



Ohio Practitioners' Network for Fathers and Families

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Newsletter

Reflections on "The Summit"

By Calvin Williams, President, OPNFF Board of Directors

In sports when a player performs consistently with excellence, his or her name is shortened, almost as if it were a verb – Ruth, Ali, Jordan, Gretzky, Tiger.

So it is for a little OPNFF sponsored event held this past May in Cincinnati. The Summit. The full name of the event was the Advance Fatherhood Ohio! Summit at the Marriott Kingsgate Conference Center. Yet since the event, people refer to it simply as, "The Summit". And it's been referred to a lot.

Over two-hundred and eighty people registered.

About 210 people came from all over to participate in what was designed as a local/regional event that took on a statewide flavor, in no small part due to our co-sponsors: Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections, the Ohio Justice & Policy Center, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services Office of Child Support, the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood.

One powerful aspect of the event was how quickly and strongly people reacted and committed to being a part of it. Like the throngs in Zaire desiring

to see Ali vs. Foreman in 1974, there was a clamoring for information and registration when The Summit was announced. Once we began the registration process, people registered at a rate of 10-12 per day for weeks. One couldn't help but get the sense that there was a distinct hunger to gather around fatherhood policy issues like Child Support Guidelines Council, Incarceration and Child Support, Fathers Reentering the Community, which were topics for the panel discussions at the event.

Who were these people registering and why were

they coming? Intuitively one would think they were fatherhood practitioners, or other family serving professionals. While those groups were well represented, a closer look at the attendees on the day of the event revealed stark diversity. Foundations, hospitals, mental health providers, Adult Probation, higher education, public schools are just a few of the organizations represented. Deepening the array of attendees was the large number of fathers from the community, all clearly focused on gaining what The Summit had to offer. There were probably as many reasons for attending as there were people

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Promising Practice: Father-2-Father Program in Columbus

By Ann Fisher, Metro Columnist, Columbus Dispatch *(reprinted with permission)*

Anyone can celebrate Father's Day. There's no law that says you have to like your father, or that you have to be a good father yourself, to give or receive a greeting card.

Twelve young men who graduated from a new fathering program probably would tell you that, this year, they'll feel a whole lot better on the receiving end.

Glenn Harris lost his father to crime and pun-

ishment. While Harris grew up, his father shifted in and out of Ohio's prison system. There was a stepfather, but Harris never bonded with him.

And when he found himself with children of his own, he had to learn on his own how to manage the role, which, for him, included child support. When he lost his retail-management job a few years ago, he struggled with finances. But

he also had earned a business degree from Otterbein College and knew how to research his rights and options.

That's not the case for many young fathers who are undereducated and oblivious to personal finance. And without personal childhood experience as a guide, many of them fail.

If your father abandoned you, how do you know how to stay with

your children? If your father abused or neglected you, how do you nurture and protect them? We can bellow all day about children having children and the now-multigenerational pressures of single parenthood, especially in the black community. But the stereotype of young black men as absent or bad fathers is unfair, Harris said. Of course, he's right.

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Columbus Urban League Graduates First Father 2 Father Class

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A few years ago, he started the African-American Male Initiative at the Columbus Urban League. From the beginning, he envisioned a fathering class and, on May 29, saw his first 12 students graduate from Father 2 Father.

Twelve doesn't sound like a lot, but among them there are many children who will benefit now as well as later, when they have their own children.

The class was created

especially for young men, ages 16 to 35, of any race who are caught in the tangled web of child support and visitation rights. Harris brings in experts who teach about anger management, parenting skills and personal finance. He also shares his own struggles.

Some of the students are referred by the Franklin County Child Support Enforcement Agency. Some are ordered to attend by judges. Some, such as

27-year-old Nathaniel Jenkins, learn about it through the grapevine and enroll themselves. Jenkins was adopted when he was 7, old enough to appreciate his loving, adoptive parents but too old to forget the flaws of his mostly absent birth father.

The class taught him how to look to his adoptive father for inspiration. He shared his new vision in a speech to his children and others at graduation. "The father

I choose to be is a father that is kind, wise, understanding, sensitive, strong," he said, "a father who is there for my children, and their needs, who listens and gives them good advice."

Sounds like the perfect father. But fatherhood can't be bought, Jenkins knows, or put on like a pair of pants. It is learned. And the lessons are hard.

For more information about Father 2 Father, e-mail AAMI@cul.org or call Glenn Harris at 614-372-2344.

