

Chapter 1

Charity TV: *Privatizing Care, Mobilizing Compassion*

On January 16, 2006, *The New York Times* announced a positive trend in reality TV: “do-good” programs had emerged to provide housing, healthcare, and general help to the needy. The article focused on *Miracle Workers*, an ABC series that intervenes in the lives of “seriously ill people who lack the contacts or the money for treatment.” A team of doctors and nurses provided by the TV network steers people to the “latest medical breakthroughs” while TV cameras “capture the drama of patient-hood, from consultations to surgery to recovery.” ABC pays for medical treatments not covered by private health insurance, as was case in an episode featuring the Gibbs family of Florida, whose father and son underwent surgical procedures to remove brain tumors that cost the commercial TV network more than \$100,000. Besides footing the bill for the surgeries, ABC’s medical team “asked the questions they did not know to ask, held their hands, made the arrangements,” reported *The Times*. According to Mr. Gibbs, who described his family as “average people,” it was television’s close involvement that got them through the ordeal.¹ At a juncture when reality TV is being offered as a solution to the plight of people like the Gibbs and, implicitly, to the lingering social problems of a post-welfare society as well, the management of “neediness” presents a useful place to begin our examination of contemporary television as a technology of governance.

This chapter considers TV’s efforts to intervene in the lives of “real” people cast as unable (or unwilling) to care for themselves adequately in the current epoch of privatization and self-responsibilization. It is a sign of the times that hundreds of thousands of individuals now apply directly to reality TV programs not only for medical needs, but also

for decent housing (*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, ABC; *Town Haul*, The Learning Channel; *Mobile Home Disasters*, WB), tuition, and income assistance (*The Scholar*, ABC; *Three Wishes*, NBC), transportation (*Pimp My Ride*, MTV), disaster relief (*Three Wishes, Home Edition*), food, clothing, and other basic material needs (*Random One*, A&E; *Renovate My Family*, Fox). This is not an entirely new phenomenon: In the 1950s, game shows such as *Queen for a Day* and *Strike it Rich* showered needy contestants with cash prizes, goods, and services donated by sponsors. However, today's charitable interventions are much more extravagant and prolific, appearing on network and cable channels during daytime and primetime hours. They have also become more specialized, as programs differentiate themselves by focusing on specific populations and needs. The interventions are now more likely to take place outside the TV studio, with professional helpers going "on location" and portable cameras documenting the results. Most importantly, TV's foray into the helping culture is now more intensely aligned with the rationalities of deregulation and welfare reform. Within the context of the search for new ways to deliver social services, its interventions can be sanctioned as providing a public service in ways that *Queen for a Day* and other precursors were not.



Illustration 1.1 *Queen for a Day* brought charity to TV in the 1950s, but was panned by critics as tasteless and exploitative (ABC, 1956–60; NBC, 1960–4; creator and producer Edward Krandall)

Television, especially in the United States, is not required to do much more than maximize profit. The notion that it must serve something called the public interest has been more or less obliterated by deregulatory policies. As Michael Eisner, former CEO of the Disney Corporation, which owns ABC Television, stated bluntly in 1998, “We have no obligation to make history; we have no obligation to make art; we have no obligation to make a statement; to make money is our only objective.” Nonetheless, Stephen McPherson, president of ABC’s entertainment division, now contends that television is more than a “toaster with pictures,” as famously claimed by Mark Fowler, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) under Ronald Reagan. Although *Miracle Workers* was being packaged and sold as entertainment, McPherson played up its charitable and educational contributions to *The Times*, insisting that “whatever the rating,” ABC had done a good thing by providing “knowledge and access” to unfortunate people who lack the “wherewithal to get the best treatment” on their own.

McPherson did not dwell on how quickly ABC would pull the plug in the event of a less-than-desired rating or other business factors: such is the fate of all television produced within the operating logic of the market. Instead, he emphasized the ethical possibilities of cultural commerce, particularly TV’s capacity to mobilize private resources (money, volunteerism, expertise) in order to help needy individuals overcome hurdles and hardships. When joined to the conventions of reality entertainment, this enterprising and personalized approach to social problem solving allows television to do good without providing unprofitable “serious” news and public affairs programming.² However, critics who fault TV for failing to provide substantial journalistic attention to health-care policy, poverty, homelessness, public-sector downsizing, and similar issues also fail to fully grasp the significance of charity programs built around the “empowerment” of people whose everyday lives are clearly impacted by these issues. TV’s relationship to the “public interest” has been severed from the ideal of preparing the masses for the formalized rituals (deliberation, voting) of democracy and linked to a “can-do” model of citizenship that values private enterprise, personal responsibility, and self-empowerment – the basic principles of George W. Bush’s Ownership Society. Instead of rejecting any allegiance to the public good, as many predicted would occur with broadcast deregulation, TV has quite aggressively pursued a form

of civic engagement that enacts the reinvention of government. As we will demonstrate, for-profit TV programs like *Miracle Workers* have proliferated alongside the proposition that State involvement in the care of citizens is inefficient, paternalistic, and “dependency-breeding” and the related imperative that citizens take their care into their own hands. McPherson’s self-congratulatory praise for television’s recent efforts to tap the resources of the private sector and help individuals navigate a plethora of consumer choices and make sound decisions about their well-being speaks to the affinity between deregulated public interest activity and contemporary welfare reform.

From “Welfare State to Opportunity, Inc.”

To understand the political rationality of reality-based charity TV, a brief detour through the conceptual history of welfare will be helpful. We take our bearings partly from political theorist Nikolas Rose, who situates the changing “mentalities” of government leading up to welfare reform within stages of liberalism.³ According to Rose’s account, the liberal state was called upon to become more directly involved in the care of citizens in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period of time that happens to correspond with the development and progression of industrial capitalism. As relations among elites and workers became increasingly antagonistic, rulers were “urged to accept the obligation to tame and govern the undesirable consequences of industrial life, wage labor and urban existence in the name of society.”⁴ What Rose calls a “state of welfare” emerged to provide basic forms of social insurance, child welfare, health, mental hygiene, universal education, and similar services that both “civilized” the working class and joined citizens to the State and to each other through formalized “solidarities and dependencies.” Through this new “social contract” between the State and the population, Rose contends, the autonomous political subject of liberal rule was reconstituted as a “citizen with rights to social protection and social education in return for duties of social obligation and social responsibility.”⁵

In the United States, where faith in the market’s ability to regulate society is especially strong, the 1930s and the 1960s stand out as key moments in the “state of welfare.” The depression of the 1930s spawned a crisis of capitalism that required federal intervention to

buffer. New Deal reforms signaled a new way of conceptualizing the State's responsibility to "protect citizens from the vicissitudes of life".⁶ Two types of federal welfare programs were created: national insurance programs to manage the collective risks of unemployment, old age, disability, and catastrophic illness, and need-based public assistance programs. In the 1960s, these programs were expanded in the name of the War on Poverty and the Great Society, extending the promise of "social protection and social education" while also bringing socially and economically oppressed populations further into the disciplinary arena of the public agencies responsible for overseeing their welfare.

