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PRESERVATION

Introduction

When Ralph Nesson first approached me about becoming the founding Board President of the Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Program, I had to think hard about the wisdom of taking on any additional responsibilities. At the time, in 1989, I was First Lady of Arkansas, had a busy private law practice, was rearing a young child, and already had extensive community commitments. However, the more I thought about the daily desperation in the lives of so many other young parents, and the more convinced I became of the enormous potential this program had for dealing with that desperation in a practical, productive, and lasting way, the more I knew I had to try.

Ten years later, now that over 4,000 scholarships have been awarded through this program to single parents whose lives have been transformed permanently for the better, I'm very grateful I was given an opportunity to help bring this program to life. I hope this book will inform and inspire many others, who will then replicate the program in their own states and communities.

The goal of the Single Parent Scholarship Fund is to assist poor single parents to complete the higher education which is indispensable for skilled employment and family economic security in today's world. Even the most ambitious and determined of single parents often finds herself or himself struggling against an array of discouraging factors: the high cost of tuition and books; the scarcity and expense of good day care; the absence of extended family or friends to provide backup day care and emotional support; the lack of reliable transportation; the lack of information about available scholarships and other assistance. No wonder so many become discouraged, and the downhill spiral begins.

The Single Parent Scholarship Program begins by directing recipients toward every form of tuition and scholarship assistance available for post-secondary education. It provides guidance toward all public and private assistance, everything from housing to health care, for which recipients and their children may be eligible. Recipients are offered mentoring by knowledgeable and responsible adults in their communities. And then the scholarship itself is awarded, usually \$500 per semester for those who are making good progress toward graduation. That amount may seem negligible to some, but in fact it often provides the indispensable margin between success and failure.

The uses of that money are as varied as the lives of the individuals involved – everything from child care to car repairs, school shoes to utility bills. One woman memorably recounted for me how she had been unable, prior to the Single Parent Scholarship, to take certain courses necessary for her degree because of the laboratory fees involved and the cost of a lab coat, essential expenses simply not covered by her tuition assistance. Another woman was able to purchase automobile insurance, another bought two new tires for her car, without which these women were literally immobilized. It is the flexibility in the use of the money that makes it so valuable to scholarship recipients, not only for its monetary worth but for its symbolic meaning. Many scholarship recipients tell us that simply knowing that others had enough confidence in them to invest in their lives and trust their judgment was a powerful and uplifting agent for change.

Scholarship recipients have told me that often the biggest beneficiaries of the scholarship are their children who, watching their moms taking their schooling so seriously, become much better students themselves. One woman related that she was on the verge of dropping out of college, worried that the sacrifices she was asking of her children were just too weighty; but her son's schoolteacher told her, "Don't you dare drop out. Not a day goes by that your son doesn't brag to his classmates that his Mom's going to be an engineer."

The stories of degrees earned, good jobs obtained, children's lives immeasurably improved are an endless source of gratification to the volunteers and contributors who have brought this program to maturity all across Arkansas. However, the evidence of this program's success is much more than anecdotal. At this writing, 48 counties are represented by Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Fund affiliates; and an extensive follow-up survey conducted in 1997 indicated that 69% of scholarship recipients had either graduated or were currently enrolled; and 92% of graduates were employed at higher than poverty-level wages.

And what better evidence of this program's effectiveness could there be than the fact that the author of this volume, Lori Holyfield, herself one of the program's first scholarship recipients, used the funds to earn a degree from the University of Arkansas, went on to secure a Ph.D., and is now a member of the University of Arkansas faculty? I know Lori shares my hopes that the information provided in her book will be used by many others, to establish Single Parent Scholarship Funds in their own communities.

There is no reason that this wonderful idea can't work in places beyond Arkansas. Local businesses, foundations, churches, civic organizations, and private citizens can join together to form their own scholarship funds and their own committees, designed to help single parents in their communities lift themselves and their families out of poverty on a permanent basis. The investment is minimal. But the rewards for the recipient, their communities, and all those who become involved, are rich indeed.

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May 3, 1999

Mrs. Hillary Rodham Clinton
Office of the First Lady
White House
Washington, DC

Dear Mrs. Clinton,

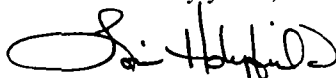
Allow me to introduce myself. I am Lori Holyfield. I currently teach sociology at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville campus. I am working with Ralph Nesson to produce a book which documents the Arkansas Single-Parent Scholarship Fund and its tremendous efforts in assisting single parents to achieve self-sufficiency through education. Ralph has shared with me your most generous offer to write the introduction to my book. Please forgive my delayed response. Over the past weeks, I have had numerous conversations with you in my mind but I became overwhelmed each time I sat down to write to you. When I received the news from Ralph, I called my daughter immediately and we shared tears of joy over the phone. Mrs. Clinton, there are no words to express the depth of my gratitude for your kind offer. Your advocacy for families and children have been a model for the entire nation and your tireless efforts to help change perceptions of single parents has impacted more lives than you know. I can think of no greater honor than what your offer entails. It has taken weeks for my feet to touch the ground.

