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Children of Promise

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“Children of Promise, Investing in Our Legacy” is an area of concentration that I have selected to use as a focal point during my term as ACA President. My 29 years of service would be in vain if I said, “Done,” severing the lifeline that initially motivated me to work with youth. I am just as committed now as I was when I opened the door of my first classroom. This generation of youth is challenged by more social, moral, ethical, and spiritual decisions than any other generation. Viewing a child through a holistic lens is a laborious task, sustaining the quality of life, a boundless journey. Our youth have a promising future, but it is not promised. I believe that their future aspirations and accomplishments hinge on the way in which we personify excellence, courage, perseverance, and a vision of hope. Children come into the world with promise and potential, trusting and lacking hatred, prejudice, and fear until they become challenged by poverty, spurred by violence, pampered into laziness, disillusioned by entitlement, or contaminated and/or scarred by adults who have abused, neglected, or misled. The principles we stand for and practice send a message to the future through children. My professional activities and daily routines allowed me to touch the hands of those challenged by adversity and sometimes by unconceivable atrocities. There are so many children who are trying to grow up in a land of violence, drugs, and spiritual deprivation, in a culture that is too fast, too busy, and sometimes too preoccupied.

I have just completed a 29-year career in education. As a military wife, I had the opportunity to work in a variety of settings as we traveled across the United States—in mostly urban, low socioeconomic areas. My involvement with youth ranged from preschool to senior high school, in the classroom, religious/secular camps (I was the lead counselor trainer at various camps), and mentorship programs that addressed the scholastic, social, and cultural growth of middle and high school girls.

When I first started working with kids as a teacher, it was exciting, yet challenging. With my Mary Poppins

attitude, I was prepared to meet the challenges of my students with diverse learning abilities from families whose lives were far removed from the *Leave It to Beaver* lifestyle. It wasn't long before it seemed that the virtuous bag of tricks was traded in for the tough posture of Marshal Dillon (from another popular TV series in the 60s and 70s). Perhaps a more modern comparison could be made between the Huxtable family and the pistol-whipping chastisement of Judge Judy. As I became more seasoned in my role and established my personal style, my classroom transformed into a colorful, print-rich environment that invited students to learn. I saw the management of students as the number one priority after basic survival needs were met. Integrated with academics, respect, cooperation, responsibility, empathy, and self-discipline were taught, modeled, expected, and celebrated.

I reflected back on my experiences as an elementary school counselor as I stepped into the shoes of the principal. I recall addressing a third-grade student's motives for bringing a gun to school as if it was a show-and-tell activity. Another situation involved a pregnant fifth-grade student “wanting someone to love and take care of.” I was beside myself trying to deal with the emotional trauma of a distressed fourth-grade student forced to fondle the genitals of her mother's boyfriend as the mother remained in denial to keep the paycheck of the perpetrator coming. I looked at the population of students I was working with and decided that “normal” was just the setting on the clothes dryer. There were parents who felt hopeless, not knowing what to do with a child who was incorrigible, defiant, and unmotivated to be educated.

As I entered the administrative ranks 9 years ago, I knew that I would definitely need the counselor's tool box. Having the materials to lift the bar of excellence in academics was not an issue. Offering the best opportunity and empowering youth to rewrite their own history resonated with urgency.

There are some issues that we consider givens that will always plague our professional response:

- There will always be children in poverty.
- There will always be peer pressure.
- There will always be a need to advocate for the welfare of children.
- There will always be children who are victims of social ills.
- There will always be oppressive situations that will impede consistent parental involvement in the lives of children.
- There will always be failing students.
- There will always be children suffering from family change.
- There will always be children who are traumatized by the environmental factors that are perceived as threatening to their survival.
- There will always be children affected by death and divorce.
- There will always be children who feel lonely, unloved, and abandoned.
- There will always be children who are afraid, hurt in their own homes.
- There will always be children who experience role reversal.