As Rose and others have shown, the revised social contract inherent to a "state of welfare" has been contested since its inception. In the 1970s, however, the critique began to escalate, as critics across the political spectrum charged the Welfare State with fiscal waste and limiting "individual freedom, personal choice, self-fulfillment, and initiative."⁷ In the United States, need-based programs were especially vilified, but more recently even those popular social insurance programs (such as social security) that escape stigma have been targeted for privatization in the name of efficiency, choice, and empowerment. As this rationale suggests, "undoing" welfare involves more than rolling back the Welfare State – it also entails enacting market-based strategies of governing and reconstituting citizenship as the "free exercise" of choice and responsibility.⁸ This occurred in the 1990s. As Lisa Duggan argues, the push to "de-statize" welfare was disarticulated to some extent at this point from punitive, and overtly racist and sexist characterization of welfare "cheats" and "freeloaders" that had gained currency in the Reagan era. Instead, the basis for welfare reform was tied to a promise of empowerment through self-help.⁹ The justification for imposing strict time limits on welfare benefits and implementing welfare-to-work policies was to enable people caught in a state of dependency to "help themselves," claimed politicians. As this was occurring, social service provision in general was also being outsourced and privatized: "In one policy domain after another – pensions, education, transportation, criminal justice, and environmental protection to name a few examples – we are moving away from having governmental agencies actually delivering services toward service delivery by private firms," observed one analyst of the move from "Welfare State to Opportunity, Inc.":¹⁰

The American Welfare State is not dead yet, but it is fading away. Its replacement, Opportunity, Inc., seems to be growing brighter by the day. These two forms of governance, Welfare State and Opportunity Inc., differ in their methods, goals, and not the least, rhetoric. The Welfare State delivers benefits to recipients in order to cushion them from the harshness of markets. Opportunity, Inc., in contrast, seeks to assist clients in becoming independent actors within markets. The Welfare State is not inherently provided by the government, nor is Opportunity, Inc., provided by the private sector. As part of the Welfare State, private firms can simply deliver benefits. Opportunity, Inc., does not intrinsically consist of private forms. Government agencies, too, can act to empower citizens to become economically independent. However, the transition from Welfare State to Opportunity, Inc. often does, in fact, involve the transfer of responsibility for social service delivery from governmental agencies to private firms. Federal, state, and local governments are all creating public-private partnerships (most often, through contracts) to operate social welfare functions; as measured by the numbers of partnerships, services and dollars, these efforts are growing.¹¹

Since taking office in 2000, George W. Bush has further cut federal funding for public housing, food stamps, energy assistance, and most other need-based welfare programs. He reauthorized welfare reform law of 1996 (which ended welfare as a federal “entitlement”) and increased the time restrictions and work requirements imposed by the original legislation so as to “empower” people by moving them “off welfare rolls.” Bush has also promoted marriage as a component of welfare reform, arguing that “stable families should be the central goal of American welfare policy,” and allocating a significant portion of his welfare budget to programs (outsourced to private firms) that encourage marriage between low-income couples. He has promoted private and personal responsibility as the twin bedrocks of post-welfare society, telling TV viewers during his inaugural address: “What you do is as important as anything government does.” Bush has promoted the further privatization of public services and has sought to develop “armies of compassion” to address lingering social needs. He established the USA Freedom Corps to promote volunteerism as a solution to problems ranging from illiteracy to poverty, and a President’s Council on National and Community Service comprising leaders from business, entertainment, sports, nonprofit agencies, education, and the media to cultivate a private ethic of “service and responsibility.”

The White House's reliance on "partnerships" with the private sector, including the culture industries, to accomplish welfare reform also speaks to the advancement of liberalism. Thomas Streeter has shown how the corporate sector has always played a high-profile role in government in the United States (including broadcast policy), to the point where "corporate liberalism" is a more accurate description of liberalism as it developed in the country.¹² However, we are seeing a new twist on this, in that government is increasingly expected not only to embrace corporatism, but to be itself revenue-generating. Advanced or "neo" liberalism entrusts the market to improve upon the Welfare State by "relocating" its focus on governing through social service within the realms of commerce and consumption. Such is the reasoning, we contend, that currently informs reality TV's do-good trend.

While enterprising helping ventures like *Miracle Workers* warrant critique, the leftist tendency to dismiss them as manipulative – for creating a sense of "false consciousness that things are being taken care of" in the absence of the Welfare State, in the words of one critic – doesn't take us very far. We can't understand TV as a technology of governing by comparing representation to "reality" or evaluating the political affectivity of texts. Charity TV is ultimately about a thoroughly commercial medium's move into new social roles and relationships than it is about ideological positioning in any simple sense. To create *Miracle Workers*, for example, TV producers formed alliances with patient-support groups, hospitals, and health-care professionals, and through these private associations became involved in the social work (screening, evaluating, outreach, testing, counseling) of the medical establishment. In determining eligibility of need and administering the flow of care to "deserving" cases, television took over the role of institutionalized charity and, later, public welfare office. By distributing the surplus of capitalism in the manner of its choosing, it advanced a corporate liberal governing strategy that can be traced to the tax-sheltered philanthropies of robber-baron industrial capitalists. The difference between the charity work underwritten by the Carnegie Corporation and other industrial giants and today's TV interventionism is that television has situated the power to shape social life through philanthropy entirely within the logic of the commercial market: There's no distinction – and no presumed need for one – between do-good activity and the manufacture and sale of cultural

product. Finally, television facilitated solutions to needs that might once have been addressed by the State with “efficiency” and cost-cutting zeal, implementing extreme versions of risk-management strategies practiced by HMOs and private insurance carriers (only those surgeries with at least a 90 percent success rate were considered for funding by the TV program).

Our aim here is not to mythologize the state of welfare, but to show how TV is working to produce substitutes for it that require analysis on their own terms. It is not a stretch to suggest that reality TV now offers what passes as welfare, and if this is the case we must come to terms with its productive strategies as well as its limitations. While we situate this development within the move to reinvent government, we don’t wish to overstate the break from the past, for residual and emerging techniques of governing converge and sometimes collide in TV’s charity productions. As John Clarke reminds us, welfare states have historically been deeply contradictory, involved in the “management and regulation” of subordinated populations as well as the provision of services. Moreover, as Rose argues, their success in “implanting in citizens the aspiration to pursue their own civility, well-being and advancement” is what makes newer market-based strategies of governing possible.¹³ Reality TV’s foray into privatized forms of social service demonstrates this complexity.

Programs like *Miracle Workers* enact templates for self-empowerment as well as commercial alternatives to the provision of social services, but they also draw in part from public welfare’s relationship with needy subjects. Because the recipients of TV’s concerns are not conceived of as entirely self-sufficient citizens, their capacity to govern themselves through their freedom is subject to question. This uncertainty manifests itself in numerous ways, from the rules and instructions circulated to applicants to a programmatic reliance on surveillance and close supervisory relationships. Reality TV does not acknowledge inequalities of class, gender, and race and cannot explain neediness in such terms. While much is made of the tragic circumstances that lead individuals to television for help, it therefore cannot completely escape the lineage of disciplinary techniques long deployed by charity workers, social workers, and welfare case managers in their bureaucratic relations with needy subjects.

