



January 2016

## **Father Talks ... fathers connecting with their children**

**“Any boy can have a baby, but it takes a man to raise one.”**

Arnell remembers his grandmother telling him “any boy can have a baby, but it takes a man to raise one.” He would be the first to admit that it has taken him a long time to understand what she meant by this statement. Sage advice from grandmothers is almost always true, but unfortunately it usually takes the experience of living for us to internalize these truths.

Arnell’s father was an absentee father who spent very little time with him when he was growing up. When his father visited Akron from Detroit, Arnell would contact his uncle with the hopes of the uncle setting up a visit between him and his father. Most of the time Arnell’s father would return to Detroit without visiting Arnell. This left Arnell asking himself “what’s wrong with me, why won’t my father have anything to do with me?” To this day, Arnell feels his biggest problem was not having a father.

To make matters worse, according to Arnell, his mother was “running the streets” and a “party animal.” His stepfather physically abused Arnell and molested Arnell’s sister. When Arnell told his mother about the molestation, her reply was “why are you telling that lie?” In response to this family environment Arnell resorted to spending his life on the streets and was kicked out of school in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. In looking back, Arnell stated that he didn’t care about anything, or offending anyone, and admits he was quick to get into fights. While he had promised himself that he would never abuse his children, he ended up with three convictions for spousal Domestic Violence. Today Arnell admits: “I could have walked away, but I didn’t. When I thought I was a man, I really wasn’t.”

Arnell remembers that while he was incarcerated - an inmate, with a much longer sentence than his, telling him “what are you doing here, you can do better, don’t come back!” He started attending church and as he says found “peace of mind.” He promised God that if he ever had a chance to be a father again, he “wouldn’t mess it up.” Arnell was released from prison for his last conviction in 2002.

In 2011, Arnell became a father again. The child's mother had custody and didn't want any involvement with Arnell especially when she started dating someone else. Arnell was successful in seeking unsupervised visitation, but often this visitation had to be enforced through the court system. The mother would use tactics such as showing up at the wrong time for the visit. It was during one of the visits that Arnell noticed bruises on the child. He alerted the authorities and the child was placed in foster care.

Arnell sought out Fathers and Sons of Northeast Ohio, an SCFI Partner, to help him apply for custody of his child. He was very concerned that his three Domestic Violence convictions would limit his chances for custody. Arnell started taking any class he could find on fatherhood. These classes were taught by Summit County Children Services and Fathers and Sons of Northeast Ohio. Arnell views Donald Lykes, the founder of Fathers and Sons of Northeast Ohio, as his mentor. Arnell says "Don helped me get custody of my child, how to understand my child, and how to be a better father. Before meeting Don, I used to keep my problems to myself". This mentoring continues to this day.

After a lengthy process, in October of 2015 Arnell was given custody of his child. In December of 2015, the child's mother was granted supervised visitation. This month she will get to see her child for the first time in over a year with Arnell's sister supervising the visit.

Arnell has a 19 year old daughter and 17 year old son from his first marriage. He firmly believes now is time for him to make good on his promise of not "messing up if given a 2<sup>nd</sup> chance at being a father". Arnell is very involved in his child's life. During this interview, Arnell stopped to take a phone call from his child's teacher to arrange for Arnell's sister to pick up the child so that she could supervise a visit by the child's mother. Arnell currently volunteers at the Foodbank and is completing the circle by helping give back to others. He is actively seeking employment on a night shift so that he can be available for his child after school. He is also in the final planning stages of getting his high school diploma.

It appears that Arnell now understands his grandmother's advice. He states: "My child makes me want to do better. When the going gets tough, whatever I do, it will be for my child." But, his child may have summed it up better when he said: "Daddy, I'm glad that you got me."

## **Did You Know?**

**Children whose fathers are stable and involved are better off on almost every cognitive, social and emotional measure developed by researchers.**

*Fathers Talks are fatherhood stories brought to you by the Summit County Fatherhood Initiative (SCFI). SCFI is a collaborative, community initiative dedicated to helping men become better fathers through programming, education and individualized services. SCFI was founded by three, prominent Summit County fatherhood service providers - Pastor Eugene Norris of Fame Fathers, Don Lykes of Fathers and Sons of Northeast Ohio, and Frank Williams of Man2Man. SCFI is supported by Akron Community Foundation, GAR Foundation, United Way of Summit County, and the County of Summit - Department of Job & Family Services. Comments or questions about this publication can be sent to Bill Macchione, [william.macchione@jfs.ohio.gov](mailto:william.macchione@jfs.ohio.gov)*