

**Testimony of Amanda Greubel**  
**Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions**  
**Stories from the Kitchen Table: How Middle Class Families are Struggling to Make Ends Meet**  
**Thursday, June 23, 2011**

Good morning Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi, and members of the Committee.

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. My name is Amanda Greubel. I am 32 years old, born and raised in Iowa. I received my Bachelor's degree in Social Work from Wartburg College in 2001, and my Master's degree in Social Work from St. Ambrose University in 2007. I have been a social worker for ten years and have had the privilege of working with people of all ages, races, and socioeconomic circumstances.

I am currently employed as the Family Resource Center Director for Central Community Schools in DeWitt, IA. The purpose of the Family Resource position is to work with families to meet students' needs outside of the classroom so that they can enjoy more success in the classroom. I coordinate an elementary mentoring program, summer enrichment programming, a grant program for children with disabilities, a Thanksgiving Food Basket program, and an "Adopt A Family" program at Christmas. I make referrals for health care, mental health care, utility assistance, housing, domestic violence services, clothing, health insurance, food assistance, and childcare assistance. And thanks to the generosity of my community, I have a donations account to help families in need with some concrete assistance such as school supplies, winter coats, gas vouchers, medication co-pays, electric bills, and emergency food baskets. I love my job; it's an honor to be able to assist so many of our local families in so many different ways.

I have been married for ten years to my high school sweetheart, Josh Greubel. Josh and I have known each other for most of our lives. We began dating in high school, continued through college, and got married a month after I graduated in 2001. Josh has both Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Music Education and is the High School Band Instructor in the same school district where I work. We have a 5 year-old son Benen and our second child is due in December. Like many American families

we have a mortgage, two cars, and (with two Master's degrees in the household) a lot of student loan debt.

I have been invited here today to speak to you about my family and the families I work with every day who have been profoundly affected by the long-term changes in our economy. Until spring of 2010, Josh and I were both accustomed to working full-time jobs. As the economy began to slide, we knew that our jobs could be in danger as states brought in less revenue and cut spending on education to balance the budget. During the 2009-2010 school year, the state of Iowa cut education funding mid-year, which forced our district to make some difficult decisions. We collectively held our breath as the administration met behind closed doors. In the first round of proposed cuts, my position would have been reduced to half-time. My husband would have lost portions of his contract as well. Combined, this meant a loss of almost \$30,000 annually in our household. We were distraught, and in those few weeks a lot of tears were shed in our home. In the end when the district finally figured out where they stood financially, my husband's entire contract was restored, and mine was partially restored to  $\frac{3}{4}$  time. As a result our family lost \$10,000 per year in income; we considered ourselves lucky.

Though \$10,000 might not seem like much to some people, the loss of that income required a complete financial, emotional and spiritual overhaul in our family. Everything about how we managed our money changed. Before the reduction, we followed a loose budget to ensure that all our bills were paid, and spent what was leftover as we pleased. We had just started a college account for our son and were looking at options for retirement savings in addition to our public employee retirement accounts. After my job was reduced, we examined our budget and reduced or cut all unnecessary spending. We cut back our cable, internet, and phone service. We cut back on spending for restaurants, entertainment, clothing, gas, and groceries. We set up a new budget and new financial goals. In the new budget, every penny we make and spend is accounted for on paper. We realized that living with so much debt is a liability in an unstable world so we set a goal to pay off both vehicles and all student loans in five years, or at least as soon as possible. Every bit of income we have that is not needed for

bills or necessities is used as extra payment on those debts.

These are pretty general descriptions, so let me give you some examples of what all of this means in real life, on a day-to-day basis. It means that even though I don't like WalMart and would rather support local grocers, I buy groceries at WalMart because the prices are lower there. Sometimes the grocery money runs out before payday, and then we have to be creative with what we have in the cupboards until we get paid again. At first this was sort of a fun challenge, but the novelty wears off after a while. Anyone who has been pregnant or spent time around pregnant women knows that our appetites are random and changeable, and that the nausea can strike at any moment. I don't feel like cooking much these days and the smell of raw meat is unbearable, but if my husband is working late and the restaurant money is gone we are out of luck. My son ends up eating more cold cereal at dinnertime than I care to admit. He thinks it's wonderful fun, but I know I'm not doing my best for him.

It means that most of our clothing now comes from Goodwill, garage sales, or clearance racks. We try not to pay full-price for much of anything anymore. It means that when my son brought me the snack calendar for his classroom last year, I cringed when I saw that it was his turn to bring snacks for a week for his 15 classmates. I knew that it would further stretch the grocery budget. There were no roast beef or pork chops at our house that month. It means that the only way we were able to have much of a vacation this year is through the generosity of a friend allowing us four days at his lake house for free.

This past spring our son was hospitalized for three days, resulting in \$1000 in out-of-pocket medical expenses. This month a problem with our roof required \$1500 in repairs. Even though we'd been setting aside a little money each month for medical expenses and home repairs, we weren't prepared enough and have spent the last few months catching up. And finally, this change in our finances meant giving very serious consideration to whether having another child was really the best choice for our family. Can we afford daycare, diapers, medical expenses, and all the other costs of an

infant now? Thankfully our son's brief illness and hospitalization reminded us that some things are more important than money and that we would find a way to make it work.