Reality TV modifies these residual techniques, however, by bringing social service into the market and linking its execution to consumer

choices, from what TV show to watch and what products to consume, to what volunteer opportunity to pursue and what cause to support. In this sense, it enacts a governing strategy that, as Wendy Brown contends in her critique of neoliberalism, “involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action.”¹⁴ We might even say that reality TV “neoliberalizes” social welfare by managing all conceivable human problems and needs from the vantage point of cultural commerce. Rather than merely lamenting this as evidence of capitalism’s further encroachment, we now turn our attention to exactly *how* television manages neediness. As we will show, do-good TV does not hide the “truth” about the changing state of welfare as much as it literally reconstitutes it as a new and improved product of private initiative.

ABC TV: Governing “Better” Communities

Two strands of reality TV have been institutionally positioned as performing a public service in addition to entertaining audiences and making money for shareholders: charity programs and life interventions. Charity programs focus on helping needy people turn their lives around by providing material necessities such as housing (*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, *Mobile Home Disasters*), transportation (*Pimp My Ride*), food (*Random 1*), and medical care (*Medical Miracles*, *Three Wishes*). Life interventions focus on helping the needy by teaching them how to manage and care for themselves and their families properly. The distinction can be blurry, since TV’s offers of material help are almost always accompanied by some type of life coaching, therapy, or professional advice, and life-changing ventures often involve cash prizes, giveaways, product placements, and other commercial rewards in addition to the provision of counseling, training, and expertise. We will examine life interventions in the next chapter, while focusing here on charity TV’s contribution to the privatization of care and the mobilization of compassion.

The ABC network has played a pivotal role in revitalizing and updating charity TV, and has established the basic cultural template for addressing material needs within the intersecting logics of cultural commerce and welfare reform. The template works like this: TV aims to fix a specific problem or hardship on behalf of an individual or

family. It does not do this alone, but works with an alliance of corporate sponsors, donors, experts, skilled laborers, nonprofit agencies, and TV viewers. TV plays the pivotal administrative and “outreach” roles, determining instances of need, orchestrating the interventions, tapping into existing resources for accomplishing them, and documenting the progression of needy subjects from “before” to “after.”

Behind the scenes, the Disney Corporation, ABC’s parent company, is a member of the intersecting public–private partnerships and alliances that are working to accomplish the “reinvention of government.” Disney was a corporate sponsor of the 2005 meeting of the National Conference on Volunteering and Service, which was organized by the Corporation for National Community Service, the Points of Light Foundation, and the USA Freedom Corps, a national volunteer network established by George W. Bush. At the conference, leaders from the public and corporate sectors met to strategize how to develop “volunteer service” (a term used to describe everything from corporate giving to bake sales) to meet America’s “pressing social needs.” The role of corporate and personal responsibility was made clear by the keynote speeches: US Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt lectured on the importance of “economic goodness” (a term for compassionate capitalism) and the closing remarks were delivered by Mark Victor Hansen, bestselling author of the self-help book *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. It is telling, but not surprising that popular media figured so prominently, for as Rose and others point out, cultural technologies (such as self-help books) that promise to “empower” individuals become more relevant to practices of citizenship as the State reconfigures its governing capacities and caring responsibilities.

ABC’s Better Community Outreach Program is an example. Developed in 2005 under the direction of ABC’s McPherson, the Better Community program has a mission of using television to cultivate compassion, volunteerism, and learning in American life – terminology similar to the rhetoric used by Bush and other reformers. The venture is entirely voluntary on the part of ABC, which is no longer required to serve something called the “public interest” as defined and overseen by formal regulators. Rejecting the historical connection between television that serves the public and serious news/information, the Better Community program approaches its outreach goals through popular entertainment, including soap operas, sitcoms and, especially,

reality programs. Through its programming and web activities, ABC also aims to bring “pro-social messages” to TV viewers in the service of “empowering” them to learn about the causes that ABC supports. Viewers are asked to participate in an ethical agenda that ABC has determined for them, and to fulfill their civic responsibilities by serving as volunteers in related causes. The public interest is more or less identical to ABC/Disney’s corporate aims, as explained on the Disney web site:

ABC Corporate Initiatives oversees community outreach for the ABC Television Network. Through programming, events and promotions, it identifies and facilitates opportunities that serve ABC’s corporate objectives and responsibilities as a corporate citizen. Branded under ABC’s A Better Community, all efforts follow a mission to utilize the reach and influence of the media to establish effective community outreach initiatives that serve the public interest, inform and inspire.¹⁵

The purpose of the Better Community “brand” in relation to the aims of charity TV as a whole is to publicize ABC’s role in the mobilization of resources to look after the needy through organizations the TV network did not establish, but that it aligns itself with and acts upon. ABC refers to its relationship with these organizations, which include Habitat for Humanity, Points of Light Foundation, National Center for Healthy Housing, and the Better Business Bureau, as “partnerships.” In 2005, ABC situated *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, which debuted the previous year, as its most visible cultural contribution to “community outreach” and began referring to Sears and other *Home Edition* sponsors as full-fledged “partners” of the Better Community brand. ABC emphasizes the charitable dimensions of *Home Edition* on air and on the Better Community web site, and uses the program to direct TV viewers to resources (including Sears stores, the Sears American Dream charity, partner organizations, and the Better Community web site) for actualizing their own compassion/personal responsibility. So integrated are television programming, commerce, charity, and volunteerism that ABC does not even refer to *Home Edition* as a TV program in the old sense of broadcast media. On the Better Community web site, the series is also called a “partner” of the ABC Better Community brand, a term that refers not only to its institutional connections but to *Home Edition*’s mission of networking to build a “better community, one family, one house, one donation at a time.”

Because *Home Edition* set important precedents for the current wave of charity TV it is worth examining its charitable logic in some detail. According to ABC, *Home Edition* currently receives over 15,000 applications each week from families seeking to improve their housing situations in some way or another. Each season, approximately one dozen are offered home makeovers that are completed in seven days. TV viewers are informed of the chosen family's special needs and attributes as the Home Edition bus wheels into their town to surprise the winning candidates. Their run-down houses are transformed on camera in a "race against time" carried out by a cast of technical experts (architects, stylists, and designers) and a revolving crew of local contractors and construction workers. The narrative suspense hinges on whether or not the team can complete the renovation in time. They always do, proving time and again the program's ability to "transform lives" with a degree of efficiency and speed only the private sector can provide. According to ABC, the transformation of the houses is ultimately a mere catalyst for improving the tragic lives of the residents who live in them. This emotional payoff occurs during the "reveal," when the displaced residents return from a complimentary vacation to Disney World to witness the "unbelievable transformation of the house" and viewers come to understand how the TV crew has "impacted the lives of the deserving families."

