Ronald Reagan, who decried government dependency, and he found the message to be logical and empowering. He now says he believes that federal policies do a “horrible job” of helping people work hard and pull themselves up and that low-income people are held back by government regulations, high corporate taxes and the size of the federal debt.

“There are just millions and millions of people who should be working and who are not working,” Carson said. “That’s of course a huge drag on the economy and on society.”

Some anti-poverty advocates criticize Carson’s view of how government spending can boost poor Americans.

“Little tiny bits of money end up making a huge difference” in the lives of children growing up in poverty, said Rebecca Vallas, director of policy for the Poverty to Prosperity Program at the liberal Center for American Progress. “Contrary to the dependency narrative that he loves and continues to push, these are investments in our next generation.”

On the campaign trail, Carson’s autobiography has proved to be a major selling point: 85 percent of Republicans in a recent Bloomberg News poll said his “inspirational personal story” makes him an attractive candidate.

In Detroit, Carson laments how his old neighborhood has changed over the decades. The automobile factories that once lined the thoroughfares have mostly closed, and so have the shops and restaurants that served their workers.

Residents fled in droves, including much of what had been a vibrant African American middle class in the area. A heroin trade has kicked up, and so has violent crime.

“As the economy turned around, that area just died,” said Ricardo Guzman, who grew up near Carson — and at roughly the same time — and is the chief executive of the Community Health and Social Services Center, which serves Southwest Detroit. “All the businesses pretty much went away. It’s a slum area.”

Carson’s alma mater, Southwestern High, closed in 2012. Large black bars now ring it from the street.

No one has changed the plastic letters under the dirty glass of the school signboard out front. They still promise that “Good attendance equals good grades.”

Correction: An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated where Ben Carson went to medical school. It also had an incorrect figure for the number of poor Americans who would climb to the top 1 percent of earners, according to a recent study. Both errors have been corrected.

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