

Remarks on Thirtieth Anniversary of Family Support in Maryland

Good morning to all of you. Words can never express how sad and disappointed I am that I can't be with you today. I was really looking forward to meeting and laughing with new colleagues, catching up and laughing with my old friends and colleagues, learning what's new in the field of family support, and sharing how it all began. Truth is, I feel great now, but I look like a cross between a Jack O' Lantern and Frankenstein's creature. Also my nose is a very weird color. And my missing front tooth is not such a great fashion statement! Perhaps when I come to Maryland in a few months, you will allow me to visit your program. I would adore it!

Were I with you this morning, I would not be talking about families and children, but about change. Two things have happened this week that inspire this topic. One is this gathering, celebrating 30 years of family support in Maryland. The second is the article that appeared in the Washington Post that reported on the fact that the rates of births to adolescents is now the lowest it has been in several decades. At the absurd age of 75, I have had the privilege of being at the forefront of both of these efforts. Thus I have been reflecting on what it took to make these changes occur, the extraordinary opposition we encountered in our campaigns for change, and how much compromise and working with people we really didn't agree with had to take place. We had to look for common ground and try to see the humanity in those wrong-headed people who were not on our team. We had to be strategic and vigilant. We had to follow through. Today, although we are not where we want to be, we are light years ahead of where we were in the 1980's when all of this work was beginning and we didn't even have proof that what we were attempting could work.

I want to explain the state of the state when a group of about 15 of us set about to start family support. I will take the un-family support approach and not describe the strengths, but focus on the deficits first.

Child abuse in homes and foster homes reached a new high, with some truly unspeakable horrors having recently been discovered. Adolescent pregnancy across the state had reached an all-time high, with Baltimore City leading the entire nation in teen

pregnancies, but with many other counties also experiencing huge numbers of teen births. There was an ongoing fight between anti-abortion factions and pro-abortion factions of the legislature. There were almost no clinics in public school. Excellent child care was rare. There were almost no public preschool programs. Education in human sexuality was still a fight in our public schools. Children raised in high-stress and high poverty communities and families were not prepared to succeed in school.

But here's what else was happening. In the Department of Human Resources, there was a new head of Social Services. His name was Frank Farrow, and he was very familiar with family support programs from Chicago, the city he had lived in previously. His boss, Secretary Ruth Massinga, was a smart, enlightened progressive who was open to new ideas. There were two local foundations, the Aaron and Lily Straus and Goldseker foundations, who had innovative executive directors, Jan Rivitz, and Tim Armbruster. And there was a group of advocates and practitioners in the field who had vast experience in their fields. There were also several legislators who wanted to find real solutions and a receptive Governor who wanted to run for the Senate and needed all the help he could get.

We convened a group of influential citizens who could attack on every front needed. There were politicians. There were experts in the field of early care and education, child development, and adolescent parenting. Critical to our success were the inclusion of people with financial resources, people with connections to power, and the social policy of entrepreneurs.

We did our homework to develop what we thought would be the best plan for our state, learning from those who had come before. I went to Chicago to learn philosophy and best practices from the experts in family support. We developed a complex plan to engage and enlist the support of enough legislators to get funding we needed. We had a wealthy donor and an infant development expert visit the governor. The whole process took many, many months. My dining room walls were frequently covered in newsprint as we met and worked. But after much drama and close calls, we opened our first family support center. Change had been achieved, and there was no turning back.

In the beginning, when Friends of the Family first began, three of the early pioneers who are here today were there. They are Linda Ramsey, Jean Mitchell, and Melanie Martin. There are not adequate words of praise in my vocabulary to thank them for their yeoman work and dedication to strengthening families.

Five years later, when I decided to leave, I contacted Margaret Williams to tell her to apply for her next job. Was I smart or what? Margaret and Linda, with the most capable, committed, and determined people at their side, have taken family support to new heights, joining family support with early child care and education, and joining forces with Nancy Grasmick, the Department of Education.

Family support is all about the change at every level of policy practice. As practitioners you are in the business of joining with families to change life trajectories for their children and hopefully for the parents as well. You are working in a still new way, as partners and friends, not autocrats. You are motivators and sources of skill, inspiration, and information. You are change agents. You are the reason we started Family Support.

I want to end my remarks to you today with this quote because I think it is true, very important in the work you are doing today, and may be unquantifiable. It was written by a man named Frederick Buechner, and is:

The life I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place my touch will be felt.

Now that I am 75 years old, I have had the great good fortune of experiencing the truth of what Reverend Buechner (pronounces Beekner) said. I have had the fun and privilege of meeting with young parents whose life I touched decades earlier. They have told me what an enormous impact family support, or parenting information, or the chance to complete high school, of free family planning has had on them. All of them have one person whom they can name who really heard them and did what needed to be done to help change their life and the life of their children. Most of the time, the person who helped them would not have known how important that help

was. Many of those who were supported didn't know it themselves at the time, but years later, with more maturity and no longer in the midst of stress and turmoil, they were able to realize what had happened.

May you continue to see people with love and respect. May you always see the many strengths that even the most troubles people and families possess. May you continue to help parents make it through the tough times, and may you be there to celebrate their successes with great and genuine joy. May you not forget your own families in the process of helping others. And may you accept my deepest thanks.