The goodwill gesture doesn't cost ABC anything. With high ratings, *Home Edition* is a proven moneymaker. Local businesses and builders are solicited to donate services and materials while corporate sponsors such as Sears and Ford provide household appliances, vehicles, and decorative touches. In a recent essay, John McMurria takes issue with *Home Edition*'s integrated corporate sponsorship deals, noting that the program is essentially an hour-long product placement for Sears and other companies. McMurria contends that commerce has compromised *Home Edition*'s "good Samaritanism" and suggests that in non-commercial hands it would be a better, more authentic example of public service. McMurria is suggesting that the hero of the program be changed from the corporate sector to the public sector, so that the emotional high associated with *Home Edition* can be mobilized for socialism.¹⁶ While we sympathize with these concerns, the traditional leftist perspective orienting McMurria's analysis is ultimately limited in its capacity to grapple with the complexities of governmental power. Replacing corporate sponsors with public agencies may indeed produce

a different TV show – but that show would be linked to another history of governmental relations, as Rose and Clarke remind us in their caution against romanticizing the complicated history of the Welfare State. *Home Edition's* ability to fold the legacy of charity as a pre-welfare strategy of managing neediness into cultural enterprise is what makes it an actualized example of the “political rationality” that presently shapes welfare reform. Besides calling upon the private sector to resolve needs, *Home Edition* promotes the particular behaviors and forms of conduct that emerge from this political rationality, including homeownership, self-sufficiency, entrepreneurialism, and volunteerism. The program does not simply “encode” these activities ideologically; it demonstrates them, enacts them, and directs TV viewers to a range of resources for accomplishing them on their own. This “can-do” approach to the privatization of public service is not without contradictions, but it does require a different conceptual focus than has typically guided television studies.

TV Outreach and the Ownership Society

The premise of *Home Edition* hinges on the unavailability of welfare as an entitlement. However, the program’s credibility rests on the idea that the alternative to the Welfare State – private do-goodism – is reasonable and fair. This can be tricky, given the tension between the extent to which many people in the United States apparently feel unable to care for themselves (hence the large volume of applications received) and the fact that ABC will ultimately turn most of them away. One way the tension is minimized from the outset is through a focus on homeowners and an exclusion of apartment dwellers, including residents of public housing and Section Eight facilities. The houses may be small, run-down, sparsely furnished, and/or on the brink of foreclosure, but they nonetheless exist as symbols of the so-called Ownership Society. By establishing this basic program rule, *Home Edition* does not have to deal with the factors that prevent many Americans from achieving homeownership.

The programmatic focus on homeowners serves another role as well, in that it provides the basis for promoting home ownership as a foundation for executing personal responsibility and therefore good citizenship. *Home Edition* is not explicitly positioned in relation to housing policy reforms such as reduced federal spending on public

housing and shakeups (including a greater role for faith-based charities) at the department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Nor does it directly promote George Bush's American Dream program, which siphons funding away from public housing services to promote homeownership in low-income populations through (limited) forms of down-payment assistance as well as homeownership education and training programs. *Home Edition* does, however, present homeownership as an appropriate accomplishment that distinguishes the worthy poor from welfare recipients still caught in a cycle of dependency on the State. In the following episode summary from the ABC web site, we can see how *Home Edition* simultaneously makes extreme socio-economic hardship visible and erases the public sector as a viable or desirable resource for the needy. At the same time, it finds human agency and hope in a woman's personal responsibility as a mother, which is evident from her heroic efforts and sacrifices to provide her children with a privately owned home (however small and broken-down). The fact that she has obtained this symbol of the Ownership Society through her own work and ambition is precisely what qualifies this woman for *Home Edition's* attention. She is classified as worthy of help because she exemplifies the path to freedom and self-empowerment emphasized by neoliberal policies and discourses:

Veronica and her family have had a life of adversity and struggle. Having bought the first and only home she could afford, Veronica raises her eight children – including two sets of twins – in a home that would be cramped for a family of four, let alone nine. A strong woman, she is determined to raise her children in a safe and loving home, keeping them off the streets and away from violence for good. But the house isn't much of a safe haven. The extremely hazardous Ginyard home has exposed live wires sticking out of the drywall, mold from constant flooding in their basement and holes in the walls and ceilings. The kids have to sleep in makeshift bedrooms in the basement and the attic. Veronica works two jobs just to make ends meet and uses public transportation to travel to and from work, as her run-down car sits in the driveway. The house, the struggle to pay the bills and the years of stress has taken a toll on her, but despite everything, this hard-working single mom is determined to provide the best life for her family.¹⁷

The aim of instilling the practice of homeownership is taken up more explicitly by the Sears American Dream Campaign, *Home Edition's* principal do good partner. Both the TV program and the ABC Better Community web site direct TV viewers to this campaign, which is

described as a “community commitment” to help people “maintain and outfit their homes and families” by providing financial assistance as well as educational programs. According to Sears, homeownership is not only about having a place to live or even achieving a desirable lifestyle. Along with organized religion and the family, it is also a mechanism for minimizing social and material problems, from criminality to financial stress. In this sense, homeownership is positioned as a technique for performing one’s civic obligations within what Rose calls the “new regime of the actively responsible self.” Rose argues individuals are now expected to fulfill their duties as citizens by taking care of and actualizing themselves, first and foremost. The American Dream campaign situates owning a home as one way of doing this:

Did you know that in communities where home ownership is common, children excel in school and adults are more likely to be involved in their communities by voting, volunteering and attending religious services? Additionally, where home ownership increases, crime declines and businesses thrive. That’s why the Sears American Dream Campaign is not only helping American families achieve and preserve their American Dreams, it is helping to strengthen the fabric of our communities . . . Homes are the foundation of our families, neighborhoods and nation. Home equity creates wealth for low- and middle-income families. It’s easy to see that increasing home ownership and maintenance may be the single most effective way to fortify the foundation of our country.¹⁸

The Sears American Dream campaign web site links the governing rationalities of privatization and personal responsibility to consumer training and the sale of Sears home merchandise. Through a partnership with NeighborWorks, a nonprofit agency created by the US Congress to “revitalize communities through affordable housing opportunities, training and technical assistance,” the Sears American Dream web site offers practical tips for affording a home and taking care of it properly once that goal has been accomplished. The section “Get in Shape with Financial Fitness” educates low-income people on how to obtain a home, focusing on personal behaviors such as “create a financial goal with a timeline,” “establish a budget and stick to it,” “control your wants and focus on your needs,” and “find a trusted financial advisor.” Having evoked irresponsible choices and irrational consumption as the cause of financial difficulties, the web site then

teaches people how to become responsible consumers of the home-related products sold in Sears stores. This consumer training is presented, alongside the “financial fitness” advice on homeownership, as another dimension of “community outreach”: “Now that you’ve got your house, you need to transform it into a home, which means making lots of decisions about appliances and décor,” explains the section on “Home Maintenance,” which directs users to printable checklists to help them “get into the habit” of taking care of houses (including lawns), as well as specific techniques for “choosing” appliances and other accoutrements. As the web site explains:

It takes a lot of work to outfit and maintain a home and family. For homeowners, especially for those struggling to make ends meet, an ounce of prevention is definitely worth a pound of cure. That’s why the Sears American Dream Campaign is educating low- and moderate-income families nationwide about the importance of home maintenance. It’s just one way the Sears American Dream Campaign is strengthening communities one home at a time.

