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React



WASHINGTON -- Virginia Leavell missed the first part of Occupy DC's [takeover of McPherson Square](#) because she was home sick. (She thinks she might have caught the flu when she and her four roommates ran a kissing booth at a recent party.) But on a beautiful fall afternoon, she's in the square, along with dozens of other protesters who are holding signs and spreading the "[We Are The 99 Percent](#)" message. The Occupy movement's most consistent meme, it means that America is failing 99 percent of the people who live here, sacrificing them in favor of the 1 percent who control the vast majority of the country's wealth and power, and that this inequitable distribution of resources should change.

Leavell, 28, wears her red hair loose and a little messy. She has tattoos, a piercing in her upper ear and [big hipster glasses](#). She looks the part of the young protester, concerned about overwhelming student loans, an underwhelming job market and politicians who aren't concerned enough about the sad economics of most people's lives.

Only Leavell isn't part of the 99 percent. In addition to having a job (she's a union organizer), Leavell inherited around \$1 million a few years ago. She owns the house that hosted the kissing booth. So what's she doing occupying D.C.?

"I'm an ally," she said to The Huffington Post. "I don't have debt. I was given money. I'm an ally."

Leavell grew up in Virginia outside Charlottesville. Her family has been "landowners in the South for hundreds of years," she said. As a teen, she began to feel that her family's wealth and conservative politics were somehow at odds with how she wanted to live. During her senior year of high school -- she was a boarder at Alexandria, Va.'s [Episcopal High School](#) -- she started protesting, joining the 2000 demonstrations against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in D.C.

Leavell became an organizer in college. While attending Georgetown University -- she focused on peace and justice studies, and German -- she put together a living wage campaign that involved a long hunger strike and [pushed the university to raise wages substantially for more than 400 campus workers](#).

The success of that campaign was heady. She learned, "If we organize, we can win. So we all need to organize."

After college, Leavell lived in Thailand for two years, working for a study-abroad program, before coming back to the District to take up life as a professional activist. Despite her wealth, she said she does not eat at fancy restaurants, preferring potluck dinners and house parties that can be more inclusive, although she does spend some money on clothes, feeling it's important to be taken seriously.

"I think the point is that everyone should be able to buy clothes that are comfortable and have food that they like," she said.

Also despite her wealth, Leavell considers herself part of the movement to dismantle the capitalist economy and sees the Occupy protests as advancing that movement. As a self-described "white person of privilege," she recognizes the tension in this position. But she said she's willing to live with that tension until she's completed her life's work and her "privilege" -- which is to say, the societal advantages bestowed by inherited wealth and race -- is taken away.

Yes, she inherited a lot of money in 2009. And she kept some of it. But, Leavell said, she gave most of the money away -- much of it as seed funding for the [Wayside Center for Popular Education](#), a retreat in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains for radicals and social activists. (The kissing-booth party was, in fact, a fundraiser for Wayside.) She's part of [Resource Generation](#), a nationwide group for wealthy young radicals who are, as [a recent blog post](#) put it, "taking a stand as people in the 1% and showing that it isn't just the 99% who want change."

Leavell knows the capitalist system will not fall quickly. Until then, she plans to donate, to organize, to protest. To have potluck dinners with other activists who, because of family money, could also eat at any restaurant in the city. She plans to remain an ally of the 99 percent, to keep rallying with Occupy DC and to push to bring about a world without any Resource Generation.

"I was born in the 1 percent because of my family, and I am working really hard for the radical redistribution of wealth," Leavell said. "Because that's the right thing to do. I want very much to live in a world where we all have equal access to resources and we all can get what we need to live comfortably. It's against my self-interest."