

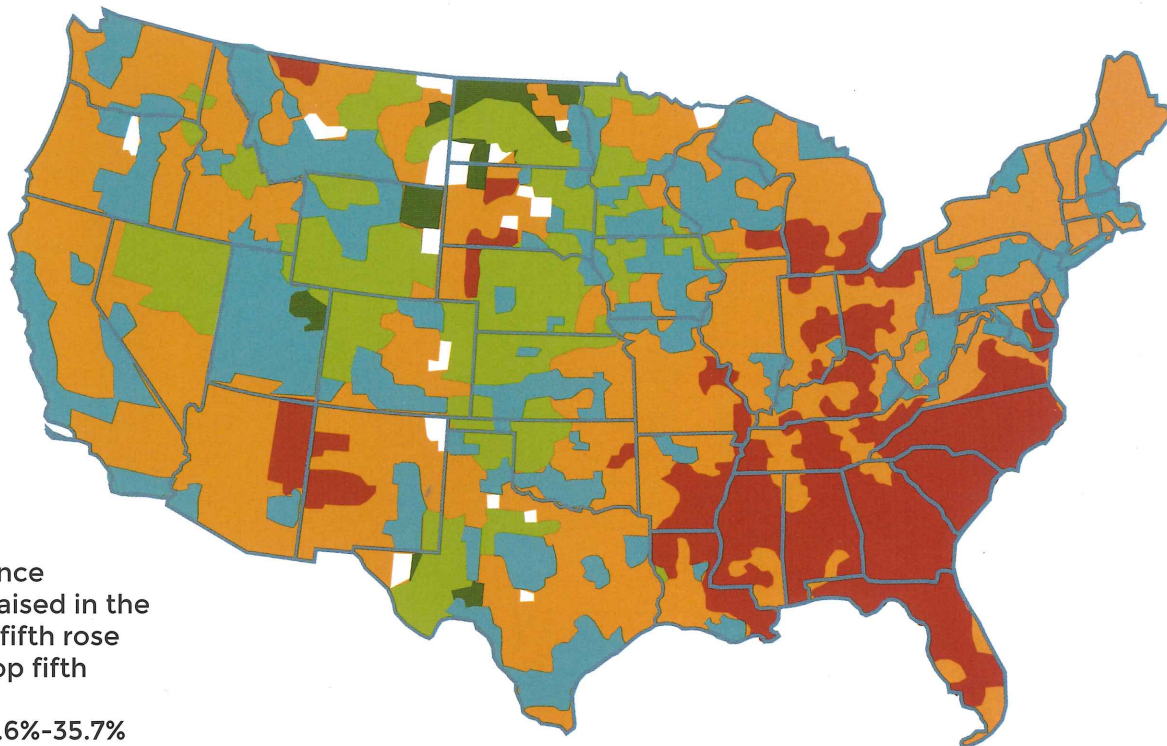


UPWARD ECONOMIC MOBILITY.

By Betsy Neely Sikma

It's a story we've heard a thousand times: the bootstrapping youngster who came from nothing but left her family everything. The industrious entrepreneur who built a business from the ground up and made a better life for generations to come. It's the vision that inspired many of our ancestors, and still inspires people today to traverse great distances in search of a land of opportunity. It's the belief in an ability to rise from humble backgrounds in order to live a life of middle-class security and comfort through hard work, determination, courage and honesty. It's the fabric of our national image. It's as iconic as apple pie.

It's the American Dream.



The chance a child raised in the bottom fifth rose to the top fifth

- 20.6%-35.7%
- 14.1%-20.5%
- 9.9%-14%
- 6.5%-9.8%
- 0%-6.4%

Source: Equality of Opportunity Project 2017

IT IS HARDER IN THE SOUTH THAN ANYWHERE ELSE IN THE U.S. FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE POOREST HOUSEHOLDS TO MOVE HIGHER UP THE ECONOMIC LADDER AS ADULTS.

For centuries, the image of the American Dream has been built on the prospect of upward mobility, of economic opportunity accessible to all. But in reality, economic mobility is much more difficult to achieve than any rags-to-riches story can ever adequately convey. Those who have struggled for generations know that there are and always have been serious limitations to the narrative of economic opportunity. And recent data suggests that the prospect of upward mobility for many Americans, especially those who were born near the bottom rung of the income ladder, is nearly impossible to achieve.

For some people— women and nonwhites in particular — the struggle to achieve upward mobility in a lifetime, much less to pass on economic advantages to the next generation is not only real, but in fact has formed trends of deep generational

poverty in certain communities. The picture for Southern youth and young adults is especially stark: it is harder in the South than anywhere else in the U.S. for young people in the poorest households to move higher up the economic ladder as adults.

Spartanburg is no stranger to this reality. In Spartanburg’s Racial Equity index, a Community Indicators Project study released in late 2018, data indicates that concentrated family poverty and income inequity by race dramatically affects the landscape of our county.

The index indicates that black and Latino people are more likely to live in deep poverty, defined as an income below \$12,169 for a family of four, in the United States. In Spartanburg County, whites in deep poverty trend with the national average of 5.2 percent, but the black

and Latino rates for deep poverty in Spartanburg County rates are higher than the national average: 11.9 percent, and 14.7 percent, respectively.