Casting Needy Individuals

Another way that *Home Edition* narrows the pool of applicants is by choosing families with “unique and extraordinary” situations. Public welfare programs rely on measurable and verifiable data (i.e., income, hours worked, marital status, number of children, time on welfare) to determine eligibility of need; all applicants who meet these “objective” requirements are entitled to benefits (presuming such benefits exist). *Home Edition*, on the other hand, helps only small number of families: “We can’t help everyone, even though we wish that we could,” explains the program of its limited capacity to manage unmet housing needs. The lucky few are selected by the casting department, which raises the important question: What does it mean when a process that has historically been carried out by social service professionals is turned over to commercial entertainment agents? The ABC web site solicits applications to *Home Edition* on the basis of two criteria – having a home that “desperately needs attention” and having a “compelling story to tell.” However, the program’s much more narrow focus on personal “tragedies and traumas” was confirmed by an internal 2005

ABC memo obtained by the Smoking Gun, an investigative web site. Sent to local ABC affiliates, it described a list of the specific “tragedies” it hoped to feature on upcoming episodes of *Home Edition*, from a child killed by a drunk driver to muscular dystrophy, and urged local station personnel to look for such cases in their areas. This is not surprising, since previous seasons of *Home Edition* have also emphasized families coping with childhood illnesses and chronic diseases. The debut episode set the stage by renovating the home of a working-class family whose small daughter was recovering from leukemia. This search for personal trauma is rooted in the economic interests of ABC in that its casting professionals search for stories with the emotional impact to produce high ratings and therefore profitability. However, it also works as a device for determining eligibility of need and classifying the “worthy” poor.

Attempted self-sufficiency and an ethic of volunteerism also determine which families are selected, maintains executive producer Tom Forman:

We look for people who deserve it. It’s tough to judge. It’s people who have given their whole lives and suddenly find themselves in a situation where they need a little help. Most of the families we end up doing are nominations. The kinds of families we’re looking for don’t say, “Gee, I need help.” They’re quietly trying to solve their problems themselves and it’s a neighbor or a coworker who submits an application on their behalf.

By rewarding those who struggle without expecting or asking for help, *Home Edition* discourages what reformers call “dependency.” At the same time, it positively singles out people who demonstrate personal responsibility to others. Low-paid public employees who protect the United States from external and internal threats – including military personnel, police officers, and firefighters – appear often. Usually, such recipients have fallen into financial insecurity because of an illness or other unforeseen circumstance. In one episode, a national guardsman whose family suffered greatly financially when he was called up for active duty in Iraq was presented with a home renovation. Typifying how official government (in this case the military) not only cooperates with but also facilitates the privatization of care through TV, the soldier was flown home for an unscheduled visit to view the final



(a)



(b)

Illustration 1.2 Families must sell themselves as worthy and needy in their application videos. In this episode of *Home Edition*, a minister “devoted to community service,” his wife, and his three daughters request the program’s help with a crumbling pavement and other problems they cannot afford to fix (Endemol Entertainment USA and Lock & Key Productions for ABC, 2005)

reveal, and various military agencies promoted the episode on their web sites.

Individuals who take up duties of the Welfare State within the context of their personal lives are often rewarded for doing so by *Home Edition*. Social workers who adopt large numbers of homeless and/or chronically ill children and struggle financially to care for them on their own modest salaries have appeared on several episodes as personifications of the “compassionate citizenship” promoted by the Bush administration. In a related episode, a poverty-stricken woman who had “turned her own life around” was operating a small nonprofit charity out of her home. The mission of Sadie Holmes Help Services, Inc. was to help other poor people in the woman’s low-income community by providing them with donated food, clothing, and furniture. When the donations overtook the woman’s small house, according to ABC, she moved her family into a rented apartment. When the house was badly damaged by a hurricane and a subsequent fire, her homeowner’s insurance was cancelled, and she was unable to afford the needed repairs. She nonetheless managed to continue operating the charity out of the now dilapidated home, while her family made do in the small apartment. The woman was rewarded by *Home Edition* with a brand new home, not only because her own house was beyond repair but because she exemplified the political value placed on individuals who, despite their own disadvantages, are devoted to an individualized ethic of compassion and responsibility. Taking welfare quite literally into her own hands, this woman not only overcame her own dependency but channeled her own limited resources (her unpaid labor, the house) into services the public sector no longer wishes to provide.

While the needy families who appear on *Home Edition* are revered as decent citizens whose pitiable circumstances are mainly due to extraordinary bad luck, their neediness nonetheless prevents them from playing an active role in the transformation of their home. There is a contradiction between the claim of using the market to empower people and the fact that they are not really allowed to exercise their “freedom of choice,” to use the terminology of neoliberal reformers. *Home Edition*’s professional experts decide what physical and cosmetic changes to make to the house without consulting the family members and, in the process, assume paternalistic authority over them. Although this paternalistic relationship is cloaked in kindness it constitutes a

hierarchy of freedom and authority nonetheless. Behind the scenes, *Home Edition's* address to potential candidates is much more authoritarian. The application process incorporates history of regulating, monitoring, and controlling welfare recipients, as documented by Linda Gordon, John Gilliom, and other historians.¹⁹ To be considered, individuals must answer questions about household income, education level, existing debt and involvement in lawsuits, and prior conviction of a crime, whether as “simple as a driving violation or as serious as armed robbery.” They are not trusted to tell the truth about this last question in particular, and so are warned: “Be honest: We will find out sooner or later through our comprehensive background checks.” The applicants must also agree to provide three years’ worth of official tax records to prove their answers to the above questions if they are selected. While enacted as a private alternative to welfare, *Home Edition* collects, evaluates, and stores the same information gathered by public welfare offices (even if it does not guarantee “benefits” as a result). It presumes that people who ask for help are more prone than middle-class people to criminality and dishonesty and that they have no inherent right to privacy. Because of this, they can be governed in much harsher ways (i.e., subjected to background checks and verification technologies) than the liberal ideal of “governing through freedom” would suggest. *Home Edition's* purpose is not only to govern needy people but also to ensure its own profitability. The impetus to weed out individuals who might be discovered to be amoral or unworthy is also about protecting the *Home Edition* brand.

