

FFI KICKOFF

These are excerpts from the remarks delivered by FFI Executive Director Chip Maxwell at the news conference announcing FFI on July 31, 2010.

Good morning. Welcome to the kickoff for the Fatherhood-Family Initiative. FFI is sponsored by the Masonic Community Center Foundation. That's the "MCC" in our logo.

The local Prince Hall Masons also are leading this effort. More on that in a moment.

Society's number one problem is the decline of the two-parent family and the growing absence of fathers in family life. Here's a statement on that point from a speech on Father's Day 2008 by a prominent American:

Children who grow up without a father are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime, nine times more likely to drop out of schools, and 20 times more likely to end up in prison. They are more likely to have behavioral problems or run away from home or become teenage parents.

Who said that? George W. Bush? Pat Robertson? Rush Limbaugh?

Here's another statement from that speech:

I know the toll it took on me, not having a father in the house — the hole in your heart when you don't have a male figure in the home who can guide you and lead you.

The speaker was Barack Obama, who on Father's Day 2008 was a United States Senator running for president.

This is not a political issue. This is not a racial issue. This is an issue of human nature. Children need fathers as well as mothers. Boys need strong male leadership.

There are many worthy programs serving at-risk children in North Omaha and throughout the metro area. FFI wants to work with them

and be another part of the solution to the poverty and violence so much in the news.

But our program is different because of its focus on fatherhood. No matter how well various programs work, the same problems will still exist 20 years from now unless the role of the father is restored in the moral formation of children, especially boys. No array of public and private programs can keep up with the chaos if increasing numbers of children grow up without fathers in their lives.

FFI has two goals:

1. Reduce the violence by bringing fathers into their sons' lives to provide a stabilizing male influence. Too many young men are looking in the wrong places for male leadership. FFI wants to change that.
2. Provide referrals to programs for fathers and sons looking to become better men. FFI does not provide social services, but as we get to know participants, maybe it turns out a father has been reluctant to relate to his son because the father needs better job skills to hold a good job. Maybe he has a substance-abuse problem. Maybe the son has some psychological issues that need to be addressed. Whatever it is that might be holding back fathers or sons and their relationships, FFI will help them get the help they need to move forward.

Our core activity is the Home Team Sports Club. We'll start with weekly sessions of basketball on September 15 here at Jesuit Middle School. It's informal and recreational, not a league. Basketball is a vehicle for fellowship. Other sports and activities may be developed as FFI evolves.

To participate, a father and son sign up and have their picture taken for a Home Team Sports Club membership I.D. card. The adult does not have to be the boy's biological father, but he must be someone willing to commit to the program. We'll have a short meeting to begin each session, but after that, it's really up to the fathers. We are looking for partners in leadership. This will work only if participating fathers buy into it and help make it work.

That's an overview of the Fatherhood-Family Initiative. Now let's hear from our speakers.

First, though, let me quickly note that most good causes have one person at the start who has the vision and the tenacity to push through early obstacles and get the project launched. Dr. Jim Karnegis has been working on this project for at least 2 years (that I know of) and is the person most responsible for bringing this concept out of meeting rooms and into the real world. Congratulations, Dr. Karnegis.

I asked Dr. Karnegis about speaking today on behalf of this latest manifestation of the Masonic legacy of community involvement. He was very insistent on the person he thought should speak for the Masons, and that person is our first speaker today.

Our first speaker has been involved in community service in very public ways, but he is just as passionate about the private, low-profile ways he serves the public good, including serving on the board of the Masonic Community Center Foundation. Here to speak on behalf of the Foundation is the former Mayor of Omaha and former United States Representative for Nebraska's 2nd District, the Honorable Hal Daub.

. . . .

Thank you, your honor. His honor is in casual dress today because he's all fired up to get in the gym and shoot hoops when we're done here. He says he's got game. He's already called me out with a personal challenge. I know he can talk the talk, but can he walk the walk? We'll see.

I did not know until I started working on this project that within Masonry there is a tradition of African-American Masonry going all the way back to revolutionary times, when a freedman named Prince Hall organized the first African lodge in America. The legacy of Prince Hall Masonry has come down through the generations to the present, and it's alive and well in Nebraska. I now introduce the Most Worshipful Grandmaster of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Nebraska, Eric Critchlow.

. . . .

Thank you, Grandmaster Critchlow. The leadership of the Prince Hall Masons is vital to this project. In the same way that I recognized Jim Karnegis, I also want to recognize a Prince Hall Mason, Fred Wisdom. He has been a key contributor to this effort. Thank you, Fred.

As a boy, Kirk Trotter played basketball here when this facility was the Butler-Gast YMCA. Fate brought him back to this building. This fall he begins his 8th year as Dean of Students at Jesuit Middle School. Jesuit was founded in response to North Omaha community feedback. There are schools like this around the country. Some are all-girls. Some are coed. The overwhelming grassroots message from the North Omaha community to the Jesuits was: We are losing a generation of young men in our community; focus your efforts on the boys. That's why Jesuit is all-boys. And the message also was: Don't wait until 6th grade. Get them in 4th grade before we lose them to the streets. For 15 years Jesuit has been putting young men on the right track to manhood. Here to speak on behalf of Jesuit is Dean of Students Kirk Trotter.

. . . .

Thank you, Kirk. Kirk mentioned that showing up is a big part of being a father, and I want to recognize my dad, Chuck Maxwell, who is here today. I'm nearly 48, but it still matters to me when my dad shows up. He knows this is something important to me so he's here, and I appreciate it, and his example motivates me to be the same kind of father to my children.

When we're finished here, Kirk has offered to give a tour of the school to anyone who would like one. Oh, and Mr. Daub, I don't have the right shoes on to play basketball so Kirk Trotter is going to take my place. He'll be looking for you in the gym when he's done with the tour.

Fr. Jim Michalski, S.J., the founder and president of Jesuit Middle School, is out of town but I thank him nonetheless for saying yes to FFI. We think this is a great fit and we are very grateful to Jesuit for agreeing to host the Home Team Sports Club.

Thank you, also, to Mike Mansour, a teacher at Jesuit, for agreeing on less-than-24-hours' notice to film our event and post it on the Internet for those who weren't able to make it. Please spread the word that people can check us out at the website address in our materials.

That's our program. We'd like to get all the Masons here today up front for a picture. Everyone is encouraged to stick around for open gym. My wife, Pam, has a sign-up sheet for those who want to get involved. Thank you for coming.