It means that every penny spent requires thought and planning and every decision made must be carefully considered in terms of its financial implications. Do we have money set aside for this? If we spend it now, will we have what we need for later? Could we get it for less somewhere else or at a later time? Is this really something we need? And if we have an unexpected expense, where can we pull that money from? College and retirement savings aren't even on the radar at this point, though hopefully that will change for us someday. Quite honestly, it's exhausting physically and emotionally to live this way. My husband and I didn't have dreams of great wealth. We never expected to have summer homes or expensive cars or vacations on the Riviera. We chose careers that inspire us, knowing that we would never make six figure salaries. All we have ever wanted is security and a little comfort: to know that our bills are paid, our needs are met, that we can have a real getaway every now and then, that our children can pursue higher education without the burden of student loan debt, and that someday we can retire and enjoy our final years together in the way we choose.

When I think back over our adult lives, it strikes me that we did everything we were always told to do in order to have the American dream. We finished high school, went to college, and got married after graduation. We work hard, pay our bills, and have no credit card debt. We waited to have children until we believed that we were emotionally and financially able to do so. We both got graduate degrees to be better at our jobs, make ourselves more marketable, and increase our worth as employees. We volunteer, donate to help those in need, and vote. We did everything that all the experts said we should do, and yet still we're struggling. When you work as hard as we have and still sometimes scrape for the necessities, it really gets you down.

I've given you a picture of how my own family has been affected by the economic downturn and explained some of the difficulties we have had. However, MY family is not the reason I am here today. Circumstances beyond our control led to some tough times, but from this situation we were able

to make some positive changes---better money management, clear financial goals, and a shift in priorities that put our family back at the top of the list. We have health insurance coverage and paid sick time through work. My family has been fortunate---we are still able to meet our needs and have a few extras from time to time along the way. We don't have to choose between food and medicine or whether to pay the electric bill or put gas in the car.

I am here today on behalf of the families who truly need your help, the families who have lost their jobs, their health insurance, their homes, and their hope for things to get better. If my family with two Master's degrees is struggling, you can imagine how difficult things are for many others. The past few years our school district has seen the percentage of students on free or reduced lunch increase steadily. Over 30% of our elementary-level students qualified for the program this year. This is in a community with a reputation of being well-off. I've sat with parents as they completed the eligibility application, held their hands as they've shed tears of shame. They say things like, "I've never needed any help like this before" and "I never thought I'd have to do this." They worry that their neighbors will find out and that their kids will be embarrassed. I reassure them that there is no shame in asking for help when you need it. I help parents apply for the State Children's Health Insurance program for their kids and cringe when I have to explain that there is no comparable program for them, the parents who are equally in need of coverage. I've held womens' hands through pregnancy terminations because they can't afford another child right now. I've bought a week's worth of medication for a child when a gap in insurance came at a bad time and his parents didn't have the \$172 to pay for his medicine. I've listened to a coworker tell how her spouse who lost his job several months before was slipping into a deep depression and had finally stopped looking for work, helping around the house, or parenting their child. Not only had my coworker become the sole breadwinner, but she had essentially become a single parent as well. I've felt lucky to offer a temporary solution for parents who, following a job loss, stayed up at night worrying about how to explain to their kids that Santa wasn't coming this year because Mommy lost her job.

Even though economic experts use their nebulous measures to say that the current recession is over, there is an entire class of people who were lost before it officially started and are still lost today. They're used to working for everything they have and being self-sufficient. For their entire adult lives they've taken care of their families themselves, and we all know that there is pride in being able to do that. These people continue to be proud even as their circumstances change, which makes asking for help difficult or even impossible. And based on my experience, the children are generally a reflection of what is happening in the family despite parents' best efforts to hide their worry. When the stability of the family is compromised due to financial strain, we see kids struggle in school, have trouble focusing, and develop "behavior concerns" that are really an outward manifestation of their fear. Kids don't necessarily tell their parents that they're afraid, because they know their parents are stressed out already and they don't want to add to the strain. Clothing becomes more tattered and sometimes parents cut off the toes of a child's tennis shoes to accommodate a few more months of growing feet. When kids don't have enough to eat or worry about losing their homes they can't be expected to concentrate on learning math facts. In some cases financial concerns lead to or exacerbate issues such as domestic violence, substance abuse, and physical or mental health conditions. So many of the things ailing our families are interconnected.

In addition to job loss there are many factors that are further squeezing families. Health care costs are high for those who have insurance coverage and impossible for those who don't. Gas prices eat up a large percentage of income for people who have to drive several miles to work in rural areas like mine. Grocery prices mean that families choose between eating what's healthy and eating what's affordable. And to add insult to injury, families who are scraping by every day see no real relief in sight. When we turn on our TV's, our radios, or pick up our newspapers and read about what is going on in our state and federal governments, we start to believe that you don't care about us. We ask ourselves who our government is truly serving? We hear that corporate welfare continues and CEO's get six-figure bonuses at taxpayer expense, and we look across the kitchen table at our families eating

Ramen noodles for the third time this week. We read that the wealthy get bigger tax breaks in hopes that their money will “trickle down” to us, then turn the page and read about how our school districts are forced to cut staff...again. We hear about the scandals and the arguing and the backroom deals. We know that money talks around here, and that means you don't hear us.

I appreciate this committee's interest in these issues and willingness to listen to me today. I hold out great hope that this is not the end of this discussion, that you will return to your offices and your states and you will continue to ask everyday Americans like me what they *really* need. And then I hope you will act on what you hear and remember your passion for service that brought you to our nation's capitol in the first place. I may have been called on to be the voice of struggling families today, but there are millions more out there who want and need to be heard by you. Please listen.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and I look forward to any questions you may have.