As I have monitored the statistics of Nevada's youth, I have found them quite troubling: the highest juvenile incarceration rate in the country, with the exception of Washington, DC (as documented on the 2000 Census report), a 20% increase in domestic violence, and a suicide rate twice that of the nation. An overwhelming rate of grandparents as caregivers, the impact of war and terrorism, homelessness, the common use of methamphetamine, and child pornography/exploitation are chronicled well in the statistical data. This is "in your face kind of stuff," sobering issues that cannot possibly be placed on the proverbial list of life's everyday trivia or whisked away by lip service to great intentions. In an annual UNICEF publication on the progress of nations (UNICEF, 2000), the Secretary General of the United Nations shared his thoughts about the importance of nations investing in children's well-being and protection of their rights. He stated that the day will come when nations will be judged not by their military or economic strength but by the provision made for those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged; and by their protection that has been afforded to the growing minds and bodies of their children.

A second-grade student recently said to me, "Things are really tough for a kid. I was almost tasered trying to keep my mother from going to jail." Without a doubt, he is correct. Life is very tough for a kid. This same young man, one in a family of nine children, proclaimed as if he were proud of it that he had an anger

problem. One day he came to school very upset because he had gotten a spanking from his mother for shooting the neighbor with a pellet gun. There were many other examples of angry children with issues that are irreversible. The following students represent just a minuscule view of daily interactions.

- Zack (name given to protect confidentiality) lived in a home with multiple families and a grandmother responsible for his care. He saw his father shot and killed when he was quite young. About a year ago, his mother died of a drug overdose. Zack wanted to punish someone, preferably his mom's boyfriend. His older brother stole from homes and often took Zack along with him. Being attentive to academics was out of the question. He was argumentative and extremely disrespectful to teachers, other adults, and students constantly. He responded to physical touch until you asked him to comply with rules and procedures. Then he would have a total meltdown. He became unmanageable, allowing no opportunity to reason with him.
- Ray, the youngest and only male in the family, engaged in a lot of attention-seeking behavior. His father berated the school for every action. Dad's little-man complex fueled his stride as he foamed at the mouth and threatened anyone who he felt mishandled his child. This dad could not maintain a steady job, and he wanted to be called to come to the school whenever there was a concern with Ray's behavior. Ray's mother was very docile and approached Ray's school problems timidly. With every visit, she always made reference to Ray's dad making pending decisions, including the school's plan to remove Ray from the classroom. Ray hung out with older males and often used racial slurs to harass students. Ray knew just the right students whose buttons he could push to instigate turmoil.
- Donald, an only child, was being raised by a mother who felt every school was against her child. He and his mother moved frequently from school to school, state to state, chastising anyone in their path. Anecdotal discipline documentation noted the mother's abusive behavior, citing examples of her accusing staff members of being racist. Donald displayed violent behavior toward students and the

administration, refused to follow directions, and caused injury to anyone who did not comply with his wishes. His file indicated several altercations and violent acts. When he began his rampages, the scowl on his face and the threatening glare in his eyes were enough to make the Devil shake in his boots. Donald's mother often came to the school to have conferences with me. Distinctive traits about her that could be expected were that she would not sit down, always wore her dark glasses, and adamantly agreed with her child's decisions. A police report was filed after Donald bit, kicked, and slammed me repeatedly into a wall. After several suspensions and due process, Donald was withdrawn and reentered school in another state where his mother painted the picture of a perfect child.

When I entered the field of counseling in 1975, I was entrenched in the Adlerian approach. I laced *Maintaining Sanity in the Classroom* (Dreikeurs, Bronia-Grunwald, & Pepper, 1978) and Glasser's (1965) *Reality Therapy* around all my activities. The professor who mentored me personified an empowering presence. He envisioned my strengths and repeatedly found opportunities to stretch me. As I watched his demonstrations in the late 70s and early 80s, his technique and charismatic style of connecting with clients was very impressive. An area of great interest to me, in which I completed a master thesis study, was birth order.