The Racial Equity index further indicates that, with more than 17,000 children living below the Federal Poverty Level in Spartanburg, black and Latino children bear the brunt of that poverty burden.

In other words, economic mobility is hard to come by, period. A child born into poverty in Spartanburg has only a 4.3 percent chance of making it to the highest rung on the economic ladder in his or her lifetime. A black or Latino child born into poverty in Spartanburg has almost no chance of making that jump at all.

And for all of our talk of the American Dream, thus far, data proves that no amount of hard work, determination,

courage, and honesty effect that scenario for individuals or for communities of deep concentrated poverty over time.

This stark data is not new. But it is a call to action that has resonated in Spartanburg.

Confronted with these numbers, a group of Spartanburg's leaders began asking some provocative questions about the identity of Spartanburg: How do we define ourselves as a community? How do we think about our lives and imagine the future for our children — for all children in Spartanburg?

**ITS ULTIMATE GOAL IS TO HELP
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This data and these questions have sparked a renewed interest in Spartanburg's leadership to look at how to raise the bar on equity.

Led by the Spartanburg County Foundation, as a part of the The Network for Southern Economic Mobility (NSEM), a task force has been formed to build partnerships and strategies aimed at changing the odds of economic mobility, starting with 14-24 year olds on the bottom income bracket in the City of Spartanburg.

Spartanburg's NSEM is designed to help our community deepen, accelerate, and align strategic investments for systemic change that position youth and young adults for economic success.

Spartanburg's NSEM is a multi year initiative with opportunities for local as well as cross-site and community level learning, systems analysis and strategy development, and implementation coaching.

Spartanburg's NSEM leaders examine how well the existing systems are working to support economic mobility for young people facing the most difficult barriers to advancement, analyze the policies, systems, and culture that impede or accelerate their progression, and adapt relevant systems to improve pathways.

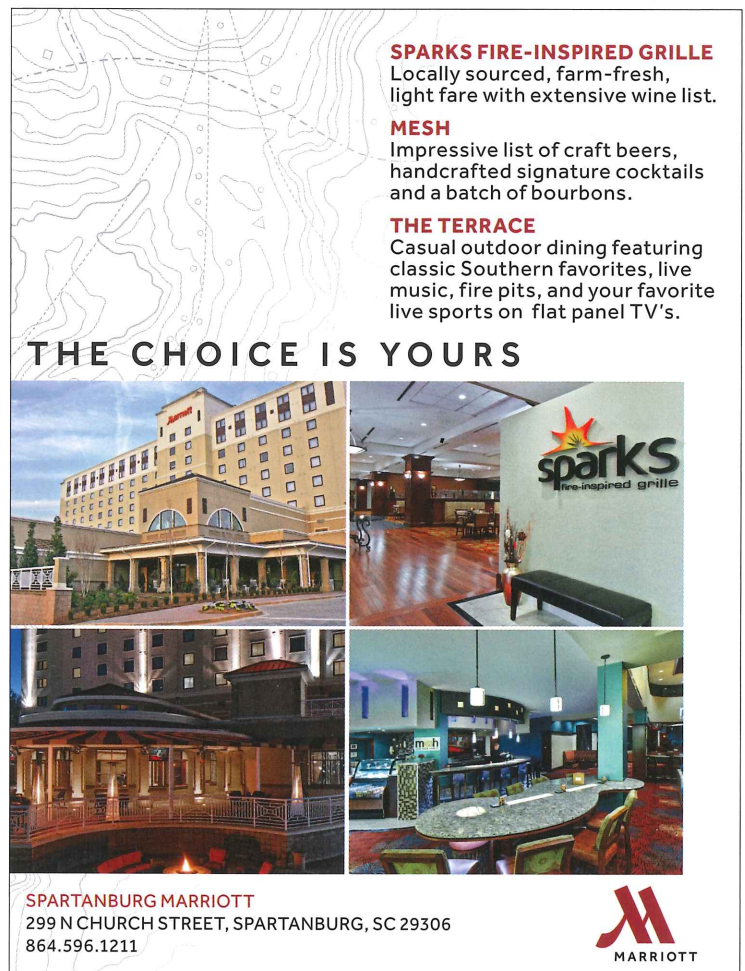
Comprised of leadership from the Spartanburg County Foundation, the City of Spartanburg, Spartanburg Community College, Upstate Workforce Board, Spartanburg Academic

Movement, Contec, and OneSpartanburg, and an advisory board made up of clergy, educators, business experts, systems experts, and high school youth, Spartanburg's NSEM goals include data-driven analysis of the barriers to economic mobility for Spartanburg's youth, aligning and connecting city wide initiatives on economic mobility to increase collective impact, and developing and implementing an action plan connecting youth to employers.

Spartanburg's NSEM team says its ultimate goal is to help Spartanburg become a healthy community that can challenge itself to be a place where all people can live and thrive. Through its efforts, Spartanburg's Economic Mobility task force is taking a hard look at the data behind the lived experience of so many Spartanburg residents — those who have struggled, often for generations to lift themselves and their families out of poverty.

And with this data, they are accelerating what could be a watershed moment in the history of our community: to build informed cross-sector leadership dedicated to systemic change aimed at increasing the odds for our most economically burdened young people to see a bright future — not only for themselves, but for their children.

And that, after all, is the American Dream.



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