I want to share with you a little about the structure of the book. I have enclosed a draft of the preface to the book in order to give you a sense of the style in which I am writing. A chapter of introduction, detailing your role in founding the ASPSF and its history, will lend great credibility to this project. Ralph has explained that he can help provide the historical details and will assist you in any way. In addition, if I can be of help, please do not hesitate to call upon me. The voices of the women in this book will tell of their struggles, their dreams of self-sufficiency, and most of all, their successes! While my intention is to apply a systematic sociological investigation to the transition from poverty to self-sufficiency through education, my objective is to also highlight the actual lived experiences of the families we speak to throughout Arkansas, weaving into their stories, the sociological backdrop of the structural conditions in which they live. Besides the fact that this work is a labor of love, I am both confident and hopeful that the completed book will reach a broad audience of legislators, policy makers, service providers, and academics.

I am currently speaking with several publishers to find an appropriate outlet for the book. With your introduction, the preface, and one more sample chapter, I am confident I can secure a quality press for the work. My goal is to meet with representatives in August at the American Sociological Association meetings in Chicago. Ideally, it would help the process along if I am able to send a sample packet prior to August 1, 1999. Thus, if it would be possible for you to have a draft of the introduction chapter by mid-to-late July, it would be an immense boost to this process. I do realize your busy schedule, however, and will understand if this time-line is not reasonable, given your other commitments and demands.

Again, I cannot thank you enough for your kind offer. It means more to me than I can ever express.

Gratefully yours,



Lori Holyfield, Ph.D.

Introduction

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Hillary Rodham Clinton

Preface

The story I am about to share with you does not come freely, I admit. In the process of writing this book, I was encouraged by colleagues and friends to write of my own journey out of poverty. I resisted at all points. “I am a sociologist,” I proudly exclaimed. “Nobody wants to read my narcissistic tale. It wouldn’t be research!” “But you can’t leave it out,” my co-workers replied. “You’re an ‘insider’ and your experiences have shaped your voice in this research.” I would nod, agreeably, and then go on to explain that my goal was to remain as objective as I could and that it might be distracting for the readers of the book if they thought I was too “close” to my subject. Typically, the response was, “Oh, I see.” I was not very convincing.

Over several months of struggling with what came to be a moral dilemma, I realized my resistance had little to do with my philosophy of research. I was simply trying to avoid the pain of sharing my personal story. I was willing to tell the stories of others. That was different, I rationalized. I could provide them confidentiality, something I wouldn’t be able to obtain. Being poor, after all, carries with it an enormous social stigma. I wanted to avoid this at all costs. My motivation was unconscious at first. It would simply be more comfortable to keep my own voice silent, so much easier to forget, and as I would come to acknowledge, even easier to deny. The change in my decision came one night during a conversation with a single-parent scholarship recipient. We were at a party for a mutual friend. We talked at length about the project and she agreed to be interviewed for the upcoming book. “I’ll do it,” she agreed. “At least you know where I’m coming from.” Our friend interjected, “Are you going to tell about yourself?” “No,” I replied. “I’m just the researcher.” “Why not?,” the single-parent asked. She appeared puzzled by my quick response. “You’re one of us,” she continued. She was right.

Getting By

Megan and I lived on Pettigrew street, one block from the Levi Plant. I used to joke with the neighbors how I never needed an alarm clock. The workers at the plant arrived a little before 6:00 a.m. and I always swore they dislodged their mufflers just before they turned on our street, as if to say, “We’re here, we’re loud, get used to it!” We never did. The house was one of those small frame, tract homes that never smelled clean, no matter how hard I tried. Poverty has its own musty smell. But my mother had always told me, “To be poor is one thing. To be dirty and poor is quite another.” The best I could achieve was the smell of pine-sol which only masked it enough to create a different version of intolerable.

The windows of the house were perpetually fogged from the gases released between the double panes. I’d never lived in a house with double pane windows so at first it was like Christmas year-round, until a friend explained that foggy windows meant the insulation was no longer working. I couldn’t afford to replace them and the landlord apparently couldn’t either, so one day my daughter Megan and I cut out paper snow-flakes and taped them to the windows. I told her we were “accentuating the positive.” She liked the idea.