There is another way that *Home Edition* resonates with welfare reform discourse, and that is by illustrating and rewarding enterprising activity among the needy. An example here is an episode featuring the African-American Kirkwood family of Port Orchard, Washington. The family applied to *Home Edition* when they found themselves living with exposed wiring, open walls, and poor ventilation caused by a failed home-remodeling project. Their main concern was a toxic black mold creeping over their floors and walls, which eventually forced the parents and their five children to move into a crowded motel room. The case fit the criteria for *Home Edition* in that the Kirkwoods’ story was not only dramatic but also life-threatening: “Their house was making them sick . . . their dream – to get back in.” The family documented the situation (including the oozing mold) using home-video equipment and concluded their tape with the plea: “ABC: please do

something.” However, more than a year passed and nothing was heard from the TV network. According to the *Home Edition* application, this non-response is typical: “Due to the volume of applications received,” families are never contacted unless they are chosen to appear on the program. Eventually, *Home Edition* did take up the Kirkwoods’ case in a two-hour episode that addressed the family’s struggle to get onto the TV program, and thus offers some insights into the selection process. In the explanation for the “special” nature of this episode, viewers are introduced to 11-year-old Jael Kirkwood, who not only filed the application but also used her ingenuity to get the family on the air. While Jael admits to having been devastated when she didn’t hear back, much is made of the fact that she didn’t take no for an answer. The girl began telephoning *Home Edition*’s casting department on a daily basis and contacted families from past episodes for their advice on getting the attention of producers. She also visited the mayor of Port Orchard, who contacted *Home Edition* on her behalf, and who was praised on camera as the right sort of public official who goes the extra mile for her constituents, not by directing them to local care resources but by getting their case accepted by national television. However, Jael’s “sheer determination” is said to be the deciding factor. While the arguments for welfare reform are never explicitly stated in the episode, Jael’s precocious drive to take responsibility for her needy family by mobilizing every resource at her disposal is rewarded against an implied counter-image of the stereotypical welfare recipient who must learn not to passively cling to government “entitlements.” This image is historically coded in racial and gender terms, despite the move away from explicit stereotyping in neoliberal discourse.

Welfare recipients, as Martin Gilens and others have shown, have long been conceptualized within political and popular discourse as lazy, dishonest, helpless, and unmotivated.²⁰ While neoliberal policies officially minimize these stereotypical associations, they lurk within the rationalities of welfare reform and reappear in television’s attempt to manage neediness. Black Americans are even more likely to be constructed this way, given the intersection of economic and racial disenfranchisement in the United States. The role of the mother in the reproduction of welfare “dependency” comes into play in this discourse as well, in that the figure of the black, unmarried welfare mother has come to stand for the negative connotations of need-based welfare programs, particularly their cyclical nature. Jael’s turn to *Home Edition* for help is differentiated from this representational legacy and

situated within the proactive, self-enterprising activities that make up “good citizenship” according to neoliberal regimes. As *Home Edition* explained, it was “the tenacity of one girl” (and implicitly not a formalized system of rights and responsibilities) that got the family the “home they deserve.” At the end of the episode, the camera lingers on a group of neighbors gathered outside the Kirkwood house, mingling with the family members, the masses of anonymous workers and volunteers, and the *Home Edition* cast, while the musical theme “We’ll Make it Through” plays in the background. The scenario draws from a nostalgic image of community cooperation (agrarian barn-raising rituals come to mind), but the long list of sponsors/partners that follow affirms that without television’s involvement the Kirkwoods would be nowhere: It was TV that recognized and rewarded Jael’s enterprising skills, and it was TV that mustered the private resources for the intervention and administered the flow of care.

Self-enterprise is also required of people who wish to appear on *Home Edition* as needy families. While applicants are addressed as potential criminals, they are also advised to be enterprising, to work hard to “sell themselves” to the producers and potential audiences on camera. Because the individuals who apply for help are not presumed to possess the know-how to sell themselves on their own, detailed instructions are provided. In addition to answering socioeconomic questions and signing legal documents, would-be families are required to produce a video narrative (borrow a camera if you don’t have one, instructs *Home Edition*). They are guided in this process by a complete shot list, tips for handling the camera properly (no zooms allowed), and a sample script. The videos must follow certain conventions established by *Home Edition* to solicit viewer empathy, including having children give the guided tour of their own rooms (if they have one) and filming the entire family outside the home for an introduction that incorporates the scripted line “Hi, ABC, We’re the _____ Family (big waves and smiles and lots of energy.)” Successful applicants must follow these guidelines, a requirement that puts ABC in a position of cultural power while also making the production of *Home Edition* more cost-efficient (the free home videos are used to introduce the families). All members of the household are required not only to appear in the video but to sell their stories to a potential TV audience of millions: “We understand that talking about your situation can be difficult but please do not hold back and PLEASE don’t turn off the camera if you feel emotional.” They are also instructed to make

themselves “camera ready” and are presented with tips on personal grooming and wardrobe choices: “Please know that IF you are selected for the show this tape could be used on television so make sure appearances are fit for TV! Ladies, please take the time to put on light makeup and do your hair. You should dress as if you were going out for a family dinner or nice lunch,” advises the application.

Privatizing Care, Mobilizing Compassion

Home Edition’s affinity to the neoliberalization of welfare and the privatization of social services was clarified by a number of “After the Storm” episodes devoted to helping communities affected by Hurricane Katrina. Because the devastation of an entire geographic region was at stake and thousands of families qualified as “exceptionally needy and deserving,” the program could not rely on its usual strategies of selection. The new aim was to undertake relief efforts that “would benefit more than one family.” This did not mean channeling resources into state and municipal governments: any role of the public sector in both preventing and resolving the crisis was eradicated by these episodes. Instead, the *Home Edition* team channeled energy and resources into assisting local non-governmental private relief efforts such as a privately funded low-income health clinic that was displaced by the storm and was operating out of a double-wide trailer, and a hard-hit New Orleans church that doubled as a local charity for homeless people.

Other strategies for helping Katrina victims were tied to cultural commerce, such as sending busloads of displaced families who lost everything in the disaster on a complimentary \$250 shopping spree at Sears. Besides demonstrating the urgency of restoring private, nongovernmental, and faith-based charities to their full operating capacities, storylines stressed the role of both corporate goodwill (Sears and its American Dream campaign played a prominent role in all of the revitalization efforts) and individual consumption to the restoration of normalcy. When Laura Bush agreed to appear in a cameo on one of the special Katrina episodes, *Home Edition’s* relationship to welfare was made explicit: On the White House’s official web site, Bush said she went to the filming to discuss the importance of “partnerships,” from the Sears truck filled with donated goods to volunteer medical workers to the Army Corps of Engineers. “This is what it’s going to

take . . . partnerships between governments, between corporations, between individuals, faith-based groups to make sure all of these people will really be able to rebuild their lives.” The *Los Angeles Times* put it more bluntly, explaining that “Mrs. Bush’s spokeswoman saw a conservative message in the show’s usual story line: the private sector doing good work, rather than waiting around for the federal government to do it. That, she said, was what the first lady wanted to endorse.”

