



SISTERS *of* CHARITY
FOUNDATION
OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Rebirthing Hope

FATHERHOOD LISTENING SESSION SUMMARY

*Columbia, South Carolina
Tuesday, June 21, 2011*

- Rebirthing Hope -
Celebrating Fathers and Families

INTRODUCTION

“The fatherhood program has rebirthed my hope.”
Fatherhood Program Participant

In celebration and recognition of Father’s Day, the Sisters of Charity Foundation of South Carolina hosted a listening session in partnership with the South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families on June 21, 2011. Fathers and program representatives from each of the six fatherhood programs throughout the state of South Carolina joined Foundation and Center Board and staff representatives for fellowship and sharing. Each father eloquently shared his story, and offered encouraging words to other fathers across program locations. Below are ten insights we heard directly from the fathers’ perspectives that struck us across the multiple stories shared.

“Before starting the fatherhood program, I felt like I was drowning.”
Fatherhood Program Participant

Prior to beginning the fatherhood program, many fathers expressed they couldn’t see the light at the end of the tunnel of darkness that they faced. Some fathers have made “less than best” decisions based on limited options to overcome the difficult circumstances or obstacles they were facing. In the face of trouble, running from problems often seems like the easiest solution. As a result, fathers often arrive to the fatherhood programs defeated, with multiple experiences of being overlooked, ignored and labeled in the various systems they have encountered. They often enter feeling hopeless and overwhelmed. The fathers we spoke with shared that being a part of the fatherhood program provides a refuge, a place where they are embraced in a nonjudgmental setting. With consistent love and support, as fathers’ progress throughout the program, they begin to feel hope again and believe in a future for themselves and their families that has unlimited possibilities.

“I’d be in prison or dead if it weren’t for the fatherhood program, it changed my life.”
Fatherhood Program Participant

All of the fathers expressed a sincere appreciation to the South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families and the Sisters of Charity Foundation of South Carolina for the investment made in fatherhood which changed their lives. There are many critical elements that enable fatherhood programs to change lives. While some of the fathers voluntarily enroll in the fatherhood programs, others may be court-ordered as an alternative to incarceration for non-payment of child support. We heard from fathers who were referred by judges to the “Jobs not Jail” alternatives to incarceration program express that they did not want to initially participate in the program because they did not trust “the system.” However, once they joined fatherhood programs and trust was established, these fathers began to get the full benefit of what the program had to offer. Fatherhood programs provide a place where fathers can get support and assistance without having to feel vulnerable or threatened – and the walls they have built around them begin to come down.

“Real men cry, we are like family here.”
Fatherhood Program Participant

Men are expected to be strong – making it hard to show vulnerabilities or ask for help. The peer-to-peer support built among the fathers through fatherhood group discussions provides an invaluable source of strength and encouragement. Upon entering the program, fathers are surrounded by a new source of peer support, other men who understand the obstacles they may be facing and can challenge each other to confront issues that they may be trying to avoid.

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“Now that my heart is in the right place, I am proud to be a father.”
Fatherhood Program Participant

The spiritual foundation upon which fatherhood programs are built grounds fathers and provides an often previously untapped spiritual resource for many of the fathers. God is important in the fatherhood programs and the spiritual aspect is not only comforting, but also needed. It helps men set their priorities and determine what is most important. Several of the fathers grew up without father figures in their homes or had fathers that were not positive role models. These men emphasized that even through their dad wasn't there for them, they now recognize that life is about choices and they consciously refuse to repeat the pattern they may have grown up with. Being spiritually grounded provides the perspective and strength they need to continue pressing forward and apply new values and beliefs that they are learning to their lives.

“I look up to the fatherhood program staff – they are my role models.”
Fatherhood Program Participant

Fathers shared how grateful they feel to the fatherhood program staff for being positive role models and helping them to change. Fatherhood program staff not only offer needed spiritual guidance, they provide moral and emotional support needed to make difficult life changes. The fatherhood program staff are truly invested in the success of each father wrapping their arms around fathers to support, encourage, motivate, walk beside them and believe in them. For men who are often ignored in the broader society, receiving a call from a fatherhood program staff checking on them means the world.