A Not So Happy Father's Day: Reflections on Faith-Based Programming for Fathers

By Reverend Eli Williams, OPNFF Board of Directors and President of Urban Light Ministries, Springfield, Ohio

Unfortunately for many fathers, Father's Day and all the other days are not filled with cheerfulness. Here is why. They long to be part of their children's lives. The Creator has placed within each male an instinct to care for his children. That instinct needs to be encouraged to develop into effective parenting by family, religion, government and society.

Tragically, modern culture in America has failed to reinforce the importance of fathers in the lives of their children. And while there are plenty of genuinely deadbeat dads, often it is more a matter of being a "dead broke" dad. The former get lots of attention. The latter, hardly a mention. The inability of such fathers to pay child support as ordered results in criminalization, as though incarceration

is an answer, when a living wage job and parenting education would be much more appropriate. These men are trapped in a "no-win" situation. And truly, no one wins, least of all their children.

It's clear. Children and teens need both mother and father actively engaged in their lives. There is plenty of research to prove this. Yet, father absence continues to be a national epidemic and is a major problem here in our community. Almost 40% of American children will go to bed tonight in a household in which their natural father does not live. The consequences of this are profound. Children from father-absent homes are five times more likely to live in poverty; three times more likely to fail in school; two to three times more

likely to develop emotional or behavioral problems; and three times more likely to commit suicide.

Absence is not always the fault of the father. I've talked with plenty of them who want to be there for their children but are denied their rights by vengeful mothers. These men become angry and frustrated that there is no justice for them. They question why there is not as much pressure put on the custodial parent to comply with the noncustodial parent's right to visitation as there is to force the noncustodial parent to "pay-up". For the sake of our community's children, we must do better. Unless he is a danger to them, a father needs to be empowered, encouraged and equipped to share in

the parenting of his children.

To address the need for parenting education for fathers, since 2006 Urban Light Ministries, a Springfield faith-based organization, has been offering Nurturing Fathers for Life. NFfL is a free 39-hour fatherhood training class which has helped dozens of men get the knowledge and skills they need to become better dads. The class also helps men heal from their hurts. NFfL is open to all Clark County fathers whether or not they live with their children. Classes are currently alternating between the Urban Light facility and the Clark County Jail thanks to Sheriff Gene Kelly. A recent class in the jail served 48 willing men. In one session, nearly 70% (11 out of 16) of the participants grew up without their biological fathers actively sharing in their

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Book Review: THE MISSING PIECE TO FATHERHOOD PROGRAMMING: Become a Touchdown Dad, David Justus, author

Review by Burl Lemon, Executive Director of Forever Dads in Zanesville, Ohio

With just a few years under my belt, even having worked with several hundred dads, I still consider myself a “newbie” to the fatherhood practitioner arena. Originally I was convinced, most importantly, that meeting dads at their crossroads of life, in the mist of their questions, was how this fathering business really worked. After seeing the fathers’ look of dismay, however, I soon became aware that in the mist of all the programs, training opportunities and case management formats, there was still a missing piece. Although some fathers had the good fortune of a healthy role model, even when their biological father was not present, it quickly became apparent that the lack of a positive male influence was crumbling the family. These fathers’ problems were mostly a result of this dilemma.

David Justus’s book, “Become a Touchdown Dad: Turn Your Love of Football into a Winning Parenting Style,” is not only a great tool for parents, but the missing piece to fatherhood programming. It has been

written in a story format and in a language that dads off the street can read and understand — it just makes sense.

I think, however, the greatest tool this book provides is an idea. It is the idea that fathers have a responsibility and the ability to make a difference in their family. Justus is able to take the complex challenges fathers face and using football principles provide practical solutions in a way that is informative and yet entertaining. Since sports are a common thread that is shared among most men, the message is delivered in way that fathers can identify with and apply to their situation.

On a higher level, the mentor-model demonstrated throughout the book is the basis to what is missing in most fatherhood programs. As fatherhood practitioners, we have a variety of services that meet the needs of fathers in various life stages, but there is no program that supports fathers on a long-term basis. This book

provides the fundamentals of such a program, which Forever Dads is developing as a means of keeping fathers involved in the lives of their children.

Become a Touchdown Dad is full of lessons for both parents and fatherhood practitioners. I believe reading it will prove extremely beneficial to fathers, mothers, teachers, counselors, coaches, or anyone who works with fathers or families.

