



Faith and action. For John Wessel-McCoy '98, they're a powerful combination.

He recalls seeing that power at work when he was a high school student growing up in Decatur. It was the early 1990s when workers at Caterpillar, Staley and Bridgestone/Firestone were walking the picket lines. Though the strikes didn't impact him personally, he saw the toll that labor unrest was taking on the community. And he saw something else.

"The experience gave me my first insights into social justice work," Wessel-McCoy says. "I was inspired by the leadership and actions of solidarity with the workers demonstrated by local religious leaders. Their example taught me that faith and action have to come together."

For the past 15 years, he's been putting that lesson into practice. First, he participated in the university's program with the Urban Life Center in Chicago as a Millikin religion student, and after graduating from Union Theological Seminary, he's a project organizer for the Poverty Initiative in New York, where he lives with his wife, Colleen, and their 16-month-old son, Myles (pictured above with his dad and some friends).

The Poverty Initiative was founded in 2004 at Union Theological Seminary with the mission of building a social movement to end poverty. Wessel-McCoy explains that the most successful way for this to happen is for the leaders of the movement to come from the ranks of those most affected, the poor. But where do those who are struggling with poverty find the resources and support to start a social movement? That's where the Poverty Initiative and its cornerstone program, the Poverty Scholars Program, come in, he says.

"The Poverty Initiative has developed a broad network of grass roots organizations led by poor people themselves," Wessel-McCoy says.

"They're emerging leaders who come out of different struggles, such as housing, labor and health care. The Poverty Initiative serves as a supportive hub for these groups and their leaders to come together to learn from each other and to build relationships. Our goal is to develop this emerging leadership and give them real tools for thinking and acting strategically. There will never be an adequate response to the many issues people face until they unite in a broad social movement that

## Sowing the seeds

*This 1998 alum puts his faith into action working with New York's Poverty Initiative.*

goes beyond the boundaries of particular issues, particularly communities or particular geographic locations."

Wessel-McCoy notes that throughout U.S. history, from the abolition of slavery to voting rights for women to the struggle for civil rights, those most affected by the social problem had to be at the forefront. It's no different in the fight against poverty, he says: "Clear, committed and competent leaders from the ranks of those most affected must emerge if the effort is to be successful. To put it another way, how successful do you think the women's suffrage movement would have been if it was led by men?"

History is the best example for him. "In my lifetime, I've never seen a social movement," Wessel-McCoy says. "The toughest part of the work is having faith in something you haven't seen yourself." But Wessel-McCoy finds inspiration in working alongside people like Willie Baptist, the coordinator of the Poverty Scholars Program, formerly a homeless father who grew up in Watts, Calif., before spending 40 years working among the poor as a community organizer.

To Wessel-McCoy, it's no mistake that the Poverty Initiative is based at Union Theological Seminary, a place that develops religious leadership.

"Every major social movement in U.S. history has had faith as an integral part of its formation in terms of the moral language that framed the issues and in shaping the leaders' own personal commitment," he says. "The more I've become engaged in the work here, the more I see the power of faith and action. The people I work with are sowing the seeds, and that's where real change comes from." •

*by Cathy Good Lockman '79*

**According to the Census Bureau, 39.8 million people in the U.S. lived in poverty in 2008, up from 37.3 million in 2007. To learn more about how you can support efforts to end poverty in your own community and across the country, visit [www.povertyinitiative.com](http://www.povertyinitiative.com).**

**To read an article about Millikin student efforts to combat homelessness in the Decatur area, turn to page 5.**