



Raising successful black boys alone, but not without help

By Donna M. Owens

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David Miller is a man on a mission. Simply put, he wants single mothers who are raising sons to know they're not alone.

So the former public school teacher - a co-founder of the youth-focused Urban Leadership Institute in Baltimore - has developed an ambitious national campaign called "Raising Him Alone." It's designed to help single mothers and their sons by providing a network of resources, advocacy and access to community-based services.

Since launching the initiative back in April, Miller has reached out to predominately African American audiences across the country, via workshops, seminars, online initiatives and more. Several celebrity moms have joined the crusade, including Dr. Mahalia Hines, a Chicago educator whose son is the rapper/actor, Common; and Sheron Smith, mother of entertainer, Mos Def.

"We have been to New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and other places, meeting both single mothers and grandmothers, because a lot of women are raising their grandchildren," said Miller, 41, a married father of three, with one son. "The experience has been fulfilling, but extremely alarming ... An inordinate number of women are raising boys alone. Their sons have no contact with their fathers, or the contact is sporadic or minimal at best."

According to Miller, the mothers he's met hail from myriad social and economic backgrounds, and don't fit easy stereotypes. Some have always been single, others are separated or divorced. A good many are educated, professional women, he notes, who have found themselves without the partners they believed would be around to co-parent their sons.

"Some of these sisters thought they would be married or with someone for the rest of their lives," he said. "Most never dreamed that they would be raising their children alone."

"Raising Him Alone" is funded by the Open Society Institute and its Campaign for Black Male Achievement. The organization has earmarked \$12 million dollars over the next several years to address issues related to black boys and men.

Such support is critical, says Miller, because of the vast social implications tied to single parenting in America. For every mother who manages to raise a productive, successful son, there are countless others, he says, whose boys will fall through the cracks.

www.RaisingHimAlone.com

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RAISING HIM ALONE



Providing Resources and Support For Single Mothers Raising Boys

A variety of statistics bear this out. For instance, black males account for some 8 percent of total enrollment in America's elementary or secondary schools, but nearly 22 percent of total expulsions. Nationwide, the average high school graduation rate for black boys is less than 50 percent.

Miller also points to data that shows that six out of 10 children living with only their mother were near or below the poverty level. Moreover, children from fatherless homes are more likely to commit suicide, have behavioral disorders, drop out of school or abuse drugs. They're also 20 times more likely to go to prison.

While a variety of complex factors account for such dismal numbers, Miller says it's hard to ignore the correlation between single parenting and some of the problems facing African Americans and the greater community.

"It's very difficult for a woman to raise a boy to be a man," he says, acknowledging that there are exceptions. "A boy has to be around good men for that to happen."

While mentoring is one way to expose young men to positive male role models, says Miller, he believes the best approach is more broad-based - with the 'village' helping to raise the child.

"The reality is, there aren't enough mentors to go around, and some don't have the right intentions," he says, stressing that single mothers must be mindful about whom they allow to form bonds with their kids.

Miller urges mothers to cast a wide net of support at church, school, and throughout the community: "Find several men who can informally mentor and hold ongoing talks about peer pressure, staying in school and so on."

The "Raising Him Alone" campaign - along with a new companion book by the same name that Miller has co-authored with Matt Stevens - offers single moms both resources and strategies.

Topics range from how to properly advocate for a child who's been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, to re-establishing ties with absent fathers. (To that end, the team is already in the process of developing the next phase of the initiative, called "Changing Fatherhood" along with a stand-alone website.)

Miller notes that while there have been some "hostile blogs and emails" from people who think he's glorifying single motherhood, the response has been "overwhelmingly" positive.

"We're not celebrating single parenthood. We are offering mothers encouragement and support so that they can raise responsible, spiritually guided, sober men."

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Miller plans to work with like-minded advocates and educational entities, including the Harlem Children's Zone and others. He's also hoping to elicit the attention of President Barack Obama - who was raised by a single mother and his grandparents.

"We would love to sit down with him and get his administration's support," Miller said. "I believe this is one of the most important social issues facing America."

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