Major milestones began to shape my commitment to the profession. As I became more involved in leadership roles for the school counselors and the state counseling association, I was elected to the presidency of these two organizations, respectively. I became the chair of the Western Region, the region representative on the Governing Council for the American Counseling Association, and a participant on several professional committees. I realized I needed more knowledge and skill. My postgraduate studies clearly defined the changing face of counseling that seemed to be shaped by another set of historical and social contexts adding more dimension, more demand for specialization, accreditation, and licensure. Staying alert professionally through quality literature, training, and networking was invaluable for new possibilities and the inevitable new struggles. A longtime friend, educator, and mentor said to me, "To whom much is given, much is required."

Another important milestone for me has been the opportunity to utilize my group work skills in a variety of settings. As individuals adapt to assumed roles,

skillful communication requires a high level of self-awareness. One of my favorite presentations is interactive and collaborative, utilizing "hat therapy" (a Marie-ism) as a creative, visual communication tool. We explore leadership/learning styles, generational values, and the influences of internal/external factors that impact our personal message. Through the years I have always used visualization tools of some nature to open the door of communication and focus on an issue or the application of a concept. I started with fancy fingernails. I found it easy to establish rapport with someone talking about something totally off center, unrelated, out of the norm. Hostility in the room often dissipated as a child was distracted by the design. Another set of visuals I was able to incorporate and use as out-of-the-box thinking was road signs. Great analogies can be created that reflect the success of an organization. For example: Detour: sometimes as we think that we are moving along well, suddenly a situation causes us to deviate from our current strategies. During hat therapy (the props), the tone is established in a risk-free setting to examine thoughts, beliefs, ego states, and behavior. This was an opportunity for me to exercise counseling theories that I subscribe to in a creative way: RET, Adlerian, and Systems. The hats are symbolic of a value, work ethic, slogan, or motto that influences, inspires, motivates, or affects the thoughts, feelings, and actions of self or others, consciously or unconsciously. Perhaps it is another way of engaging in a personal, upscale SWOT—strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The results are in the hands of the SWOT (er).

My involvement in the American Counseling Association has been a professionally energizing experience. There were so many opportunities to consult with other professionals, collaborate, and cultivate relationships with those who nurture what I value. A unique feature of ACA is the diversification of its leadership and membership. To all ranks, specialties, and walks of life, I extend an invitation to grip the handles of negative influences on our youth with tenacity and an insatiable vigor. ACA is working diligently to provide products and services that can easily be accessed to support and bring visibility to the profession. The Web site, PSAs, and published materials made available through the publication catalogue are invaluable sources to be shared.

Each of the divisions within the structure of the American Counseling Association must ensure that best practices are employed to meet the needs of all youth, all cultures, all socioeconomic levels, with all levels of dreams and aspirations. As we aspire to raise the bar of our own level of expertise, the bigger picture dictates the necessity of accessing powerful research sources,

broadening personal perspectives with high quality professional development, effectively facilitating theory into practice to make a measurable significant difference, and mentoring those following the trail we blaze.

From time to time families are faced with the dilemma of moving to another state. Expanding the field of networking to promote continuous service and lessen the risk of children falling through the cracks is an investment now, a worthy redemption later. If we subscribe to early intervention, mobility should not be a deterrent. Within the scope of ethical practice, keeping well informed of a child's location and healthy state is important. The initiative to preserve the well-being of our children places us in a pivotal role. We have a professional obligation to be resourceful and willing to keep our communities and ourselves well informed.

Legislation is another area that keeps professionals knowledgeable of decisions being made that affect our children. The Office of Public Policy and Legislation, through ACA, ensures our visibility as well as urges participation. The legislative institute provides an opportunity to visit Congress and directly express a persuasive opinion, and also provides information to help stay in contact with local officials. Locally or nationally, our professional counseling voice must be heard.

There are some valuable implications impacting future roles in counseling, regardless of the specialty area. Although our direct presence is not forecasted, goals and measurable objectives weigh heavily on research practices. As a predictive enterprise, research elevates renewal and relevancy for the direction of the profession. Although data will speak for themselves, the impetus for wellness and prevention will give our youth the wings to weather life's storms. The counseling profession calls upon us to wear a number of hats: as visionary, teacher, advocate, researcher, consultant, and mentor to name a few.

References

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