A free preview of *Become A Touchdown Dad* is available online at www.TouchdownDad.com. Individual books are available at Amazon.com or bookstores everywhere, while bulk orders for use with fatherhood groups or programs are available at a significant discount by contacting the publisher at info@northcoastuniversity.com and typing OPNFF in the subject line.

Burl Lemon is the executive director of ForeverDads in Zanesville, Ohio. Married to his wife Brenda for over thirty years, they have a daughter (still at home), and two sons that have birthed a granddaughter and grand-

son. Since 2005, he has been actively involved with the fatherhood movement and in 2006 became the executive director of ForeverDads, a newly formed community-based, non-profit organization whose sole purpose is to *celebrate and strengthen fatherhood*. “Fathering is a full-time experience that doesn’t rest nor is retired when the nest is emptied or any of the children mature to adults,” says Burl, “Once you are a father, you are forever a dad.”

As a father of three children, and as a step-father, **David Justus** believes that children benefit from the presence of mothers and fathers in their lives. This belief has come to define his purpose in life, which led to his involvement with the Ohio Fatherhood Movement, where he serves with the Ohio Practitioners’ Network for Fathers and Families and is the founder and fatherhood coordinator of the Northcoast Fatherhood Collaborative in Toledo, Ohio. In addition, as a motivational speaker, Justus provides a winning message to groups and organizations about parenting their children in a way that is humorous and enjoyable.

David Justus can be reached at touchdowndad@hotmail.com

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Faith Based Fatherhood Program in Springfield, Ohio

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parenting. That is consistent with national research which shows that boys from homes in which the father was not present, are twice as likely to commit crimes for which they are incarcerated.

Urban Light and our partners are seeking to break the cycle. Here is what a participant had to say about NFfL: *This program has really helped me. It has given me understanding of: The difference of parents... from what a mother gives, to what a father gives, in different ways to the child. How it takes forgiveness of self and others to recondition self. Helps me understand the mother, the woman and how they work as a person. Has taught me how to take and react to certain situations with my children. Taught me some of the different outcomes, of positive and negative ways that your child could suffer from when a situation isn't handled properly. Thank you so very much.*

We are endeavoring to create a support system for men who want to be better fathers. As a start, once per month, case workers and attorneys from The Clark County Child Support Enforcement Agency volunteer their time to work with Urban Light to present a free monthly Parent Support Clinic for NFfL participants. The fathers are given the opportunity to ask questions about child support, visitation rights, custody, paternity establishment and how to navigate the legal system. The men are grateful for this and the volunteers appreciate the chance to demonstrate that they are not haters. In fact, I've found that many CSEA staff care sincerely about these fathers and want to see them engaged as providing, protecting, nurturing fathers for their children. For them, it is not just about collecting money. It's about the children. May many more fathers find themselves happier next Father's Day as they become nurturing fathers for life.

Calvin Williams Reflects on "The Summit"

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there, but one thing was clear, everyone knew that something has to change - the inconsistency, lack of logic and the unintentional negative impact heaped upon fathers who engage public systems. What that says to me is that seeds sown over the past five or so years in Ohio have taken root. People know better than ever that fathers matter - all fathers matter.

Tiger blasting a first tee shot to within 100 feet of the hole describes how leaders from each sponsoring organization set the tone for the day with their opening remarks. Then, Carrie Brown from the State Office of Child Support, Dan Cade, Section Chief of Child Support Legal Department, Hamilton County CSEA and Representative Clayton Luckie from House District 39 (Dayton/Montgomery County) provided context, background and accurate information in setting up the discussions for each panel. A good idea to have mothers on each panel turned out even better when we heard heartfelt "testimony" from women who are vicariously experiencing the difficulty their partners are having in managing various public systems as fathers. The voice of the mother in the fatherhood discourse was strong and necessary.

Throughout the day and until the end, like Jordan going to the hole, the dialectic couldn't be stopped. Indeed, we reached The Summit. Many times during the day one could literally hear the "hallelujahs" as points were made, understandings were reached and hope was delivered. More importantly, ideas and strategies were shared in front of the people in state government who could effect change.

I think what I've been saying for a while now continues to ring true: intuitively, people know that fatherhood is elemental; that in order to improve child and family well being, to stabilize and nourish communities, we must involve, support and celebrate the father.

All materials related to the Advance Fatherhood Ohio! Summit are now posted on our website, www.opnff.net – click on the "public policy" page. You will find a pdf package of all of the materials distributed at the Summit, a compilation of all comments and questions, with answers; and the powerpoint presentations delivered by panel presenters Dan Cade and Carri Brown.