“The fatherhood program staff taught me the life skills I needed to be able to reach my dreams.”
Fatherhood Program Participant

Fathers desperately need knowledge that is relevant, applicable and transferrable to their real-world situations. Increased life skills were necessary to build a brighter future – such as learning how to dress, walk and talk properly in order to be respected, approachable or hired. Whether it was counseling, building communication skills, learning how to manage finances, or gaining a deeper understanding of how to cope with stress, fathers learn in the fatherhood programs to concentrate on solutions, instead of concentrating only on their problems. They are reminded to build the skills they need to be better men, in order to become better fathers.

“I needed to improve my education and become employable in order to keep moving forward.”
Fatherhood Program Participant

Fathers want to work but often only qualify for low-wage jobs. In today's economy, higher wage jobs are even more competitive. In order to maximize their potential in the work place, fathers must be willing to further their education or obtain new job-related skills. Through job training assistance or pursuing additional educational options, the fathers are supported in their pursuit of obtaining liveable wage employment, including overcoming court-related issues and transportation barriers. With each new step taken they learn, by making it a priority to help themselves and improve their lives, they are surrounded by other people willing to help them along the way.

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“My kids inspire, uplift and motivate me to be a better man and father.”
Fatherhood Program Participant

Fatherhood hits home at different times. For some of the fathers, it was the moment they heard a child was to be born; for others, it was when they held their child for the first time and looked into their child’s eyes that they knew what being a man was really about. In those moments they recognized that their life was not just about living for themselves anymore, instead, it now had a different purpose; living for the child. Some of the fathers grew up without fathers themselves, and through the program, they have come to recognize they can’t allow not having a father define the type of father they desire to be. Because parenting is a lifelong commitment, they learn the best way to love their children is to be a part of their lives, spend time with them and keep the promises that they have made to their children. Quality time means listening, learning and creating new memories together. Fathers are encouraged to bring their children to the family-centered activities that are offered throughout the year.

“Fatherhood is not just about being a man; it’s about being a family.”
Fatherhood Program Participant

As fathers became better dad’s through the program, often their entire family life changed for the better through improved parenting and co-parenting skills. By reaching for higher goals as a family unit, even if they were not all necessarily living in the same home, a greater family stability overall is obtained. Even for those fathers that are not with their children on a daily basis, assistance with mediating relationships with their child’s mother and navigating the child support system, they have learned to invest as much in their children as they can during any amount of time they share together. The fathers also work on improving their communication skills and putting anger behind them that they may have towards the mother of their children in order to create a better environment for their children in the long run (i.e. knowing not to argue in front of the children, etc).

“We need to reach more fathers.”
Fatherhood Program Participant

All of the fathers expressed compassion for fathers who are in need of a fatherhood program in their life. They were adamant that more should be done to inform fathers and make the public aware of the fatherhood programs in their community.

SUMMARY

Since 2003, the South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families through the services of the local fatherhood programs have served more than 6,857 fathers. Lives destined for tragedy, to become yet another statistic, now have a future and hope. Seeing fathers for who they are, listening to their struggles, caring about them and providing support provides the opportunity for transformation to occur. The fatherhood programs provide a stronghold for fathers; they no longer need to be branded for past mistakes. They have overcome so many frustrations, setbacks and challenges but are standing up for their children.

The impact of the fatherhood program goes beyond fathers. For every father reached, there is a child with a brighter future who is connected to their dad and a stronger family unit. Since 2003, over 12,220 children have also been touched by the South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families via the services of the local fatherhood programs. The fathers love their children and want everything for their children that anybody else wants for their own children. These fathers, once empowered themselves, in turn, are willing to advocate and be a voice for other fathers – thus, rebirthing hope in generations to come.