The private sector enlisted by *Home Edition* to manage the lingering needs of a post-welfare society is not limited to corporations and businesses: it also includes “armies” of individuals who are called upon to voluntarily donate their time and personal resources to the care of the less fortunate. At the end of each episode, *Home Edition* host Ty Pennington also encourages the audience to log onto the ABC Better Community web site, where ABC talent quote Martin Luther King, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Disney, and other well-known figures in streaming public service announcements that extol volunteerism as civic obligation (the announcements are also broadcast on television). TV viewers are encouraged to take steps toward fulfilling this obligation by seeking out the organizations and charities featured on the web site – including nongovernmental housing agencies such as Habitat for Humanity and Home Aid and the Sears American Dream Campaign – and by researching volunteer opportunities through ABC’s partnerships with the Points of Light Foundation, Volunteer.org, and other agencies. In this effort to transform TV viewers into civically engaged citizens, ABC encourages allegiance not to the State or the body politic, but to an ethical “community” filtered through the Better Community Brand. In this sense, it constructs a template for citizenship that is not unlike the participatory charities (such as Race for the Cure) analyzed by Samantha King. Drawing from Rose, Samantha King’s research shows that in “contemporary organization of political responsibility, subjects are addressed and understood as individuals who are responsible for themselves and others in their ‘community.’” This responsibility is not to be demonstrated by “the paying of taxes to support social welfare programs, or by the expression of dissent and the making of political demands on behalf of one’s community, but through participation in practices of volunteerism and philanthropy.” Do-good reality television works in similar ways, by aligning TV viewers with an individualistic ethic of compassion and the technical

means through which it can be harnessed for the good of the “community.”²¹

Volunteerism is promoted, not just as a personal and community responsibility but also as a venue for middle-class consumer choice and lifestyle maximization. Tips on volunteering provided courtesy of the Corporation for National and Community Service, a public-private agency devoted to “supporting the American culture of citizenship, service and responsibility,” situate the importance of finding the “right” volunteer position as a choice that will lead not only to service but to self-fulfillment. “Sometimes the hardest part of volunteering can be finding an opportunity that fits your personality,” explains the site, which recommends customizing the experience to one’s personal interests, beliefs, and experiences so that it is “enjoyable and rewarding.” Not only are volunteers elevated to a position of civic power over the “needy” in their capacity to determine which causes are interesting and worthwhile, they are also encouraged to see the practice of compassion as a variation of other consumer-related activities. Unlike the restrictive guidance imposed on people who apply to appear on *Home Edition* and the paternalistic requirement that the chosen families leave the renovations entirely up to the experts, TV viewers are offered the “freedom” to tailor their own volunteer experience from a list of possibilities, not unlike the shoppers who, with just one click, are invited to customize the look of home-décor merchandise using the Sears Virtual Makeover Program. For TV viewers who are not inclined to volunteer, compassionate consumption presents another sanctioned (though less customizable) way to participate in the mobilization of private helping resources through television. In the Katrina episodes, people moved by the human toll of the disaster were asked to contribute money to Winds of Change, a fundraising drive organized through the integrated partnership between *Home Edition* and Sears. And on the Better Community web site, they are asked to help by purchasing *Home Edition* DVDs, with the promise that \$1 per unit sold will be donated to charity.

The Proliferation of Charity TV

Home Edition’s ratings success did not go by unnoticed by the television industry. In 2005, NBC announced that it also was “granting

wishes for deserving individuals” for a prime-time television show entitled *Three Wishes*. Hosted by Christian recording artist Amy Grant, the program offers help to individuals with a range of needs that are not limited to housing. Each week, the program travels to a small or mid-sized town, typically in the Southern and Midwestern Bible Belts. A huge outdoor tent bearing the corporate logo of Home Depot and other program sponsors is set up in the “town square” (Home Depot was also a sponsor of the 2005 National Volunteer Conference in Washington). Thousands of local people wait in line to enter the tent so they can plead their cases to the *Three Wishes* casting agents in person. The viewer sees only a tightly compressed version of this fusion of the updated headline and the small-town faith revival. The implications of the mass rejections that ultimately ensue are greatly minimized by a narrative focus on the three individuals who are helped on each episode. In interweaving stories, Grant and her on-camera assistants work tirelessly on behalf of these individuals to solve their immediate material problems and make their wishes come true.

The criteria for determining who deserves help are not made explicit but, as with *Home Edition*, some key themes are apparent. Beneficiaries of the interventions often have tragic circumstances that are evoked to



Illustration 1.3 *Three Wishes* host Amy Grant greets the residents of Brookings, South Dakota as they wait in line to present their “cases.” Only three will have their wishes granted by NBC (NBC Universal TV for NBC, 2005)

rank their needs above those of others who also spent hours in line hoping to appear on the program. Seriously ill and disabled people (particularly children and teenagers) who need costly medical treatments they cannot afford are often chosen, and here *Three Wishes* anticipated ABC's *Medical Miracles*. By facilitating access to these services *Three Wishes* enacts a high-profile private alternative to publicly funded health and insurance programs (such as Medicaid and medical disability) that is limited in its capacity to help only a handful of the millions of Americans who require some form of assistance with medical care. Unlike the familiar image of the impersonal, slow-moving bureaucracy and surly personnel associated with state welfare programs, the *Three Wishes* team provide swift, energetic, empathetic, and personalized attention to the people who appear on the show. As TV "caseworkers" the hosts are able to focus entirely on coming up with solutions to the special needs of individuals whose stories they have heard personally and who they come to know intimately. However, the caseworkers have another crucial job besides attending to needy subjects. Their role is also entrepreneurial in that they must personally mobilize and coordinate the private resources required to make their wishes come true.

Like *Home Edition*, *Three Wishes* classifies and rewards certain modes of conduct, including personal responsibility and compassion for others. This code of ethics and conduct is differentiated from the system of state-sanctioned rights and responsibilities emphasized during the welfare stage of capitalism. As the *Three Wishes* casting call explains, "We are looking for emotional stories of people in need. We want to help deserving people. People who always help others, but never think of themselves." In the debut episode, a sick high-school teacher was characterized this way when the program agreed to grant her request for a new football field. From her hospital bed, the teacher explained that her students needed a place to play competitive football. The public school where she worked did not have the resources to purchase new turf for the field; nor did the town where the high school was located. *Three Wishes* did not dwell on the reasons for this funding shortage, but instead asked a private manufacturer to donate the needed materials. The host handling the case flew across the country to meet personally with the CEO of the company on camera. While the executive initially stammered that he was "not in the business of philanthropy," he did agree to make the donation, probably because television was involved. In this episode, *Three Wishes* demonstrated

“compassionate” capitalism as well as specific techniques of enlisting the corporate support of nonprofit causes.