The house had its amusing points. A furnace, the type that stretches from the floor to the ceiling, was located in the living room, on the wall, between our bedrooms. Megan and I were sure it was haunted and would explode one day. It seemed to burst into action every time we walked past. Sometimes we would try to sneak up on it just to see if we could tip-toe past without being caught. I imagined it to be a fiery god that demanded reverence. I both feared and respected it. It was, after all, our first home since the divorce that didn’t have wood heat and it did not require stoking in the middle of the night. Besides, the housing authority approved the house for rental assistance and the rent was cheap. And while we didn’t own a mower, we did have a yard which was a far cry better than the alternative; a housing authority apartment. Besides, the house was just large enough for the two of us and the rent *was* cheap.

It was 1984 and Megan was six years old. Her father and I divorced when she was two and contact between the two of them was little to none. Her birthday fell in October, causing her to miss enrollment in the first grade with her friends. She was too old to enroll in another year of head-start. So, I entered her in a nursery a few blocks away and paid almost one-third of my paycheck to keep her there. There may have been assistance for child care but because I was a full-time worker, I didn't receive AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children). If I was eligible, I never knew. Besides, I felt humiliated enough every time I paid the rent or bought groceries with the small amount of food stamps we received. I dreaded the glances at the check-out stand. I imagined people watching me leave to see if I really drove a Cadillac. I paid the child care and we held on as best we could.

I had tried several things to keep us afloat after the divorce. I waited tables, stocked produce, worked the graveyard shift in a factory, and for extra cash, played in a rhythm and blues band. For a few years, I cleaned windows for local grocery stores on the weekends until someone came along with a lower bid. But by 1982, I had run out of options. Traditional women's work was getting us nowhere. Thus, I entered the world of construction. Because this was "mans" work, I was sure it had to pay better than what I was accustomed to and with a ninth-grade education, was probably the best I could do. I tried my hand at installing lockers for the athletic building on the campus at a local University, ironically, the one I teach at today, then went on to work on other projects as a laborer, meaning, I was a "grunt" worker. My co-workers used to poke fun at students as they passed by and speak of their "ivory tower" worlds, but I never did. I so wanted to be one of those students but knew I couldn't get there from here, or so I thought at the time. When the job was finished, I hired on as a manpower worker, building bridges. I tied steel. "Rodbusting" is what they called it but the official title was "iron worker-reinforcer." I was miles away from school but the images from campus stayed with me.

Construction is not easy work and the pay was nowhere near what I had hoped. Megan and I barely stayed afloat. Sometimes we skimmed the surface, sometimes we bobbed up and down, and all too often we came up, gasping for air just before we went under again. We never had a phone in those days. That would have been a luxury. I paid the bills in a sporadic fashion, the light bill one month, the gas and water the next. A few years ago I saw an episode of the sitcom, *Roseanne*. She was explaining to her husband how she had learned to keep her utilities on by sending the gas company the check for the light bill and the light company, the water bill, and so on. I remember laughing and commenting to my husband, "I thought I was the only one who did that!" But there was little humor to our real life situation. For Megan and I, poverty and everything that came with it, was clinching its fist and pounding us in the gut. We seemed glued to this downward spiral and every exit was blocked. Indeed, it was, but not for the reasons I thought.

Opportunities *were* being blocked but I hadn't had a sociology class and didn't know that there is a direct correlation between education and poverty. I didn't know that as many as 24% of those without at least a high-school diploma live in poverty. I didn't know that with a college education, the chances of living in poverty dropped to a dramatic two percent. I just knew that I was unlucky! I couldn't appreciate the fact, that without an education, this was truly as good as it would ever be. All I knew was that I was divorced, willing to work and struggle for my family, and it simply was not enough. Everything I had been raised to believe was not holding true. I wasn't lazy. I wasn't holding out for a prince charming to sweep me off my feet. I wasn't wading out to sea, foolishly waiting for some ship to come in. I had my oar in the water and I was paddling hard, fast, and damn it, I couldn't get out of the eddy. It was the little things that kept us down, a tooth ache, the flu, the measles, a missed day from work, a car that wouldn't start. I remember telling my dentist once, "You know, it costs a lot

to be poor.” Preventive health care and wellness programs were not in my vocabulary. Like 40 million other Americans, health insurance for me, was only a dream.

Making it by Faking it

My older sister and brother had graduated from high school. They both encouraged me to take the GED in the winter of 1983. High school diplomas were certainly valued in my family but neither of my parents had finished high-school. I had left home at the age of fourteen, had a child at eighteen, and was divorced by twenty. Thus, their expectations were fairly low for me. After several months, I followed my siblings’ advice, scheduled the exam, called in sick to work, and took the test. When I received the scores that revealed that I had passed, and done well, my sister, who by then was working toward a degree in architectural design, said, “Lori, they have financial aid and student loans. You could probably qualify for all of it and you’d be as well off as you are now.” “Who me?” “Yeah, right,” I responded, with more than a little sarcasm. I listened to her advice but in the back of my mind I was sure she was wrong. After all, she was different. She hadn’t made the mistakes I’d made. She couldn’t possibly understand. After all, how could someone who dropped out of school ten years ago, experience anything but failure as a college student. But she persisted. My sister is known for that. So, with her encouragement, I paid the admission, applied for financial aid, and enrolled at the University of Arkansas in the fall of 1984.

