



Institute for Family & Child Well-Being

PERSPECTIVES ON OUR WORK

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Kinship Care *Down In The Delta...* Celebrating A Tradition of Family Taking Care of Family!

Oronde A. Miller

Greetings, and thank you for reading this issue of our ongoing analysis and commentary publication.

Across the country there are families that are struggling to keep it together. Many of these families come to the attention of the child welfare system for various reasons. The majority of the Caucasian families that come to the attention of child protective services are referred because of suspicion of physical and sexual abuse. For African American families it is more frequently the suspicion of some form of neglect.

When the allegations are substantiated, Caucasian families are more frequently offered family preservation services in an effort to keep their families intact. African American families are more often separated, with the children coming into the formal foster care system. This decision by presumably well-intentioned social workers marks the beginning of what too often becomes a career in foster care, in

many cases spanning an entire childhood. Indeed this is unacceptable and doesn't have to be the case. There are other viable and more constructive alternatives. Consider the following all-too-familiar scenario...

A relatively young (mid-thirties) and unmarried woman lives with her mother, pre-adolescent son and pre-toddler daughter in Chicago. She is unemployed, largely undereducated and seemingly locked in a cycle of poverty, despair and depression. While she really does want to work and provide for her children, she really is not confident in her ability to do so, nor does she really know where to start. Most of her efforts to acquire even basic employment are either unsuccessful or met with rejection, personal humiliation and embar-

rassment. She often numbs the hurt and passes her days away high on either drugs, alcohol or both. As you can imagine, she has no difficulty at all finding the corner liquor store and/or neighborhood drug dealer.

This woman's mother and son are both extremely supportive of her. Yet, they are simultaneously frustrated and appear to be running out of patience. They know that she is really not being herself, and is just a shell of the person she once was. But they continue to be there for her, knowing that it's just a matter of time before she gets her act together again. Rock bottom is sure to come, but they just don't know when. Through it all, they always keep that door of hope and possibility open, waiting and waiting for what might sometimes seem to be a distant miracle.

"Let us be reminded that none of our families are perfect. We should also not require perfection from our many families struggling against real life challenges."

As a last resort, the grandmother sends the family down south to live with relatives. This gets the children out of the dangerous and unhealthy circum-

stances they currently live in, and gives the mother some time and space to "get her act together."

This is a very brief description of at least one aspect of the 1998 motion picture *Down in the Delta*, starring Alfre Woodard, Al Freeman Jr and others. Different versions of this basic story line play out every day in many families in communities across America, including the African American community. Certainly, resilience is a central theme of our history and experience living in this country. Unlike this story, however, many such families come to the attention of this nation's punitive-oriented public child welfare systems.

In 1977 Dr. Robert Hill published the results of a research effort documenting the practice among Afri-

can American families of caring for other relatives during hard times. This tradition of informal adoption and the centrality of extended family support systems in the African American community has been around for centuries, dating back to our pre-America family patterns in Africa and other parts of the African diaspora. In more recent years, the child welfare field “discovered” this pattern and named it *Kinship Care*.

There are a few brief points I would like to make in this essay. They are not new points, but ones that I think we should continue to uplift in our work, and in our conversations about family and child well-being.

First, I encourage all of you to buy or rent a copy of *Down in the Delta*. We have to search hard, high and low for quality images and stories highlighting the integrity, perseverance and hope that characterizes the African American experience. The story shared above is a classic story depicting the African American spirit of resilience, spirituality, the value of hard work and education as well as the resourcefulness of the extended family. These are among the characteristics discussed in Dr. Robert Hill’s 1972 book, *Strengths of African American Families* (republished in 1997).

More than to express my appreciation for this movie, I have also written this essay as a reminder that while families might be struggling and while children may even at times be at risk of harm, parents are often trying their best to make some sense out of extremely challenging life situations. While all of this is going on, there are often other relatives willing, even if hesitant, to step in and support the child and parents.

Too often, the furthest we tend to look is for grandparents. As great a resource as grandparents often are,

they are not the only relatives that can support the process. We must broaden our search efforts to identify cousins, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters and other individuals that may not be blood relatives, but are just as close to and supportive of the family. Our search must also reach beyond the artificial borders of city, county and state. Family ties are spread out around this country, and so must our search efforts follow these ties. Policies regarding inter-jurisdictional placements and kinship care funding must be responsive to this dynamic.

How ironic that we keep children in foster care for years and defend a worker’s assertion that she or he cannot find any relatives, yet the child ages out of foster care and goes right back to a parent or some other member of the child’s extended support network.

There is a familiar saying that people evoke when arguing against *Kinship Care*. It states that “*The fruit don’t fall far from the tree.*” Well, I am also clear that you can make some real good pie, preserves and more from all of a tree’s fruit, be it picked off the tree or picked off the ground. Moreover, as my Aunt Ruth and Uncle David taught me as a little child playing by the pear tree in their back yard, during some years the tree’s yield may leave us wanting and wondering; but, we will keep going back to the same tree every year expecting the best. And so it is with life and family.

Let us be reminded that none of our families are perfect. We should also not require perfection from our many families struggling against real life challenges. Let’s provide families real support! - OAM

The author of this essay, Oronde Miller, can be reached via email at omiller@ifcwb.org.

INSTITUTE FOR FAMILY & CHILD WELL-BEING

Website: www.ifcwb.org Email: info@ifcwb.org
Mailing Address: IFCWB PO Box 7761 Upper Marlboro, MD 20792

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