By granting the teacher’s wish, *Three Wishes* demonstrated a private solution to a particular (and seemingly isolated) local problem that is actually part of a larger pattern – inadequate and profoundly unequal funding for public schools, particularly those located in low-income areas. Other episodes also gloss over the shrinking public sector by granting individual wishes that compensate for shortages of municipal and state resources. In one, *Three Wishes* secured private funding to build a town library to fulfill the dream of a sick teenager who loved to read books. According to the American Library Association, “America’s libraries are now facing the deepest budget cuts in history. Across the country libraries are reducing their hours, cutting staff or closing their doors – drastic measures that were not taken even during the Great Depression.” To overcome this problem, some supporters of libraries have advocated the pursuit of “diversified” private resources to insulate the public library system from a “dependency” on tax-based government funding. Although *Three Wishes* did not reference this trend, it did enact the new method of library funding within the highly emotional context of one girl’s chronic health problems. In a similar vein, *Three Wishes* agreed to help a young woman burdened with many thousands of dollars in student loan debt. Many recent college graduates are in this situation because federal grant and tuition assistance programs created during the Great Society era have been drastically downsized. Even low-interest student loans – which, unlike grants, must be repaid when the student graduates – are becoming harder to obtain: This episode of *Three Wishes* appeared around the time the House Education and the Workforce Committee approved \$14.5 billion in cuts to spending on student loans – a move that critics said would cost the average student borrower \$5,800 more to attend college. It was in this broader but unstated context that *Three Wishes* staff personally contacted Iowa Student Loan, the nonprofit lending institution to which the student was indebted. According to a Des Moines newspaper, the president/CEO of Iowa Student Loan was “happy to help” the Iowa State University graduate’s wish come true, but he also emphasized that his decision to waive her loans was an exception, not the rule. “Many young people begin their post-college career already in debt,” said the official, who placed responsibility for the situation squarely on parents and the young and advised, “it’s never too early to start financially planning for college.”²²

Three Wishes also demonstrates personal responsibility and self-entertainment in storylines that often overlap with contemporary welfare reform discourse. The program has helped several low-income single mothers with a wish to become better providers for their children by making it possible for them to pursue higher education and/or start their own small businesses. The women who are helped by NBC have, importantly, already “chosen” the path toward self-empowerment. The program is very clear to differentiate them from an implied image of single mothers who “wait around for” or “depend on” Welfare State entitlements. It is worth noting that when the public sector explicitly appears on *Three Wishes*, it is shown to be a rigid bureaucracy that is more hindrance than help to those who seek to empower themselves and their families. The program does call attention to elaborate systems of rules and paternalistic forms of address found in public bureaucracies, but these are dismissed as unavoidable annoyances rather than power dynamics worth addressing. In one episode, a boy wished for a new pickup truck for his stepfather. According to the narrative, the boy was grateful to the man for taking care of his family when his father died, and here the intervention overlapped with the current promotion of marriage and stable two-parent families as a way to overcome the need for welfare programs for low-income women and children. Upon discovering that the boy had not been adopted by his stepfather owing to the maze of official paperwork involved, host Amy Grant used the power of television to push the documents through a stalled bureaucratic process. After taking TV cameras into the country courthouse, she eventually tracked down the appointed judge during his off hours (he was at the airport, flying his personal plane) to obtain the necessary signature.

Three Wishes circulates discourses, or ways of thinking about welfare, the public sector, the family, and corporate America. However, like other charity programs it goes beyond this discursive role to also present applications, demonstrations, and techniques that are governmental in the sense of shaping and guiding human behavior toward specific ends. The *Three Wishes Dollars* program is an example of how charity TV incorporates behavioral action on the part of participants as well as viewers. According to NBC publicity, this “community outreach” program (which doubles as publicity for *Three Wishes*) works through the marriage of commerce and individual actions. The network kick-started the *Three Wishes Dollars* venture by traveling to 15 “markets”

to grant a wish to a local charity and “surprise shoppers and restaurant patrons by picking up the tab at select retailers, including grocery stores and restaurants.” NBC will pay the retailers with \$1 bills carrying *Three Wishes* stickers, which “cashiers will then distribute to customers with their change.” The corporate goal is to “drive recipients” to the NBC/*Three Wishes* web site by “encouraging consumers to use the marked dollars to fulfill another person’s wish to coincide with the show’s theme.” According to Barbara Blangiardi, vice-president of marketing and special projects at NBC, “It’s about touching people individually and creating and weaving a magical web of support and community around these individual wishes . . . We thought this grassroots program that . . . demonstrated and exemplified the [purpose] of the show was the kind of thing we wanted to do.” NBC also stated an intention to track and publicize the ways in which consumers used their special *Three Wishes* dollars. In the trade press, NBC executives predicted that the dollars would continue to generate good deeds. Summing up how commerce and compassion intersect in the network’s approach to community outreach, Blangiardi explained: “We are using the stickered dollar bills so the currency will get into the marketplace. And [we want to] encourage people to use that money to do something for someone else. This is a unique execution for us.”²³

Cable networks from Arts & Entertainment to MTV have also moved into charity TV programming, recognizing that reality-based do-good ventures are not only good for the network’s image but can also be a successful venue for high ratings. As one A&E executive put it, “Television used to have a public-service factor. Now the cable industry is finding a way to embrace those roots and offer entertainment programming that might also do some good. That’s the magic bullet if you can get both.” While the charity programs developed by cable tend to be aimed at specialized audiences and focus on a single need, such MTV’s car-makeover show *Pimp My Ride*, they incorporate many of the conventions and techniques discussed so far. The A&E network, which is owned by the Disney Corporation, has developed a broader approach with *Random 1*, a grittier version of charity TV that overlaps with the domestic/lifestyle intervention discussed in the next section. The official aim of this program is to “breathe life” into the parable of the Good Samaritan by “scouting the streets of America looking for people who need help solving everyday problems.” According to the *Random 1* web site, the program also demonstrates the

“power of grassroots philanthropy, defined as people helping people one at a time.” Toward that end, it advocates for “individuals who are ready to better themselves,” asking the question: “What can we do to help you help yourself?” Episodes have helped homeless people find shelter and unemployed people find jobs, among other good deeds. Even more than network charity programs, *Random 1* emphasizes the need for personal responsibility. It does not claim to make people’s dreams come true, nor does it present television as a safety net. In fact, it does not even accept applications, but instead selects people who need help on a “random” basis. What the program claims to offer is a “nudge, helpful push in a life-changing direction,” one that will presumably fold into the larger society via the tips for making a difference, from donating old clothes to the Salvation Army to “cleaning up a local park or playground,” promoted on the *Random 1* web site. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t, says A&E. The impetus to rise above the needs of the post-welfare society is on the individual.

Charity TV is mainly a United States-based production (although some of the shows, including *Home Edition*, do circulate internationally). This is undoubtedly related to both the economic dominance of US culture and advertising industries and the minimized state of welfare in the United States compared to other parts of the world. However, the format has begun to spread internationally, particularly to locations that, for complex reasons, lack a state infrastructure for providing social services. One example is Iraq, where *Labor and Materials*, a variation of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, debuted in 2004 to address the unmet needs of Iraqi families whose homes had been destroyed during the ongoing US intervention. According to a description of the program, “In 15-minute episodes, broken windows are made whole again. Blasted walls slowly rise again. Fancy furniture and luxurious carpets appear without warning in the living rooms of poor families. Over six weeks, houses blasted by U.S. bombs regenerate in a home-improvement show for a war-torn country.”²⁴ Corporate sponsors do not figure in this example of public service; instead, each episode of *Labor and Materials* encourages Iraqi TV viewers to donate the goods and services needed for future interventions. What links the program to the US version of charity TV, and to the interventions we will examine in the next chapter, is the enactment of private care through television as a foundation of “good” government.