College was another world, indeed. My earlier images of college students left me ill prepared for what I would encounter. Studying did not come easy. I had not read books as a child and have only vague memories of my mother reading some fairy tales when I was very young. Most of my childhood, like millions of children of alcoholics, was spent dodging my father. He was not physically violent but he drank heavily and there was always the threat of

violence. I learned early that I could diffuse the emotional terrorism by making my father laugh. I carried those survival skills into the first grade. Unfortunately, I carried them into high school. My aim was never to make good grades. Instead, I assumed the role of class clown and spent most of my time conjuring images of better days to come.

As I would quickly learn, reading and comprehension are not the same animal. Like so many single-parents, study time was relegated to a few hours in the library between classes and late in the evening after my daughter was asleep. Remembering what I had read in the textbooks was difficult for me. I could never decide what was important and what might be on the exam. There were classes available for returning students but they were stigmatizing and they could not be taken for credit toward graduation. Besides, I was determined to stream-line my education by taking only classes that would move me toward a degree. Looking back, I realize how much more pragmatic it would have been to take a course on note-taking or time-management but hindsight, after all, is just that.

My first year of college can best be summarized as the “adjustment zone.” Megan was doing well in the first grade and I was trying to convince myself that I really could be a student. My self-esteem was building but I lived in constant fear that my professors would find me out, realize I was a fraud, and had no business being in college. I lacked all the necessary capital for this investment and sooner or later someone would show me the door. When I received my first semester grades, I was sure it was a fluke or that they had somehow made a horrible mistake. Once the shock wore off, I began to believe that I might be able to make it. I can’t describe in words what this meant to me, personally. I can only say that the lesson I learned from the experience is that sometimes it’s best to try, just try, even if you have to keep one eye closed and the other squinted for fear of watching yourself fail.

It Really Does Take a Village

It would be my second semester before I would meet Ralph Nesson, the director of the single-parent scholarship fund. He was working in the EOA building where I had come more than once to seek help with my utility bills. I can't remember how I found out about the scholarship. I do, however, remember my meeting with Ralph. My earlier encounters with helping agencies, especially, human services, child support enforcement, and the housing authority, had left me more than a little skeptical about the interview. I was sure I would have to go through a self deprivation process of having to prove my eligibility and confirm that I was worthy of the "entitlement" about to be bestowed upon me. But, I was resolved to go through the process if it meant helping me stay in school another semester. Instead, Ralph greeted me with a warm smile, invited me into his office, and we sat down to discuss the scholarship application. He asked me about my daughter and how she was doing. He somehow knew that I was a local musician and asked about that. He asked me about school and my experiences there. I answered politely, sure the bottom would drop out at any moment. It never did. Instead, Ralph told me how proud he was that I took the chance of returning to school and that he knew that it was a risk. He understood that it was difficult to make it, even on the student loans and Pell-Grant, and did I know about the Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant and other forms of aid that might help. Almost apologetically, Ralph explained that while they didn't have a lot of money to give, he could offer me a \$250.00 dollar scholarship and that maybe I could use it to help with child care, or gas, or to fix my car, just whatever I felt was needed. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. There was no need for deference, no degradation rituals. I didn't need to save face by assuring him that I would only spend the funds for this purpose or that. He wouldn't need receipts to prove how I had spent the money. He trusted me to know best.

Looking back, my meeting with Ralph was perhaps, the most empowering experience I have ever had. Here was someone who recognized my

potential and wanted to give me, a high-school dropout, a scholarship! I left his office feeling proud of myself and my accomplishments. The program was genuinely interested in helping me make it through college. Fourteen years later, in a meeting with state legislators, I listened as Ralph described the program which now assists single-parents statewide with an endowment of over one million dollars, as a “barn raising” experience, one that allows the community to give to others. He was right.

The stories you will read in this book are from the voices of single mothers throughout Arkansas. But the women in this book are similar to women all across this country, who struggle, hope, and dream of self-sufficiency. These are just some of the millions of single-parents who understand that raising children is no small task, no matter the circumstances. Yet, obtaining the resources to successfully maneuver under conditions that are already stacked against one, makes the journey even harder, especially for women.

While only nine percent of two-parent families live below the poverty line, the percentage for female-headed families is above 46 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). Community resources are essential in building the scaffold by which single-parents can climb to heights they otherwise might never imagine. The only state-wide program of its kind in the nation, the Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Fund (ASPSF) is a program designed to assist single-parents in furthering their educational pursuits. Having helped more than one thousand scholarship recipients achieve their goals, the Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Fund demonstrates for us all, it *really does take a village!*