

Sanders Brings Campaign to Greenville at Poverty Forum

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Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, currently a senator from Vermont, brought his populist brand of socialism to the Upstate this past Thursday and Friday.

By Terry Thacker

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At a Poverty Round Table forum on Friday afternoon at the West End Community Development Center on Vardry Street in Greenville, Sanders spoke of poverty and redistribution of wealth.

The panel included several local leaders involved in social work, as well as nationally known heavy hitters Cornel West, a noted professor and social justice activist, and actor Danny Glover. The forum was hosted by Working Hero Action.

Reverend James Speed, pastor of Allen Temple A.M.E. Church, began the forum with the following greeting, "We welcome everybody here who believes that health care is a right and not a privilege. We welcome everybody here who believes that education is a right and not a privilege."

Sanders said that poverty is not talked about a whole lot. He said that 40 million Americans live in poverty. "They live in the wealthiest country but have no health insurance," he told the more than 200 people in attendance.

The senator, a self-described democratic socialist, decried the "outrageous levels of student debt." He also decried the fact that "mothers are desperately trying to find child care," and that millions of Americans are living paycheck to paycheck.

"How in God's name do you survive on \$8-9 an hour?" Sanders asked, adding, "The vast majority are struggling." He continued, "If you work 40 hours a week you shouldn't have to live in poverty." He mentioned the recent push across the country for a \$15 minimum wage, noting that he had touted such a proposal years ago.

Speed asked Sanders about his plan to redistribute the wealth.

Sanders began by saying that his political friends get nervous when the word 'redistribution' is mentioned.

"Not me!" Sanders said to laughter and applause.

Sanders said that redistribution of wealth has gone the wrong over the last several decades. He said that the rich have gotten richer and that the middle class has shrunk.

The socialist senator touted several ideas to achieve his purpose – guarantee health care as a right, as other countries do; make public colleges and universities tuition free; lower student debt and demand that the very wealthy start paying their fair share.

Glover has long been involved in the fight for social and economic justice, said Sanders. In brief remarks, Glover said that racism, poverty and mass incarceration are major issues facing the

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Reverend Jerry Blassingame, senior pastor of Soteria Christia Fellowship and executive director of Soteria Community Development Corporation. said that poverty is the root cause of mass incarceration, stating that 70 million Americans have been impacted by the judicial system. His organization helps recently released prisoners to find work and to reenter society.

Blassingame supports rehabilitation for released prisoners, sentencing reform and automatic expungement of criminal records after three years of clean living on the outside. He said that released prisoners need to be able to work or else their children and grandchildren will end up in prison as well.

Another local activist, Stacey D. Mills, spoke on the subject of gentrification. Mills, the senior pastor of the Mountain View Baptist Church in downtown Greenville, said that churches should unite to buy city lots and build affordable housing. He said that his church has already purchased 25 such lots.

Sanders said that gentrification needs to be discussed more. He said that developers should be required to build a certain percentage of affordable housing and that working people have a right to work and live in the communities where they grew up.