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Wilkerson's Woes and Our Part in Them

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Op-ed

This week State Senator Dianne Wilkerson became a poster child for Massachusetts' political corruption. She has become the butt of jokes and cartoons. She has inspired a barrage of at the least snide comments on the Boston Herald's e-comment line: "it's not Dianne's fault she needed to get her Shameka done ... girl friend had to look good for the us poor folk that can't survive without her for the next 60 days !!" The Massachusetts Senate is shocked and prepared to expel her with no sadness. She has sinned and besmirched their name.

In one sense all this is classic celebrity "Gotcha." An easy target. Brittany Spears in the State House. Filly takes bribe in the Fill a Buster.

But it is not funny for those of us who put Wilkerson at the top of our lists when we needed to speak with someone about justice for low income women, for people punished forever by their criminal records. People in the district saw her in the streets when there was violence, and she didn't just show up for a photo-op. When UMass Boston (where I have taught for 30+ years) was swapping its urban mission for a world class corporate focus she spoke out because she knew what mattered to her community. And she helped us push them back. When Diane Dujon and I wrote an anthology on women's poverty, For Crying Out Loud, we spent hours following Dianne around, getting her to find the time to tell us about her life and her roles as a former welfare recipient, former NAACP lawyer, as a "rising star" from the black community who didn't leave.

But all the while many of us guessed or knew that Dianne was in trouble personally. She had money troubles beyond the norm and she wasn't managing well. There were backstories about her sons, about troubles of her own: was it addiction, depression, gambling? Speculations would rise and then fall when once again we needed her to go to bat for the community, for justice, for us. When we tried to offer personal support she would just say she had come to expect attacks, she learned to ignore them, so should we. The truth was in the struggle.